

ASCHER / STRAUS

*Letter to an
Unknown Woman*

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CONTENTS

Letter to an Unknown Woman

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Letter to an Unknown Woman

From a distance you were a blond woman in a pea green bikini, sunning yourself on a bamboo “tata-mi” mat, natural wood with a blue border. A body under the sky, with its hair, its eyes, its nostrils, its skin.

He says that he can’t *hear* you because of the *helicopter*.

You see a small fishing boat approaching in the distance, from the southeast.

“I said I was a *prostitute!*”

He shakes his head. He *still* can’t hear you.

“He didn’t treat me like his *mistress* at all. I was a *prostitute*. A prostitute and a maid. Sexual abuse. He abused me sexually. *Degraded* me in every way.”

You brush your coiffure away from your face. Does he notice the dark bruises or the faint red marks?

Just as you’re thinking, “for all I know this guy can’t speak English!” he says: “This is *impossible!* Let’s get *out* of here!”

Already that night in the restaurant the fact that your voices are not being drowned out by the sound of a motor is felt as a disturbance. Once, in fact, the waiter discretely suggests that you lower your voices.

“Diana Morelle.”

“Diana de Morelle?”

You both laugh.

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“You have an air of sophistication.”

“An air of *borrowed* sophistication?”

“No, seriously....”

“Underneath it all. That is, I have friends who say, ‘Underneath it all you’re primitive.’ Should I resent that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does it mean, do *they* mean: ‘you’re an animal?’”

He says: “Don’t turn around—but do you know that guy who’s staring at you?”

“If I don’t turn around, how the hell can I tell if I know him!”

“I’ll describe him. He’s wearing a blue suit. There are white specks on the left collar. He has sort of reddish hair with grey patches. A blue shirt. Blue tie. Large round face, receding chin, sideburns. Not much space between the nose and the mouth.”

“What’s he drinking?”

“Looks like rum and coca cola.”

“Thank god! I thought it was Jeff. But it *can’t* be Jeff. Jeff started out on rum and coca cola. Then it was rum and *cherry* cola, then it was vodka and tomato juice, tom collins, whiskey sour, mint julep. Mint julep? Or was it old fashioned, scotch old fashioned, scotch on the rocks, *then* mint julep? Which is more logical? All the while he’s tasting other people’s martinis. At first he found them strange. ‘They must drink this stuff on the moon!’ At that time he couldn’t stand olives either. Still, he kept drinking them. Finally, he had a perfect martini in Chicago. It became an obsession. Boodles, Tanguerey, Beefeater—a good gin can be drunk straight. ‘Martini’ olives are small, unstuffed, bought by the barrel. They’re so stale they can ruin a drink. The best is the anchovy olive. After that, any stuffed olive. The ones in Stouffers are oversized, they displace

too much gin. Everything matters. Even the quality of the water in the ice. The ideal martini is what Jeff calls the 'in and out' with a twist of lemon. Tangueray gin. Vermouth poured over ice then discarded, leaving only the flavor. Most martinis have too much vermouth. A drop of pernod in your martini is possible. Etc."

"So that's definitely not Jeff."

"Don't you understand English?"

"I shouldn't say this, but I feel a strange sensation. I could fall in love with you, but in a peculiar way. The way you fall in love with an actress. A sort of visual love. Does that make sense?"

"I know exactly what you mean: 'I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived a few weeks while she loved me.'"

At 3 a.m. you wake up in a state of terror. The cop wants to light a cigarette for you but you refuse. You say that you were dreaming. You were staying with Jeff in a motel on the outskirts of Niagara. Rather woody. You fell asleep. Something about dogs—dogs barking, dogs wailing, whimpering, baying, etc. Jeff says, 'oh no, not at all, I don't hear a thing, you're crazy,' and so on. You insist: there are dogs. And not far away either. You're frightened. The dogs aren't normal. A pack of mad dogs. You and Jeff begin to look for the dogs. Jeff may begin to hear the strange wailing and become frightened. The longer you search through the motel the more doors, rooms, corridors, shadows it seems to have. At last you open a door. The dogs turn on you.

