

**A WRECK IS BLOCKING ALL LANES —**  
**USE ALTERNATE ROUTE**  
CONVERSATIONS WITH STEVE



MARBLES BUILDS CHARACTER

When I was in the third grade one of the kids from south of the tracks (that is, one of the tough kids) undertook to teach me marbles. His name was Billy. Billy something, built like a small Cagney, with the same smile. I had brought a big cloth bag of marbles to school — a bag made, as I remember, out of a leg of pants — marbles are naturally to be sorted into types and colors and I suppose that was what I was doing with them on the playground at recess. Sorting them, looking for order.

It was late spring. The snow was gone, and its successor mud, and the playground had dried out enough to use though it was awfully lumpy. I suppose Billy thought he was going to take my marbles. A year older he would have just pushed me over and walked off with the bag. But now, only third graders and not quite sorted, it was not yet the right thing to do.

Billy took a stick — from where, this stick? the playground was naked — and scratched a ring about two feet across. The mark was shallow and hard to see. Billy scraped off some bumpy parts with the heel of his shoe and redrew the ring in new dirt. We both scattered some marbles in the ring. Who goes first, Billy explained, is who can shoot closest to this. Which was a steel ball about an inch in diameter that he took from his pocket and which seemed to have a power of attracting glass to itself when it was Billy's turn. Going first, Billy pretty much cleared the ring.

We did not wear denim pants to school then, even the tough kids, and Billy's shoes must have been leather. I remember he was a spruce kid, no punk. It was still cold, probably in the low thirties, with that playground wind which blows dust in your face no matter which way you turn. I was wearing, I'm sure, some hickishly thick loden overcoat and a *boue*-colored stocking hat; Billy, as befit his emerging status, wore only a light jacket, what we would call now a windbreaker, made of tan poplin. The cold didn't seem to make his fingers as stiff as mine, though I noticed he always had one hand or the other in his jacket pocket. His nose didn't run, either.

This vision of Billy is one of my more intense and detailed mental acquaintances, whereas I remember nothing whatsoever of our teacher. I suspect thus a lot of Mickey Rooney has infiltrated it. But it will have to do.

I had been watching Billy pretty carefully, but when I got a turn to shoot I didn't do very well. The marble, in fact, didn't even make it into the ring. It dribbled instead off to one side into a pothole. We reloaded the ring with another twenty each.

I got quickly down to my shooters. Billy had taken everything else. Side by side we squatted fraternally outside the marble ring and pondered five or six spots of dull lollipop-colored glass on the ashy ground in front of us.

Billy emptied his pockets without standing. He'd had only a dozen or so marbles to begin; now he had mine. Look, he said. You take these back and we'll do it again. Here — hold the

shooter like this and kind of flick it. You got to hit something direct. You roll it on the ground no telling where it goes. Aim at this bunch.

On the second try I did hit something, but too weakly to knock it out of the ring.

Not so high, Billy pointed out. Tip your fist down and work your thumb good.

See this, he demanded. Billy's shooter fired into the ring. I copied, weaker but got results. Billy exulted this success. I guessed later he thought he'd rather play than win, because if he won it all he'd not get to play anymore.

This went on for the rest of the week. In the end Billy did get all the marbles, of course, but I kept back my best shooters and there were more marbles for me in the Ben Franklin store a couple of blocks away.

But on Monday Billy wasn't looking at me now. He sat a couple of rows over with two other guys of the guys from his south side neighborhood, heads together, and at recess he was nowhere to be seen. Six weeks later school was out and I never saw Billy again, and I never played another game of marbles. I don't know what happened to the bag which my grandmother sewed for me.

Really, it wasn't a very interesting game, marbles. When your brother-in-law tried to rope me into throwing horseshoes I thought the same about that. Then on the trip to Malta two years ago we saw a game of Maltese boules more like marbles than the shuffleboard game you see on travel television. Muscular young Billies were shooting into the field, twisting it like a cricket ball, placing their feet as carefully as for a cross-table pool shot. Beer and whooping spilled out of the boule-pit.

Billy learned something from me, too, I guess. About loyalty and betrayal and who is worthy of affection.

