



L I F E
Among
G I A N T S

A NOVEL BY

B I L L
R O O R B A C H

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Writing Life Stories

Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth

LIFE AMONG GIANTS

A NOVEL BY

Bill Roorbach

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2012

PART ONE

My Dancer

I have a thing about last meals. Not as in prisoners about to be executed—they know it's going to be their last. But as in just about everyone else, most all of us. Whatever's coming, there's going to be that last thing we eat. My folks, for example. They did pretty well in the last-meal department: beautiful restaurant, family all around them, perfect sandwiches made by someone who truly cared about food. Lunch, as it happened. Their last meal, I mean. For my sister it was breakfast, but that was years later, and I'll get to all that. The point is, I like to eat every meal as if it were the last, as if I knew it were the last: savor every bite, be there with the food, make sure it's good, really worthy. And though it's an impossible proposition, I try to take life that way, too: every bite my last.

MY FATHER TOLD me I could do what I set my mind to, though it hadn't been true for him. Mom told me not to expect everything to go my way, probably because of her own bad luck with Dad. She wasn't a mom to coddle you; she thought once you were ten you could make lunch for yourself. And we did, Katy and I, wild inventions, often edible. Dad ate what we offered, never a complaint.

He wasn't one of those fathers who did it all for a kid; he liked to stand back and watch, ready to give a standing ovation, but ready to withhold it, too. My mother was tough on Katy, pushed her toward tennis stardom. The same mom took no particular interest in my football career, hoped I'd pick up a more useful hobby, like gardening. And Mom and I spent hours in the borders around our modest house most Sunday mornings—the azaleas were our church. Who knew what Kate and Dad were up to? Always in cahoots, as my mother liked to say.

But Mom was Dad's one true love: Barbara Barton Hochmeyer, a real prize, her wedding photos like glamour shots, his only great success knocking her up to produce Katy, he wasn't shy to tell us the very boy Mom's father dreaded: no-college Nicky H. She was a formidable woman, all right, tall and broad in the shoulders, a tennis star in her day, club champion to the end, always organized and scheduled and ready to go. Nick was slicker, looked for leeway, wasn't one for a plan. Words were their sharpest weapons, and they didn't need more than a few. She called him inept; he called her unloving. *Kaboom!* Their fights were like boxing matches—all the moves well practiced, weeks of workouts in preparation, strategies stored up, sucker punches in desperation.

Figurative punches, I mean.

He apologized elaborately after bouts of anger, after errors, after outlandish deceptions, foolish decisions, all of which were frequent. Mom wasn't one to apologize—Mom was always right—but quietly she'd wear a tight dress he loved, or bake him one of the oddball pies he liked: gooseberry, mincemeat, quince. And the two of them were constantly up to their bedroom, where they made way too much noise, lovers till the end.

KATY AND I had a private world. The cellar was the crater made by the crash of our spaceship, the old stone stairs a rock-climb to the dangerous new planet above. The object was to make it to the attic to collect the magic cloak (a sable cape that had belonged to our grandma) and get back downstairs unnoticed by the natives, great fun during our parents' frequent parties: Mr. Coussens sniffing his way through Mom's underwear drawer, Mrs. Paumgartner slipping a porcelain bunny into her purse, the

pockets of all those coats piled on the bed unsafe from our alien feelers: diaphragms, strange syringes, once even a revolver, pretty pearl handle, polished steel barrel, chambers fully loaded. My big sister and I passed it back and forth—surprisingly heavy.

On family trips back to Mom's lakeside Michigan from our corporate Connecticut, Kate and I were the backseat duo—barely a year apart—always some elaborate card trick or dance routine (no seat belts, not in those days). The motel rooms we shared inspired proto-sex games: Monster in the Dark, Cannibal, the Blob. But at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Seashore, summer of 1964, Kate stopped playing. Later in the week, as we sat bobbing bored on a raft, she said, "I've got hair." And she pulled the crotch of her suit aside briefly to show me, frank kid.

She was even then a girl who harbored secrets, parceling them out on a need-to-know basis. She was a shoplifter in junior high, a Freon sniffer freshman year, a medicine-cabinet bandit after that, a dealer of hashish at times, small amounts in glassine envelopes she showed me the way she'd show me her pubes: frankly, briefly, with the understanding it wasn't for me. Before long I was making pipes for her from every odd material in the house, gifts in adoration, though I never liked to smoke. Also—and this seems more important in hindsight—she had what she called "magnificent thoughts" sometimes she saw the world as if from high above. Looking off bridges she could feel her wings flex. Looking at the sea she grew fins. These big moods were balanced by weeks of darkness, bleak pronouncements, irritability, furtive movements.

Her most ironclad secret was boys. Tim Hayes was the only one I actually encountered, a kid I knew as the leather-jacket guy. Home early from freshman football one inclement afternoon I walked in on them, he naked, she fully clothed (still wearing her rain slicker, in fact), her face flushed dark. Arousal filled her pink bedroom as if with smoke, stung my eyes and caught in my throat as I made my escape: I'd been seen. Later, Katy pledged me to secrecy. "I made him *strip*." To what end, she didn't say.

My sister was what I knew about sex before I dated. In fact, she was what I knew about girl's period. Lady Kate sank into a kind of simmering monthly funk that I knew to be womanly in some way: she gave off actual heat, owned special items, left spots of blood on the bathroom tiles.

I came into the high school as into a foreign country, looked to Katy for guidance, but very little guidance was forthcoming. Where I wanted only to fit in, she was falling out. To all appearances we were a team, the clean-cut Hochmeyer kids, sharply dressed, serious students, successful athletes with sunny smiles, good deeds. And I *believed* in those things, felt them readily as our identity. But my sister clearly did not believe or feel the same.

Half the guys on the freshman football team had crushes on her, asked me how to proceed, asked me to put in a good word, asked me to set them up. Of course I didn't: what would Katy want with my jerky pals? She didn't really have boyfriends at all, not as far as I knew. Yet as soon as the pill became available, she was on it, a circular month's supply hidden among the dust balls under my dresser. Mom never searched *my* room for anything, ever.

And Kate's friends might have been a source of dates for me, but they were the tennis girls, tight-knit crowd with muscular legs, deep tans, and lanky, bespectacled boyfriends from the local country clubs. Otherwise, oddballs: she ate lunch with Giant Janine the goiter girl, who spat food and often burst into tears; she stood at the bus line with Mark O'Meara, the thalidomide boy, unafraid

grasp the tiny hands that grew from his shoulders; she idolized June Harrison, who played piano well despite the wheelchair, spent nights at her house. She courted drama, was enamored of difference.

She in her own heart was a freak, is my guess now.

Otherwise, why all the secrets?