Now you are calm enough to smoke a cigarette.

"Now and then a wolf really does come down from

the timberland above Niagara.”

“I’m a little embarrassed to admit this, but at the end of the dream a big dog is fucking me. My thighs, my pelvis, my ass are pumping, swivelling. It seems to go on for hours. Even in the dream I felt myself getting wetter and wetter. I was dripping. It was bestial.”

“You actually have a British accent,” he says.

“When I woke up I felt like an animal. My body was covered with sweat—but it felt like saliva.”

“You’re really a sweet guy,” you say. After all, he’d been nice enough to let in your bath.

He confesses that in the restaurant he hadn’t heard much of what you’d said. In a window on the thirteenth floor of the shiny grey high-rise across the way a woman had been walking back and forth, holding a red telephone. Her disappearances from the window. Her reappearances. The light through the thin curtains. The way the red telephone flashed at certain moments. Her gestures. It all added up—he could tell the woman was suffering.

“Maybe if that guy *had* been Jeff my mind wouldn’t have wandered. But once I knew it *wasn’t* Jeff...”

“Still, it was sweet of you to let in my bath.”

“Hey— did you notice I have orange hair,” you call out from the bathtub.

You hear him laugh from the bedroom.

“I don’t think it’s good for me to talk about it.”

No answer, so you continue even louder.

“Talking about it brings back so many *memories!*”

“When I talk about it I hear a million voices!”

You give up and whisper to yourself: “You can’t know what memories are welling up. You see me. That is, while I’m talking, while I’m speaking to you, you’re

listening to me. But you can't know what talking is doing to me."

You don't scream.

You disappear for a week. So completely it's as if you haven't even seen yourself. The next time anyone spots you— just the usual pair of guys horsing around with a football, trying to figure out a way to screw somebody before the day is over—you're sunning yourself on a yellow blanket, apparently writing a letter or making an entry in a journal.

"The diary-keeping of a young girl. The desire to write. To see it on paper. It didn't apply to me then, when I really was a young girl. But I'm doing it now— now I want to lie here *forever*. This morning I was sitting in a diner on Astoria Boulevard, on my way to the beach. For a moment I felt a surge of independence: 'my own woman.' I was on the road. I could take care of myself, but now I find I miss you a lot. The guy behind the counter asked me how's business. I looked at him. He got embarrassed. Said he thought I was somebody else. Later I had to ask some cops for directions and I realized I love all cops since I met you."

When you finish you feel disgusted, tear up the small pages and bury the pieces in the sand. You lie back: a woman improving her tan. The air is blue, the water is blue, the sun is blue. Space is filled with quiet ripples and a long narrow ship, dark as a submarine, slowly measures the horizon.

The next time you see him he's wearing a heavy-weight black-and-white plaid lumber jacket, a black wool turtleneck, some sort of trousers, shoes lost in memory, black sunglasses. He looks overdressed—not for spring in autumn, but for real autumn, late autumn at that, even for winter. He explains that during the

week you were away, for some reason people in different zones of the city were living in different seasons. On the beach, for example, it was unnaturally warm. While at the same instant couples were coming out of the warm red interiors of restaurants and observing how *glacial* the city looked. White clouds over empty trees, a real winter sun blazing down the walls of the avenue as if they were coated with ice. "The sun that shines on ski slopes."

You tell him that in his shades he looks like the Invisible Man. A man staring. His clothing reminds you of bandages.

He says: "you seem more animated."

"More artificial?"

"More *animated*."

"I always try to give a great performance." He insists on taking a helicopter ride over the beach where you met. Seems a buddy of his on the force can make one available.

As you take off you say: "I like this blue light."

"I can't do anything about it."

"I said I *like* it."

He shrugs. Broad areas of noise are beginning to concentrate along a rotary axis.

"Did I tell you about the time I told Jeff I always keep my promises? 'I promised you one thing, Jeff. To get you where you are today. You know damned well, Jeff, you wouldn't be rich, you wouldn't be powerful, you wouldn't be the polished businessman, "the busy executive," if it weren't for me. You used me, Jeff, and you know it.' When I met him he was a midnight air conditioner repairman. 'Your fingernails are *filthy*.' He says: 'so what.' 'You aren't going to touch me intimately with filthy hands.' 'Why not?'"