Affection is like grace — you can't deserve it. If you do, it's the reward for good works and not the same thing at all. Good works, my Lutheran mother told me, cannot save you.

Steve whooped. The classic recipe for anxiety! Something is expected of you which you have no means of knowing, which if you don't do it will punish you.

Yes, I said, a little cautious. I remember a day when my friend Jim and I met on the street someone we knew. Ron who was in Jim's year. Jim gave Ron a punch in the stomach and we walked on. No explanation. After he'd caught his breath, Ron came running after wanting to know what he'd done. To know why. Jim never said. That's grace.

A pause in the talk while our mental third stomachs broke down this insight into shit. Scratching of pencil.



#### SAVED BY ACCIDENT

In the fifth grade, I said, by which time I was a confirmed outsider, I had a problem with dirtying my underwear.

That's delicate.

I couldn't ask to leave class to go to the bathroom. I don't remember whether you weren't allowed, or I thought you weren't, or as the class nebbish I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

Not nebbish, surely.

No, that's a word I learned in graduate school from a guy from Chicago.

I remember.

Yes, well the others would have noticed. I mean when a two-day old fart produces sneers? But no one said a word.

To be saved by grace, you're saying, is not noticing the poop? I think that's the way most marriages get on. Either you're dreaming and don't notice or you're stupid and don't know.

After that I started going to the public library instead, which was across the street from the school.

Instead of what?

Instead of being saved. They had a children's room in the basement which I was old enough to get into and I started then reading my way through it. Dr Seuss and *Freddy the Pig* and whatever else was there, most of it older than my mother. Mother read *Return to Ararat* and *The Deluge* and the Bible, which were not the children's books in the library. We read the Bible twice. In the library, just inside the heavy door of black-varnished wood and beveled glass, on a small landing where the stairs went up on the left to the grown-up books (*Moby Dick* and *The Doors of Perception* and thick collections of mystery stories) and down on the right (*Nancy Drew* and *The Five Little Peppers*), stood a grandfather clock. This clock paid no attention to anyone or whether they went up or down but talked to itself in a deep voice sounding rather like an Ent's, I imagine. It got into a novel I wrote later, in the doggerel line "tick tock of the somnolent clock."

She was Stephana then, lying in a hammock all summer looking at the sky. She could have been reading if she were able, but undiagnosed dyslexia made that mysteriously hard to do. Dyslexia is like getting into heaven. By the time you figure out what the problem is, it's too late. The damage is already done. Steve processes most of her information by ear, or on the right side. This is the main reason why she thinks talking is a waste of time. Aside from the impropriety of it, words mean nothing, answer nothing. Whereas *my* brain doesn't work unless my mouth is moving. There's a little rod on a cam that connects the two and goes up and down and turns the wheels. Up and down all the time like a dick in a porn film and when it stops you're dead. The screen goes black.

So Steve doesn't read anything I write. I can say what I like about her, and you shouldn't believe any of it. Probably not about me, either. I am the Unreliable Narrator — or the Walrus, as the Beatles said. I never understood that song. I don't think I was supposed to.

As for writing something so as to publish it Steve finds the idea bizarre. To suppose you had anything to say, unless some other fool's ego gets tangled up in the thing, in which case it's also a gross breach of good manners. Writing is like sex — if you have to, you should just go ahead and wash up after. If you're talking, you're bluffing.

When she started town school in 1959 she says she wasn't Steve yet. By the time she was, there was no retreat. Stephana signs checks and tax forms and fortunately hasn't yet been arrested yet for that. It was Steve who was there at the bedside when I came back from the dead. She was hoping for someone else. No Orpheus me, but I don't think knowing how to sing would have helped.

In *The Pawnbroker* Rod Steiger's character, by means of his position as camp orderly, finds out his wife is being kept as a sex slave when he catches a glimpse of her, barefoot in a white shift, brought back to her cell. He'd thought she was dead. It was the end cell of a long row of bare concrete rooms not big enough to lie down in, each one presumably occupied likewise. Later on in the movie he has a spiritual crisis and runs a receipt spindle through his hand, but it hardly bleeds at all. Hard to tell, actually — the film is in black and white. I don't suppose the rancher whose wife was snatched by the Indians did that.