IN OUR NICE stone house—three bedrooms, huge yard sloping to willow-wept water, one-car garage—we thought of ourselves as of modest means. Because across the pond, on what was called the High Side, there loomed an immutable example of what it was to be truly rich: a mansion the size of an embassy. In winter, you could see the far-flung wings of it across the ice and occasionally the movements of its tenant, the world-famous ballerina Sylphide (say it in the French manner *sill-feeeed*, as many *e*'s as you wish), whose even more famous husband, the English rocker Dabney Stryker-Stewart, had died on the Merritt Parkway (as everyone in the world knows), piling his Shell GT Mustang at eighty-some miles per hour into the abutment of one of those handsome Depression-era WPA bridges. But the body wasn't with the car, didn't show up for two full days, found flopped by a muddy stream nearly half a mile from the accident scene. Had Dabney wandered dazed from the crash? Or was there foul play?

Despite months and then years and even decades of conjecture and investigation and conspiracy theory, answers were not forthcoming. The sorrow and disbelief (some say madness) on Sylphide's veil-shadowed face in the famous photo of her standing at his graveside in Newcastle, England—we still see it still haunts me, haunts everyone, the closing visual bracket on an era that begins with John-John Kennedy saluting at the graveside of his dad.

There'd been another person at the High Side, too, Dabney's child from a previous marriage, just as famous as his father and step-mom: Linsey the *Life* magazine boy, visited for a photo shoot every year on his birthday, both physically and mentally deformed, as we would have said it then, anyway profoundly challenged (fetal-alcohol syndrome is my diagnosis in hindsight—the abandoning birth mother was a lush and a leech, famously). He was sweet as a puppy, small and soft and helpless, those huge eyes, but with a weird sense of humor and sly smile, a secret nasty streak the rest of us delighted in. He'd been a vexed and cross-eyed fixture in my classes from kindergarten straight through, the richest kid in the public schools, mainstreamed before mainstreaming was even a concept, all because the private day schools in the area wouldn't have him, and his stepmother—the greatest ballerina in the history of the world—wouldn't allow him to be institutionalized. The superintendent of Westport schools was happy to oblige, as were Linsey's teachers: the boy wasn't charming, but you got to hobnob with the famous parents.

By the early sixties, Sylphide and Dabney had become the world's own royal couple, their courtship and subsequent wedding a glimmering fairy tale. He bought her various castles and mansions and retreats around the world, but the High Side became their home base. The permanent move to the U.S. from London came with her elevation in 1964 to principal of the New York City Ballet (George Balanchine her longtime mentor and devoted fan—"Her *sweetness* of thought," he famously wrote, "her *sweetness* of motion and lineament emerges from the very core of her soul and moves ever outward"—of course I'm working from Google for my quotations), and was followed by Dabney's megaplatinum album *Dancer* (the only album at the time other than *Meet the Beatles* to contain more than one number-one single, four in fact; I'm still always catching his melodies

waiting rooms and elevators). The beloved in all the songs was Sylphide, or so we thought, and that her on the wildly controversial original album cover (the cover that got pulled after two weeks favor of the safer and more familiar airplane image), that sleek, modest, achingly shy nymph fleeing naked into the forest with an almost taunting glance over her shoulder, blond hair streaming sweetly in misty golden light, her high, pretty fanny more plain lovable than erotic.

But then, I was just eleven.

My big sister was to become well acquainted with the dancer. By the time I finished junior year Kate had, in fact, babysat and tutored and contained Linsey for nearly four years. She'd been pledged to utmost discretion, became insufferable about her constant contact with fame. She was stingy with the free *Swan Lake* and Dabney Stewart-Stryker tickets and hoarded amusing or shocking inside stories (dinner parties attended by Mick Jagger or Julie Christie or Muhammad Ali, even the likes of Twiggy; Marlon Brando naked with three girls in the High Side pool, no one swimming). Katy's closets were filled with old Nehru jackets and worn-out guitar straps, her summers with exotic jaunts three weeks here, four weeks there, various points in Europe or Africa, trips to famous Japanese and Brazilian and Australian cities during every school vacation and often *during* school, the lucky duck. The Prince and Princess needed her, and of course the puppy-eyed Princeling most of all.

ONE WEDNESDAY EVENING in my senior year, Kate off at college, one especially wonderful Wednesday in the especially warm October of 1970, just as Mom and Dad and I were sitting down to an especially wonderful dinner (fishsticks and frozen French fries, plenty of ketchup, mounds of canned peas) several black cars pulled into our cul-de-sac and parked neatly along the curb. Two men from each car headed for our different doorways. We could see them coming every step of the way. If we'd been armed and dangerous, they'd have been toast. Dad was calm, simply let the main guys in the front door. "FBI," one of them announced. Another offered him sheaves of papers, which he didn't take. They let him gather a few things—toothbrush, fresh underwear—and then they took him away on multiple felonies connected to his work at Dolus Financial. (Yes, *that* Dolus Financial, the one that a few years later has collapsed under its own weight despite some 15 billion in federal cash.)

"Dad's had some trouble at work," Mom said when he was gone, no particular emotion. "Bail has been set very high."

Later I heard her cursing him out in her room. "Fucking asshole" was the exact phrase, repeated endlessly, Bar-Bar someone who never swore, except on the tennis court.

A FEW DAYS later (October 30, 1970, to be exact), Dad's court-appointed lawyer—a portly sycophant named McBee—met us at the courtroom steps, gazed up at me.

"Ozymandias," he said darkly.

I knew what he was saying, more or less, knew my Shelley from Honors English. "It just means it hit my head a lot," I said.

"Seven feet?"

"Only six eight," I told him.

McBee wheezed, sighed, gave us our marching orders: "Okay, just as I discussed with your mother. You kids, you must look solemn. Pretend it's his funeral. Look one part pissed, two parts forgiving, like people who are going to put your old man on the straight and narrow. Got it?"

My sister put on a face—pissed forgiveness is hard to do—and of course kept putting it on, and soon I couldn't stop giggling. Kate wasn't laughing much in those days, kept the straightest face possible, which just made things the worse for me. Mom was plainly irritated with her, but said nothing, just as she'd said nothing about Katy's tennis clothes, which were hardly appropriate for the occasion. They hadn't seen each other since Katy had left home for her first year at "New Haven" (you weren't supposed to say the name of the school), and maybe Mom just couldn't admit that her daughter looked great.

Katy's new boyfriend was there, Jack Cross, who (shockingly enough) was her professor. He was a stoic guy with wild hair and posh court-day clothing, meeting Mom for the first time. Solicitous, he took the old lady's arm, shot Kate a look that froze her. And silenced me, too. Because, well, I'd met him before.

Plenty of secrets in our family.

Under the dome of the stately courthouse lobby (still not so grand as the High Side foyer), Mom brushed her hair and pinned it into a bun, made her face up in a tiny mirror, reclaimed her gorgeous poise. The courtroom itself was just plain, nothing but cinderblocks and workaday furniture, the judge at a table in shirtsleeves, not what I'd pictured.