"There must be a storm further out to sea!"

While you've been talking you have, in fact, been wondering about the dark, irregular clouds that have begun to appear below a second layer of dirty white and unhealthy blue. And another helicopter, a red and white one, its deep yellow-orange light blinking powerfully from the interior, seems to be circling a fixed point in the turbulent water.

"I said: 'there is one other promise I'll make you, Jeff. And you know me well enough to believe I'll keep it. And it's this: you'll never see your son again.' He turned red. His face grew larger. Twice the size, I think. The eyes became red also. I thought he was going to explode. He said: 'I'm going to torture you. I'm going to cut you up. I'm going to mutilate you. I'm going to disfigure you. I'm going to hound you wherever you go. And then I'm going to take out a contract on you.' I said: 'Oh, really? In that particular order? Sure you wouldn't care to alter it a bit?' "

"THERE ARE REPORTS OF SHARKS IN THESE WATERS!" the cop shouts, leaning close to your face. You seem to hear him—but do you?

"I *had* to say that. But I was terrified. Five years! Was I his wife? More like his mistress. No, not like his mistress. I'm lying. I was *dead!* Am I alive now?"

"I'll bet you anything some damn bastard's in the soup!"

The red and white helicopter has veered off to the left. It's so close to the choppy water it must be making an effort to land. But the only craft in sight, a small white one, is quite upright, quite stationary. Though, on the other hand, it doesn't seem to be moving and you don't hear the sound of its motor.

How long is it going to take him to answer his phone? At last he picks it up, after 50 rings. His voice is

so groggy it could be anybody's.

"Hey, are you alive or what! Listen, I may be going to Florida, I don't know. If I take him to court I'm putting my ass in danger. You don't know, but I know. I once had him locked up for knifing me. He didn't want me to get a job as a barmaid. He was out in ten minutes flat. That's the time he put the muzzle of a gun down my throat. I have it on tape—hold on a second."

A few minutes disappear as thoroughly as the day May 3, 1744. At last your voice, surprisingly similar to your voice in real life, reappears through the receiver.

You say that you can't seem to find the damned thing. You hope it wasn't erased when you recorded your conversation with Father Leroux. You had to record *that* to prove that someone else, someone who's actually spoken to Jeff, knows that these things really happened. You insist on playing the tape of Father Leroux, including the sound of dialing, the phone buzzing, a man's voice coughing, and so on.

"How are you, father?"

"Not too good. I have the flu. I think you're beating a dead horse."

"I love him. I don't know if he loves me."

"Well, I'll tell you—in many respects he's right."

"But I don't want to be degraded, father."

"You led him to believe there was a boyfriend. He did what he did in desperation. This is what he said: I love my wife, but I'm slowly losing the feeling. She's got to change.' "

"What he says to your face is entirely different from what he says behind your back. He started going out with someone two months after we were married! He's *still* seeing the woman. I found out he was sleeping with that woman only when I stopped sleeping with him. That's when he became desperate—he didn't care

what I knew.”

“He thinks you should see a therapist.”

“Why does he do it to me? Does he want to hurt me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he wants to get even about Joseph.”

“About *Joseph*? It’s unbelievable! That kid tried to sexually assault my daughter! I don’t give a shit if that boy’s only thirteen—he’s screwy! Of *course* I had to get him out of the house.”

“I know about that run-in between his son and your daughter...”

“Did he call it a ‘run-in’?”

“I think I’d better get myself a shot of penicillin.”

“You were on the phone, I had you on the wire the time he *admitted* to pulling the gun on me—he had it to my head, then in my mouth. You heard him say so.”

“I don’t know. I see very little future in this marriage.”

“What about all the women he’s had? And now this one with the crooked teeth! He’s spent a fortune on those lousy teeth of hers! Would you put up with that, father?”

“Please believe me. If I don’t get off right now I might collapse.”

