

The Art of
Love
and Other
Stories

By R. A. Conti

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Authors Note:

Warning: The stories in this collection are love stories, so they contain strong sexual content.

The Art of Love opens with a sex scene. *Finding True Love* has several, all of which are somewhat unusual (a woman with two gay men.) *Penelope* has some sex scenes as well.

I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

For more of my writings, please visit my blog:
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The Art of Love

1.

“That’s not how you hold it,” Joseph said. The paintbrush wobbled in her hand. He put his thumb and forefinger over hers and gently squeezed. The brush immediately stopped shaking. “Feel the pressure?” he asked. She nodded. “You can add more,” he said, and then squeezed a little harder. “Feel that?”

“Yes,” she said, “Do you?” Her question puzzled him, until he looked down, and saw her hand on his zipper.

”Damn,” he said. No one had touched him there in a long time.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, as she lifted her hand away.

“It’s okay.” She was new to his Adult Art Class. He recalled that her name was Naomi, and she was in her sixties. He tried to figure out what she was up to, and whether he should let her continue. She decided for him.

She unzipped his pants, touched his penis through his boxer shorts, and then stroked her fingers gently up and down. He realized it was not a painting problem that she needed his help with. He also realized *he* had a problem.

“I’m not handsome, or sexy, or even young,” he protested, but not too forcefully.

“None of that matters to me,” she said, as she pressed a little harder. He sighed.

“Touch me,” she said. He hesitated. “Anywhere you want to,” she added, urging him on. He glided his fingertips from her wrist to her shoulders, but barely touched her skin. She trembled when he reached her neck. “Do that again,” she whispered. Her voice had changed from shy to sultry.

Instead of repeating the move, he slowly reached his hand under the hem of her skirt, and gently slid it up her

calf to her knees. “Keep going,” she whispered, delighted by his impulsiveness. He moved his fingers along the inside of her thigh, and reached toward her crotch. “You’re very gentle,” she said, appreciatively.

“I’m also very married,” he confessed, as he reluctantly pulled his hand away. He hoped there would be more.

“So am I, baby,” she replied in a sultry voice. No one had called him ‘baby’ for a long time. He had assumed she was just a lonely, horny widow. He was right about lonely, and horny, but wrong about ‘widow.’ She leaned over and kissed him, and then gazed into his eyes. “Should we keep going?” she whispered.

“You mean...?” he mumbled, astonished. She smiled and nodded. “Right *here*?” he asked. He was already hard, and did not wait for her reply.

He could have stopped a few moments ago, but now he wanted to go all the way. He took down his pants and shorts. She stood up, turned around, and slowly pulled her skirt to her waist. It reminded him of a curtain going up in a theater. *The show’s about to begin*, he thought.

She lowered her panties, bent down over the table, and waited for him. He stood up and moved behind her. His penis touched her ass, and she held her breath. Then he moved it slowly until it touched the most private place on her body. She swayed from side to side.

“Please?” she said, encouragingly.

He did not hesitate. He pushed himself into a strange woman who was not his wife. It was easier than he would have imagined. It had been a long time for him. He did not know why, but he felt he was where he belonged.

“Do whatever you want,” she murmured. “You can move, or stay still. I just need to feel you there.”

After a long, long drought, he was fucking again. He moved in and out, slowly and deliberately. It was exquisite. “Oh. My. God! That’s perfect!” she said, in a

passionate whisper. She was giving him pleasure he had not enjoyed for years.

They were making love in a classroom, with the lights on; students and teachers were passing in the hall. At any moment, someone could walk in and catch them. He realized the risk and sped up. She moaned. That was all he needed to finish.

They put their clothes back, gathered their art supplies, and headed for the door. "Wait," he said. "Can we meet again?" She nodded, but he was almost certain he would never see her again.

2.

She showed up for the next class. He smiled when she came in, but still had his doubts. He worried she had come to her senses, and would turn him down. She just sat and prepared her art supplies.

After class, he asked her, "Do you still want to meet?" She smiled and nodded shyly. His friend David was away on business for a few months and Joseph was looking after his condo. He handed her the address. "Monday afternoon?" She nodded again. "Around two?"

"I'll be there," she said, and hurried out.

As he drove home, he thought about what they had already done, and were about to do. His doubts returned. Was this a good idea? Were they crazy? Had it already gone too far? He did not want to admit that all the answers were 'yes.' He wanted to see what would happen next.

3.

Naomi was waiting when he arrived. She calmly removed her clothes as soon they were inside. "This is who I am," she said. "This is all of me, there's nothing else. If you like what you see, I'm yours." She paused, allowing him time to respond. "Otherwise, I'll put my clothes on, and leave." He did not speak, and finished undressing.

“I’m merely Joseph. What you see is what you get.”

“I like what I see, Joseph.” Her reply startled him. He did not think he was much to look at.

“Shall we make ourselves at home?” They both knew he was not inviting her to the kitchen so they could have a sandwich and a beer. He was inviting her to bed. He took her hand, and led her to the bedroom. She went to the right side of the bed, and he walked to the left.

“Now, what?” she said. He had assumed they both knew what was coming next, and then realized she was teasing him.

“No idea,” he said, jokingly.

“It’s chilly. I’m getting under the covers.” She slid under the blanket, and pulled it up to her chin.

“Mind if I join you?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she teased.

He got in and lay close to Naomi. He realized he knew nothing about her. Maybe it was better to keep this anonymous.

“So what do you do, Joseph?” she asked.

“I’m retired. You?”

“Same.” Long pause. “I don’t have any other questions, for now,” she said. She sounded like a lawyer. “But if you want to know more about *me*...” He did, but the questions could wait.

He wanted to make love again. He wanted to see if it would be as exciting as the first time. Neither of them made the first move. There was another long pause.

“We gotta talk about it, don’t we?” she asked. He knew what she meant.

“I think so,” he answered, reluctantly. He did not want to, not yet.

“What the hell did we think we were doing?” she said.

“I wasn’t thinking,” he replied, boldly. “I was just *doing*.”

“You mean fucking?” she said, and then giggled.
“Yeah; me, too.”

“So maybe we should do it again?” he suggested.

“A reenactment?” she said, naughtily. He kissed her and then began stroking her body.

“No, let’s make it an *encore*,” he said, and hoped it would be the first of many.

4.

“You know, I’m not falling in love with you,” Naomi said. She was on her back, looking up. He was on his side looking at her. After several afternoon trysts, he had come to know all of her body. He liked knowing all of it.

“I didn’t think you wanted to,” he said.

“I expected that would happen. I thought the love that was missing from my life was related to you.”

“It wasn’t?” he asked, surprised.

“No. It was related to *me*. The love I was missing was love for my own life.” Her statement puzzled him. “I didn’t realize that I had given up. I was just waiting for old age, sickness, and death.” She paused, lost in thought, as if she was trying to find the words she needed. “I wasn’t even suffering. I wasn’t feeling anything at all. I was numb. You’ve made me feel, again.”

“All I did was touch your hand,” he smiled. He had not seen her in such a reflective mood before. She went on.

“Love is for the kids. You know what I mean; all that sweaty passion and fervent desire; the forever-after stuff. I do *not* want that. I want *this*.” She reached out and touched his thigh.

“A little to the left,” he directed her toward his penis. She giggled.

“No, not just that; *you*,” she whispered. “That’s all,” she added, astonishing him. He never expected her to want him. Want to be with him, but not want him.

She started to cry. He hugged her, but did not understand why she cried. Was it because this was the first time she realized she wanted him? She appeared to be struggling with her feelings. He waited patiently for her to explain.

“This is new. I’ve never felt this way before,” she finally said.

“What way?” he asked, puzzled by what she meant.

“Content. It’s perfection. I love it.”

“You’ve never felt contentment?” he asked, surprised.

“No. There always seemed to be something missing.”

“Me?”

“No, not you. I didn’t know you were missing because I didn’t know you existed. Now I am so glad I found you, and you can be naked in this bed listening to me.” There was another long silence.

“When we were young we wanted it to be like this forever,” he said, reflectively. “Now that we’re old, we know there is no forever. There’s just right now.”

“Yes!” She exclaimed, and then rolled over on her side and kissed him. “Yes, yes, YES! Oh, thank-you.” Her fervor surprised him.

“For what?”

“For understanding me. For knowing there is no...”

“Happily ever after?” She looked intensely into his eyes. He had the strangest feeling she was trying to find her ‘happily ever after’ somewhere inside of him. “What are you looking for?” he gently asked.

“Oh, I’m not looking. I’m *seeing*. I’m seeing you.” She penetrated deeper, right into his soul. He liked having her inside him. It felt like a new way of making love.

“You’re inside me right now,” he whispered, surprised he could feel her there.

“I know.”

“I think you’ve found a place I never knew existed,” he said. She seemed surprised. “Maybe it’s been there waiting for you to find it.”

“No.” she unexpectedly said. “No. It’s been there, but it wasn’t waiting for me. That would mean it somehow knew about me. But we didn’t know about each other until we met. Whatever that place is, it’s all yours. But I like being there.” He looked at her, unsure of how to respond. “Maybe it’s your soul.” She was serious.

He smiled back at her. “I don’t know; maybe it is,” he said, tentatively. He did not care what name it had, so long as she was in it.

“You know, I’m glad I didn’t meet you when we were younger, when all that dating and mating was happening,” she said.

“Oh?” he asked, surprised by her comment.

“We would probably have been certain we were soul mates.”

“Would that have been that so bad?” he asked.

“No, but I think the intensity would have burned me out.”

“You’re not going to burn out on me now, are you?” he teased.

“No way. I know how to keep the fire burning without it burning me; I didn’t know how, back when I was young.” She looked at him.

“You’re right. Neither did I.” There was a gentle, sweet silence. It felt as if they had finished the conversation. Maybe they had said all they needed to say to each other. Maybe they had reached as deep inside each other as they were going, for now.

“There’s something I gotta ask,” he said, after a long silence. She looked at him, expectantly.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“Did we just fall in love?”

She sighed, and then smiled. “No. We didn’t.”

“Whew. That was close!” he exclaimed. She laughed, and he rolled over on top of her. She opened her legs for him. He gently entered her and they both said ‘oh’ at the same time.

They went back to being Joseph and Naomi. They did not need anything else. He fucked her slowly and whispered her name several times. She did not reply. She just smiled each time.

All that other stuff that was so important when they were young was unimportant now. Back then, there was a future. Now there was only the present. They were here, in it, making love. That was all they needed, or wanted, to do.

5.

“That night after art class, when I touched your zipper; you didn’t push my hand away,” Naomi said, “Why?” They were in bed, tired, and did not feel like making love again.

He had the feeling the question had been on her mind for a while.

“It just felt nice,” he replied. She nodded.

“Then you let me go further.”

“I wanted you to. As soon as you increased the pressure of your hand on my zipper, I wanted just to let you go as far as you wanted.”

“You thought I was seducing you?”

“No, I sensed that if I surrendered, you would have stopped. It seemed you wanted me to feel you, to feel what you were doing, like you were sending me a message.”

“Did you think about the consequences of what we were doing?” she asked.

“Consequences?”

“Your wife. My husband. Adultery. Betrayal. That stuff?”

“No. Did you consider all that before you touched me?”

“Actually, none of that was important,” she said. He felt puzzled. “I had figured out what was missing from my life; what I wanted; what I needed. I just didn’t think it would ever happen. I assumed it was all just an old woman’s fantasy, and regret. Then you touched me and, suddenly, *something* was happening; and I wanted everything that could possibly happen to happen right then and there. I wanted to go all the way. I thought it was my only opportunity. I didn’t care. I just wanted to feel something.”

“So that’s why you didn’t hesitate to say yes when I asked you if we could meet again. I expected you to say no,” he confessed. She looked at him, embarrassed. “Why did you say yes so fast?” he asked.

“I knew I would say yes when you were still inside me.”

“Really?”

“I wanted to pull you in as deep as I could. That’s when I knew that if you offered more, I would not hesitate to accept. When you came inside me, I almost burst out crying.”

“My God! Did I hurt you?”

“No. I know it’s a cliché, but they were tears of happiness. I realized that I had experienced perfection. That thing I was certain could *never* happen, had just happened, and I felt loved. Not by you, but by the Universe.”

“Sounds like you had an epiphany.”

“Don’t tease me!” she protested, and then smiled. “There we were pretending to be artists, striving for perfection; and then, when we weren’t actually doing art, we achieved perfection.” Her profound insight awed him.

“Yes. I felt it too, but I didn’t understand it until now.”

“This doesn’t sound all mushy does it?” she asked, and then suddenly switched to a new topic. “Neither of us wants to break up our marriages.”

“Just because we don’t want to be mushy, doesn’t mean we can’t say what we feel,” he said. His already knew his marriage was no longer a concern.

“But our marriages?” she pressed.

“Well, I love you, but I don’t want you.”

“I feel the same about you.” They were in harmony. That was all that was important.

They did not have a routine. They had not created anything like an affair. They planned one date ahead. Any date could be their last, if either of them chose not to agree to the next. There was no name for what they were doing.

“So, will there be a next time?” he asked.

“Let me think about it.”

“I’m waiting...”

“I’m thinking. Okay, yes. I think I can work you in.”

“Well, if you’re too busy?” he teased.

“I know this will sound mushy again, but I never want to be too busy to be with you.”

“Thanks. I was hoping you’d say that. I really don’t know what I would do if we stopped,” he said.

“Maybe we should talk about that sometime. Maybe we could talk about what if we had never started? What would our lives be like right now? What would you be doing if you weren’t here with me? And what would our lives be like if we had to stop seeing each other?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t even want to think about that.”

“Me, neither. How about I get on top for a while? Do you like it that way?”

“I haven’t really done that,” he replied.

“Oh. Well, Don’t be afraid. I’ll show you what to do, and I’ll take it real slow...,” she teased.

“Oh, I feel better already!” he said, as she straddled him.

6.

He did not want to say the words, but he had to tell her. "This is the last time we can be here. David's coming home soon."

"Oh, no!" She immediately looked devastated.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what we can do. I can't afford a motel, or hotel."

"Me, neither," she said, dejectedly. Then she tried to lighten the gloom. "Well, maybe we could rob a bank. Then we'd have all the money we need."

"It's been so long since I did any bank robbing that I'd probably mess it up and we'd get caught. Then we'd never see each other again," he said, and smiled. He knew it sounded lame, but hoped she would not feel so glum.