Mom and Kate and I took seats in the front row. Jack sat in the row behind us. He was Dad's age, Mom's age, craggy as a sea cliff. My mother had asked if I thought he and Kate were sleeping together. Unlikely, I told her. Kate, who'd never even had a boyfriend? Sleeping with a professor? Easy lies. Because I knew more, a lot more. Kate basically lived at Jack's beautiful house, for example. And I'd visited them there. I'd liked him for not mentioning my height, a feat few could manage. He'd even loaned me a car to take home to our family. That was the kind of man he was, someone with extra cars. Dad had lost ours. The kind of man who lost them. For Mom's sake I'd said the loan was from Katy's roommate, true enough, as far as it went.

The judge shuffled papers. He looked like an insect. People came and went, whispered to him, whispered to one another. Kate wasn't the only one with a new love. My mind wandered over Emily Bright's brown skin, her soft and secret hair, a whole night of her kisses and long hands, Emily in the shower, Emily in my little bed all night while Mom was away managing Dad's crisis, wreaking havoc, vicious serve on defense and prosecution alike. Two cops brought him out in his rumpled business clothes, handcuffs in front. He definitely looked like a guy who'd been in jail, dusty and pallid, badly mussed. He scanned the room back over his shoulder, couldn't find us.

McBee approached the bench with the sandy-haired prosecutor, said a few quiet sentences. The prosecutor said several more—nothing we could make out—and the judge nodded. He looked to Dad. Dad said a long, long paragraph, almost silent, his back to us, his posture weary, carefully remorseful. When he was done the judge made a sign and two Afro-American men the size of NFL tackles stepped to Dad's side. The judge instructed them, didn't look at my father. They nodded seriously. A bailiff came in, removed Dad's handcuffs. Exhausted smiles all around. The gavel.

Dad had gone state's witness. He turned to us, looking unhappy as ever. He shuffled over to the docket gate. "Lunch," he said.

Katy leapt to him and hugged him with all her strength, which was considerable. Dad teared up, choked and sobbed. Mom joined them, offered hugs, too, less voluble. She wasn't buying the tears.

Professor Cross waited for the exact moment, found it, shook my father's hand. I could see from the brisk quality of the shake and greeting that they already knew one another, too, more secrets.

The prosecutor sidled over before I could join the greeting, gave Dad ten fond slaps on the shoulder. "We'll be getting to know each other very well," he said. He gave Katy a long look, the way certain kinds of men did, up and down, down and up, wry twinkle when he got to her eyes.

Katy didn't turn away but took him on.

"State Champions," he said to me, tearing his eyes from hers, a guy who must have played football himself, years back.

"Yessir," I said.

"You're even bigger than they say. Gonna repeat this year?" Dishonest eyes, a guy on the take, something you could see from a vantage point high as mine.

I didn't feel any need to explain I'd quit the team. "Sure," I said.

Mom accepted a folder of papers from McBee, who looked proud of himself. And finally it was time to go. With the big African-American guys—Dad's security detail—we formed a phalanx around the old man, made our way out to the parking lot. He said, "They're paying for the best restaurant around. It's all approved."

My mother made a show of not being impressed.

Dad rode with his guards. We dutifully followed. The restaurant was called Les Jardins, and it was very fancy, all right, acres of garden, empty fountains. Empty parking lots, too, and an empty dining room—it wasn't even eleven o'clock yet. At our lace-and-lantern table, under the staid textures of what Dad said were real medieval tapestries, we ordered Bloody Marys, though Kate and I were underage. When his drink arrived, Dad looked happy for the only time so far that day. He chugged it down and ordered another before the waiter, working around the table, had even managed to put mine in front of me.

"Love this place," Dad said. The bodyguards stood in two corners of the room, deadly serious, no lunch for them. The Bloody Marys were like salads, spears of celery, slices of green and red pepper, home-pickled pole beans. Emily the night before with Mom away was our first time, my first time, and I couldn't stop thinking of her skin, the skin on her inside, too, endless minute visions, her brown skin, and pink, her kisses, the nipples of her breasts like knots to untie with your tongue.

No prices on the menu.

Mom choked down sudden rage, I could see it.

Jack said, "These are going to be difficult weeks."

We sat in silence, empty dining room soon to fill, clatter from the kitchen, biting our celery stalks.

"How's your tennis, Katy?" Dad said suddenly in his investments voice, loud and jovial, always disastrous.

"Good," Katy said, not buying.

Same voice: "No, I mean, give us the works. Who the heck have you played? What are the rankings? How awful is your coach? Bring us through the season."

Mom writhed, rankled.

Which inspired Katy. She took Dad's cue and held forth. Her coach was brilliant, she'd been seeded high. Dad signaled for a third drink, or maybe it was his fourth, or even fifth, impossible

keep up with him. We all slaughtered a basket of bread, speared our tiny salads. Just the previous weekend, Dad not yet in jail, Kate had played the longest match in the history of the Hanover Classical but lost finally to the top seed—a girl from Penn.

“I cried,” my sister said.

“She howled,” Jack said.

“Oh, honey,” Mom said, not very warmly.

“I’m sorry,” Dad said. And then he laughed, booming mirth, vodka hitting the old brain, bones a sore from jail, laughed his hollow laugh, deeply all alone inside his misery.

The meals arrived, really gorgeous, simple BLTs, thick, flavorful bacon like I’d never had, slices of tomato thick as steaks, crisp, fresh-picked lettuce from the gardens beyond. We ate in the silence of Mom’s silence, except a single moment in which Jack cleared his throat. But he thought better of whatever it was he was planning to say, and we all looked back to our food.

The waiter cleared the table efficiently, dropped dessert menus in front of us. No other diners had arrived. The place was like church.

“So, state’s evidence,” I said. I just wanted to jumpstart a conversation, the one we really should be having.

“I’m not allowed to say much,” Dad said. He nodded toward the bigger of the guards.

“But he’ll be free when it’s all done,” said Mom, no apparent joy in the thought.

“Get my good name back,” Dad said.

“They’re treating you very well,” said Jack. He was a philosopher with a famous book and plus towels in his house, that’s all I knew.

“Daddy’s got valuable information,” Kate said wryly. Her neck, her arms, even her wrists were thicker than when she’d left home, more muscular, much healthier: college sports.

“Always something to sell,” said Mom, mocking.

“Didn’t we agree . . .” Dad said, but he trailed off.

Mom pounced: “We agreed on *lots* of things. We have always agreed on *everything*. And look, just *look* where we *are*.”

Kate slammed her water glass down on the polished table. “Just get off his back,” she said.

And Mom said, “Don’t *you* start.”

Jack said, “Of course we’re all tense. Couple of deep breaths here.”

Mom puffed and fumed, but Jack had a way about him.

Dad said, “I’m thinking cognac.”

“If you want to know,” Kate began.

Cutting her off, gentleman Jack said, “I’d really better get Kate back to campus. The tennis vac leaves for Ithaca at two. She’s supposed to travel with the team if at all possible. Your girl gets another crack at Miss Penn again this weekend, if all goes well.”

“We leave at three,” Kate said, sudden wince.

He’d kicked her leg under the table. “I believe it’s two,” he said.