You explain that Father Leroux has known you since you were a little girl. You can’t understand how Jeff managed to get to him. Also, you can’t afford to pay your rent any more, so you’ll probably be staying with your old friend, Themis, the ex-water-polo champion.

As you turn the corner in the red sports car you feel the green November light in a bank of hedges. A cold shadow travels toward you through the closed window as distinctly as the sound of a piano. For a second you

may wonder what you're doing on this suburban street, under a white sky with purple clouds. Nobody knows what you once were. The cop certainly doesn't know what you once were. Who does he think you are now? A woman with orange hair, rather alluring, at times, in her mint green skirt, a fur jacket over her arm—a perfect size four. A woman with a story to tell. A woman with a story she can't help telling. An attractive woman who brags that she can hold a cigarette in the space between two teeth.

“Your husband actually did that? Jeff knocked out a tooth?”

“You think I did it myself?”

Now he's standing on the sidewalk, smoking a small, French cigarette. You feel yourself arriving—being compelled to arrive from the instant he sensed your presence in the neighborhood. First he hears the sound of a motor in the distance. It drones nearer, turns the corner. Then he sees you approach behind the wheel of the red sports car, against a background of orange leaves. It's so quiet around here you can follow the path of a motor for miles. So that, even though he looks restless, he probably hasn't been waiting at all—he was able to time it perfectly, to leave his apartment the instant your car crossed the bridge, etc. Still, you can tell he's getting ready to say something as he opens the door.

But he gets in without saying a word. It's only when you've crossed the bridge again and you're about to say: “Listen, you won't believe what happened to me last night!” that he opens his mouth.

“I've done some checking on this Themis character of yours. He's from Athens. As an Athenian he feels superior to every Greek in New York. Nobody speaks his language. OK. So the question is, what's he doing here? Apparently he really was an Olympic water polo cham-

pion. Of course that's a number of years ago, when he was just a beautiful boy who looked a bit old for his age, a little like Victor Mature in *Samson and Delilah*. A more-or-less wealthy American woman is travelling in Greece, sees young Victor or Themis playing water polo, and decides, as usual, 'I have to have that' or 'that would be nice to take home to Florida' or something like that. So they get married in the American consulate in Greece or they fly back to Florida together and get married here. It's not a bad deal for Themis. The woman's pretty good-looking, she's got a twenty year edge on him, it's true, but that still leaves her under forty—so all in all it could be a lot worse. Also you have to figure he's been living quite handsomely while he's been a member of the Olympic water polo team—but you can't keep that up forever. Meanwhile he's gotten used to pretty things, to taking himself seriously as a piece of furniture, to getting himself re-upholstered every few weeks, keeping the wood polished, smelling good, etc. etc. So he lands in Florida, where he's a little annoyed to discover that they don't eat dinner at 10 p.m. the way he did in Athens, but he figures there'll be plenty of compensation. Not so simple. The wife's no dope. Nothing, absolutely not one thing is put in his name. He's actually on some sort of pension, has to ask for every dollar, account for everything, and so on. He's living ok, but still it doesn't *quite* remind him of the movie he saw with Dean Martin or Alain Delon. Next she wants him to get a job. They quarrel. 'Me? You want me to get a lousy *job* when we can just live off the fat of the land! It's crazy!' He ends up as a maitre d', a first class shoe horn in some fancy night spot. Meanwhile he's probably getting out of shape—the wife's spotted some kid on a tennis court who looks exactly like Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*. She's buying him

less and less pajamas, it just doesn't do the same things to her when he wears his burgundy ascot. Months pass. She wants a divorce. He packs as many bags as he can and flies to New York, where some sort of distant relation has just opened one of those enormous Roman diners in the suburbs. So now he's living in a small apartment in a rooming house, working nights and sleeping all day, complaining about the company he's forced to keep. He's still getting incredible mileage out of those hand-made Florida suits, they go over big in the suburbs, but you can tell he's depressed. He's a little *too* smooth, he's overdoing it. Husbands are beginning to check him out. And nowadays there are so many bottles of crap on his dressing table it smells like a regular flower garden."