Atonement, you mean?

He was too dead by then.

That movie wasn't about love, Steve reminded me. It was about guilt.

I almost snorted. Love is the most promiscuous element on the periodic table. Love will alloy with anything. Hate, greed, duplicity — anything.

We never found out what happened to the pawnbroker's first wife, did we? Steve said. Fucked to death, presumably



#### LOONY STUDIO CONVERSATION

You never screwed any blondes, Steve remarked, looking up from her drawing. There was a pencil smudge on her cheek, an analog of this sudden mental twitch.

No. I made that up about blondes.

Of course you did, she said, eyeing the plate of gourds she was attempting to reproduce.

Let's have the Specks over for drinks, she said while sharpening her pencil. We haven't seen George and Martha for ages.

Well, I haven't, anyway.

So if we had them over we'd be even up. Settled.

That's Steve talking. *Stephana* would never propose a dinner party. She's secretive — inscrutable I'd say if the idea that you could scrute something inscrutable weren't a solecism like *more perfect*. If Stephena ever had a bang-up with anyone but herself, and I find even that hard to imagine, she sure as hell wouldn't say so. With Stephana, the first problem with group sex would be that too many people know about it.

Of course, it's also a tacky and ill-bred thing to do. Like taking more than one cookie when the plate is handed round. Greedy.

The scrawny, cautious Stephana who believed the people who told her she was stupid would have never suggested fucking anybody. Who would she have suggested it to?

Steve is different.

Zo dann, I said, a little resigned. Eh bien. Why don't you just call up George for an afternooner? While I'm away somewhere. And don't tell me.

That's a problem. You're never away.

And don't tell George, either. How about the office? In all the movies there's a box room at work for that.

I could go ahead without Martha, I suppose, she said speculatively, sipping tea. I still think it would be easier to have them here.

Ruminative silence. We could serve sushi.

Chopsticks raised bearing a small heap of rice, a thought struck. Not good, she said decisively. I have your interests in mind here. You can't be left out. I don't want to be accused of pushing you aside. That would be a porny thing to do.

Oh. What's the difference?

Then I'd be using you to get what I want. To manufacture the excitement of a seeecrit trist, don't you know. As in *bonjour trystesse*? It wouldn't be fair on you. I need to make some sacrifices here, for your sake.

Like doing without Martha?

Exactly. So we'll put the afternooner aside. I don't like secrets, anyway. I'd have to tell you everything, wouldn't I?

No. You wouldn't have to. I prefer to imagine it for myself.

Λ studied me for a long while, until I had to look down bashfully into my rice bowl. There were a few grains left there which I moved around with the tip of one chopstick.

■  
RHINOCEROS

By the way, I said. I don't like that new shampoo you bought. It smells like sweat.

Get on with it, Steve replied impatiently. You wanted to tell me something.

We were sitting after breakfast in front of the big window looking out on the back garden. Steve was combing her long, lion-colored hair with her fingers. She twisted it up into a rope and let it fall, ran her fingers through it again — behavior I've heard called the 'hair thing' for times of boredom or anxiety.

So, I began. This man and woman -- well, boy and girl really -- were having tea.

Girl and boy, you mean.

Why do I mean that?

Girls come first.

Ummm — maybe I shouldn't reply to that.

Best not. Tea?

Yes, I'd like some ... well, no. I'd rather coffee.

Meaningful silence.

Very well, then, I said, going on. In that upstairs place in Oxford we used to like. The Nosebag. A winter afternoon. The place was sort of emptied out — Long Vacation.

No, that's before Michaelmas Term. It was after.

Whatever.

This is what you wanted to tell me? Steve said. A sardonic, puzzled smile passed faintly across her mouth.

They — the girl and boy — had gotten one of those tables by the window that's otherwise hard to get. Mullions and all. The tea was good. Why is it one can't make English tea at home?

Chinese Restaurant Tea, neither.

