The Last Time They Met

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Extract

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PART ONE

Fifty-two

She had come from the plane and was even now forgetting the ride from the airport. As she stepped from the car, she emerged to an audience of a doorman in uniform and another man in a dark coat moving through the revolving door of the hotel. The man in the dark coat hesitated, taking a moment to open an umbrella that immediately, in one fluid motion, blew itself inside out. He looked abashed and then purposefully amused – for now she was his audience – as he tossed the useless appendage into a bin and moved on.

She wished the doorman wouldn't take her suitcase, and if it hadn't been for the ornate gold leaf of the canopy and the perfectly polished brass of the entryway, she might have told him it wasn't necessary. She hadn't expected the tall columns that rose to a ceiling she couldn't see clearly without squinting, or the rose carpet through those columns that was long enough for a coronation. The doorman wordlessly gave her suitcase – inadequate in this grandeur – to a bellman, as if handing off a secret. She moved past empty groupings of costly furniture to the reception desk.

Linda, who had once minded the commonness of her name, gave her credit card when asked, wrote her signature on a

piece of paper, and accepted a pair of keys, one plastic, the other reassuringly real, the metal key for the minibar, for a drink if it came to that. She followed directions to a bank of elevators, noting on a mahogany table a bouquet of hydrangeas and daylilies as tall as a ten-year-old boy. Despite the elegance of the hotel, the music in the elevator was cloying and banal, and she wondered how it was this detail had been overlooked. She followed signs and arrows along a wide, hushed corridor built during an era when space was not a luxury.

The white paneled door of her room was heavy and opened with a soft click. There was a mirrored entryway that seemed to double as a bar, a sitting room with heavily draped windows and French doors veiled with sheers that led to a bedroom larger than her living room at home. The weight of unwanted obligation was, for the moment, replaced with wary acceptance of being pampered. But then she looked at the ivory linen pillows on the massive bed and thought of the waste that it was only herself who would sleep there – she who might have been satisfied with a narrow bed in a narrow room, who no longer thought of beds as places where love or sex was offered or received.

She sat for a moment in her wet raincoat, waiting for the bellman to bring her suitcase to her. She closed her eyes and tried to relax, an activity for which she had no talent. She had never been to a yoga class, never meditated, unable to escape the notion that such strategies constituted a surrender, an admission that she could no longer bear to touch the skin of reality, her old lover. As if she would turn her back against a baffled husband, when once she had been so greedy.

She answered the door to a young bellman, overtipping the man to compensate for her pathetically small suitcase. She was aware of scrutiny on his part, impartial scrutiny simply because she was a woman and not entirely old. She crossed to the windows and drew back the drapes, and even the dim light of a rainy day was a shock to the gloom of the room. There were blurred buildings, the gleam of wet streets, glimpses of gray lake between skyscrapers. Two nights in one hotel room. Perhaps by Sunday morning she would know the number, would not have to ask at the front desk, as she so often had to do. Her confusion, she was convinced (as the desk clerks clearly were not), a product simply of physics: she had too much to think about and too little time in which to think it. She had long ago accepted her need for extravagant amounts of time for contemplation (more, she had observed, than others seemed to need or want). And for years she had let herself believe that this was a product of her profession, her art, when it was much the other way around. The spirit sought and found the work, and discontent began when it could not.

And, of course, it was a con, this art. Which was why she couldn't help but approach a podium, any podium, with a mantle of slight chagrin that she could never quite manage to hide, her shoulders hunched inside her jacket or blouse, her eyes not meeting those in the audience, as if the men and women in front of her might challenge her, accuse her of fraud – which, in the end, only she appeared to understand she was guilty of. There was nothing easier nor more agonizing than writing the long narrative verses that her publisher put in print – easy in that they were simply

daydreams written in ink; agonizing the moment she returned to consciousness (the telephone rang, the heat kicked on in the basement) and looked at the words on the blue-lined page and saw, for the first time, the dishonest images, the manipulation and the conniving wordplay, all of which, when it had been a good day, worked well for her. She wrote poetry, she had been told, that was *accessible*, a fabulous and slippery word that could be used in the service of both scathing criticism and excessive praise, neither of which she thought she deserved. Her greatest wish was to write anonymously, though she no longer mentioned this to her publishers, for they seemed slightly wounded at these mentions, at the apparent ingratitude for the long – and tedious? – investment they had made in her that was finally, after all these years, beginning to pay off. Some of her collections were selling now (and one of them was selling very well indeed) for reasons no one had predicted and no one seemed to understand, the unexpected sales attributable to that vague and unsettling phenomenon called 'word of mouth.'