"Life of crime, huh?"

"Long story." They were grateful for the humorous interlude.

"Maybe we could use the art room?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "We might get time to make love, but not get naked and talk like we do now. Sooner or later somebody would catch us."

She tried more humor. "Couldn't we just tell them we were posing for each other?"

"Yeah, and the fact that we were panting, and our skin was flushed was just a coincidence!"

"Couldn't you just ask David to let us use his guest room?"

"No. He's not my friend so much as my wife's. I'm sure he would feel he should tell her. You don't have any friends with condos?" She shook her head.

"I have one other possibility," he said. "My grandson Gary has a place of his own. He's struggling to pay for rent, a car, and a girlfriend. Maybe I could offer to help him with the rent."

She liked the idea, but saw the risk. “That would mean telling someone else about us. Are we ready for that?” she asked.

“I felt ready a while ago.”

7.

“I was wondering if I could use your apartment while you’re at work,” Joseph said, and then paused to assess Gary’s reaction. “I’m working on a new project and I need some solitude. I wouldn’t be here a lot, and I would coordinate with you. I could give you something towards your rent.”

Gary suspected why Joseph had asked. “Gramps, is this project a woman?”

“Yes,” Joseph answered, sheepishly. “How did you know?”

“Just a hunch. Been seeing her long?”

“Several months. I wouldn’t expect you to lie for me; just don’t tell anyone else.”

“Oh, I don’t mind lying for you. I think it’s awesome.” Gary surprised him. He had assumed his grandson would be agreeable, but not approving.

“You do?”

“I don’t see you as often as I did when I was a kid, but I’ve noticed you’re different than you were back then.”

“Different, how?”

“You don’t talk much. Not to me, anyway. You used to tell me stuff about life, about what I could be, or do, when I grew up. Now that we’re both adults, you don’t have anything to say to me. Just a bland, ‘Hello, how you doing, what’s new?’ Stuff like that. I thought maybe it had something to do with me. Maybe you just don’t like me anymore. Or maybe you just got old.”

“I still love you,” Joseph said. “But, yes, I just got old.”

“So I’m happy that you’re seeing someone, because it shows you haven’t given up on life.”

“You’re pretty smart for a young guy. How did you get all this wisdom?”

“From you. I was listening.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“I’ll get you a key. We’ll have to coordinate when you’re gonna be here, but I work a lot. You could stay here for as long as you want.”

“Few hours. Just enough to be together.”

“So who is she? Can I meet her?”

“Her name is Naomi. I’ll ask her if she wants to meet you. I think she’ll say yes.”

“Are you planning to divorce Grandma? That could cause major problems in the family.”

“No. Let me give you a check. I hope it helps.”

“Oh, it will, believe me. Thanks for coming to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there were lots of times when I needed something; and, whatever it was, you were always eager to help me out.”

“That’s just stuff grandfathers do. It was nothing special.”

“But it was, to me. You made me feel special. I always wanted to find a way to repay you. Now I can. You can bring Naomi over here as often as you want, and stay for as long as you like. If she makes you happy, that’s all I care about.”

8.

Gary opened the door and the unreality of what he saw struck him. As far back as he could remember the only woman he had ever seen with his grandfather was his grandmother, Lois. Now Joseph stood there with his arm around a woman who was not his grandma. Naomi smiled

as she came in the door. She did not resemble his grandma at all.

Lois was taller than Joseph. She had an elongated face, a prominent, almost patrician nose, tired eyes, and blonde hair. Her voice was soft, now that she was old; but it had been loud when Gary was a kid. She had slowly gained weight over the years, was widest at her waist, and tapered to her head and feet. There was an air of solemnity about her. She never seemed to smile.

Naomi was slightly shorter than Joseph. She had thick, flowing steel-gray hair that draped to her shoulders. Her face was round, her nose small, and her mouth seemed large. Her eyes were a bright sky-blue. Her voice was lower than Lois's, and seemed slightly rough.

She wore loose-fitting clothing. Her top had large sleeves, and fell freely to her waist. Her trousers were baggy; the cuffs rolled up as if they were her garden pants. Gary noticed the fabric had richness to it.

Joseph introduced Naomi, "This is my grandson, Gary."

She immediately smiled and hugged Gary. "So you're our savior! Thank-you!" Her warmth charmed him.

"This is something I never thought could happen," Gary said.

"What do you mean?"

"If I imagined all the stuff my Grandfather could do, I would never in a million years imagine he would ever introduce me to his girlfriend." He smiled at Naomi.

"Neither would I; but wonderful things happen when you least expect them," Joseph said.

"You wanna tell me about it?"

"It?" Joseph asked.

"This wonderful thing that happened," Gary said.

They told him their story.

“I have to go. You guys enjoy my place. Consider it your place, from now on.” He hugged Naomi, and then left them alone.

As Gary drove to work, he thought about how strange it was to see his grandfather and Naomi together. It was obvious Joseph was happy; but it was more than that. Gary assumed they were in love. *Imagine my grandfather falling in love, at his age! I guess the old guy's still got it. I hope I still got it when I'm that old*, he thought.

Nevertheless, he worried about what would happen if the family found out. He assumed it would devastate his grandmother. She would see it as rejection, negation, and her personal failure. His Mom, Patricia, would also freak out. They would not care that Joseph was no longer morose, distant, and pessimistic.

Gary was happy that Joseph was happy. *Why couldn't people grow up? Gary thought. Why couldn't they be happy when people they cared about were happy?*

He did not think there was anything his grandmother could do to give his grandfather what Naomi gave him. It was that simple. He also worried about his grandfather. What would happen to him when all this ended?

9.

“Oh, sorry Gramps. I didn't mean to barge in on you,” Gary said when he and his girlfriend Clarissa walked in.

“It's okay. I was just finishing up for the day. Who's this?” Joseph asked, smiling.

“Granddad, meet Clarissa.”

“It's a pleasure!” She threw her arms around Joseph, and then hugged him tightly. Then he said good-bye and left.

“So why was your grandfather here?” she asked, after Joseph was gone. “Did your granny throw him out?”

“He’s working on a project, and needs isolation. Plus, he’s helping me with the rent,” Gary explained.

“So, this project, what’s her name?” Clarissa asked, smiling coquettishly.

“What do you mean?”

“He wasn’t working. Where was his laptop? He didn’t have a briefcase. He wasn’t even carrying a pencil or paper. What was he *really* doing here?”

“Naomi. I met her. She’s nice.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Yes. How did he look to you, just now?” Gary asked. She thought for a moment.

“Happy, I guess.”

“That’s right. For years, he’s been grim, emotionless, and numb. I had forgotten how warm and loving he used to be. He’s like that again.”

“Are they in love?”

“I think so, although they have this arrangement that they won’t fall in love.”

“But they did?” she asked, pleased.

“Looks like it. I think it’s great.”

“And what about your grandmother? How would she feel if she knew?” Clarissa asked, concerned.

“I really don’t know; and, anyway, she’s never gonna find out.”

“Oh, you agreed to keep it a secret between you two?”

“Yeah. Just between us.”

“And now me.”

Gary frowned. “Please, Clarissa, promise me you won’t tell anyone. I think it’s beautiful, and I don’t want anyone to get hurt. As long as no one knows, everything’s okay.” His seriousness struck Clarissa. *He must really love his grandfather*, she thought.

“I didn’t know you were such a romantic. It’s a real turn-on. You ever walk in on them?”

“No!”

“Wouldn’t you like to catch them doing it?”

“Of course not! Why would I want to do that?”

Gary pretended her question appalled him, but he was delighted she was joking about sex.

“To make them feel like a couple of horny teenagers who got caught doing the nasty.” She paused, and then asked, “You think she’s pretty?”

“Who?”

“Naomi. You think she’s attractive?”

“You can tell by just looking at her that she was a really pretty girl, when she was around your age.”

“You can tell, huh? You’re into old ladies, now?” she teased.

“She’s the same age as my grandma!” Gary protested.

“And your grandma’s not so old, is she? Does he think she’s hot?”

“I don’t know whether that matters to either of them, being hot or not.”

“You sure they’re not just a couple of horny seniors?”

“I think there’s something else going on. He’s not happy just because he’s having sex. It’s more than that.”

“So what is it? You gonna tell me they have a spiritual connection?”

“They have some kind of connection. I don’t know what it is. You can almost feel it when they’re together. It’s like they have their own little universe. They’re the only two people in it. It obeys different natural laws than our universe does. It’s fueled by love.”

“So you’re sure they’re in love?”

“They say they’re not. Either they won’t admit it or it’s just not important to them.”

“How could love not be important to them?”

“Anyway, Naomi got it going on,” Gary said, smiling. Clarissa laughed.

“I’d like to meet her. Why don’t you invite them for dinner? I’ll cook.”

“I don’t know if they’ll come.”

“Make him feel he owes you for letting them use your place,” Clarissa said. Gary nodded in agreement. He would try it.

10.

“Mom! What’s wrong?” Patricia had found her mother sobbing. “Did something happen to Dad?”

“He doesn’t love me anymore!” Lois blurted out.

“Dad?” she asked, in disbelief. “Why do you say that?” Lois looked at her daughter.

“Your father has a girlfriend,” she said, bluntly. Just the thought made her cry even more. Lois’s statement stunned Patricia.

“A girlfriend! Really? How can you be sure?”

“He’s been different lately. He’s been pleasant, easy-going, and happy.” Patricia thought her Mom was exaggerating.

“Maybe he’s just feeling good.”

“That’s what he told me, that he’s finally started enjoying his retirement.”

“But you don’t believe him?”

“Well, no. He’s enjoying it with somebody else, not me.”

“Mom, I hope you’re wrong.” Patricia said.

“I’m not,” Lois said as she started to cry again. “My feelings are *never* wrong.” Patricia hugged her, but refused to believe her Dad was having an affair.

“Dad wouldn’t do that!” It felt unreal to talk about her father’s adultery with her Mom.

“He is doing it. I know he is. One of his volunteer jobs isn’t really a volunteer job. It’s when he sees *her*.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“Of course not.”

“You have to confront him! Give him a chance to deny it. He won’t lie to you.”

“No. He won’t lie. He’ll just walk out on me.” Lois had resigned herself to the worst.

“Do you want me to spy on him?” Patricia asked, trying to be helpful. Lois shook her head. “Then what else can I do?”

“Nothing. Nobody can do anything.”

“How about if I just talk to him? Make him come to his senses? Tell him how much this is hurting you?”

“It won’t do any good, but you can try.”

11.

When Clarissa met Naomi and Joseph, she immediately sensed they were a warm, comfortable, and easy-going couple.

Naomi seemed shy at first. Then Clarissa took her aside and told her that the thought of what they did when they were at Gary’s apartment excited her. Naomi sensed Clarissa was a passionate young woman.

“If you wanna take Gary into the bedroom for a while, I’ll finish cooking dinner,” she offered, smiling. Clarissa shook her head.

“I can wait. Just make it better.”

“Don’t wait too long or you’ll get old like me and start to worry that you don’t have much time left.”

“For sex?” Clarissa asked, curious. Naomi shook her head. “For love?”

“For *life*,” Naomi said, softly.

“*That’s* what this is about?”

Naomi told Clarissa about her thoughts in the months before she met Joseph.

“So you think it was fate?”

“No. It was just an accident. He touched me and bells went off inside my head.”

“I envy you those bells.”

“You haven’t heard them yet?” Naomi asked. Clarissa shook her head. “You might never hear them, but that doesn’t mean anything is wrong,” she added.

“I guess you’re right. Gary and I have these little moments when we connect, and everything just stops. We look at each other but don’t say anything. Then the connection fades.”

“If you’re lucky enough to have those little connections, they can develop into a big connection that will be the best thing that ever happened to you. I think you’re on your way.”

“Thanks. Wanna eat?”

After they sat down, Clarissa smiled and said, “Well, I’ve just cooked you this lovely dinner. While you’re eating you’re gonna tell us all about how you got together. Please?”

“Well, it’s really not all that interesting,” Joseph started to say. Naomi smiled.

“*Every* detail!” Clarissa insisted.

“I was teaching a painting course at the Community College,” Joseph began. “Mostly of my students were older adults. Naomi was one of them.”

Clarissa pretended Joseph had shocked her. “You seduced your student?” she said, tauntingly. “Couldn’t you get in trouble for that?”

“I could if that’s what happened. But I wasn’t the one who did the seducing.”

Naomi continued the story. “It was the second or third class, and the first time we were gonna paint anything. He had set up a simple still life; just some objects of different sizes and shapes, each a different color. We were working on getting the shapes and sizes right so objects would stay in proportion. Except I couldn’t make the brush

do what I wanted. At the end of the class I asked him to tell me what I was doing wrong.”

“So I sat down on her left and told her to pick up the brush and pretend to paint something on the canvas. Right away I noticed the brush was wobbling.” He described what happened next. Gary and Clarissa’s eyes widened in surprise.

“No way! You *did* it right there in the classroom?” Gary said, astonished. Naomi and Joseph smiled bashfully, and nodded.

Clarissa teased Joseph, “Did you care?”

“No. By that point I didn’t care about anything but the astonishing woman I was making love to.”

“So, Naomi, had you been planning this? Were you hot for teacher?” Clarissa asked, playfully.

“I wasn’t hot for anything; hadn’t been for a long time,” Naomi replied, forlornly.

Clarissa was having fun teasing the old people about screwing. “So you were just horny?”

“No, I wasn’t horny; but I *was* on fire,” Naomi answered, enigmatically.

“By the next class I had found a place where we could be alone for as long as we wanted,” Joseph continued their story. “We made a date. I honestly didn’t think she would show up. I came early and she was already there.”

“We started to undress as soon as we were inside. She whispered in my ear, ‘I don’t care whether we make love; I just want to be naked with you.’ It was the best idea I’d heard in a *very* long time.”

“So...what, then?”

“I think we’ve told you enough.”

“That was beautiful, I think. I really don’t understand it, though,” Clarissa said.

“Neither do we.”

12.

“Just because Clarissa’s moving in doesn’t mean you can’t still use the place,” Gary said.

“No way, Gary. You guys are entitled to your privacy,” Naomi said, and Joseph nodded in agreement. “You wouldn’t want to have to straighten up every time we came over, would you?” Naomi asked. She was insistent that Gary and Clarissa deserved their privacy. Gary shrugged. “No, you wouldn’t,” she said. That was the end of the conversation.