No. Well, then. It was because they needed to get out. They were tired of chicken tikka and Renaissance music in the Camera and the train to Paddington. The conversation was desultory. Winter talk. They were avoiding the subject, you see, which was that they really didn't want to go out at all.

This is pretty tired, Steve said.

Yes, it is, I said. Who wants to go out in the winter anyway? All that sloshing about. And anyway, people are like that.

Like what?

That. It's always the same, like dropping stones down wells, you know, or honking in tunnels. You see a hole in the ground you want to jump in. People jump into the Grand Canyon every day. If they didn't haul them away it would be filled up in no time.

You weren't breathing again last night, Steve said.

Wasn't I? I was having a satori.

You were forgetting to breathe.

I dreamt the wind was blowing everything away like rotten clothes clinging to a fence, I said, leaving only the armature.

Armature, Steve mused. Like sculptors use to putty the clay on.

Exactly. There were these other people, rocks and trees and so forth, that still had their clay on. I felt this great compassion. Love for the things of the world.

You felt sorry for them, you mean.

That's crass. Do you think I'm crass?

Hardly that. Crass has to do with money, doesn't it? Steve said pointedly.

It doesn't. Or only indirectly.

This is a long ways from The Nosebag.

Exactly. They were going out, these two. They were young people in love. They wanted to find their Buddha natures, the Tao. Nothing.

Go back in and fuck, I think.

You're making it hard, Steve.

I'm sorry, she said, insincerely contrite. Steve is insincere much of the time. Now there was a long silence, an appraising scrutiny, and again the sardonic little smile.

You're thinking about him again, she guessed.

What?

That. You ought not do that, you know.

So why was I going on about Oxford and English tea and the rest? I wanted to know. If you knew.

Because I asked you to, but that was a mistake, Steve said.

An authentic remark. I was proud of her.

That satori, she went on after another long pause, almost a cup of tea long. That was when you were suffocating, wasn't it? A near death experience.

Near enough. It doesn't change anything.

After a while I roused myself and said that I didn't like tea very much anymore, actually, and I was going to pour myself a cup of coffee.

You've got to stop doing that, she said. Coffee's not good for you.

I suppose.

So, Steve said. These two. What were they talking about that it was so important to get out?

It was something they weren't talking about.

Well, what, then?

I don't know. They weren't talking about it.

Something to do with sex, then.

I suppose. It usually is.

Why weren't they talking about it, then?

I don't know, I tell you. It was the rhinoceros in the room.

I believe, Steve said, you mean an elephant. In the room.

An elephant? Yes, I suppose I do.

Steve was moving the tea things around on the table as if they were the pieces in a game of chess.

Rhinoceros are going extinct, I said. It's the horn. People are wanting to carve things out of it.

That's ivory, you doufous.

Oh. Yes. Ivory. What's the plural of rhinoceros?

Rhinoceroses.

We need to get out, I said after a while. Where shall we go?  
The wineries.  
I'm not buying any \$150 bottles of wine.  
We'll just taste.  
They look at you funny.  
Let 'em, she said.

■  
HER STONE BRIDGE

For some time the conviction has been growing with me that I don't really know what is going on. I suppose everyone feels this way as they get older and probably retirement intensifies it. Probably it's something to do with having so much time to actually think about what you *do*.

Myself, I spend a lot of time in coffee shops now. I like the wireless time and I can eat the pastries I shouldn't and there are people about and I can listen to what they are saying. People, especially women, will say the damndest things in a coffee hubub. "So I caught my husband doing bleep and he told me to go fuck myself and I did and guess what?"

People you have lived with for forty years do whatever it is they are doing and you don't have a clue until you overhear about it at the next table and you realize you are never going to have a clue. It's uncanny. You're wandering like Lestrade or Cuff among unkenable doings. Then comes a gust of truth that makes your eyes water and after a moment you put down your coffee cup and remark that the air conditioner might be turned up a bit.

We were looking at some old pictures of her. This is generally a bad idea as it encourages illusions about which we have enough already. As the sage says, the past does not go there from the present.

There was one of her from around 1968 when she first wore her hair short. She was wearing the big glasses which were popular then and a faint smile which made her baissé elfin face demurely malicious. She reminded me of the government prosecutor in Costa-Gavras's *Z*.