"Themis knows who I once was. But he doesn't know who I am now. He shook when he saw me. He literally *shook*. Later that night we were kissing. I was melting. I think he was melting too. Suddenly he pulls away. His face is cold. 'I thought you were my wife.' I said that I understood—but did I? 'I would become cold with my wife also.' He begged me to stay in his place. 'It's so good to have a woman around again.' So I'll hang around for a while."

"Does he know that you never finished high school? Or that you've worked as a bar maid? Does he know what you dreamed the night before your wedding?"

"Jeff doesn't want to get back together. He wouldn't mind screwing me again—but he doesn't want to get back together. 'You probably found someone who screws better than I do.' Would you believe it? I have to admit I have the desire to go to bed with him too. He's a lonely man, he must be a lonely man—even with that ugly little whore of his! Don't you agree?"

"It's strange, but what I'd like right now is a bowl of

chili and a cold beer. If I only had some idea where the hell we were....”

“Last night that pig Eddy took me to a party at his friend Charly’s house. I’m nibbling on my third White Russian when suddenly Eddy is behind me, holding my arms, Charly is yanking my feet off the ground and screaming for somebody to grab my ass and get my skirt off. They all went nuts! Pretty soon this guy in the concrete business is trying on my camisole. I gave Charly a kick he’ll never forget and got the hell out of there. I had to get dressed in the fuckn elevator!”

“I saw a review the other day of a restaurant called La Cueva, but it didn’t say anything about chili.”

You say that you smell licorice in the air. Is it the damp shadows of the leaves rotting under the hedges?

He wants to know if they have chili in the diner where Themis works. You say that it’s impossible, the one place it’s crazy to go. The owners of the diner *know your husband!* He did the air conditioning and heating for them! You don’t even want him to know you’re living in that neighborhood.

“You think he’s not capable of murder? That time he shoved the gun down my throat he said: ‘If I could kill you now I’d come in my pants.’ Not *everybody* would say that. So if he heard I was in the diner with you or Themis—”

You’re not sure if you like being alone in Themis’s apartment: taking a bath in the morning, lounging in your bathrobe, eating some toast and marmalade, reading a magazine or turning on the television. It gets you down. Living in someone else’s apartment you end up living like someone else. By nature you love to be on the move—while here you simply can’t fend off a certain laziness: happy on a swimming pool patio, gloomy

at home in your small suburban apartment.

You open the window: a woman is bicycling by in an electric green polo and white shorts, holding a tennis racket. The two tires revolve nineteen times, just barely audible, before you lose sight of her. Down on the lawn insects are buzzing around the remnants of the shrubbery and the evergreens. Because of the steam heat you had no idea how warm it is—almost too warm, too sweet, the atmosphere as thick as powder. You feel (do you feel?) you're in Alaska, the ice has just melted on a river. You wriggle up to the surface to catch an insect, only to find you're no longer a fish, but an insect buzzing off from the water, which seems to ripple sharply below you for no reason.

Later that morning it cheers you up to receive a note in the mail: "At first you were Gloria Graham in that Bogart movie that takes place in Hollywood. You know the one, where they live in little Spanish-style haciendas around a patio and Bogart's a hot-tempered screen writer who may or may not be the guy who's murdered some hat-check girl. Your name is Laurel Grey. You're a minor, unemployed actress. That is you *were* an actress named Laurel Grey. Now I'm not so sure. In fact, I'm sure you're *not* Laurel Grey. But if you're not Laurel Grey, then who are you?"

For the first time in your life you have a dream that you've dreamed before. Insects are attacking cattle in a warm meadow, around twilight. The cattle are covered from head to foot, the insects sting them on the back, the belly, the ears, the eyes, and so on, so that after a bit the cows run off and disappear into the dense wood-

land. Later that night a woman sleeping in a cabin hears them baying in packs, like dogs.

The cop gets permission to allow you to accompany him and his partner on a tour of duty. Driving through the Lincoln tunnel, sitting in the back seat of the patrol car, you try to make yourself heard through the multiple sheaths of noise.