Later, Joseph and Naomi discussed what they should do. “Well, this is the moment of truth, I guess.” She paused and he was silent, so she continued. “Should we look for our own place?” She looked expectantly at him, but he remained silent. She started to become uneasy. Had she said too much? Was this as far as their relationship would go?

Finally, he said, in a quiet voice, “Lois will want David to be her lawyer.” Joseph’s statement startled her. They had suddenly crossed the line. They were going to transform their lives.

“David? The guy with the condo?”

“Yeah. He’s not just one of Lois’s old friends; he is our lawyer, too. I’ll consult him. He’ll recommend somebody to be my lawyer. I trust him to give me good advice.”

“Even about this?” Naomi was worried about confidentiality.

“He will have to keep it to himself for a couple days until the papers are drawn up.”

By ending their marriages, they were going to hurt people they once loved more than anyone else in the world. People they had built lives with. Now they wanted to take those lives apart because they had become silent, empty, and cold.

As they had gotten to know each other, a wonderful new world had opened before them. They slowly discovered they could have new, different, happy, and loving lives. They decided they wanted to settle down and spend the rest of their lives together in their new world.

Later, in a dream within a dream, he met and fell in love with a beautiful woman. In the dream-time they lived a rich, loving, happy, and magical life together. Then, still inside the dream, he awoke and discovered she had only been an illusion. Grief and sorrow overwhelmed him.

Then he fully awoke, and felt lingering sadness from the dream. He lay there, worried he would discover that Naomi had also been a dream. After a moment of sadness, he felt her presence as she slept peacefully beside him. She had not vanished like the woman in the dream. She was real, and she was his.

13.

“This doesn’t feel right, somehow,” Naomi said, as she looked around at their sparsely furnished apartment. Right now, it was the place where they could be alone. Soon it would be their new home. The few objects they owned had already taken on a special glow, as if suffused with the warmth of their love for each other.

“What do you mean?”

“It feels like a magical beginning, but it can’t be. We can’t start our lives over again.”

“I guess what’s beginning is a new happiness. That’s all. Not a brand-new future together, like the first time,” he added.

“Yes, a new happiness. Not like the first time; but just life, period. Is that enough?” They both felt certain that it was.

“Whether it’s for one day, or one year, or one decade doesn’t matter - so long as I’m with you,” she said, and looked at him. The enormity of what they had done

finally struck them. They had taken the first step toward starting a new life together. It seemed like it should have been impossible or forbidden, but they had done it.

“If we want to be honest, likely it’s the beginning of the end,” he said, softly, suddenly aware of how fragile their new life was. Whether it was a day, a week, a month, a year, or a decade, did time matter anymore?

She did not think he was being morbid. They accepted the fragility of life and shared philosophical observations with each other. The unlikelihood of them ever having found each other still awed them.

They knew their happiness was not ever-after. It was right here, right now; and that was all that mattered. They were not denying the future. It was no longer important. The only important thing was that was that they could be together, for as long as they had left. That was blissful happiness, to them.

It was the end. Well, it was the beginning of the end, anyway.

14.

Joseph waited until Lois left to go shopping, and then placed the divorce papers on the kitchen counter. He wished there could be another, kinder way to leave, but could not think of one. Then he locked the door to his past, and let it go.

Naomi handed the divorce papers to George. He stared at them as if he did not know what they could possibly be. He looked up at her with a shocked, wounded look on his face. She felt she needed to explain, make it clear what was happening.

“I’ve met someone else and we want to be together,” she said, softly.

George immediately pleaded, “Can’t we talk about this?” She shook her head. “Please? You owe me that much.”

“I’m sorry. Talk won’t change anything. I guess our lawyers will be in touch with each other.” She wanted to add a casual, ‘Have a nice day,’ to lighten the moment but decided it was not the kind of moment that could be lightened. She walked out.

Leaving was the hardest part. The rest was all lawyers, and paperwork. George called her later, and begged to meet her, but she turned him down. It would just have made it worse for him. She did not want to hurt him anymore.

Lois did not call Joseph. He wondered whether he hurt her so deeply that she was shocked into immobility, and he felt guilty.

15.

Gary’s mother, Patricia, called Joseph and asked, tersely, “What the hell is going on?”

“Your Mom and I are getting a divorce,” he said, calmly, as if he was just mentioning they were going out to dinner, fixing up the house, or taking a trip.

Patricia fumed. “No, Dad. *You’re* getting the divorce. Mind telling me why?” she demanded.

“I met someone else and we want to spend the rest of our lives together.”

“So Mom was right. She told me months ago you were seeing someone. I didn’t believe her.”

“She knew?”

“She suspected. You know how good her intuition is.” Joseph did not reply. “She doesn’t want the divorce,” Patricia said.

“It’s a done deal.”

“Done deal? What about your past? Was your entire marriage just a ‘deal?’”

“I know you’re shocked, but this really doesn’t involve you.”

“Yes it does! It involves your whole family. You can’t do this!”

“Why can’t I do it?” Her father seemed unreasonable and stubborn, which enraged her even more.

“You fucking *married* her. You made babies, struggled with bills, houses, careers. Remember all that? You did those things together, always a team. Until now.”

Joseph did not reply. There was a long silence. “Dad? Don’t you have anything to say?” He wanted to tell her she was right, but that it was all in the distant past, and it no longer mattered, so he remained quiet. She started to cry.

“I’m sorry, Pat, I really am,” he said, contritely. “Sorry if this hurts you. I love someone else, now. There was no other way.”

“No other way? Remember ‘till death do us part?’ Does that sound familiar?” He had no more answers to give. There were none. He had finished with that life. He hoped she would just let it go for now.

“I don’t think this conversation is going anywhere,” he said, kindly. “Maybe we can talk about this some other time.” She did not reply and hung up.

“I love you, too,” he said, into a dead phone. He already knew her likely retort, ‘Yeah, right.’

He understood why Patricia felt so hurt. She was their oldest child. She her Mom had a special bond. He hoped his other family members would not react as she had. Gary was already on his side. He would have to wait and see how the others felt. It was not going to be easy.

For the first time he worried that not only would they stop loving him, they might hate him. Or, worse, their feelings about him might divide the family. Nevertheless, it was too late to turn back. Even if he agreed to stay with Lois, everybody would know he did not love her. He did not hate her, either. He just loved someone else.

He wished they would just accept his feelings. He was not disowning or abandoning them. He realized he was going to have to deal with their true feelings as well, and that might turn out to be more difficult than he first thought.

16.

“The night before our wedding, Gary and I went to dinner with Naomi and Joseph,” Clarissa said. She stood at the small podium and looked out at a full room. Joseph had many friends from his job, volunteer work, and the senior community where he and Naomi lived. They had all come to pay their respects.

“He wanted to give us some unsolicited advice, and insisted we listen carefully.” She paused, and noticed Lois, Patricia, and Joseph’s other children had arrived late and sat in the back.

“He confessed that he and Naomi should never have married.” She paused and looked at Naomi, who smiled as she recalled the conversation. “His statement shocked us. Joseph and Naomi were one of the most loving couples we had ever met. He said it should have been impossible for them to have ever found each other. He blamed himself that it happened.” She paused, and glanced at Lois, to see whether she was listening.

“He told us that Naomi woke up something inside him when they met. He felt as if he had suddenly come back to life. He had been numb; there were no feelings of any kind in his life. Over the years, his love for his first wife became weaker and weaker, and finally their marriage just died.

“He thought maybe he could revive it, but it was too late. He could not go backward to revive his old love, so he went forward into new love. But he was sorry. Not that he and Naomi found each other; but that he and his first wife had lost each other.

“Then he told us we should work very hard every day to make sure what happened to him didn’t happen to us. Our marriage should be the center of our lives. He made us promise to cultivate and nurture it. Every morning we should thank God that we had each other. We must never let our marriage weaken and die because once it does, it can’t be revived.

“That was his advice: ‘Don’t let your marriage die.’ Gary and I live by his advice. I hope you will, too. Thank-you for coming.”

She nodded to the funeral director. He stepped up to the podium and invited everyone to a luncheon to celebrate Joseph’s life. He told them to go out the door and down the steps to the dining room.

Then Naomi took Clarissa’s hand and they both walked to the doorway. They stood where they could thank everyone as they filed out. People hugged them, and thanked them for a beautiful service.

Suddenly Lois stood, crying, in front of Clarissa. She hugged Clarissa and said, “Thank-you for explaining it.” Then she looked at Naomi and said, “May I stand next to you?” Naomi extended her hand. They held on to each other for a long time.

17.

“Before you leave, can you help me find my canvas and paints?” Naomi asked.

“Sure,” said Clarissa. Her children watched as their Mom disappeared into the closet, rummaged around, and then emerged with Naomi’s art supplies. She handed them to Naomi.

Clarissa, Gary and their kids occasionally visited Naomi, and she sometimes stayed with them. Clarissa had repeatedly begged her to live with them after Joseph died, but she told them they needed their privacy, and Naomi

needed solitude, so she refused. Clarissa eventually stopped asking.

She would like the kids to visit more often. So would they. They loved Grand-mom Naomi. She was different from Grandma Lois, who seemed a lot older. She made them cookies, and gave them gifts, but seemed to be doing it only because she thought that what grandmas did, and not because she especially wanted to.

Grand-mom Naomi hardly ever gave them any gifts. Instead, she held them close and told stories. She wove a magic spell that enchanted them and made it seem they were in a world all their own. Gary and Clarissa looked on, and knew the little enchanted world did not include them. They often left Naomi and the kids alone and went into another room to talk or watch TV. The kids never knew they were gone.

Joseph and Naomi had lived in the senior community for six years before he died, and had made many friends. You do not move into a senior community to die, but you know the only way you will leave is when you die. Joseph's death was not a shock, and their friends remained friends with Naomi.

When Clarissa, Gary and the kids were gone, Naomi set the small canvas on the easel, and then opened her paints and prepared her brushes. She usually tried to paint something that expressed or reflected her feelings at that moment. Her friends told her paintings were awesome. She knew they were awful.

However, this time she did not want to create art. She wanted to remember Joseph. As she held the paintbrush, she again felt his fingers touching hers. Then she watched her memories projected onto the blank canvas.

She re-lived their life together from that first moment they touched hands, until the day Joseph died. She was happy in some places, and sad in others. Mostly she

was grateful for Joseph and his love, and their happiness, which she could not believe was gone.

Naomi put down the brush, stared at the empty canvas, and then started to cry.

The show was over.

Finding True Love

1.

“I noticed you’re not wearing a wedding ring,” David said. He and Jessica had just finished their business meeting and he was about to leave.

“I’m still married, but we both know it’s over,” she replied, dejectedly.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” David was a short black man in his thirties. He had an athletic build and a serious bearing that was not grim, just pragmatic. They did not know anything about each other beyond the project they were working on.

Jessica was forty, tall, and slender. Her eyes sparkled, and she had an easy laugh. She was intelligent, intuitive, and talented. She could almost figure out what her clients wanted before they knew themselves.

“I’ve started dating,” she confessed. She had not dated since she was in college, and did not have many dates back then.

“So how’s it going?” he asked. She grimaced and shrugged. “You don’t like the men?”

“Oh, they’re mostly okay.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“They all want the same thing,” she said, a tone of frustration in her voice.

“Let me guess.”

“No, *that* would be okay.”

“So what, then?” he asked, and hoped she would not see his question as a come-on.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said, and then changed the subject back to business. She had been working on a logo, letterhead, and website design for his company. Her creativity impressed him.

“I’ll have this done Friday night, or Saturday morning. Do you want to schedule a meeting for early next week?” she asked.

“I’ll be away next week. How about coming over for dinner Saturday night? Just a casual meal; maybe pizza or Chinese. We can go over the whole project, and it will be more relaxing to be away from the office.”

She wondered whether he had invited her because of the conversation. He had never asked her about her personal life before, and it was her marital status he inquired about. David did not seem like someone who would mix his professional and personal life, so she thought it would be fine.

“Around six?” David said, and she nodded.

2.

She need not have worried. When she arrived, David introduced her to his partner. Jeffrey was older than David, tall, lanky, and looked like someone who was mostly sedentary. He had gentle, radiant warmth that enfolded her and made her feel safe, right from the moment they shook hands.

Their dinner chat started with casual stuff, but soon became more personal. David asked her about dating, and she talked about her situation. She insisted she was looking for love. She wanted to lose herself in someone. Even though she was forty she believed something like true love was still out there, and all she had to do was keep looking until she found it.

She was soft-spoken, had a bright smile, and a quick wit. She felt comfortable and self-assured around men, and could banter and joke with anyone she met. She knew many men found her attractive, but she had not yet found anyone special.

David and Jeffrey listened sympathetically as she described her situation, and her openness and honesty

impressed them. They admired her positive attitude, perseverance, and sense of humor. They also felt sorry for her.

They shared a little about themselves. They had been together a long time. They loved each other, but knew how fragile relationships could be, and worried they could be in danger of drifting apart. Their concern surprised her.

“You guys seem made for each other,” she said, puzzled by their anxiety.

“We’ve been together for what seems like forever,” Jeffrey said. “We love each other more than we can say.” He paused, and wondered whether he should continue. Then he spoke frankly, without any hesitation, or sense of embarrassment. “Most of the time the sex was great, but there were times when it wasn’t.”

“We got bored with each other,” David added, bluntly. “It happens.” He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Jessica listened, slightly embarrassed, but also impressed by their honesty. “So from time to time we tried to spice up our sex life with things like clothes, porn, and toys, but nothing kinky.”

“But those things didn’t work,” Jeffrey added. “We tried to figure out why. Something was missing...”

“We finally figured it out. The stuff we tried was passive. There was no passion, spontaneity, inventiveness, or fun. We wondered what we could do,” David said. She began to feel uncomfortable, unsure why they had told her all this.

“We decided the only way to get what we needed would be to invite another person to join us,” Jeffrey added.

“Wow. That seems radical,” she remarked, unsure she wanted to continue the conversation, but fascinated by their openness.

“Our relationship was worth the risk.”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, we immediately ran into a problem. We couldn’t ask our married friends, or our lesbian friends.”

“Wait,” she said, startled. “You wanted a *woman*? You didn’t want a man?” They explained that it could not be another man, since one of them could become attracted to him. It had to be a woman.

Jessica began to wonder if it was time to leave. They sensed her discomfort, and changed the subject to her consulting work. They finished their meal, and she offered to clear the table.