I like this, I foolishly said. Are there any more?

She thought a moment.

Do you know the koan about the stone bridge? she said.

No.

Well, it goes this way. A traveler showed up at the monastery and asked for water. Coming here, he said, I was told there was a famous stone bridge which I ought to see, but it was only a few stepping stones. Your water is very good, by the way. Perhaps you can enlighten me about this bridge. Certainly, said Joshu, passing the traveler another cup of water. It lets donkeys cross over.

I thought about this a while but had to admit I was puzzled.

Of course you are, Steve said. It's a koan.

The only thing I know is that bridges are especially important in Chinese painting. They mark important transitions in people's lives.

Steve's eyes glowed enigmatically. She rummaged through the box of photographs. Here's one, she said.

In this one she was younger, with that long red hair she wore for a while. I guessed it had been taken in a Japanese garden somewhere. There was a railing and the garden lay spread out behind her. A tea house?

She leaned back against the balcony railing, her hands a little behind and seeming to brace her. One leg was slightly bent. She was wearing a loose long-sleeve blouse closed at the neck and a skirt which covered the knee and draped across her thighs and on her face that same insouciant enlightened expression she has worn for forty years.

You didn't have red hair then, I remarked.

When?

When this was taken.

Hmm. Well, then you're wrong about when it was taken, I suppose.

What's that one? I said, snatching a photograph from farther down in the box. I almost crushed it. It was the same picture, or it seemed to be, only she was perfectly naked.

Fuck, I said, no more than a whisper.

Potty-mouth word. I hate it.

What, I lashed out. Fuck? What would you call it, then? *Screw* is epicene. Everything else is either cute or a euphemism. Make love, have intercourse, satisfy a conjuncture agreement. Sausage in a bun.

Mit senf.

Yah, danke. Mit dei Begeisterung.

There was an uneasy pause. I began to giggle.

The best wurst we ever had was that time in Freiburg, in the market square beside the cathedral, with a glass of Alsatian wine. Remember?

Steve nodded.

Why has it never been better, before or after? The sausage, the wine, you can get them anywhere.

So can you mustard, Steve said.

I looked at the photograph some more, holding it by its edges, bent into a curve. A hotel balcony, then.

So can you mustard. Get it anywhere.



#### ABOUT LETTUCE

I'll not ask you for a story, Steve said some weeks later, after an abashed respite. After that other one. That slipped a bit out of hand, I think.

Nevertheless, I replied –

Oh dear, it was now her turn to say, quietly to herself. But it was you who started it. There was something on your mind, I think you said.

Yes. Well I'll tell you something anyway. But on a quite different subject, I assure you. I'm to blame for mentioning sins in the first case.

Yes, she agreed. I've never quite understood what those were. Little nuggets of something that gets into things. It's the way people talk, you know, about chocolate and perfume and so forth. I can't quite think that can have been your original intent, no matter how daft.

At this time I had been in the mountains for a month. Steve had stayed behind, having found a co-op studio in which to work and being reluctant to pass up the opportunity. During that month alone she had been able to make a few pots, of which there was now a small show on the dining room table among the tea things. I had been turning several of these over in my hands while Steve poured. Taking tea rather than coffee at these times had come to seem a good idea.

Pours well, I observed of the new pot. Good balance? Handle's a bit small for me.

You don't drink tea.

I've changed my mind. You must remember that museum in Tokyo. One would have liked to feel – that is, to handle them. What they're like in the hand.

Hmm. Famous old tea bowls with individual names, national treasures, I can't think if you were to drop one. Do you like that pot in particular? You're petting it like a cat.

But then, I went on, one doesn't want to feel a painting, even a de Kooning or a Pollack or one of those new lumpy things. That's a dimension missing in paintings.

Your books are like that, Steve said.

What, missing something?

Yes — that dimension of touching. In your books it's as it is when there's something going around and nobody wants to be touched and when you shake hands you feel you ought to be wearing latex gloves.

A strange custom, I said. When you think about it. Who else does that? I mean what other culture. I thought it was hugs now.

Just my point. Your books — the people in them, anyway — never touch each other.