“No dessert?” Dad said. He wasn’t oblivious, though, and let them get up and go without protest, just an overly long hug for Kate, and a kiss on her hair. She kissed him back, on his cheek, his ear. They whispered to one another, patted at each other, always in league. He held her out for a look

straightened her collar, gave a tidying tug at the pockets of her tiny skirt. Once again, tears started his eyes, but this time continued to flow. More hugs.

“These have been tough days,” he said over her shoulder.

“Not only for you,” Mom said.

“Always selfless,” Kate said to her bitterly.

“Don’t force your backhand,” Mom said brightly, as if it were just tennis advice.

“Good afternoon,” Jack said, enormous warmth. You could certainly see why Katy liked him forty-year-old genie with a famous book about love. “Wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Hochmeyer.”

Mom patted at her hair. “Yes, Professor, lovely.”

I felt glad when Jack and Kate were gone. Much of the tension dissipated the second the restaurant’s perfect front door shut perfectly behind them. And nice to have my parents to myself.

We dug into dessert, which was a huge piece of chocolate cake to share.

Presently, the check came, and Dad proffered the credit card he’d been given by the state. The three of us talked logistics, nothing more interesting than that. I would drive Mom and myself home Westport in the loaned Volvo. Dad’s new bodyguards would take him to his secret location. Apparently the judge thought the old man’s life was in danger. Mom would join Dad in a few more days, get him settled in his rooty-toot lodgings (as he called them—this was before anyone had even heard the phrase “witness protection program”), then she would come home to me. This or the undisclosed town around Danbury would be his home and his life for the next several months; he had to remain under guard. There were people who wanted him to stay quiet. What people, what crimes these were not discussed, not for the children to know, though of course I’d read the papers: half of middle management at Dolus Investments had been indicted for hundreds of counts of dozens of crimes, from fraud and extortion to murder and back again, also gross embezzlement. Dad’s boss had been portrayed as victims, Dad as a ringleader. Not true, I knew, impossible: Dad was a follower never in front.

Mom would be allowed to visit him, but only under escort, a night or two maybe a couple of times a week, occasionally longer. And while she was away I’d attend school as always. Take the school bus. Go to the store—our neighbor Mrs. Paumgartner would be glad to drive me. Get the mail. Keep the house neat. They trusted me *implicitly*, was the exact word. Lugubrious talk like that, talk I could barely stay with, my one thought being that I’d have any number of nights with Emily, making love with Emily all over our house, this lithe, lanky girl who knew too much: mouth and tongue, hips and thighs, breasts and hands, smoothest brown skin.

Outside, one of the guards hustled off to get the government car, which he’d parked down the hill in a gravel lot hidden among rhododendrons. Mom admired the selection of mums in the breezeway—those mums, I’ll never forget them, all dried out in lines of flower pots, rare colors, apparently splashes of blood and brains and bruises. The second guard crossed his arms, closed his eyes in the nice sun. His name was Theo, suddenly comes to me, *Theo*. Dad and Mom stood apart, fury spent, some semblance of peace arising, some old redolence of love.

Oh, man. I’d rather not go on.

But:

A new-looking silver sedan pulled into the drive, swung around very slowly under the portico

stopped. A man in a crisp blue suit got out, blue tie dotted with hundreds of golden fleur-de-lis, cocked his head, and grinned.

“Kaiser?” my Dad said clearly.

Smoothly, the man pulled a large black handgun out from under his jacket, the barrel a black hole sucking in everything. He aimed it casually, pulled the trigger, shot Dad in the face, shot him again in the chest. The bangs didn't seem loud enough to be real. I thought it was all a joke, had to be a joke like Daddy's stupid jokes, the man still grinning. Time went into suspension. The place was lit in sparkling dust motes, forever lit. The bodyguard fumbled in his own jacket, couldn't get his weapon out. My mother made an impossibly slow hop, caught Dad as he was falling, fell with him in a blooming mound of their nice clothes.

“Nicholas,” she said, almost conversationally. Then incredulous: “*Nicholas.*”

And then, and then, and then, as I was making my own hop toward them, the man shot *her*, three bullets, three pops, efficient trajectory, making sure my dad was dead, that's all; Mom was just in the way.

The guard still couldn't get his gun out, stepped forward anyway with a shout, and the man shot him, too, dropped him. In the moment's vast illogic, Dad and not the shooter seemed the dangerous one to me, someone who pulled bullets to himself and his loved ones with his big negative magnetism. So it was no heroic act when I finally got my body to lunge at the shooter, a big leap on longest legs, even as he aimed his weapon at my face, *click-click-click*, empty magazine, or whatever it's called, any rate no bullets. I would have had him, too, but tripped over my parents' tangled legs, landed on my mother bodily, lay on her heavily, and she on Dad, a bleeding, stinking pile.

I looked up into the coldest eyes I'd ever seen, clambered up in that tangle of legs, like breaking tackle. Kaiser didn't like leaving me alive, that I could see, but he'd already used too much time, must have known he wasn't going to prevail in hand-to-hand combat with the likes of me. He slid easily back into his car, shut his door almost gently. The transmission clacked into gear like an automatic transmission. I dove at the car, luckily missing: I would have hung on till my skin was peeled off every scrap. The shooter drove away neither slow nor fast, crunch of groomed gravel.

I grabbed a pot of mums—heavy, cold, plenty awkward—held it like a football as time resumed at full speed, spun, cocked my arm, calm quarterback, spun and fired that thing in a perfect spiral after the retreating car, watched it smash that wide rear window.

But the shooter just kept going.

The perfect drinks, the perfect salads (down to perfect individual slices of radish, clearest memory, bit of the red skin pulled into the white of the glistening core by the edge of a prep cook's knife). And the perfect sandwiches, so neatly made on white toast, perfect, perfect, and served with perfect chinolvas, lavender ramekins of house-made mayonnaise, tiny spreading knives plated in gold. It was really, *really* good food, unforgettable down to the last details, details I'd linger over for the rest of my life. So simple: *pommes frites*, those BLTs, tiny cups of lobster bisque. "Sherry," my mother said, tasting the soup, that palate of hers. And then dessert. I've never since had chocolate cake like that, a celebration in itself where no celebration was possible.

I linger over the people, too, except for my father, whom I just can't ever quite stand to conjure. Jack, though. That confident presence, the élan with which he handled the tension—tension was just something to be expected, he seemed to say, as if conflict were a gift. And my mother, of course. I linger over her. But reluctantly, memory going cloudier, Mom in her best little smart suit, short tweed skirt, great gams, Mom in her perfect makeup, her hair in a perfect coil glistening with lacquer, secret pins. And Katy. How strong she looked in her tennis clothes! How buff she'd become, new bracelet on her wrist, her easy access to perfect rage, no transitions for her, lightning bolts igniting the barn when all around the sky is clear, those long fingers, the quick blue eyes, the skin of her face, the faint freckles, her straight teeth, the scar on her lip (a bicycle fall), the very slight but permanent impression therefore of a sneer.

It's Kate I have to start with, Kate where the story really begins, though she would disagree.