David asked Jeffrey to help him with the DVR and they left Jessica to finish cleaning up. When they did not return, she went to find the bathroom. As she walked into the living room, she overheard David say, “I think she might be open to it.”

“Are you guys talking about me?” she asked.

“Oh, you heard me?” David said, embarrassed. She was apprehensive. What were they up to?

He did not answer her question so she went on. “Open to *what*?”

“We were wondering...since you are single...and you seem open-minded...,” David began, haltingly, and then realized what he was about to say was delicate, and bizarre. He did not know how to continue.

“We have a request,” Jeffrey said. She already suspected what it was and cut him off.

“Wait! Is this why you invited me to dinner?”

“When I told Jeffrey about you, he thought you might be the person we were looking for,” David admitted.

“Maybe the toys we tried were the wrong kinds of enhancements,” Jeffrey explained. “A woman would be different...”

“A woman is *not* a toy,” she said, firmly.

“We know that,” David said, petulantly. “Let us finish. All the toys we tried were passive,” he pointed out.

Jeffrey smiled and continued. "What we needed was a toy that you not only play with *it*, but it plays with *you*," he said proudly, as if it was a great insight.

"Yes. That's it! Perfect!," David added, enthusiastically.

She was impressed. They had thought it through, and they were in complete agreement. They were also nuts.

"Let me jump ahead," she said. "You're suggesting you want to play with me?" They nodded. "And you want me to play with you?" She paused and glared at them. They suddenly felt awkward. "You're serious?"

She became quiet and looked at them as she thought it over. They suddenly felt awkward and assumed they had angered her, and she would now leave. She was not outraged, however, but intrigued. Neither of them was likely to fall in love with her, or expect her to fall in love with him. In addition, she was horny. It could be a win-win.

"I thought gay guys hated women," she said, coolly.

"We don't hate women; we just don't desire them."

"Or fall in love with them," David added, as if he read her mind.

She had never had a sexual affair. She had heard of them. They would start out simple, but complications would arise when feelings came into play. However, David and Jeffrey had made it clear there would be no feelings to mess this up. They loved each other. They could never have feelings for her. Jessica felt this could be interesting, and fun.

The room was silent. Their faces were expressionless. They could not decide if they should be happy, sad, disappointed, or relieved. They had taken a huge risk and wondered whether they had made a huge mistake. Did her silence mean they had irreparably offended her? Did she hate them? The longer she was silent the more apprehensive they became. They wondered

whether they should just serve her some dessert, and then she could leave.

“You’re sure you can handle me?” she asked, candidly. They had not thought of handling her. It dawned on them that she had meant what she said about a woman not being a sex toy. This would not just be about their pleasure; it would be about hers as well. What would she want? Could they satisfy her? They nodded shyly but did not say anything.

After an awkward silence, she calmly reached down, unzipped her shorts, and dropped them to her feet. She reached her fingers into the elastic waistband of her panties and pulled them down. She pulled her shirt over her head, and then quickly removed her bra.

She showed them a real, in the flesh, naked woman. Even though women did not attract them, they knew what an attractive woman looked like. They liked what they saw, but they did not react.

Then she walked over to them, spread her arms, grabbed them, and pulled them close. She pressed them against her bare skin, breasts, belly, and thighs, just to make certain they were sure that this was what they wanted.

She had become aroused. She took Jeffrey’s hand, moved it to her crotch, and pressed his fingers into her vagina. She wanted to see how he reacted to her arousal. He did not pull his hand away.

“Yes,” she said, and kissed them both.

3.

“Oh, wow, you *do* like me,” she said, as she lay between them and looked at their erections. She had thought it best to take them to bed right away to prevent them from backing out.

She had worried they would only get erect for each other, and this little experiment would be a failure. She

feared this might end with her having to get dressed and go home, without getting laid.

“You’re so gentle,” she sighed, as she felt Jeffrey’s hand on her breast. She wrapped her fingers around David’s penis and began stroking it. After a moment, she enclosed the tip with her lips.

“The way you do that almost makes me think you know what it feels like,” he said, appreciatively.

“I never had a penis of my own, and I’ve only touched a few, but I’ve always loved how they felt in my hand, and my mouth,” she replied.

She had turned her back to Jeff when she touched David’s penis. She felt Jeff’s hands on her ass. He ran his fingers along the curves, down between her cheeks, close to her vagina, then away, and then back. She loved it.

She released David’s penis from her mouth. “No one’s ever touched my ass like that. You know *just* how to do it,” she said, excitedly.

“He’s been doing my ass for years,” David replied, humorously. Jeff chuckled. She slowly turned toward Jeff and immediately found him. He moaned. She put his penis in her mouth, and because it was slightly smaller than David’s cock, she pulled more of it in. He moaned again.

“I love it when he moans like that,” David said, overjoyed by his lover’s pleasure.

Now that her back was toward David, it was his turn to touch her ass; but he did not. He touched her shoulders, gently ran his fingertips down her back, put his hands on her hips, and then held her.

He felt the subtle movements of her body as she vigorously sucked Jeff’s cock. He felt as if he was in touch with Jeff’s penis through her mouth. She shifted slightly and his penis touched the back of her leg. Her skin was soft, smooth, and warm. He rested it on her skin and did not move.

She wanted him to enter her. “Go ahead,” she said. She felt his fingers gently open her vagina, and his penis slide inside her.

4.

Jessica arrived late and wanted a shower. She had been busy all day and needed to unwind and refresh herself. Their bathroom held a huge shower stall that took up much of the room.

“*That* is an awesome shower,” she said.

“We had it installed after we moved in,” Jeff replied, proudly.

“I’m getting in,” she said, as she stripped off all her clothes, and then looked at them. Neither of them moved off the bed. “With you two.”

She opened the shower door and reached for the valve. The water warmed up, and she stepped in. After she did, David reached in and turned another valve and water sprayed from outlets on the walls. It was a full-body shower. He and Jeffrey stepped in and closed the door.

Jessica wet herself down, and then began to lather herself. She started at her shoulders and went down to the tops of her thighs. Her skin glistened from the water but the soap made it shinier. David and Jeffrey watched as if they had never before seen anyone lather up in a shower.

She turned, and Jeffrey ran his hand from her shoulders to her breasts. David helped spread the soap as she put it on. Their hands touched a few times, but did not linger.

Jessica was happy they both touched her at the same time. She turned around, asked them to lather her back, and then felt a hand spread the soap. Another hand worked its way down into the crevice of her ass, and stopped at her vagina.

She backed up and found an erect penis behind her. She put both hands on the shower wall, leaned slightly

forward, and held still. Then two hands grabbed her by the hips and David thrust into her. Jessica moaned.

David moved, but not too fast. After a moment or two, Jeffrey grabbed his hips from behind, and entered him. They both moaned. Jeffrey did not fuck David. He wanted to share some of David's pleasure as he fucked Jessica. He kept himself buried deeply inside David and rode with David's movements.

There were several moments of unhurried, sensual fucking as the three of them slowly built toward orgasm. Then David said, "I'm not wearing a condom." Jeffrey started pounding him as soon as he pulled out of Jessica. David stood still and surrendered to his lover's cock. He reached orgasm just as Jeffrey did.

Jessica had stayed in her position, and hoped Jeffrey would take his turn fucking her. When she realized Jeffrey was fucking David, she turned just as they climaxed. She looked at their faces. Their expressions of mutual ecstasy astonished her. *Truly*, she thought, *these men are deeply in love*. She resolved at that moment to do as much as she could to make their love grow deeper and stronger.

Nevertheless, their ecstasy also made her sad. In all her years of marriage, she could not recall ever seeing such an ecstatic expression on her husband's face. She knew Pete loved her, but she also knew she never made him happy. David and Jeffrey's ecstasy came out of their deep-seated love. It celebrated their blissful happiness. She was jealous.

5.

It turned out to be the ideal sexual arrangement, at least from her perspective. Jessica was delighted that she had two attentive lovers. Their sex with Jessica was far beyond what they had expected. Whatever role she played in their lovemaking made them enjoy it even more than usual.

She liked watching them. They knew subtle but intense ways to please each other. Sometimes they were playful; other times they were insistent. She carefully watched them so she could do the same things to them that they did to each other.

One night they ignored her as they quietly fucked. Their moans of pleasure had excited her. "Um, guys?" she said. They kept going. "Guys, maybe I should leave?" That got their attention. They had agreed that they would all share in whatever they did.

They reluctantly stopped fucking. Jeffrey looked at David. He nodded. Jeffrey got out of bed and went into the bathroom. David rolled her onto her stomach. She had no idea what he was going to do. He touched her thigh, and then ran his hand upward so he could touch her ass. She felt a finger at her anus.

She tried to wriggle away from his finger. Jeffrey came back to bed with a tube of lubricant. He squeezed a few daubs onto his hand. She felt the cool lube on her anus. He massaged her for a while, and then slowly inserted a greased finger. She moaned.

His finger went deeper. She felt his whole hand between her ass-cheeks. He gently moved his finger in and out. She moaned again, he pulled out, and then inserted two fingers. She loved it.

Then he withdrew his fingers and she felt a penis pressing against her anus. "Wait. What are you doing?" she asked, apprehensively.

"You said you wanted to be part of everything we did. Well, we fuck each other in the ass. So, now it's your turn." He squirted several daubs of lube onto his penis, and then stroked it to be sure the lube was everywhere it had to be. Then he touched the tip of his penis to her anus. He put the head in, and she gasped. It felt a little uncomfortable, but held herself still. She waited for him to press further in. He pushed until he filled her up.

He slowly withdrew, and then slid back in. She felt the movement, but because of the plentiful lube, there was no friction, and no pain. He pulled further out, and then pressed deeper in. He liked it when David did this to him. She moaned a steady, soft murmur of pleasure.

Then he grabbed her by the hips, pulled her toward him, and plunged harder than before. She cried out. He thought he had hurt her. She told him she was okay, and could he please do that again? He did.

He moved faster and she surrendered to his hammering. He finished after a few more deep strokes. She was so wet from the lube that she did not feel his semen inside her. His penis stayed firm, as if it did not want to leave. She liked the feeling. It was less intense, but pleasant. He slowly pulled out and lay down beside her.

“I can’t move,” she said, exhausted. “I’m stuck in this position.”

David wanted to fuck her, but he did not want to force her to let him do it right away. He waited, and hoped she would invite him. She sensed his hesitation. “Next time,” she said, and disappointed him. He was sympathetic. He did not want to hurt her.

They basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done that,” she said. “I forgot how good it was.” They all eventually fell asleep.

6.

“What’s she doing in there?” Jeffrey asked, irritably.

“Let her have some privacy. You in a hurry or something?”

“Yeah. I need both of you.” The door swung open. She walked out of the bathroom stark naked with a huge strap-on dildo protruding in front of her. They gasped.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen. I let you fuck me in my ass, so now I’m gonna fuck you in your asses. Who’s first?” They looked at each other, alarmed.

“You first,” David said, amiably.

“No, you; please, I insist,” Jeffrey replied, deferentially. She smiled and waited. Neither of them moved.

“If one of you doesn’t get greased up in the next thirty seconds, I’m gonna do it without any lube at all,” she threatened, smiling.

David jumped out of bed, ran to the dresser, got the lube and jumped back in bed. He offered it to Jeffrey, and hoped he would use it on himself. Jeffrey grimaced and shook his head. Before he could protest, David rapidly opened the lube and greased Jeffrey’s anus.

“All-right! Let’s get this party started,” she said, pleased that one of them was ready for her. She climbed onto the bed, got on her knees behind Jeffrey, aimed the dildo at his ass, and shoved it in before he could wriggle away.

“Fuck!” Jeffrey yelled. David panicked.

“Is she hurting you?”

“God, no. She’s fucking me!”

“You go, girl,” David said, and smiled at Jessica.

She did. Both of them. As much as she wanted, until she wore herself out. Then they all fell asleep, exhausted.

7.

“This is Laura. I told her about you. She’s gonna join us.” David and Jeffrey looked at each other. They both thought Jessica was out of control.

“But...”

“No butts. Get them in the bed. She’s horny.” Laura smiled but was shy. She hoped they would smile back, but they did not. She looked at Jessica.

“It’s okay. Maybe another time,” Laura said, shyly.

“*Now*. Remember the strap on? She’s got an even bigger one than I had.” It had never occurred to them to let one woman fuck them with a strap-on. Now it would be two. They suddenly became very turned on.

David went over to Laura and offered her his arm. “Milady, your bed awaits.” She giggled and they walked toward the bedroom. Jessica offered Jeffrey her arm. He smiled, took it, and they followed Laura and David.

Next morning, Laura woke up satisfied by the best sex she had in a long time. The men were gone, and she and Jessica were alone in the big bed. She felt uncomfortable naked with another woman, so she got out of bed, found her clothes and went into the bathroom to dress. When she came back, Jessica was awake.

She sat down on the bed next to Jessica. “Damn, Jessie, these guys are awesome. Where did you find them, again?”

“They found me.”

“Did you see the expression on their faces when they looked at each other?”

“Yeah, I know. Awesome, isn’t it?”

“They seem to be so in love. How long have they been together?”

“They met in middle school but didn’t hook up until college. I guess it’s twenty years now.”

“God, I wish somebody would look at *me* that way,” Laura said, dejectedly.

“That look is what made me agree to do this. When they first approached me, I thought they were two crazy perverts who just wanted to screw around with me. Then I realized how committed they were to each other. They weren’t risking a breakup by fucking around, they were strengthening their love.”

“How do you mean?” Laura asked. It was a new idea, for her, that people could strengthen their love by adding another sex partner.

“They explained it to me the first time we met. When sex gets stale, each partner blames the other. They might look for better sex somewhere else, and there goes the intimacy.”

“So they’re protecting their relationship by doing this?” Laura asked, astonished.

“Yeah. And it seems to be working. Since we started, they’ve gotten more loving and attentive toward each other.”

“I guess that makes you feel good.”

“It does. My love-life is screwed up; but at least somebody’s so committed to *theirs* that they will do anything to protect it and make it grow.”

“Strange way of doing it.”

“Strange and beautiful.”

“So, when can I come back?” Laura asked, excitedly.

“Probably never. We don’t repeat. Repetition is boring.”

“Maybe I could come back alone, without you,” Laura suggested, hopefully.

“You’d have to ask them. But I doubt it.”

“You’re special?”

“Yeah, I am. I didn’t think of it that way, but I am.”