Not knowing what to say to this I kept quiet.

You were going to tell me a story?

I did say so, yes. But I've forgotten it.

Steve gave me one of her practiced suspicious expressions, of which she has a considerable repertoire. This was one of the slitty-eyed sort, with just a hint of something worldly about the corners of the mouth.

I believe, she said, I've heard that English is the only language which permits beginning a sentence with *but*. Have you been taking your medication?

Yes yes, it's only that we got talking and I forgot my story.

Well you'll just have to think of another one, then.

Steve put down her teapot decisively and sat forward, elbows on the table and forearms crossed, waiting with all attention. The light through the shutters made her skin, the pots, everything glow. It's something you miss in the mountains, that light, thick as syrup.

She had made pancakes that morning, her own milkless eggless sugarless gluten-free recipe. Quite delicious, not what you'd think, especially with a bowl of cut-up strawberries. Perhaps this was why the syrup image came to mind. The breakfast things were still on the table with everything else, pushed aside along with an untidy refolded newspaper with the sudoku on top, half done.

Your mother freezes watermelon, Steve mused, a leap which might have puzzled some.

And lettuce, I added.

There is a certain comfort in knowing someone for so long that your mother's way with lettuce is a topic of conversation along with syrupy light, zen tea bowls, and the mysterious properties of sin. Steve's peignoirs were rather too see-through at times. Perhaps that explained a failure to notice odd leaps of mind.

Give us a hug, love, I said, reaching across the table for her hand.

You've been watching old English sitcoms up there in the mountains, Steve said, making her hand available with a barely noticeable hesitation. It was a bit rough from the pottery. Wet clay bothered her arthritic knuckles, and had given the last joint of the index finger on her right hand a pronounced inward twist. Perhaps that was why when she pointed something out in what I'd said her reference was often a little askew.

■  
THE NAME OF GOD

Speaking of names, I said.

We weren't, Steve insisted.

I continued on. Speaking of names, you used to be someone else.

That was when I was in pigtails.

But everyone called you Steve, even the teachers. Who were you before?

Why didn't you ask me, then?

Squeamish, I suppose. It's like not looking at naked people. Personal. It was a long time before I discovered... well, never mind.

Anyway, she said, it's a secret. Maybe if you'd asked me the first time we went out, but all you wanted was to feel my twat.

Yes, I'm embarrassed about that. I wish you hadn't brought it up.

If you'd have listened you could have had me the second date.

Listened to what?

A story, of course. But it's secret.

What good is it then if it's a secret.

It wasn't then. It is now.

I suppose you aren't going to be naked any more, either, I said regretfully.

Probably not.

And just when I'd learned it wasn't a secret.

What wasn't? Isn't, rather.

You... well, never mind.

Some people on the bus who were listening stopped listening then. It was Wednesday morning, which is free day at the museum and we were taking the metro in except first you have to take the bus, and the bus came while we were talking so we went on talking. The bus was full of office workers and students. The workers had used so much perfume and aftershave it made my nose itch. The students smelled of pizza and sex and old beer. It was already a hot day which made everything worse. Steve smelled like always, green tea and bagels and some other things, except that she didn't now because of the workers and students. Bagels make me think of a breakfast counter in Brooklyn where we ate one time because we were going to the museum and a theater and they had an orange juice maker. You dumped the oranges in the top and orange juice came out of a spigot at the bottom. We tried to figure out where the used-up oranges went but it was no use.

Secrets, I said after pondering the matter, don't seem to be something one can do anything about. They're like the wind or the ocean that way.

I get tired of the wind, Steve said, musing. Forty miles an hour day after day, first one way and then the other. Very tiresome.

We'd gotten to the museum sooner than planned at it wasn't open. The day wasn't yet warm so instead of finding a coffee shop we sat out on one of the benches in the museum courtyard. Perhaps five minutes passed in silence, perhaps more. Conversations with Steve are like that.

You're a very private person, I said. After all this time I still don't know what's going on with you.

It's because you don't listen, Steve said after another five minutes had gone by.

You're not saying anything.

Look, I said then, this was a mistake. Can we find some shade, maybe?