WHEN DABNEY STRYKER-STEWART died (on April 7, 1970, according to Wikipedia, so six months or so before my parents' own catastrophe that October), my sister cried as if he'd been *her* husband and not the great ballerina's. Our robust girl became a wraith walking the hallways of Staples High, and it was a good thing she'd already been accepted at Yale. She locked herself in her room every afternoon, wouldn't come out on weekends, refused to go back to the High Side, not even to collect her belongings, her accusations getting wilder and wilder as the weeks went on, hysterics giving way to paranoid fantasies: the dancer was out to get her, would have her killed!

What?

Yes, Sylphide! The dancer had forced Linsey away to England, where he was in custody of his awful grandmother, who was a witch! As for poor Mom, Katy decided she was in on whatever the conspiracy was supposed to be, wouldn't eat food if Mom had touched it, wouldn't ride in the car with her. My father said it was the shock, that it would pass. My mother didn't let on what *she* thought, for fear of saying something unkind, as she put it, which was her way of being unkind.

Kate, meanwhile, was failing to pack for college. Mom entreated her. Dad still said she'd come around. Four in the morning, five, she'd ghost into my room, wake me just by the queer force of the things she couldn't tell me, these long silences as she sat on my desk tugging at her hair or inspecting the moons of her fingernails. Here and there she'd murmur answers to my queries: the dancer had stolen valuable belongings from her (never anything specific, though I pressed); the dancer had called

her a slut (no particular context cited, and the idiom more like Kate's than any international ballerina's); the dancer had put weights in the handles of Kate's tennis rackets (oh, sister, no); the dancer had bugged Kate's room with microphones (I couldn't find any, of course, but searched thoroughly through two separate dawnings at Kate's forceful behest).

Therapy, medication—those things were uncommon back then, and were certainly not things we talked about in my family. Psychiatrists were for crazy people, not for any of us. There were normal people and then there were people with character issues. We Hochmeyers, of course, were the normal people. So Kate pined and mourned and slammed doors and made accusations in cycles of delusional intensity, thoroughly retreated as summer wore on.

I could understand her being upset. Dabney and his band had planned a very fancy world tour for the new album, including two whole months in South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan; there had in fact been discussion of Kate's deferring matriculation at Yale for a year so she could continue to care for Linsey as he traveled with the rockers past the summer: India, Indonesia, Australia. A glamorous vision of her future had died, and not only Dabney.

I WAS INVOLVED in my own little drama. In early July, Coach Powers had sent out a mimeographed memo about the summer practice schedule for football, stern handwritten note at the end: **HAIRCUT MANDATORY!**

That was aimed at Jimpie Johnson, who had managed to grow a huge bush of curly hair since the end of our last season, and at me. I was no hippie, and no Samson, either, and certainly not a rebel. I didn't care about my hair, and in fact my then-longtime girlfriend, Jinnie Bellwether, liked to rub her hands on a new buzz cut like nobody's business. But I didn't go to the barbershop, and I didn't go, my hair sneaking down into my eyes, over my ears, into my collar. I could take my shirt off and lean my head back and feel the ends of it on my shoulders, nice.

Dad, still alive (still alive!), sat up with me in the nights before my announcement, marched me through the consequences step by step, but I was firm: no haircut. I meant to stand by Jimpie and surely the whole team would stand by us. Dad's angle was reassuring, too, delivered with a hot grin. He sat on the edge of my bed: "What's Powerless going to do? Cut his championship quarterback? He's an all-state fullback?"

COACH CUT BOTH of us, is what he did. He'd made a public stand, so he was stuck. After a week, be friend or no, Jimpie gave in and went back to practice with his head shaved. I hung on, could hardly say why. I hung on even when Coach Powers tapped Wes Fielding, a promising freshman, to be quarterback two weeks into summer practice. I hung on even when Jinnie Bellwether dumped me, end of August, and even when she took up with Jimp the first week of school. She was a football girl to the core, and I was off the team.

If all these years later the decision seems momentous, the breaching of some kind of fateful dam, an unleashing of the floods of destiny, it certainly didn't seem that way then. It just seemed right. I was a kid who stuck to his guns, my father liked to say, but it seems more to the point that I was a kid with a father who did not stick to his. My reasons seemed diamond sharp back then, but they were quixotic at best, deeply vague. I was a kid who loved football. Why would I quit? Maybe I just meant to please Kate, not that she gave any sign of caring, or maybe I was compelled to echo her withdrawal

from all things. Anyway, without football practice to worry about, I had time to do good deeds, the stuff my mother was always on me to do but never gave me credit for, stuff that made me feel happy: dog walking at the animal shelter, clean-up after a flood at the YMCA, youth night at the old folk home.

I could also sit with Kate, pat her back, tell her things were going to be okay, even though I didn't believe it. Just about the time I thought she was going to break down completely (she barely slept, barely ate, didn't talk, never laughed), she straightened herself up, appeared for dinner, showered and dressed and shining bright, two suitcases tightly packed, her tennis bag stuffed and ready.

"What'd I tell you," my father said. And the next morning he drove her the fifty miles to New Haven, where she took up residence in her college (as they called the dorms up there), took up residence, in fact, on Saturday, August 26, 1970.

WHICH DATE I remember perfectly, because that same afternoon I took it upon myself to rescue the bereaved widow next door. This was less saintly than I was prepared to admit: like my mom, I'd been jealous of Kate's connection with Sylphide. Here was a chance to forge my own.

Dabney (so we had learned in the "People" section of *Time* magazine) had made some kind of mess of his last will and testament—apparently he'd written two versions. The newer one turned the mansion and everything in it over to Sylphide, but every penny else, including the rights to his songs—a vast fortune—went to Linsey, with specific instruction that the boy be remanded to the custody of his grandmother (so much for Kate's theories about the matter), Dabney's blighted mother back in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where Dabney himself had famously worked as a coal miner into his early twenties, writing his heartsick songs at night.

It all happened instantaneously after Dabney was dead: Linsey was flown to England under escort and in a firestorm of publicity. There were photos in the *Daily News*, photos in *Newsweek*, photos in *The Saturday Evening Post*, editorials (all of them arguing for the return of the beloved boy to his stepmom); there were the dancer's ever-so-gentle public queries about the motives of her in-laws and ungentle countercharges (which sounded, in fact, a lot like Kate's ideas, all wrong: the dancer was a piranha, a gold-digger, a careless parent, a fake). The legal system, immune to the great ballerina's delicacy, her magical kindness and obvious honesty, oblivious of her inability in grief to dance and to make a living (my own take on the matter), froze all assets indefinitely, so that she couldn't even sell her belongings to pay for daily life.

And after a season without funds, the High Side was visibly in trouble. Sylphide, we knew from *The New York Times*, had had to let go the High Side's groundskeepers, cooks, maids, drivers, and finally the famous little butler. From my bedroom window I could see that the glorious gardens were overgrown. The vintage Bentley sagged in the driveway under a layer of old rain-patterned pollen and acorn caps. The daily deliveries of food and liquor and flowers and the streams of guests had stopped.