8.

“Jessie, you seem down, is anything wrong?” Jeffrey asked.

“I’m lonely,” she said.

“Have we been ignoring you? I’m sorry,” David said.

“No, it’s not that. Laura and I had a conversation about how much we envy your love for each other. I want

somebody to need me like Jeff needs you, and you need him. And I want to want somebody, too.”

“Didn’t you try to find someone?” David asked. Jessica nodded, and then grimaced. She had looked, but it had not gone well.

She had tried out different men, and hoped to learn, not so much about them, as herself. What male qualities attracted her? What did her own likes and dislikes say about her? What turned her on? What turned her off?

She discovered that what almost all men have in common was a desire they were not even aware of. It was not only sex they wanted, it was possession.

Most men want not just to be with a woman, but also to *own* her. Not like in the old days, when a wife was literally the property of her husband. It seemed men felt the same way about owning a woman as they felt about owning a car.

When Jessica went on dates, she always felt that what was a date for her was like a test drive for the men. She felt as if they were evaluating her as if she was a new car. *Do I like it, does it have what I want, is it stylish, is it fast, is it sexy, how much does it cost, is it worth the price, what kind of deal can I get? What do I have to put into it? What will I get out of it?* Some men decided right away. Others took longer.

She could tell the moment they lost interest. She learned to shrug off the rejections. They did not mean any harm; they had decided she was not the ‘car’ they were looking for.

“It didn’t work out,” she said, disappointedly.

“Can we help?”

“Know any single guys looking for a forty-year old woman?”

“Not offhand. I’ll ask around. Got any head shots?” She looked at David, shocked that he would make a joke. Nevertheless, maybe he was right. Others did that when

they went online and offered themselves; just like those automobile websites. It disgusted her, but her loneliness was too compelling, so she felt like she had to do something.

“Why did you and Pete split up?” Jeff asked, cautiously.

“I couldn’t get pregnant.”

Jessica and Pete had been able to get almost everything they ever wanted. There were no miracles; things merely worked out the way they wanted them to, and they were happy. They thought it would be easy to have children. They had plenty of sex, but no pregnancy. After some frustration, which they talked through, they had more intense and deliberate sex, but still no pregnancy.

Test results were inconclusive. Doctors told them there was no physical reason they could not conceive. They assumed that implied there was a mental or emotional reason; and this suggestion troubled them.

They were in love. They thought making a baby would be easy. The doctor told them not to worry about it, and to keep doing what they were doing, and it would eventually happen. Maybe they were just trying too hard.

They accepted the doctor’s advice and tried not to force every sex session to have a baby-making result. They also considered artificial means of getting pregnant but the procedures were expensive, and they did not feel comfortable with all the scientific intrusions into their intimacy. It would be like having a third person in their bed, and they did not like that idea.

Deep down, each suspected the other of being at fault. They both wondered whether they might be more successful with other partners. That is when it became clear that they were no longer in love.

“So it was all because of *babies*?” David asked, astonished. She nodded. “It seems sad that babies could affect a marriage like that. After all, we can’t make babies

but we're okay with that. We still love each other." This made Jessica feel even worse, and she began to cry. "I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have said that."

"No, it's okay. You're right. It hurts that Pete and I were the love of each other's lives and we couldn't do this. Isn't the saying 'love conquers all?' Well, it didn't. Or maybe that means it wasn't really love, was it?" It was the first time she had realized the truth about their marriage. She cried some more.

David hugged her while she cried. The way he saw it, love was the most important thing in a person's life. If you could find love, true love, everything else would be easy. He did not understand how people who were deeply in love could allow anything to ruin their love. He guessed it was different for straight people. They did not seem to know much about real love, even though they thought they did. David was glad he was gay.

David and Jeffrey knew a lot about sex, and they made sure she got the full benefit of their knowledge. They figured out ways all three of them could have sex at the same time, with each of them always involved in some way. It might not always be fucking, but they did not care as long as all three of them were part of the same act.

In addition, they were all spontaneous, imaginative, and creative. It was not just her. It began to seem there were not two men and a woman but three different sexual beings who could take any role.

9.

"Jessie, we have something we'd like to ask you," Jeffrey said, guardedly.

This was the first time they had dinner waiting for her when she arrived. They usually went straight to bed, and ate after they had exhausted themselves with sex. She suspected something important was about to happen. *Oh,*

shit, are they going to ask me to move in with them? she thought.

David continued, “We would like you to have a baby with us.” She looked at them, not sure she heard them right.

“You mean like a surrogate mom?” she asked, taken aback.

“No. We want you to be the *real* mom. We want your DNA to be part of our child,” Jeffrey said.

“Oh, *my* DNA. Gosh, that sounds *so* romantic,” Jessie said, sarcastically.

David added, sheepishly, “Sorry if that sounds coldly biological.”

She was quiet for a moment, not sure how she felt about their invitation. “So which one of you will be the father?”

“We don't want to have to make a choice,” Jeffrey said.

“You're talking in vitro, aren't you?” she asked. “One of you will have to provide the sperm. I can't do *everything*.”

“No. We're talking *natural*.”

“Well, the birth would be natural, of course. I wouldn't have a problem with that,” she said.

“Um... We mean the conception. We want *that* to be natural, too,” Jeffrey clarified.

She was quiet and thought about it. “There's only one way to do that...oh, wait. Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?”

“Yeah, we are,” they both replied at once.

They did not want to have to choose whose sperm made the baby. They wanted it to be random. There was only one way to do that. They would both fuck her at the same time. They would not know whose sperm did the deed. She reminded them they could easily do a DNA test after the birth to see who the father was. That was okay

with them. Both of them wanted an equal chance to be the father. Nature could choose.

“I guess that would work,” she said, still not certain she wanted to do it.

“We thought you might be angry with us. It's asking a lot,” David seemed apologetic.

“Not really. It will be like what we do now, only without condoms.” They smiled and nodded.

“So you'll think about it?” Jeffrey asked.

She told them it might not work, but she was willing to try. The arrangement would have to be more than just that she carried the fetus for nine whole months. Pregnancy could be difficult and unpredictable. She would need their help and support all the way to the birth. They might have to pamper her. They both seemed okay with her request.

She looked at each of them and hoped to see a hint of hesitation, but there was none. “I'm flattered. You guys sure know how to sweet-talk a girl.”

“So you'll do it?”

“Well, I should be ovulating again in three weeks. How about then? That will give us time to prepare. I need to see a gynecologist, and we need to see a lawyer, and get HIV tests.” They both nodded, and then they all hugged. Jessica was not sure what she had just gotten herself into, but it could turn out to be the most interesting nine months of her life.

Later that week, Jeffrey and David saw a few of their friends at a birthday party. David mentioned that they might soon have a new birthday to celebrate. He tried not to say anymore, but Monica, one of his oldest lesbian friends quietly asked him what he meant.

She had known David since they were both teenagers struggling to understand and explore their sexuality. In fact, they had explored it together one time

and found out that, despite their feelings for each other, they did not turn each other on. Which was okay. They became good friends and then best friends for a while, until Jeffrey and David got together. She still had great affection for David, and was glad he was happy with Jeffrey.

A couple times in the past few years, David mentioned they had talked about becoming parents. Monica told him she would help in any way she could. David thought she wanted to be an aunt. She did not tell him she wanted to be the mother. She wanted them to choose an egg (she hoped it might be hers), have it artificially fertilized with one of their sperm, and then inserted into her womb so she could carry the fetus for her friends.

10.

Jessica moved in with them for a few days when her ovulation was due. She wanted to settle in, get comfortable with their household routines, buy some food she liked, and figure out what TV shows she wanted to watch while she was there.

She had stayed over a few times, but always left in the morning after they made her an incredible breakfast. She had often told them the only reason she did the sex with them is that she got such wonderful breakfasts afterwards.

They were excellent hosts. They tried to wait on her but she would not let them. She did some of the cooking, baked a few treats, and helped them fix some broken stuff they did not know how to repair.

She teased them that their dicks and balls belonged to her for a few days, and not each other. They would have to do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it done. She planned to drain every single sperm from their bodies.

They had as much sex as possible. It was the first time David and Jeffrey abstained from sex with each other.

It was also the first time that just two of them might be making love at any given time.

For her part, Jessica thought she would never have the opportunity to have this much sex ever again in her life, and she enjoyed every second of it. She did not wear clothes for several days. She just wore a fluffy bathrobe that kept her toasty warm and ready whenever someone wanted to fuck her.

She had never fucked so much in her life, not even on her honeymoon. She made sure to oil herself so all the sex would not irritate her vagina. They always had plenty of lube around and she wore it constantly. She liked the way it made her thighs feel wet and slippery. It kept her turned on for almost all the time she was there.

She did what she could to entice them, even if they had fucked only a few hours earlier. They got her back by waking her up in the middle of the night. She enjoyed a drowsy fuck and then went back to sleep.

When they were not fucking, they talked a lot about their lives. She told them about her childhood, and her husband, and mentioned details she had not shared before. They talked about their lives before they met each other and during the first years they were together. Sometimes the stories were almost as short as anecdotes. Other times the stories might take several hours to tell, possibly because they interrupted them to have sex. It was a three-day orgy, and they thoroughly enjoyed it.

11.

Her period came right on schedule two weeks after the orgy. She was glad. She wanted to see how they would react. She wondered whether they were as committed as they thought they were. Were they truly ready to be dads? Would they want to try again? She hoped they would, but was hesitant to suggest another orgy. She wanted them to ask her, so all three of them could talk about it again.

David's friend Monica called to ask him if she could be their surrogate mom. He told her they had already found someone. She was surprised, and hurt.

"What about me?" she said, disappointed.

"We're doing it the old-fashioned way," he told her. She did not understand what he meant.

"But I wanted to do this for you."

"Yeah, I know, but that wouldn't have worked out."

"Why not? Artificial insemination is no big deal," Monica protested.

"Would you have allowed Jeffrey and me to fuck you?"

"Of course not," she said, exasperated.

"Well that's the way we're making this baby. We're gonna let Nature decide which one of us gets to be the father." Monica understood. It was bizarre, but poetic, in a way.

"Oh. I get it. I hope it works out," she said, disappointed.

12.

Jessica missed her period two weeks after the second orgy. She got a pregnancy test and it came out positive. Jeffrey cried when she told them. He could not believe they were finally on their way to becoming dads. She wondered if the pregnancy would alter their relationship. Would they still want to fuck her? She would wait until they invited her to their bed.

She waited a couple weeks and they did not say anything, so she mentioned it. She told them that some women get horny when they are pregnant. She was one of those women.

"So, I was hoping you guys would help me out," she joked. They had not asked her for sex because they thought that once she had a baby in there it would be

uncomfortable, or even dangerous (to the fetus.) They were delighted that she cleared up their confusion.

She told them she could probably have sex right up the due date. Even if she got really big (which she probably would) she knew ways they could fuck. She expected them to be available to meet her needs whenever she asked.

“Don’t worry, guys,” she said, “I’ll go easy on you. I don’t want to wear you out!” They did not think what she said was funny.

13.

Jeffrey walked out on David in the seventeenth week of her pregnancy. There was no real explanation; he just left. David told Jessica he did not know why. He was heartbroken. She assumed Jeffrey had realized he just was not ready to be a father, after all.

She tried to cheer David up but worried about what was going to happen with the baby. The child should have two loving dads, but now was down to only one. Would David even want to be a father, now?

At the age of forty, she was pregnant, and alone. *Better than at age fifteen*, she thought. At least she knew about pregnancies and babies, and had a job and a home of her own.

She hoped David and Jeffrey would work it out, and get back together. Then she found out David did not even know where Jeffrey was, and she gave up hope. It was over.

These men had propositioned her, and she accepted because she believed in their love and commitment. Now she wanted to cry, for hours and hours, just to let out all the shock and disappointment. It was almost overwhelming, but she did not blame anyone. Not David, Jeffrey, or herself. She did not even feel she had misjudged them. She had not been deceived.

It had been fun and she had enjoyed it, and now she was pregnant, and alone, and did not even know who the father was; not that it mattered. However, she had been clear-headed and thoughtful every step of the way. This child would be special not because of them but because of her. She would give the child everything it needed to have a rich life. After all, they conceived this child in love. (Well, sort of. They never talked about it, but she felt, at the time, there was at least a little love between the three of them.) So she had found love, after all.

14.

Jessica was alone, but she was okay. She was glad she never heard from Jeffrey. David never called her, either. She assumed this was because she and the baby would remind him of Jeffrey, and the memories would be too painful for him to handle.

She was almost glad to be rid of them, even though they left her pregnant with their child. The dads might not care about the child, but Jessica did. She did not want to have to deal with the problems between Jeffrey and David.

David called six months after Charlie's birth. He asked how the baby was doing and whether he could meet him. Jessica still felt sorry for David after what Jeffrey had done to him. She invited him to dinner so he could meet Charlie, and they could talk.

Jessica wondered if David was trying to re-connect with her, and get to know the child he had (possibly) fathered. She liked David, and wanted him to be part of Charlie's life. However, not part of her life, at least not yet.

She was sympathetic toward him for all the pain Jeffrey's abandonment had caused him. She might even want to sleep with him again, if he was even into sleeping with a woman after all these months. Nevertheless, it would be out of sympathy and not because of love. She did not know whether he was dating.

She greeted him with a smile and a hug, but he avoided kissing her. He asked about Charlie, who was asleep. Jessica invited him to sit and talk until Charlie woke up. They sat at the kitchen table with steaming cups of herbal tea.

“There’s something I should tell you. It’s about Jeffrey.” David said, gravely.

She tensed up. “Okay.”

“He didn’t walk out on me.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

“I mean that he had a reason for leaving.”

“Yeah, he wasn’t ready to be a father, that was obvious,” she said, disparagingly.

“No. That’s not it.”

“Really? Then what was it?”

“It was me.”

“You?”

“The night before he left there was a party. He had to work late and told me to go without him. He didn’t want to disappoint our friends. So I went to the party without him. There was this guy. I didn’t know him. He was a friend of a friend, I guess.

“We started talking. He was younger than me, much younger. He seemed to like me. I couldn’t tell if he was flirting with me; but the few drinks I’d had made it seem like he was. I was flattered, and we started a suggestive banter. He casually mentioned he had to leave to catch a bus. I told him it was dangerous to take the bus so late at night.