We got up and went to stand in the passageway which led out from the museum courtyard to the parking lot. There was a breeze there, generated by the pass-through tunnel, which tugged at the hem of Steve's light silk skirt. She leaned back against the wall, hands behind her keep from soiling her clothes.

So, she said. You think I'm secretive.

Private, was what I said. But I suppose you keep secrets. Everyone does. Or I suppose so — it's hard to know unless — well, yes.

You're like that crazy woman we saw in Boston, Steve said.

The Commons.

Yes. Muttering spells, and then stopping to wave her arms and shout Get away! Get away!

It was the flies, I suppose.

There you are, Steve said fiercely. See what I mean?

No.

They could have been demons. She said they were.

There aren't any demons, I said firmly. It was flies. There are demons only in stories.

Steve snorted derisively. If there are to be no demons we should stop telling stories.

I don't believe that's possible, I said. It's one of the first things we did with language. Around the campfires, about how we killed the mammoth.

Oh of course, Steve said. Mayhem and sex are all we talk about.

Stories are like that. They don't go away.

No, Steve said. You don't even know his name, do you? Because you weren't listening.

It's like the Hebrew God's name. It's a secret.

It's not, you just can't say it. The museum is opening.

We went to stand under the ramada and wait. The ramada had bronze grapes and Mayan sundials on it and a lifesize bronze man with a briefcase taking up valuable shade in a corner. I looked for a plaque with the artist's name but there wasn't one.

I hated that town, Steve said. I would have fucked the Latin teacher if it could have gotten me away from there. Everyone looked at me sideways and said I was a Jew because of my hair. I wanted to go to museums and concerts. Drink coffee, go bowling. Wear black leotards and sandals and grow my hair long. It gave me stomach cramps, all that wanting.

You did have long hair.

How would you know? You never saw it. It was black and coarse and I spent hours fighting with it and if I could have just let it loose I would have had some kind of nimbus. Like a saint. I guess there are no Jewish saints, are there.

You aren't Jewish. You're an atheist.

Maybe. You can be both, you know. The other girls were so white they were transparent. You'd be wasting your time trying to feel their twats. You wouldn't have known where to put your hand.

You're bitter.

You wouldn't know. I got over it.

I'm sorry.

Steve arched one eyebrow and looked at me doubtfully sideways.

The next metro train showed up across the street, sliding electrically to a stop. Everyone on the platform seemed to be standing exactly halfway between two doors. There was a lot of

bumping and pushing. All of the students with bicycles crowded over to that door, getting in the way of people who wanted to get in this door. The doors twitched impatiently.

The museum guard turned back the lock and the air-conditioning came out of the lobby and we walked in.

We had lunch in the museum restaurant and went to see whether there was anything new been brought up from storage.

They moved the Bonticue, I said. And what's happened to the Nevelson and the Chuck Close?

In the Asian gallery I spent a lot of time studying the landscapes, looking for the little bridges painted in them.

So why did you go out with me the second time, then? I said when we had come out of the museum and were waiting for the train. When it came, Steve pulled me on by the sleeve and we ended hanging from the same strap in the midst of the bicycles. Nobody was listening now because they all had wires in their ears and were talking to somebody else who wasn't listening either, probably.

Maybe I wanted you to feel my twat, she said. Maybe you would take me away from there. But you didn't. You ran off by yourself. I was bitter about that. When you stopped me on the street in San Francisco I should have maced you.

I remember that. You were working in an office somewhere. A bank. You had a valise.

And you were wearing sandals and orange pants.

What was in the valise?

Nothing, Steve said, bitterly.

We got off at the bus stop. The bicycles stayed on. We went across to a coffee shop for tea and croissants.

This is the story, isn't it? I ventured after a hesitant silence.

Everything is a story, you said, she said sinisterly. Did you remember the bus tickets?

I felt in my shirt pocket for them. Yes, I said. And really your parents were nice people and you didn't have a little brother or pigtales. Your hair was soft and really short.

No it wasn't.

Steve, I remember. You had a butch cut.

It was a page boy. If you'd been listening you'd have known that.