After a long look at Dabney's old album cover—a really long look, that nymph both fleeing and beckoning, that exquisite form, that open, angelic face, that dancer's *derriere*—I ferried our lawnmower across the pond in Dad's aluminum rowboat (the closest he'd gotten to his dream of a yacht). On the far bank I unloaded quickly, set to work mowing, stopping often to clear the discharge gate of the machine, my fingers turning green. I pulled my shirt off, paced the great, dewy expanse of lawn, a whole sweaty morning in hot sun. If nothing else, I was getting a workout. I pushed the mower,

daydreamed, I made my way toward the mansion, stripe by stripe of lawn, more and more intricate. I got closer. In a tremendous sugar maple growing inside their walled garden, I spotted the remains of a tree fort Kate had often mentioned, a leafy palace for the kids of the Chlorine Baron, the industrialist who'd built the High Side during the Roaring Twenties on his profits from industrial chemicals and home cleaning products, also the poison gases used by the enemy in World War I.

The front yard was ornately planted. I made my way around the rhododendrons and azaleas, ducked under wild branches (but no matter, at my height I was always ducking), doubled and tripled back, going for every blade, taking the opportunity to examine the famous building, almost a mausoleum: leaded windows, iron shutters, massive lintel stones, an elegant but forbidding entryway, a heavy oaken door looming at the top of a flight of ancient steps, the whole setup imported from Europe block by block, remnants of a feudal castle. Last pass, I killed the mower and studied the door, black iron straps and vast hinges, massive knocker held in a life-sized lion's mouth, really enormous.

There was a bang and creak up there, and suddenly the door swung open with a momentum of its own. Framed by the blackness behind her, the ballerina appeared, hugging herself sleepily, dense bathrobe faint green. She was smaller and much more delicate than she'd seemed onstage those few times Kate had coughed up tickets, more airy and light and ephemeral than even on the famous album cover. And certainly less beautiful, not particularly beautiful at all. I cowered, all but bowing, soaked in sweat, filthy, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm just mowing," I said.

She gave a small but grateful nod.

"I'm Katy's brother," I said. "David."

"I thought it is Lizard, no?"

"That's what they call me at school."

"Ah," she said seriously, even somberly. "In Norway, *firfisle*."

"Fur-fee-z-ul," I repeated, best I could do, as serious as she.

"You are taller than anyone is saying," she said, all matter-of-fact, famous Scandinavian lilt. Her gaze lingered briefly on my belly, which in those days was hard as any marble god's. I was used to comments about my size, used to being stared at, and used to people being a foot and more shorter than I. But even as tiny as she was, at the top of the stairs the dancer towered over me, her greatness like sunshine up there, her sorrow like clouds.

I said, "I just wanted to help."

Apologetically she said, "I can't pay."

"It's okay," I said. "Neighbors help neighbors. You know."

She seemed to consider that, brightened. "I am wondering if you can help me with one thing more."

I tried to take the wide stone steps gracefully, even if three at a time, followed her into the enormous foyer, past the grand stone staircase and through a hidden door, down a hallway into the spacious, restaurant-grade kitchen. We floated right to the stove, where a teapot waited cold.

She handed me a box of matches, gazed up at me. She said, "I can't make the fire to light."

Those startling celadon eyes, always mentioned by the press! (I'd paid attention to every word)

ever written.) Eyes the color of oxidized copper, or what my mom called sea-foam green, full of light and a penetrating intelligence. Pale, spare eyebrows, open and generous face, her nose tall and thin, cut like glass. Her lips thin, too, and parted in supplication, and I saw as I broke her stare that a front tooth was chipped. She was short, I kept realizing, really quite short. She had breasts under that robe and all the rest of a female body. And she had *bad skin*, acne-scarred and shining. Which was what I told Mom when I got home. The dancer's unassailable beauty in photographs, her imposing beauty onstage, that towering presence, they were illusory! She was really only a girl, not very much older than Katy and her friends, or me. She smelled of bed sheets more than anything, like someone who had been ailing, smelled of what must be jasmine—always her scent, according to Kate, who found it nauseating.

Not I.

I lit a match, turned the knob, waited. Nothing. "The gas is off," I said.

"Off?" said the world's greatest dancer.

I looked into green light of her eyes a second too long, like rocketing past the earth's atmosphere and into the realm of stars. Helpfully I said, "You have to have gas to make the burners work. It comes in through a pipe. Did you pay your bill?"

She studied me, trying to understand. My heart fled to her helplessness. The dancer had no equipment for living in this world. When tears came to her eyes, tears came to my own.

"Oh, for me," she said cryptically, and then something urgent in Norwegian, a song of a sentence about a woman troubled about much more than her gas bill. Abruptly she reached up to hug me, or rather she reached up to *be* hugged the way a child might. I leaned and put my arms about her as best I could, more than surprised, intensely aware of my naked, sweaty, grass-stained chest against her cheek as she pressed back. "Oh, Firfisle," she said, rising up on her tiptoes, balance enough for both of us. "Firfisle is mine."

We breathed there in front of the ten-burner stainless-steel stovetop five minutes or so, monumentally long embrace, the multiple fragrances of her rising to my nostrils—a little sweat, a little liniment, that smell of bed—just about the most awkward five minutes of my life. I wondered when it would be okay to let go.

"I am hating it, to be alone," she said finally.

"Me too," I said. And then I flushed with the truth of it: my former teammates, and Jinnie, and most of all, my sister, Kate, all lost.

THE NEXT WEEK, entirely out of the ether, a message arrived from the head football coach at Princeton. "Rumbling Rick" Keshevsky himself, a crisp piece of bond paper folded into a shorter note from no less a personage than the president of the university. The letters took some deciphering, but after several readings it became clear that based on my junior-year game stats and my perfect grades they were offering me early acceptance and a full academic scholarship, plus room and board.

It wasn't that I'd forgotten meeting the Princeton scouts, wasn't that I'd forgotten my Princeton dream; it was that I'd assumed I'd blown it, quitting the Staples High Wreckers. Had wanted to blow it, no doubt. But the letter made it clear they knew all about Coach Powers and my hair, my getting cut, my being axed: didn't matter—they'd had their eye on me for years. I was pleased but not jumping up and down, nothing like that, mostly I was just surprised. I really had very little sense of the honor of the

thing, had always taken my physical prowess for granted, just something I'd been born with, nothing to be particularly proud of, not something to peddle in exchange for status. Long hair or no, I was one of the best high-school quarterbacks in the country, something to this day it's hard to keep in mind. Jock or not, I was an academic star, as well, on course to be valedictorian, a kid who read philosophy on his own, a kid who translated Latin poetry (looking for the sexy bits, but still). Of *course* Princeton wanted me.

My high-school-dropout father, always the salesman, put on his best pair of penny loafers and his most collegiate sweater and drove me down to South Jersey—he wouldn't let me go on my own, he wouldn't let me not go. He steered the big highways with one hand on my knee, a squeeze every twenty miles or so, not a word between us. The two of us were shown around campus by a simpering series of assistant football coaches. I was being courted, stroked, seduced, nothing subtle about it. I wasn't impressed—not with myself, not with the school, not with any of their blandishments.