“Jeff wants his *son!* He said ‘it’s a question of *our* children, *your* children, and *my* children.’ Over my dead body! He screwed up his first son! That kid’s a monster! Thirteen and he’s exactly like his father! How come his first wife gave up her kid? What did he have over *her*, I wonder! My brother killed two people in a car accident when he was twenty-one! He was so guilty he became *psychotic!* I took too many seconals when I was nineteen! It wasn’t really a suicide attempt! I was exhausted—I thought I was taking one or two! And I was upset about my daughter, April! April Aimee Lorraine. Her father was a dope addict! It happened in the *army!* I became pregnant when I was *seventeen!* I had to leave school! April was a cripple! She almost died as a baby! She wouldn’t eat! Only I could feed her! I had to be with her *constantly!* But I had to give her up. Jeff *knows* all that! He said: ‘If you take me to court, if you don’t give me my son without a court battle, who do you think they’ll believe?’ So I got in touch with his first wife. She was going to testify in my behalf! Then last week she tried to commit suicide!”

As you emerge from the tunnel you’re overcome, of course, by the enormous transparency of things. It all dissolves. The world, dark and heavy as it looks, dissolves right through you. And you lose the thread of what you were saying—something about the strange contract you found one day on your husband’s desk, an

agreement drawn up between Jeff and some clinic for an abortion after precisely $5\frac{1}{2}$ months of pregnancy. So, even though you'd intended to have the child, you went out that very day and arranged for an immediate abortion. They thought you were crazy, they wanted to call your husband—but you made them do it.

You notice for the first time that the second cop is really rather old, almost sixty, a ring of white hair around a bald dome, more or less flattened on top. The head, in fact, consists of a series of unusually flat planes inclined toward a point—a sort of wedge or flat-sided cone with prominent ears. He's wearing glasses with dark frames. A square of gauze is taped over the left eye, under the lens. Strips of tape extend to the forehead, the cheek, and so on.

That's what happens when you do nothing but talk: you don't notice *anything*. Not only is the guy strange *looking*, but he has an unmistakable accent—and he's in the middle, maybe toward the end of a story that's been going on god knows how long.

"I was thinner in those days. A real lightweight—120 pounds. You don't believe it? This was you understand in Vienna. Vienna in those days—if you know Vienna only now then you don't really know what I'm talking about. I came up the drive. A large estate, you understand. The woman was waiting on the doorstep. A pale blue gown. Beautiful! I got out of the car. and when she saw me she looked terribly frightened. 'But it's not the same man! You're not the same man!' The other fellow you see was quite stocky. 'The same height, perhaps, but stocky.'"

Your cop begins to sing the praises of the restaurant where the two of you ate the very first night. Why don't the three of you go there? They had such wonderful Pilsner!

The only sound is the wind shaking the windows to the north. Not an insect or a bird call. As if you went to sleep in April and woke up in November. You wrap yourself in the thin, yellow blanket and cross the cold floor to close the window. White sheets, blue towels are reflected in the picture window across the way: waves of air are passing from one world to another.

Driving in a heavy rain in the red sports car, you may find yourself on a wide avenue bounded by yellow marshes, and called “Cross Bay Boulevard.” It dawns on you that you should have left a note.

Dear Themis:

Your skin is as cold as a rubber glove. I could pour boiling water on you—you wouldn’t blister. The mornings I was lying there in my red silk pajamas and you kept reading those horrible body building magazines, I couldn’t help thinking: “This guy’s a *reptile!* No wonder his wife left him!” But that isn’t why I’m leaving. I’m leaving because I couldn’t stay in your apartment any more. I’m psychic. I can tell when death has been in a place or is going to be in a place. I’ve predicted auto accidents. When I was 16 I knew my best friend’s plane was going to crash on the way to South America—and it did. This is what I dreamed last night: A woman and a young man arrive at a woman’s house with groceries or packages of food from a restaurant. They expect to find her home. They go in and look around, but she isn’t there. They decide: ‘let’s eat anyway’: and they rush around,

ASCHER/STRAUS

laughing, preparing their meal, etc. They push everything off a low white table and lay some of the materials for the meal on that. The young woman says, 'why don't we use the new table,' and they put a greasy package down on a beautiful antique table. The young man decides the woman *has* to be in the house. They go upstairs and look in some other rooms. Finally they look in the dark blue one with the heavy drapes he's always hated. 'There she is!' the young man says, 'asleep on the couch.' The young woman goes over to wake her, touches her shoulder, turns her face up. I can see her blonde hair, her face. She rolls off the couch, onto the floor. 'She's dead!' Someone died in your apartment. An old woman who died of starvation or a young woman who killed herself. So I'm going to stay with my old friend Bobby. He's a sweet guy — I'll be ok there. Love, Diana

P.S. You don't have to call the cops. I have your car. I'll let you know where you can pick it up.