Well if I wasn't listening why did you go out with me?

It's a secret, Steve said.

■  
OTHERYMAN

Sunday morning seshin over coffee, except tea for she who always does say we have nothing in common. She's made scones, the authentic little ones, echt-scones. This is, I think, to get me to sit still.

What's that? she said, putting down the plate. That you're reading.

It's about trees, about the possibility they may have a language of sorts, and feelings.

I closed the book and pulled the plate of scones nearer.

Trees are an important vector of cultural mythology, I said. Lakes, also. I find lakes to be a little malicious. The smaller ones. Lake Erie was always dubious, do you remember?

Yes.

Because it's shallow, I think. Superior was all right. I wonder about Lake of the Woods. The men all wanted to go fishing there when they could, for pickerel. Fifteen pound Northerns that could chew through wire and take half the morning to get into the boat. I never went. It's a frozen bayou, it goes everywhere. I think the meanness —

Of pickerel?

No, of lakes. — has to do more with depth than size.

I don't think Northerns fight like trout, do they? Steve said. I think they lay on the bottom and try to sneak back into the weeds and snarl your line.

Is that so? I don't think I ever caught but the one, at church camp.

Steve carefully buttered a scone. It was still hot and the butter slid off onto the plate. The Aral Sea is drying up, she said. The Mediterranean was dry once. Oceans are too big to take notice of us. Older than trees. Was that fish the one that put you off fishing because you couldn't kill it?

Yes.

Gutted it alive?

That's the one. Don't remind me.

Have a scone.

Reflective sipping of tea and coffee. I was remembering a particular body of water, in a low-lying area half a mile north of the farm, when Steve said quietly — You know the scene at the end of *Six Degrees Of Separation* where — I forget the actress's name — comes out of the hotel or wherever onto the street and she jumps up and reaches into the sky?

Stockard Channing. It was a reference to Mary Tyler Moore I thought. And she had just told her husband to — um. She was leaving him, that's why. I was always infatuated with her. Her and Sinead Cusack, who was in *Smoke* and some other things.

*West Wing*.

Steve took the last scone. I went to get another cup of coffee from the pot on the kitchen counter.

I'm thinking, she said when I sat down again, about that picture in the Western art gallery in the museum. The woman abducted after a massacre? Where she's lying unconscious on the ground in the chief's lodge?

Wigwam.

Her hands and feet are tied and she's supposed to be out cold.

It said on the sign the painter's wife was the model for the captured woman.

Steve went on talking while she gathered up the plates, silverware, glasses, and the rest of it. The chief, she said, is sitting cross-legged beside the body, looking at her with this impassive, melancholy, faint regret. They said in the museum that was painted for the 1925 Paris Salon. I wonder what the French thought. Nothing's changed there since Montaigne, I suppose. There were a lot of problems with that picture, you know. You had to know about the historical massacre to make sense of it — I mean museum sense. We're supposed to know that this chief has taken her for his wife and she has refused. She's lying unconscious, her arm is bleeding from the ropes, she's just been brought in, when could she have refused him? In some wet dream? And you have to know her husband was massacred but not her children, so she was, so to speak, emotionally available. You can imagine all sorts of reasons why she might refuse anyhow.

Breath smelled like bad meat. Too short. Squeamish. Not ready for that yet. Angry, scared. The museum said on the wall that the chief's sadness was a meditation on unbridgeable racial differences. So it's not lust, it's a moral thing — she's refused, to keep her purity. How are you to know that? Maybe he's browned off at having been told to go to hell and is wondering whether raping her will be any fun after all and maybe he should just give her away to one of the more enthusiastic peckers. There's a lot of repulsive eroticism in that picture. The only thing in it I could see inconsistent is her legs are tied crossed.

Yes. The painter's wife posed for it.

Steve gave me a long, appraising, suspicious look.

From a single word arises delusion and misunderstanding, she said. The world is too narrow.

Conversation	words
Marbles Builds Character	1036
Saved by Accident	855
Loony Studio Conversation	461
Rhinoceros	865
Her Stone Bridge	754
About Lettuce	802
The Name of God	1417
Otheryman	805