But my dad glowed, handed his business card to each new professor and coach and admissions dean, shook hands vigorously, talked too loudly, led with his bulky, oft-broken nose, cranked up his sparkling but damaged charm, left me in the background, where, as it happened, I was content to be.

Rumbling Rick, though, was too imposing for that treatment. His office was a cave in the bowels of the football stadium, steel door like a prison gate; he answered Dad's knocking only at length, filled the archway—chiseled face, chin like a truck grille. He ignored my father, took my hand in his two Princeton tiger paws, pulled me in, squeezed my biceps, unembarrassedly pulled a leather-covered stepstool between us and stood on it so he could look directly into my eyes.

“Son,” he said, “a little haircut shouldn't come between great men. You can play in braids and ribbons as far as I'm concerned. First-string quarterback by sophomore year! Can you give me a year today?”

From out in the alcove my Dad said, “Yes. Yes, he can.”

Keshevsky ignored him, could see the ambivalence in my face. Gently, he said, “Yes, no. Hochmeyer, take your time, make your own decision. But come out and practice with us today. Those boys want to see you in action.”

The 1970 season at Princeton would start in two weeks. I was intensely aware that I was still on the way to going to be a high-school kid. Quitting the Wreckers had made me different; nothing that had been important before had remained important after. And meeting Sylphide had turned me one notch again in the direction of this undefined thing I seemed to be straining toward, nothing to do with hair, more to do with the ambiguities I'd begun to notice in the world, a new feeling that nothing was black or white, nothing either/or, that no one could truly lose or win. I thought of the dancer's not exactly delicate hands on me there in front of her kitchen stove. I was no gridiron brute, took no pleasure in my own powers, didn't need to stomp anyone, didn't want to play out my father's dreams, or Coach Keshevsky's, these stale old guys with their failing testosterone.

But there was no way around it. I dressed for practice and worked out with the college fellow shadowing the quarterback, Matt Morrissey, my once hero, a senior everyone knew was going to play for the Green Bay Packers. In a scrimmage Coach Keshevsky let me take the helm of the freshman team. The varsity drubbed us, of course, and the real first-year quarterback, left on the sidelines, was visibly pissed. I ran plays perfunctorily, completed a dozen solid passes, slowly got inspired, ran for

the only freshman touchdown—an arrogant quarterback sneak against the coach's call, purposeful knocking over my own man, the enormous freshman center (guy from Hawaii, later to do well in the bigs), using his bulk as a ramp to launch myself over the opposing line, then dancing through the secondary, breaking one tackle, two, head fakes, spins, straight-arm right, straight-arm left, lots of simple ducking, and then, all alone out there, a colossus racing seventy-nine yards with the whole varsity defense chasing me, the best tackling team in the Ivy League.

So what?

Rumbling Rick was stern with me after, of course—I'd gone against orders—but I just gazed at him, nothing to say, this little tyrant without his stool. I was through apologizing to coaches. As a parting gift—a little more incentive towards my decision—Keshevsky gave me an envelope with six box-seat tickets to the upcoming game at Yale—the opponent's homecoming. "Closer to Westport for you," he said in a way that was warm and cold all at once.

"Hey," said my dad.

I was indifferent until I had the obvious thought: I could invite Katy to her own homecoming game. Of course the coach would have known where she went to school, would have known everything there was to know about me, including my plans to major in Philosophy and Culture, a new field being pioneered at Princeton, as it happened. But none of that would have occurred to me then, the extent of a coach's manipulation.

He said, "Okay, mister. No more bullcrap. Time to grunt or get off the pot. Can I tell the boys yes? Can I give Professor Lunkins the good news?"

Lunkins was the chairman of the philosophy department. From him I'd had three stirring letters a week. "I need some time to think," I said.

"Nothing to think about," said my father.

"He'll *think*," said Rumbling Rick approvingly.

Dad drew himself up, handed over a business card, barked in imitation of the coach: "Mr. Keshevsky—Rumbling Rick, if I may—telephone me at your leisure. Have *I* got investments for you?"

CRUISING UP THE Jersey Turnpike on the way home Dad and I laughed about the coach's face at that moment—his dismay, disgust, disdain for my father all barely hidden—but I must have let on that I'd been embarrassed.

Pop said, "I know, I know. You think it's extortion. You think I'm using you. But, buddy, you've got to be fighting all the time. All the time, fighting. Because why, David?"

I mocked him mildly: "Because 'Opportunity Could Be Right in Front of You.'" Sign in his boss's office apparently, oft quoted.

"Exactly right. And I've got to be sharp these days, believe you me. Mr. Perdhomme is up my ass every second with a hot glowing poker, David. You should see the scars. I've got to be on my toes. No, not good enough. I have to be on my goddamned *toenails!*"

"Especially in these times," I said unhappily, since that was going to be the next line.

And those were bad times indeed. Kate's tuition at Yale was an issue, I'd come to understand. We hadn't had beef for dinner in weeks. Only a couple of months before, Dad had lost a briefcase with negotiable bonds inside, also his entire collection of illegal gold coins, also his raw diamonds, his vaunted Yangtze River pearls, all his paranoid investments, stuff he could physically touch, keep i

sight, keep protected from man and market: gone.

That briefcase!

He'd been bringing it to the office vault for safekeeping, he said, one of his occasional paroxysms of insecurity, and managed to *leave it on the train*, just another in a long series of self-imposed disasters. All the humor drained from his face as he remembered it now: "My fucking pearls! How could I be so stupid?"

I didn't want him crying. I said what I'd said a dozen times before: "It could have happened to anyone."

But he did cry, first just a little, his lip quivering, and then he was sobbing. He pulled over on a patch of grass, all there was for a shoulder on the Merritt Parkway, folded himself into the steering wheel, really broken.

"Dad?" I said.

"Never be a loser like me, David. Please, please, please. Don't say no to Princeton, David."

"Oh, Pop." I patted his back. "You're no loser." And because I knew I had to be plain, I added, "And as for Princeton, we'll see."

I was too big for the car (too big for a lot of things, come to think of it), sat there cramped and uncomfortable patting at his back, no further gesture I could make, just waiting him out. It had never been close to this bad, and, painful truth, for the first time he did seem like a loser to me. Finally I spoke, blubbing: "Mr. Perdhomme's got my ass in the fire, son. He's a bad oyster. If I come up with suicide, don't believe it!"

"Oh, come on, Dad. Mr. Perdhomme? Suicide?" Like my mom, I wasn't one for his histrionics.

He knew it, too, tried to be funny: "Unless it's by martini. Then you'll know it was real. That's my weapon of choice, David. If I'm dead of olives, you know I was depressed." Then coldly serious another big sob: "Anything else, go after that little prick Perdhomme. You hear me? Make that little prick pay!"

"I'll make him pay," I said gently. Humor thy father. Pat, pat, pat his back.

THE NEXT DAY I called Coach Keshevsky, told him yes.