You disappear again. No one hears from you for three weeks. Possibly life ought to stop building itself up out of this and that while you're gone, but it doesn't. Even The Florida Diner keeps making itself up day after day, exactly the same as last midnight, or just a little bit different—in a thousand ways no one would ever notice. A solitary guy in a mackinaw jacket, for example, is eating an order of Sole Florentine and listening to Frank Sinatra on the miniature, table-side jukebox with selections A1 to X96, two selections for a quarter. The

waitress imagines she knows the guy's life story (he's depressed and lonely, his wife left him six months ago, ran away to Vegas, now he can't seem to figure out how or why you live a life, etc.) and she gives him an extra vegetable or forgets to charge him for the imported beer. A couple near the table that faces north, toward the Manhattan skyline, is continuing a conversation that began about two years ago.

She says: "I'm fed up. I'm sick of everything. This morning I said to myself, 'another sunny morning and you're off to work in the supermarket.'"

"Your face is swollen. How come your face is swollen?"

"I was kissed by the noon bus."

"You're a damned liar!"

"What're you talkin' about?"

"I saw that hairbrush! Where'd you get that hairbrush?"

"You must've left it there."

"I don't use no hairbrush!"

Four or five men in green uniforms come in and take seats at one of the round tables toward the far eastern section of the diner, down a few steps, partially screened off by a wooden grill and plastic vines. After twenty minutes of drinking beer they're as noisy as if they've been there all night drinking scotch. A man in a red plaid sports jacket calls over the night manager. He doesn't like the noise those men are making. It's spoiling his wife's dinner. He wants the night manager to do something. "Yes sir. What, for example?" "Tell them to keep quiet or leave! Call a cop! That's your problem!" He seems determined to make the night manager come to life. From a distance, posing at the counter with a cocktail, he probably looked like one of those handsome but athletic window dummies, sort of gloomy

and inanimate, just the sort of good-for-nothing who's always pissed him off. "Can somebody tell me why I left Miami?" the manager sighs and heads for the table of troublemakers.

At about 6 a.m. when he leaves, the four or five uniformed guys are waiting in the dark parking lot: they get out of a van and beat him until he's unconscious. One arm and three fingers of the other hand are broken and he has a gash above the hairline and a concussion from the impact of his head striking the fender of a car.

"You don't know what happened last night."

Is it you? It doesn't really sound like you. The receiver is so filled with static it sounds as if you're calling from a village along the Amazon or from underwater. The voice at the other end asks you to speak up. It must be a bad connection, he can hardly hear you. You're surprised: you can hear him perfectly, as if he were in the next room.

"I say you don't know what *happened* last night."

"What?"

"I'm in a hole."

"You're in a hole?"

"Yes. Another hole. This one is really weird. My friend, my good friend, my good old friend, Bobby."

"Bobby?"

"Good old Bobby. At least they tell me it happened. I suppose it happened."

"*What* happened?"

"I don't remember a goddamn thing! I was asleep. I'd been up for 24 hours without sleep. That's *another* story."

"What are you talking about?"

“When I’m asleep, I don’t know a damn thing. I’m *out*. I mean just *normally*. When I sleep I’m out cold. They always say: ‘When Diana’s asleep you can’t wake her.’”

“So what?”

“Even Bobby used to say, he said it a lot of times, I should’ve gotten a clue: ‘You know, the way you sleep, you sleep so heavy, ten guys could do you and you wouldn’t know a thing.’”

“You mean...”

“So It seems.”

“Who says so?”

“My mother.”