“So I drove him home, he invited me in, and I went. I knew what was going to happen, or what I hoped was going to happen, and I didn’t stop myself. We spent a half-hour alone and then I left.” His confession stunned Jessica. He had never even hinted about this.

“It was late when I got home, and Jeffrey was already asleep. I didn’t kiss him when I got in bed. I just

lay down, and didn't touch his body, either. I had trouble falling asleep but I finally did and when I woke up, he was already out of bed and downstairs making breakfast.

"I went down and said good morning but didn't smile at him, or kiss him, or even hug him. I pretended I had a hangover. I ate, and then left for work. When I got home that night, there was a letter and he was gone."

"So it was *your* fault? You cocksucker!" She was angrier than she had been anytime in her life, and had to control her voice so she would not wake the baby. "All this time I've been feeling sorry for you and furious at him. I thought *he* was the one who wrecked the relationship, but it was *you!*" He nodded, remorsefully.

"Get out!" she yelled, incensed at him. He looked at her, about to plead, but she cut him off. "Now!"

"But the baby?"

"He is no concern of yours."

"But I might be his father."

"It might be you, it might be Jeffrey; but it doesn't make any difference. I'm his mother, and that's all that matters." He did not respond. They sat in silence. She waited for him to get up and leave. He hoped she would relent, and let him stay.

"I only wanted to tell you the truth," he said, contritely.

"It doesn't make any difference, now. It would only have made a difference when you went home with that guy. How could you? You and Jeffrey were the most loving couple, gay or straight, I ever met. He knew you like a book. Did you think he wouldn't find out? Did you think he wouldn't be *hurt?*"

"You're right; I thought he wouldn't find out. But I didn't even have to confess. He just *knew*. I guess he knew me better than I thought he did."

"Did you try to find him and apologize?"

“I knew where he was.” She stared at him in disbelief. “He was living with Monica. She told me, but she said he didn’t want to ever talk to me again.”

“Please go,” she said, and waited for him to get the message that it was time to leave. After a few moments, he got up, went to the door, and quietly said, “I’m sorry.” She did not reply. She hoped he had walked out of her life, forever.

15.

She contacted Monica and spoke with Jeffery. He was happy to hear from her. She told him about David’s visit, and invited him over. “I thought you might want to meet your son. But you don’t have to if you don’t want to.” He had eagerly looked forward to being a father, and still liked the idea. He said he wanted to.

His face lit up with love as soon as he laid eyes on Charlie. It was the same expression she used to see when Jeffrey and David looked at each other.

“Hello, Charlie. I’m your Dad,” Jeffrey said, with tears in his eyes. Charlie gurgled and smiled. Jessica almost cried. Not only had she found love, it looked as if Jeffrey had, too. Not with each other, but with the new life they had created.

Penelope

1.

Penelope could not feel anything. She thought she was dead. *But wait*, she thought, *I'm thinking. Can you think when you're dead? Do you have to pee when you're dead?* She doubted it.

It was dark. She was lying down. She tried to move, and it worked! She lifted herself up and tried to use her hands. (*Wait, I have hands that work?*) She felt to the right and the surface was soft. She moved her hand to the left. That was soft, too, but then she felt nothing; just empty space. *I remember, now. I'm in bed. I was asleep. I guess I should get up and pee.*

For the entire time her husband was sick and dying, Penelope was the bedrock of her family. They turned to her for comfort whenever Roger's illness and impending death overwhelmed them.

Sometimes they just cried, or raged (against cancer, the doctors, or God) and sometimes they just helplessly asked a quiet 'why' as if they expected her to give them an answer. She helped them deal with it, and gave them all the emotional support they asked for.

Now that the ordeal was over, all of her feelings were gone. She felt drained, empty. Penelope felt as if she also had died.

At Roger's wake, she saw people she knew but did not recognize. She mechanically thanked them for coming, but acted as if she did not know where she was. The funeral-goers talked with her children, who explained Roger's death had 'hit Mom hard,' and that is why she was so out of it. Everyone nodded as if they understood.

However, she did not understand. Penelope had given everything inside her. She had gone deeper and

deeper into her emotional well until all her compassion and sympathy were drained, and then she dug down to look for more. Now she faced a future that she would spend alone, without Roger, but also without any feelings at all.

He was in a box in the ground and she was still walking around, numb. She could not foresee this numbness ever wearing off. She could not see how she could ever refill her deep reservoir of love. She would spend the rest of her life as a hollow, lonely woman.

Each morning she awoke from a night of unsettled sleep and went through the motions of living. She showered, cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and shopping, all without any feelings at all. Instead of being Penelope the person, she was now Penelope the robot or zombie, or, as she thought of herself, *dead* Penelope. She looked ahead and she hated what she saw. She was certain there was nothing she could do about it.

2.

Let's see, now, how do you know you're alive? What makes it different from being dead? Well, you breathe. Okay, that's one. You can see, hear, talk, and move around. Dead people can't do those things.

There was more, but she could not immediately recall what it was. Then it came to her.

Oh, I know; you have feelings. Yeah, feelings. I remember I once had them; but I don't have them anymore. So, I guess I really am dead. How can a person live without feelings? It's impossible. I should just lie still and wait for the rest of me to die.

3.

Alice worried about her mother. It had been six months since her father, Roger, had died, and Penelope still seemed out of it. Alice took some vacation time so they could spend a week together. Penelope knew her daughter

was checking up on her, to see whether she really was okay, as she always said she was whenever people called. Only, she was not. *I might as well be dead.*

They were on their way to the spa. It was Alice's treat. Penelope was quiet in the car. Alice became concerned. "Mom, are you okay?" she asked.

Penelope did not know how to reply. She did not know what 'okay' meant anymore. Was it okay that her husband got cancer? Was it okay that he suffered through painful chemotherapy? Was it okay that his cancer turned out to be incurable? Was it okay that he suffered a lot more pain, and finally died? Was it okay that she was now alone? Was it okay that she had no idea what her future was going to be, or if she even had a future? She and Roger had a future together. Without him, she had none. *I might as well be dead.*

Alice and Penelope had never been to a spa. This was one of the best, so Alice was hoping her Mom would enjoy their visit. It was decorated in restful pastel colors, had several big gray rocks, and a lot of dark wood.

They changed into their spa robes and went into the massage suite. A male masseuse greeted Alice and asked her to follow him. Penelope's masseuse was a stocky woman named Bo (as in Bo Peep, she told Alice.) In her room, Penelope removed the robe and lay on her back on the table. Alice had paid for the deluxe massage; ninety minutes.

Heck of a long time to fool around with a dead person, Penelope thought. *I'm just doing this to make Alice feel like she's taking care of me. Maybe she'll go away and let me go on being dead.*

As soon as Penelope was on the table, Bo began to re-position her arms and legs, as if she was arranging flowers. Bo told her she was just making it easier for her to do the massage. Penelope did not mind. Bo offered Penelope a hot towel for her face so her pores would be

open for the facial that was coming later. Penelope was a little nervous. She felt apprehensive, just like when she was in the dentist's chair. Bo asked her to relax so her muscles would be more pliable. Penelope tried to relax.

Bo smeared warm oil over her left foot, and then Bo's fingers massaged the skin and muscles. The oil went between her toes and it seemed weird to have oily toes.

Bo was methodical, but not slow. She kneaded her way up Penelope's legs toward her belly. Penelope realized that Bo was about to reach her crotch. *Not to worry*, she thought, *nothing going on there. Them days is over*. She smiled at her little joke and Bo thought Penelope liked what she was doing. Bo dripped the warm oil into her pubic area but did not touch her there. Penelope was not certain whether she liked it or not.

Bo continued up her torso, toward her breasts. This time, Bo did not just drip the oil; she curved her hands and rubbed oil everywhere on Penelope's breasts. Bo asked if that felt good. Penelope answered that it was okay. Bo asked whether Penelope would like her breasts massaged. Penelope gave Bo another bland okay, and Bo continued.

Bo's touch was gentle and the oil was, well, oily. Penelope sighed. She realized that no one had touched her breasts since she and Roger made love just after his cancer diagnosis. That was over two years ago. She immediately missed Roger, not just that he was gone, but there was no one else to massage her breasts, or touch her anywhere else on her body.

Bo finished massaging Penelope's arms and asked Penelope to turn over. Penelope asked her to wait a moment. "You missed a spot," she said.

"Oh, yes, I did," Bo said. After a short pause, she continued, "We don't touch there unless our client specifically asks for it."

"It's okay." Bo took that as a yes and smiled. When Bo's fingertips touched her upper thighs, Penelope felt a

surge. Heat? Electricity? No, it was merely sensation. She was *feeling* something.

As Bo worked her hands into Penelope's crotch, Penelope tried to focus her attention on everything Bo touched. When Bo reached her labia, it seemed that sparks flew. Penelope just sighed, and kept her attention focused on Bo, who massaged her crotch some more. She knew ways to touch, stroke, and press, that Penelope had never dreamed existed.

Bo asked her to turn over and lay face down. This time Bo started the oil massage at Penelope's neck, and worked her way down her back. As Bo's fingers approached Penelope's ass, Bo noticed her tense up slightly. Bo told her everything was okay; just relax. Penelope gave herself up to Bo's hands and she massaged Penelope's ass as if she knew how much Penelope liked having her ass fondled. *That feels nice*, she thought. *Really nice. Better than nice; very good. I like it.*

When Bo finished, Penelope put on her robe and met Alice just outside the massage room. Alice asked her if it was good. Penelope just nodded. They showered so they could dress and leave.

"I could live here," Alice joked, as they were leaving. Penelope did not say anything. Alice asked, "Didn't you love it?"

"It was okay," Penelope answered.

"Did something happen?"

"I fell asleep." Penelope lied. She had not fallen asleep. She had awakened. She had been numb for so long that she had forgotten what it was like to be touched, to have sensations, to feel pleasure. She had become aroused. She had to find a way to keep the sensations coming.

She was still dead inside, but she had come back to life, outside. Her soul was cold and empty, but her skin was warm and sensual. Bo had unintentionally started a small fire; the kind of fire only the fluids of sex could quench.

She had no idea what to do about that, but she thought she needed more than just a massage.

4.

Somebody from Roger's hospice called to see how she was doing. She did not describe her feelings (or lack of them) to him, but he sensed she was having problems adjusting to widowhood. He told her about a support group for older widows and widowers and suggested she might want to check it out. She had never been in a grief group.

"Would I have to talk?" she asked.

"Only if you want to," he said. She thought that sounded safe, so she agreed to go.

She listened to the others complain about their lives now that their spouses were gone. Most of what they said seemed dull and uninteresting to her. She waited until the meeting was almost over before she stood up to speak. She introduced herself, told them a little about Roger's death, and then paused. Everyone thought she had finished, but she was gathering the courage to say what she needed to say.

"He's in a box in the ground, but I'm still here. By the time he died, I was drained. Everything I had was gone. Now there's nothing left inside me. I'm numb. I feel as if I might as well be dead. I feel like a zombie; a hollow, empty shell of a human being.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do? I came here for help. I thought there might be some wisdom I could find that would keep me going. But there's no wisdom here. You don't have any answers." She did not tell them she had found a possible answer. Sex was the last thing they wanted to hear about.

There was no reaction at all, just total silence. She looked around the circle; everyone avoided making eye contact with her. She wondered if she had pissed them off. She sat down, and thought she had just made a huge

mistake. She was certain they would tell her never to come back.

The moderator stood up and thanked everyone for coming, reminded them of the next meeting, and then urged everyone to stay for refreshments. One or two people left and several drifted toward the coffee and cookies.

Somebody sat in the chair next to her and offered her a cup of coffee. “You probably need this,” he said. At first she wanted to refuse but realized she was grateful for his kindness. Even if she was now a pariah, at least someone was taking pity on her.

“Um, thanks,” she said, looking down.

“You take it black?” the stranger asked.

“That’s good,” she answered. They sat quietly.

“What you said...,” he whispered.

“Yeah, sorry about that. I got carried away. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“No. It was the most honest thing anyone’s said here for months.”

“I don’t think I made anybody feel better. Isn’t that what these meetings are for?”

“Not really. I mean, that’s what they tell you but I think they’re for people who like support for their denial.”

“You included?”

“I think so; up to when you spoke, anyway. You woke me up. Thanks.” She could tell he meant it.

She had been gazing into her coffee cup while he spoke, but now she looked up at him. “That’s nice of you to say, but I doubt anyone would agree.”

“Would you like to get out of here and get some real coffee, or something a little stronger? Maybe we can sit and talk for a while. By the way, I’m Victor.”

“Penelope; nice to meet you.”

She did not want to be alone. If she felt, before, that she had reached the utter depths of loneliness, at this

meeting she discovered there was another whole level beneath that: isolation.

She had hoped these people, who had been through ordeals similar to hers, would welcome and sympathize with her. Maybe she would someday be able to understand and heal from what she had been through. However, it was just like being with her family and friends: give the widow a little sympathy, but keep her an arm's length away. Do not get too close to her. She might infect you. She might tell you what it is like to be entirely alone.

5.

Her failure to get any support or wisdom from the grief group made her realize if she wanted to go further, she was going to have to do it her own. She knew where she wanted to go, but not how to get there.

She thought about going to a bar to find a cute guy, take him home, and let him pound her for few hours. But she had never picked up a guy, and she thought she would just make a fool of herself if she tried.

Besides, she did not want someone to pound her. She wanted someone to care about her; somebody who would take it slow and easy and be mindful of her needs, who would respond to her, instead of the other way around. Not someone who would be so obsessed with his orgasm that he did not care about her.

She did some research and found out male escorts were available, but expensive. She emailed one of the men she could afford whose photo she liked and he immediately replied. She liked the anonymity of email because she felt comfortable talking frankly about what she wanted.

She told him it would be her first time after a long time, so she wanted it to be sweet and last as long as possible. He told her that would be okay and asked when she wanted him to come over. She hesitated to make a date.

He asked if he could call her. She vacillated, but then gave him her number. The phone rang right away.

“Penelope?” he asked. She liked his soft voice.

“Otto?”

“Yes. It’s nice to talk to you. I got the feeling you were a little hesitant.” *Hesitant? More like terrified*, she thought.

“Yes, I am,” she said. She felt like a fool. What the hell was she doing?

“I would like to meet you. Most of my clients don’t ask for what you want.”

“The customer is always right!” she blurted out. *Oh, my God did I just say that to a male prostitute on the phone?* He laughed. They made a date. He assured her everything would be discreet. If she got cold feet, she should just let him know. It would be okay.