My future as a winner secure, at least in Dad's view, I awaited the start of the Staples High school year, doing good deeds (mucking kennels at the ASPCA, litter at the cemetery, repairs at the Historical Society), my hair long enough for a baby ponytail, of which I was secretly vain. My father had no friends left, but every waiter and gas attendant, every neighbor too slow to avoid him, everyone he met, anyone who would listen, heard the news about Princeton. My mother had a different style. She seeded the story with a certain few friends, and the whole thing—my early acceptance, the unbelievable scholarship money, probable position on the varsity team as early as sophomore year, no need for a haircut—traveled in the way of such things till it reached Coach Powers' cauliflower ear.

Among my old teammates I still had vestigial friends (Jimpie not among them), and it was Cal Little, a huge tackle, smart in science, devastating on defense, that telephoned. "Congratulations," I said straight off. I'd taken the call on the illegal extension Dad had wired in the basement, where my capacity as post-football saint I'd been building new window boxes for a nursing home up Weston. "Coach says congratulations, too. And I'm supposed to kind of sweet-talk you and spit on my hands and pull on your dick and so forth, Lizard, but here it is straight: the old general needs your a

and he's ready to make a deal. He's got to save face. You're making him look like a shithead. Which he is, of course. Don't get me wrong."

"Tell him forget it."

"Lizard, you fucking won the war!"

"Tell Coach I'm taking ballet."

A FEW DAYS later a fellow in a tidy suit pulled Sylphide's freshly buffed silver Bentley into our cul-de-sac. Emerging well-buttoned and dignified, he clicked smartly up our flagstone walk, presenting himself at our door, knocking formally though it was wide open. I stood there in a towel staring down at him, my hair wet and stringing around my shoulders.

He regarded me without judgment, taking in my size, and said, "Mr. Hochmeyer?"

"He's at work."

"Mr. Lizard Hochmeyer?"

"Oh, okay, that's me."

He went on to explain with further formality (and a partly conquered working-class Boston accent) that he was employed by Sylphide. Which, of course, I knew. Kate had told me all about this guy, Sylphide's butler, Desmond: soul of discretion, heart of a lion, mind like an IBM computing machine, taking up whole air-conditioned rooms, as organized as a military parade. A person who could have run a bank, yet who'd taken this subservient position. This sacrifice he'd undertaken willingly for the good of the world, said his posture. In his eye, though, was something a little misplaced, slightly furtive.

I said what my mother would have said, and in her knowing tone, too: "I thought all the staff had been let go over there."

He smiled briefly. "Let us simply say, sir, that funding has been restored. I am the houseman. The others will be back on the job shortly, as well."

"Ah," I said, "Did Sylphide win her lawsuit?" I wanted gossip for Mom, whose attention could be won by such things.

The little butler—shorter even than Sylphide—smiled despite himself, his eyes darting. "I didn't say that. I said only that funding has been restored. Madame has sent you a gift, along with a check for your services during the brief absence of the groundsmen." He handed me a fragrant, gilt-edged envelope.

I'd thought I'd heard a lawn-mowing rig over there! Genuinely nonplussed, I said, "Oh, I don't want pay." I'd had plans to mow more, dreams of further impromptu visits with the dancer. I could not forget the feel of her cheek on my chest.

But the little man didn't hear. As I towered there in my towel, he clicked back to the car and opened its trunk, wrestled with a large, flat parcel wrapped in kraft paper. This he handed up to me with a bow I took to be ironical. He looked me over one more time, said a complimentary, "You, sir, are *gargantuan*."

"Two meters," I said. "We measured me in math class last year."

He approved of the metric system, sized me up, sized me down. Soon he'd be building me a coffin. "Your torso, it's a *keystone*," he sighed, those eyes darting. Suddenly professional again, he spun on his heel, clicked to the car, and drove off stately, not more than fifteen miles per hour.

Only when he was gone did I tear open the fragrant envelope. Inside was nothing I wanted, just a large check and an invoice in my own name, neatly typed, an accurate computation of the hours I put in mowing and a contractor's hourly rate, princely. I opened the parcel next and found a large photograph in a walnut frame: President Kennedy and Dabney himself, the two of them grinning after a joke, touching one another's shoulders. The president had signed it over to the rocker in black ink with "Great Vigor," the famous Kennedy catchphrase that comedians had made into a joke.

I trotted up to my room with the treasure, hid it in my closet, knowing my mom would never let me keep such a gift: she'd see it as the addled gesture of a woman in mourning. I preferred to see it as a promise of friendship.

I looked at President Kennedy and Dabney a lot over the next few weeks—two dead men—trying to discern in the image or frame or scrawl of presidential handwriting a message beyond thanks from Sylphide, but nothing was forthcoming. No invitation seemed implied, and without one I couldn't give myself to go back over to the High Side.

Meanwhile, the parties across the pond resumed, the deliveries of dresses in huge boxes and liquors and sculptures in ice, the constant inrushing of guests, the perpetual music—from the most delicate chamber quartet on the lawn to live, roaring rock 'n' roll barely muffled inside the great wall. Dabney's world of friends and hangers-on, all of them paying tribute to the great man at Sylphide's expense, or at least that's how *Look* magazine and I saw it, gentle Sylphide a victim of her husband's wild life.

ALTOGETHER, I FELT like a new kid in school. I suffered no great regret when I saw the football team practice or heard the roar of the sixth-period pep rallies on Fridays. The only thing that made me really feel the pain was sight of Jimpie, or worse, Jimp with Jinnie, the supercilious way they ignored me, her hand in the back pocket of his jeans.

In light of my stand against haircuts, I'd become a hero of the dress code. The artsy, intellectual crowd had taken an interest in me at lunchtime, and among them was Emily Bright, whom I'd known since grade school. Emily was also a tall person, very shy, known to be difficult, a hurt look behind granny glasses, long dresses, long legs hidden. She was angular, awkward, not everyone's idea of beauty, certainly not mine (no one but Jinnie would do for me). But she'd been voted Antioch Homecoming Queen in our junior year. The hippie types loved her, had invented a comical "antioch" tradition around her.

Emily was in my math class—Honors Calculus—and sat just in front of me, an accident of Mr. Ramsey's seating chart. Her hair was unbelievably rich and black, fragrant, thick and long like a thoroughbred's tail, always in a braid. She seemed short in a chair, her height all in her legs. On a warm day she wore a kind of jumper that left her upper arms bare, her dark, smooth skin laid over boyish muscles. When she raised her hand to answer Mr. Ramsey's questions, her wing muscles rose too, the skin of her shoulder folding. I spied the tuft of tidy, private hair under her arm and caught her scent, something in the category of vanilla, with an agreeable tinge of root, like a forest plant I'd tasted once in Boy Scouts.

I tapped her shoulder sometimes to ask a manufactured question about the math, just to see her face. Her eyes were black and burned always. She'd turn unhappily, look me over, smoldering. Did I want to get her in trouble? But Mr. Ramsey was oblivious, always writing on the chalkboard with the

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