“Your *mother*?”

“I’ve got my mother and my kids. It seems my mother came in late. She came into the room where I was sleeping. My kids are sleeping with me, in the same goddamn *bed*! You know what she said?”

“No, I don’t.”

“She said: ‘It was weird. I saw part of his body. He was layin’ on top of you—and I couldn’t see his head at all.’ Get the picture?”

“Sort of.”

“Listen. He was on *top* of me. She could see his body, at least some of his body, but his head was buried. Now where the hell do you think it was buried! See?”

“Now what?”

“That’s what *I’d* like to know! What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I’ve got to get my kids *out* of here.”

“How about your mother?”

“Forget my mother. My mother is not what you’d call an *asset*.”

“You don’t remember *anything*?”

“Not one thing. He could’ve done anything. Who

knows? What if I get pregnant? That's all I need!"

"I thought you knew this guy—an old friend, all that."

"He's a friend of my girlfriend. Now it turns out she's friendly with Jeff."

"Turns out *what*?"

You say that you'll call right back. He's begun to fade out also. (You've pretty much been guessing what he said since the word "anything.") But the phone never rings again.

The house is just the way it was described to you ages ago: a winding road, a circular driveway, the mansion at the top of the hill. A white Rolls, another automobile, a blue one someone calls a "Lambretti" or something like that, an unused swimming pool, a greenhouse, and so on.

You're sitting at your vanity table, applying your makeup. You say that the really awful thing is that after a while you change. You don't know how to put it. Nothing seems adequate. What were you like before?

The woman with the silver blonde hair sitting on the plum-colored stool (your maid? your nurse? your companion?) says that it's probably not a good idea to talk about these things. "Your bruises are almost gone, you can hardly see a red mark—and your memories ought to be gone with them."

You say that you've been poisoned.

You've deteriorated tremendously. "You can't know how I've deteriorated." Bit by bit, over the months, the years, as you look in the mirror, say when you pass by the large mirror in the living room, on the way from kitchen to dining room, from white to dark blue, or applying your makeup in the red bathroom or at your vanity table, you find your face growing more hateful,

more bitter.

“You think I don’t understand—but I do. You were a size 10. Now you’re a size 4. But we’ll get you back to normal.”

“I hope you can’t see it in my face. I feel that my face is filled with hatred.”

“Of course not, dear. You look lovely.”

You say: over the years you see—what do you see over the years? Is it really true to say that you saw Jeff’s face peering out of the mirror through yours? Or that bit by bit Jeff’s face began to gaze into the mirror through your eyes. “I suppose it’s then that I began to think of murder.”

The silver-blond woman is brushing your hair with the large, black lacquer brush, her other hand resting on your shoulder. “Let your memories become mine,” she says tenderly. “And let my forgetfulness become yours.”

A helicopter, a deep blue light glowing in its cockpit, flies over the ocean at night, gradually descending toward the surface.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

SHEILA ASCHER AND DENNIS STRAUS have been collaborating in non-traditional methods of writing fiction since the early 1970s. In addition to the volumes of fiction published with McPherson (*Letter to an Unknown Woman*, *The Other Planet*, *The Menaced Assassin* and *Red Moon/Red Lake*), the award-winning fiction of Ascher/Straus has been appearing widely in magazines, including *Chicago Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Chelsea*, *Sun and Moon*, *Epoch* and *Exile*. Most recently, both *Exile* and the online journal *Your Impossible Voice* have published early installments of their much-anticipated novel-in-progress, *Headless World*. Ascher/Straus's long history of creating narratives outside traditional boundaries (beginning with the unbound books, interactive fiction events/installations called SPACE NOVELS in the late 70's and 80's) has, since 2008, continued in *Monica's Chronicle*, an endless sketchbook drawn directly from life, meant as a model for another idea of fiction, and published in installments on their website (www.ascher-straus.com). *Monica's Chronicle* is the source for and background universe of *ABC Street* and *Hank Forest's Party*, outward-looking autobiography/novel/philosophical journals suggesting a dedicated, life-long way of documenting life as fiction.

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Hank Forest's Party

ABC Street

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