6.

Otto was just about the handsomest male she had ever seen. He was nice, too. He had a warm smile, and graceful movements. She felt awkward. Otto sensed it. To help her relax, he suggested they both change into robes and sit on the sofa.

She liked sitting next to him, naked under her robe. It made her feel intimate but not exposed. They chatted for a few minutes. Otto saw that she had relaxed. He casually slid his hand into the opening at the front of her robe and touched her skin. She gasped, and then laughed, embarrassed by her response.

He rested his hand on her thigh. After a moment, she opened the robe so he could see her. He leaned over to kiss her. It felt great and they held each other close for a while.

Then she got very bold. She reached under his robe and touched his thigh. He smiled. They started to touch each other, slowly, all over their bodies. He stood up, took

her hand, and led her into the bedroom. They sat on the edge of the bed, their robes half-open. He noticed her anxiety had returned.

“Let’s try something,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me what you would like me to do? I’ll do anything you say.”

She thought she might pick up where the massage left off. “I want to lie face down and open my legs and have you caress my thighs and ass.”

“Great!” He said. She lay there quietly. He placed one hand on each of her thighs, and then she felt his gentle touch as he massaged her. She started to remember what it was like to become aroused. He gently rubbed everywhere he could in the area she told him to.

“That’s really nice,” she said, and then abruptly moved her body away from his hands. He sensed she might be ready and stopped her.

“Stay like that,” he said. He lifted himself on top of her and entered her as slowly as he could. She did not respond. He started carefully moving inside her. He was tender, but she still did not respond. He became worried that he was not giving her what she wanted.

“Penelope, you don’t seem to be responding. Does it feel good? Are you enjoying this? If not, maybe I’m not the right guy for you. I can stop now, if you want.”

She was reacting but not in a way he could see. Her internal sensual pathways were starting to re-open. She did not want to take her attention away from her own sensations, but she did not want him to stop, either, so she replied, “It’s good. Keep going.”

After they finished, he asked when she wanted another date. She told him she could not afford another one. She could barely afford this one; so it would be the only one. She asked him to leave.

Hours later, her body was still on fire. Her orgasm had quenched some of the heat, but she still felt it. *Have I*

discovered the way to bring myself back to life? she thought. I didn't believe it was possible. Maybe I don't have to feel like I'm dead anymore.

She thought about calling him again but kept putting it off.

7.

Otto called her a few weeks later. He told her he had been thinking about their 'date' and was concerned that she had not called him. He wanted to make sure she was okay.

"Do you call all your clients like this?" she asked, teasingly.

"No. Only the special ones."

"I'm a special one? Why?"

"None of them want what you asked for," he said. He sounded genuinely impressed.

"So what do they ask for?"

"Orgasms. As many and as intense as I can give them."

"Really, that's all?"

"Well, that's only what they think they want, but not what they actually want. What they really want is to go back in time to when they were young, dazzlingly beautiful women who could have any man they wanted. Women who could make love all night, get up, and go to work the next morning. The women they were when their lives were still ahead of them; before they got married, before all the disappointment, hurt, aging, and recrimination.

"I think they know I can't make those things go away. But they think because they hire a young handsome stud that somehow his fucking will erase the yearning and longing they feel. What they don't realize is that orgasms fade, but the yearning does not. I feel sorry for them." He paused.

“Wow, you know a lot about women,” she said, impressed.

“Only the ones that are my clients. You’re not like them. That’s why I like you. You don’t want to go back in time. You don’t have any illusions about your life. You’re not in denial.”

“I know I can’t go back to the past, to Roger, as much as I would like to. I also know I can’t go forward, toward another man who might replace Roger. I will never be in love with another man.” She paused, as the weight of what she had just said struck her.

“In a real sense, I don’t need another man,” she went on. “I just need to be the real me. Part of that me, a *lot* of that me, is being sensual, living in my own body, being happy in my own body. Not a body from the past, like your other clients, but my body as it is now.”

“You should talk to them. You could teach them a lot about reality. But then, if you did, they might not need me to feed their illusions.”

“You care about them, don’t you?”

“It’s sad when people hurt themselves. Life has enough hurt that comes in from the outside. Why add to the hurt by making it come from the inside?”

8.

“I would like to show you some things we haven’t done before,” Otto said. “New sensations that you might like. Nothing that would hurt or humiliate you, and we could stop at any time.”

“Like what?”

“If I tell you it won’t be as much fun. I’d rather surprise you. Anyway, the anticipation is fun, too. Just thinking about what I might do could turn you on.”

“It has already. Okay. Let’s try it.”

Penelope was lying face down. Otto was on top of her. A few more strokes and he would finish. He said ‘oh’

when it happened. He stayed on top of Penelope while his breathing slowed, then he said, "Stay like this." He left the bed and went into the bathroom. She heard him open and close the medicine cabinet. Then he came back to bed and sat next to her. She started to move. "Keep still," he gently told her.

She heard him remove the lid from a jar. It was petroleum jelly. Then she felt his fingers near her anus. She thought she knew what he was going to do, but she was not sure. He rubbed his sticky fingertip around her opening. She waited for what he would do next. He greased her anus, slid his finger in as far as it could go, and then carefully moved it around inside. She gasped. "Do you do this with other clients?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Sometimes."

"Do they like it?"

"Sometimes." She wondered about the times when they did not like it. Did he stop, or force them to endure it?

The sensation of having a finger massaging inside her anus was new. He was gentle and it did not hurt. She relaxed a bit, wondering what he would do next. He slid the finger slowly out, and then she felt something larger going in. He was using two fingers.

She gave herself up to the new sensations. He noticed how still she was lying and how comfortable she seemed, so he stretched out beside her with his fingers still inside her. He wanted to feel his skin against hers and let her know that he had taken complete control.

As he moved his fingers, he said, "Do you like this?" She did not answer. He waited for her to say more, and then realized she wanted more. He slid his other hand down to her vagina and began massaging her labia. She softly groaned. He worked his fingers in both openings and waited for something to happen. He did not have to wait long. She began writhing and pushing her ass onto his fingers.

“Do your other clients like this?” she asked, breathlessly.

“Some do; some don’t,” he said. He continued massaging her, trying to give her as many new sensations as possible.

After a minute or two she said, “Okay, you can pull out now.” He did, very slowly. She lay still as if she was savoring the fading sensations. “Did you fuck them there, too?”

“Yes, sometimes.”

“Are you planning on doing that to me?”

“Maybe, but not right now.” He did not want to do it right away. He wanted her to think about it, anticipate it, and imagine it. He hoped to open more of her sensual pathways, maybe even help her find new ones.

The anticipation excited her, but she said nothing. She did not want to give him any response at all. She wanted give herself to him, and was willing to wait to find out what he was going to do until he started doing it, and not before. Maybe she would allow it; maybe she would not. Her body would tell her what to do.

He washed his hands and they both sat up. He put his arms around her. They felt the heat of each other’s bodies. There was no conversation. He hugged her and got off the bed.

Her goal from the beginning was to have sensations, not feelings or emotions. Her soul was gone, but she still had her body. Physical sensations were the only kind of feelings she had left. All the other feelings that had once been inside her were gone. For Penelope, sensuality had become an end in itself. It was all she had left.

9.

Otto called her one day and asked if he could stop by. She said yes and then took a shower and put on her

robe, so she could be ready when he arrived. But when he came in she could tell he had something on his mind.

He asked whether he could make some coffee. He had done this several times before and was familiar with her kitchen. He poured out two mugs of coffee and then sat down. She sat opposite him.

“Otto, what’s wrong?” She had a flash of fear that he was about to tell her he had a STD. Compared to what he did tell her, that would have been okay.

Otto told Penelope he was moving away. His partner, Jeffrey, got a professorship in another city. “Partner? You’re gay?” She asked, astonished.

“Bisexual,” he answered. She did not reply for a moment. She realized that, despite the time they spent together in bed, she did not know much about him.

“So what’s he like?”

“He’s the kindest most sensitive human being, male or female, I’ve ever met. Many people think women are softer and more sensitive than men. But a lot of the women I meet are hard as nails. I don’t think they would recognize softness.”

Otto explained they had planned to buy a house with the money he saved from his escort fees. They wanted to get married, and adopt a child.

“Everything including the picket fence...,” she muttered. He smiled.

“We’ve been planning this since Jeffrey found out about the job, about 18 months ago. It’s been our dream.”

His news overwhelmed her. She thought she was losing him, but she was not, because she never had him to lose. He was just an escort and she was just a client. But she was not ready to let him go. He had brought her so far in re-discovering her feelings. She thought there was more to discover, but with his departure, she would never get to find it.

As she thought about their conversation, she realized Roger's death had not, as she thought, drained her of all love. There was still love deep inside her, but it had all belonged to Roger. Now it was free. She realized the sensuality that helped her body awaken had opened her up to re-discovering her buried feelings. She might even have discovered a pathway to love. She had not been in love with Otto, but she was deeply grateful for all he had done for her.

10.

One year later Otto and Penelope sat at the same kitchen table. They drank coffee from the same mugs, and discussed the changes in their lives. Otto had moved in a week earlier. He was not alone. His five-year old adopted daughter, Helen, was with him.

Otto and his husband, Jeffrey, had been able to carry out all the things they planned when they moved to Seattle. Jeffrey started his new teaching job; they found and bought a house; they got married; and they adopted Helen.

One day Jeffrey was walking across the campus when he saw Alan, an old friend. Jeffrey and Alan had a torrid love affair when they were students at the university. Alan left the US after graduation. He had begged Jeffrey to go with him but Jeffrey's job was more important. They had assumed they would never see each other again.

Jeffrey had never stopped loving Alan. Otto knew about Alan but assumed the love was all in the past. Suddenly, it had come back into the present. Jeffrey and Alan re-ignited their love affair. Jeffrey told Otto he was moving out. Otto begged him to stay because he could not afford the house on his own. They filed for divorce.

Otto and Helen left Seattle and came back to Philadelphia. He and Penelope had kept in touch. She had not attended the wedding, but Otto shared with her all the momentous changes in his life as they occurred. She was

shocked and saddened when he called to tell her he and Jeffrey were splitting up. Otto asked if he and Helen could stay with Penelope while he found a place for them to live. They moved in a week later. Moved in was an exaggeration. They only had some clothes, and Helen had a few toys.

Their cover story was that Otto was Penelope's son, Helen was his daughter, and he and his wife had split up. This explanation worked for others outside their home, but inside Daddy was sleeping in Granny's bed. Helen was too young to think this was unusual.

11.

Penelope's daughter Alice had moved from Chicago to Scranton. Instead of a plane ride, now she was only a few hours away by car. They saw each other more often. Penelope told Alice about Otto and Helen, making it seem like she was helping an old friend, the son of one of her former co-workers.

Helen and Alice formed a powerful connection the moment they met. Alice and her husband Stan were unable to have children, which had caused their marriage to weaken. They were on the brink of divorce.

Alice was drawn to Helen. She started taking Helen on day trips to the Zoo, or children's museums, or a small amusement park that was near where she lived. Helen never had a relationship with a female adult before. She had always been in foster care. While the foster parents took good care of the kids, there was never time to bond with them. Alice and Helen were bonding.

12.

One day Helen asked Otto if Alice was her real mother. Otto had always been honest with Helen. He told her no one knew who her real mother was. He asked her why she asked. She astonished him by saying, "I wish she

was my Mommy.” He told Penelope and they sat down to discuss Helen.

“Up until recently, I was the most important person in my life. Now Helen is. I want what’s best for her. Alice seems taken with her. She’s asked to take Helen to Scranton for a few days. Helen wants to go. Should I let her? Am I going to lose her?” he asked, distraught.

Penelope had noticed the change in her daughter since Helen came into their lives. She was happier than she had been in years. Even her marriage had improved. Stan was shy around kids, but he liked Helen and became used to seeing her. Penelope was in a dilemma. Alice was her daughter, and Otto was her lover. Whose happiness did she care about most? It was Helen’s.

She advised Otto to let things develop with Alice to see how Helen felt in a few months. Would she tire of Alice? She also advised Otto to spend more time and do more activities with Helen.

Helen did not call him Dad; she called him Otto. He went on a couple of day trips with Alice and Helen. Helen liked having him along. When they were at the Zoo, he ran into one of his old clients who recognized him and said hello. She mentioned that he was looking well and checked him out. He introduced her to Alice.

When the client left, Alice asked who she was. He told her she was an old client. Alice asked what kind of client she was. He lied and said he used to provide data services to small businesses. Alice had noticed how the woman’s face lit up when she saw Otto, and how she could not take her eyes off him. She did not seem like a data processing client.

“No, really. How does she know you?” Alice asked, boldly.

Otto quickly decided to be honest with her. “I used to be a male escort. She was one of my clients.” Alice tried not to show her amazement.

“Really?” was all she could say. She was silent for the rest of their day and when she took Otto and Helen home, she tried to talk privately to Penelope while Otto helped Helen with her bath.

“Something weird happened at the Zoo.” She told Penelope about the client. “He told me he used to be a male escort. Was he kidding me?”

“No. That’s how I met him.”

“Wait, I don’t get it. *How* did you meet him?”

“I contacted him about what they call in his business a ‘date.’”

“You mean, for sex?” Alice asked, incredulously. Penelope smiled and nodded. “Wait, my mother hired a male prostitute? Now you’re kidding me. How did you actually meet him?”

“I’ve seen you checking him out.”

“He’s gorgeous.”

“Well, sometimes a woman needs a man who’s gorgeous to make her feel gorgeous. It’s that simple.” She lied, not wanting to tell Alice the truth that she had wanted to get in touch with her sensations and feelings.

“So, you were a client, just like that woman at the Zoo?” Alice asked, still skeptical. Penelope nodded.

“He got me through the worst of my depression and grief after your father died,” she said.

“Well, I guess I’m happy about that, but a male escort? Mom, how could you?”

“It was easy, and I’m glad I did it. We’ve become friends.” Alice seemed lost in thought.

“Wait, he’s living here. Are you still sleeping with him?” Penelope nodded. “Do you love him?”

“No.”

“Does he love you?”

“No. Neither of us wants that.”

“I can see why. He’s half your age.”

“Oh, he only *looks* half my age, but that’s not why. We’ve both suffered a great loss.”

“What about that other guy you mentioned? Victor?”

“We see each other once in a while, but we’re not dating.” She and Victor had tried a few dates but there was no spark between them. They thought this was because they had both lost their spouses and were hesitant to get into another relationship. Now they were just friends.

13.

It became clear that Helen preferred to be with Alice and Stan. She did not feel comfortable with Penelope, whom she referred to as the ‘old lady.’ Helen had never lived in a normal family. She did not know what a Granny was. She had learned what a Mom was, and had chosen Alice to fill that role.

Otto knew he would have to give her to Alice. He could be a great father but what Helen needed was a real mother. When Helen came home from a trip with Alice, she was forthright.

“Why can’t Alice be my mommy?” she asked. The decision seemed unavoidable. Otto knew he had lost Helen, but he was happy for her. She needed a normal family environment, something that he could not give her no matter how hard he tried.

Penelope knew Alice was thinking the same as Helen. When Otto discussed it with her, she suggested he wait until Alice said something, but he should be sure that he was okay with giving up Helen.

Alice invited Otto out for coffee and proposed she take Helen. She was afraid she might hurt his feelings; he told her he had seen this coming and it was clear Helen was happier with Alice and Stan than with him or Penelope. Alice was delighted.

The two of them went back and told Helen, who lit up with excitement. She asked if she could leave right away, as if she was afraid they might change their minds. She gathered her things and loaded them into Alice's car. Then, to everyone's surprise, she went to Otto and hugged him as tightly as she could and whispered, "Thank-you, Otto," into his ear. He nearly cried. She thanked Penelope for letting her stay in the house and then left with Alice.

Otto cried after they were gone. Penelope held him. "You did the right thing, for her," she said.

"Yes, but not for me. I feel so lost. I got used to her being around. I liked seeing the world from her perspective; when everything is new and interesting."

"The world is still that way, you know."

"Is it? I'm not so sure."

14.

About six months later, Otto's former husband Jeffrey called. He was in Philadelphia and wanted to see Otto and Helen. Otto was distraught. He did not want to tell Jeffrey Helen was living happily with a traditional family, which was what she needed all along. He told Jeffrey that Helen was with her Aunt Alice and Uncle Stan and she would not be available.

Jeffrey insisted he wanted to see Otto anyway. He told Otto his fling with Alan was over. Their fire had burned out. Jeffrey was lonely and he was wondering whether Otto and Helen would consider going back to Seattle to live with him.

Otto was furious. "You hurt me, and now you want me to forgive and forget? It's never gonna happen. I'm happy here."

"Wait. You're happy with that woman? You're choosing *her* over me? I thought you loved me."

"I did a long time ago, but your actions wised me up. I wouldn't even dream of living with you again."

“I must say, I’m disappointed. I know I hurt you, but I was hoping you still loved me and would forgive me.”

“It goes beyond hurt. After all the plans we made, and then successfully carried out, down to the last detail, you just abandoned Helen and me as if we didn’t exist.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Helen is happy here; she’s flourishing. For the first time in her life she has stability. I’ve worked hard to make that happen. Penelope has helped me. Taking Helen away from here would traumatize her. I won’t let that happen. You should just go back to Seattle and live the rest of your life. There’s no reason for us to have any contact, so don’t bother me again.”

“It’s not that simple. I adopted Helen, too,” Jeffrey said.

“And the judge gave me full custody.”

“I’ll have the case reopened, or file an appeal.”

“Go ahead. She’s more important to me than anything in this world and I won’t allow you to hurt her. I’ll fight you.”

“But you won’t let me see her? That seems suspicious. Maybe she would like to see me.”

“You think so? She doesn’t even remember you, Jeff. Call her right now. She’ll think you’re a perfect stranger.”

“You’ve poisoned her against me.”

“No, *you* poisoned her, I saved her. Go away.”

Otto had never been so angry in his life. Penelope was afraid he might hurt himself. She tried to calm him down, and told him he did the right thing; that this would be the end of it, and not to worry.

Nevertheless, Otto did worry. He knew Jeffrey could be devious. If he wanted something, he methodically overcame all obstacles to get it. What if he tried that with Helen?

Penelope urged him to talk to Alice. There was a remote possibility Alice and Stan could adopt Helen. Otto could put her up for adoption, a mere formality, just paperwork. They could then start more paperwork and adopt her, and she would be legally out of the reach of Jeffrey. They had to do it right away. There was no telling when Jeffrey might take action.

They completed all the paperwork and Helen became Alice and Stan's daughter, and Penelope became her grandmother. She was ecstatic. To everyone's relief, Jeffrey did not try anything.

15.

Otto felt the burden of protecting Helen lifted and he started to think about what he wanted to do next in his life. He wanted to be in love again, but not with Penelope. She had made it clear that she would never love anyone else for the rest of her life.

He did not tell her he was thinking of leaving. He still had most of the settlement from the divorce and he could go somewhere and start a business. He would be alone, but hopefully not for long. He might meet someone and start a relationship.

Penelope discovered what he was thinking and they had a long conversation. She wanted him to stay with her. When he asked her whether she loved him, she said no. He told her he wanted someone who would love him, not just like him.

She considered pretending to love him, but knew he would see through her pretense. She realized her fear and hesitation about love was about to cause a catastrophe.

"I don't want to lose you," she admitted.

"It seems you never had me, so you can't lose me. I'm sorry it's worked out this way."

She knew he was right. She understood where he was coming from, and she hated herself, not him. She had

done this to herself. She had kept love out when it wanted to come in, and now it did not want to come in anymore. It wanted to go somewhere else.

He thought the best thing for the two of them was just for him to leave, so he did. He left her a heartfelt note thanking her for all she had done for him.

Otto was alone, now. He had ended two of his relationships. Three, if he included Helen. What should he do now? He had no idea.

16.

Penelope and Otto had the same problem, although they did not know it. They had been apart for six months but they still thought of each other, a lot.

When they first separated, it seemed normal for them to think about each other. They both expected that, as time went on, they would fade from each other's memory. However, that had not happened. Otto did not know what to do, or whether he should do anything. Penelope started to see a therapist.

She talked about how she had felt drained and empty of all feelings after Roger died, and how she just assumed she would stay numb for the rest of her life, only to discover that she could still feel things. As she explored the sensations from her body she became aware of other feelings still hidden inside her, but she was not ready for them to emerge.

During the time she knew Otto, first as his client than as his lover, she had re-discovered her older sexual self, and expanded to a new, broader and more inventive and experimental sexual self. She was completely comfortable with Otto. They could do whatever they felt like doing in bed, and both delighted in the experiences.

The problem was that she refused to admit that underneath the sexual awakening was an emotional awakening as well. The reason she had felt drained and

numb was not because everything had been taken from her; but because she walled herself off from the pain and agony she had endured with Roger's illness and death. Life had not numbed her. She had numbed herself.

With Otto, that numbness had worn off, but she had refused to admit it, for the simple reason that once she opened herself to love then all the other positive feelings would come back. When that happened, she was certain the negative feelings she was suppressing would also come back. She could not go through all that again; the love and loss, the passion and heartache, the bliss and loneliness.

When she and Otto had the opportunity to explore a deeper relationship, she refused to allow it. It was not that she did not have any feelings. It was that she did not want to allow herself to feel the ones she did have, because they would just start her down another path that was likely to end in grief.

She had never discussed this with Otto. He wanted to understand why she could not love him, but she would not let him see into her soul. If anyone would likely feel grief, it was him, because he was younger; but he accepted that. She did not. The difference in their ages just served as an everyday reminder of the emotional anguish they would both have to face. She could not bear that, again.

Yet now she found herself unable to forget him. She fantasized that he would call, maybe just to see how Helen was doing. However, he did not.

He wanted to, but he thought she would be angry with him for the way he left, even though she had known it was likely to happen, and he did not want to upset her. He hoped she had found that pleasure in being a Grandma would compensate for other feelings she had lost when he left.

She did love Helen, but she ached for Otto. And Otto ached for her. When he was alone in bed at night, he would recall how it felt to lie next to her. He remembered

the way she breathed, the way she sometimes talked in her sleep. (She said his name more than once.) Maybe he should not have insisted on love. Maybe he should not have left. Maybe they could have been happy without love. Now he would never know.

He could not understand what was happening. He had been with many women; he had lolled beside them and felt the heat of their bodies. He would go from one client to the next, and never missed any of them. When they were gone, he forgot them. He could not forget Penelope; he missed her.

17.

He finally called her, ostensibly to ask about Helen. He could have called Alice; they both knew that. After she told him Helen was doing great, there was a long pause, and then he asked how she was doing. She did not know how she should answer. She assumed she should lie and tell him she was okay, but she knew he would know she was lying.

She could just tell him the truth, but she knew there was no way he would come back to her. She went for the most innocuous non-committal reply, "I miss you." He told her he missed her, too. They both assumed this is where their conversation would end, but it did not.

"I've been seeing a therapist," she said, after a long silence. It seemed neither of them wanted to hang up. "She's helping me a lot."

"You needed help? I didn't know that."

"Yeah, I had a lot of stuff bottled up inside that I needed to work through."

"Like what?" he asked.

"How confused I was about my own feelings."

"You didn't seem confused. You were very clear about your feelings."

"Yeah, but I was wrong," she said, regretfully.

“About what?”

“About a lot of things, but mostly about you.”

“Me? You were always frank about where we stood, in terms of feelings.”

“That’s the problem, I wasn’t frank. I was in denial.” She felt good that she admitted the truth to him.

“About what?” he asked, wondering whether something was about to change.

“I loved you; I just couldn’t allow myself to admit it. I didn’t want to go through all the feelings again. Sooner or later I would have had to.”

“So you were afraid of your own feelings?” he asked, sympathetically.

“I guess you could say that.”

“And how do you feel, right now?”

“I can’t stop thinking about you. I know I loved you, but I wouldn’t admit or accept it,” she said, remorsefully.

“So you drove it away?”

“What do you mean?”

“You pushed me away. I wanted to stay but you made it impossible. I loved you, too, but when you told me all that bullshit about your emotional confusion, I felt you would never sort it out and decide how you felt about me.”

“Oh, I’ve decided. Too late, but I’ve decided,” she whispered, but he could barely hear her.

“Please just tell me, Penelope. Until you say it to me it won’t be real.”

“I know, but it’s so difficult. If it becomes real, I will become vulnerable, again. Sooner or later something’s gonna hurt.”

“So you’re not gonna say it?” The breakthrough he thought was coming had just disappeared.

“I can’t. Not yet. I’m sorry, Otto.”

“I’m sorry, too. We could have been happy, for as long as it lasted. Even if things started to hurt, I’d still be

happy, just because I was with you. That's all that would matter to me."

She did not reply. He was right, but it was hard to overcome her fear. She was not yet certain she even wanted to overcome it. It was keeping her safe, or so she believed.

Otto knew she was lying to herself if she believed her fear was protecting her. Fear does not protect anything. It just stops you from doing things; it steals your freedom and makes you a victim. Thinking of her as a victim saddened him, but there was nothing he could do to rescue her. She had to do that herself, when she was ready; which she might never be.

"Otto, I'm sorry, but right now I can't go beyond 'I miss you.' That's all I have."

"I know, and that's why you lost me. I did love you but I never thought you would feel the same way. I guess I was right." She began to cry. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry," he said. She did not answer. He could hear her sobbing.

"I don't know what to do," she said.

"Penelope, I know what to do. Follow your feelings. Your real feelings. Let me back into your life. Then we both can be happy." She immediately hung up.

18.

His instinct was just to show up at her door to prove he loved her. He thought about it a couple days and could not decide. He did not need to protect his own feelings. He kept trying to decide whether she could change her feelings and let go of her fear. Part of the time he believed she was close to doing so and maybe just needed a little push. Other times, he was sure she would never change. However, he had another problem.

His problem was not just her feelings. His real problem was his own feelings. He could not let go of her. Even now, after six months apart and a deep and revealing

conversation, his love for her had not changed. He still wanted to be with her.

But how?

19.

Penelope and Otto sat in a booth at their once-favorite Italian restaurant. They each assumed that this would be the last meal they would ever share.

“I wanted to ask you a question.” Penelope said, hesitantly. She looked at Otto’s face but saw no expression there. “Why me? Why did you choose me?” He smiled. It was not the question he had expected.

“The way I see it, it was you who chose me. You picked me out from the website just by my photo and fee. Then you contacted me and you told me, without my asking, just what you wanted.” She looked puzzled. “You wanted me to make love to you,” he reminded her. She nodded. “But that item was not on the menu.” She still looked puzzled, so he continued to explain.

“My other clients never wanted what you asked for. They wanted me to fuck them, that’s all. So, I decided that I would do everything in my power to give you what you wanted.”

“I wanted to feel like it was when Roger and I were making love, to re-connect, I guess.”

“You fascinated me and I persuaded you to make a date because I had to meet you.” He paused to see whether what he said had any effect on her. He hoped it did.

“It seemed that you were not looking for something physical, but emotional. I was flattered that you chose me to help you find it. I wanted to give you what you wanted, or, at least try.”

“You know you did, right? There’s never been any doubt about that. You were wonderful.” She smiled at him. It was the first time he had seen her smile in a long time. He reached across the table and took her hand.

“Despite everything, I’m still happy that it was me you contacted and not someone else. I would have hated to miss knowing you.” His words deeply touched her, as if they were a special balm he had applied to a deep wound, so it could finally heal. She looked at him.

“I’m sorry, for making such a mess of things. For pushing you away,” she said.

“Penelope, you were protecting yourself. You weren’t ready to move forward,” he replied. Although she had hurt him, he understood why she had closed herself off from him.

“Now it’s too late.”

“No, it’s not. This doesn’t have to be the end; it can be a new beginning.”

“I don’t want a new beginning,” she said, and then looked into his eyes. The hurt she saw there suddenly woke her up. She realized the huge mistake she had made. “Could we just pick up right where we left off?” she asked, timidly.

She suddenly came to the realization that she did not want to live the rest of her life without love. She had to overcome her doubt, and face her fear. Their age difference was not a problem. If Otto wanted to be part of her life, she would welcome him in. There was no reason to hold herself back.

It is not love that hurts, it is the loss of love that causes suffering. The price for love is high; but Penelope was willing to pay it. She was not certain why she felt this way. She suspected it was a newfound maturity or wisdom.

Maturity allows you to look back on your life and see it as it was. Wisdom allows you to go forward with what you have learned about yourself, and maybe change your future.

She wanted to go forward.

Afterword

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