She covered the chintz bedspread with her belongings: the olive suitcase (slim and soft for the new stingy overheads); the detachable computer briefcase (the detaching a necessity for the security checks); and her microfiber purse with its eight compartments for her cell phone, notebook, pen, driver's license, credit cards, hand cream, lipstick, and sunglasses. She used the bathroom with her coat still on and then searched for her contact lens case so that she could remove the miraculous plastic irritants from her eyes, the lenses soiled with airplane air and smoke from a concourse bar, a four-hour

layover in Dallas ending in capitulation to a plate of nachos and a Diet Coke. And seeping around the edges, she began to feel the relief that hotel rooms always provided: a place where no one could get to her.

She sat again on the enormous bed, two pillows propped behind her. Across from her was a gilded mirror that took in the entire bed, and she could not look into such a mirror without thinking of various speakable and unspeakable acts that had almost certainly been performed in front of that mirror. (She thought of men as being particularly susceptible to mirrors in hotel rooms.) Her speculation led inevitably to consideration of substances that had spilled or fallen onto that very bedspread (how many times? thousands of times?) and the room was immediately filled with stories: a married man who loved his wife but could make love to her but once a month because he was addicted to fantasizing about her in front of hotel mirrors on his frequent business trips, her body the sole object of his sexual imaginings; a man cajoling a colleague into performing one of the speakable acts upon him, enjoying the image of her subservient head bobbing in the mirror over the dresser and then, when he had collapsed into a sitting position, confessing, in a moment that would ultimately cost him his job, that he had herpes (why were her thoughts about men today so hostile?); a woman who was not beautiful, but was dancing naked in front of the mirror, as she would never do at home, might never do again (there, that was better). She took her glasses off so that she could not see across the room. She leaned against the headboard and closed her eyes.

She had nothing to say. She had said it all. She had written all the poems she would ever write. Though something large and subterranean had fueled her images, she was a minor poet only. She was, possibly, an overachiever. She would coast tonight, segue early into the Q&A, let the audience dictate the tenor of the event. Mercifully, it would be short. She appreciated literary festivals for precisely that reason: she would be but one of many novelists and poets (more novelists than poets), most of whom were better known than she. She knew she ought to examine the program before she went to the cocktail party on the theory that it sometimes helped to find an acquaintance early on so that one was not left stranded, looking both unpopular and easy prey; but if she glanced at the program, it would pull her too early into the evening, and she resisted this invasion. How protective she had recently grown of herself, as if there were something tender and vulnerable in need of defense.

From the street, twelve floors below, there was a clanging of a large machine. In the corridor there were voices, those of a man and a woman, clearly upset.

It was pure self-indulgence, the writing. She could still remember (an antidote to the chagrin?) the exquisite pleasure, the texture, so early on, of her first penciled letters on their stout lines, the practiced slant of the blue-inked cursive on her first copybook (the lavish *F* of Frugality, the elegant *E* of Envy). She collected them now, old copybooks, small repositories of beautiful handwriting. It was art, found art, of that she was convinced. She had framed some of the individual pages, had lined the walls of her study at home with

the prints. She supposed the copybooks (mere schoolwork of anonymous women, long dead) were virtually worthless – she had hardly ever paid more than five or ten dollars for one in a secondhand book store – but they pleased her nevertheless. She was convinced that for her the writing was all about the act of writing itself, even though her own penmanship had deteriorated to an appalling level, nearly code.

She stood up from the bed and put her glasses on. She peered into the mirror. Tonight she would wear long earrings of pink Lucite. She would put her lenses back in and use a lipstick that didn't clash with the Lucite, and that would be that. Seen from a certain angle, she might simply disappear.

The party was in a room reserved for such occasions. Presumably, the view outside attracted, though the city now was gray and darkening yet. Lights twinkled at random, and it was impossible not to think: In this room or that, women will be undressing and men, with ties undone, will be pouring drinks. Though one did not know, and there were other, more grotesque, scenarios to contemplate.

The window shuddered with a gust of wind. For a moment, the lights dimmed, causing a stoppage in the conversation of equal duration, a pause in which she could not help but think of panic in a blackened hotel, of hands groping. Some dreadful music, cousin to the malevolently bland tunes in the hotel elevator, seeped between the talk. She saw no recognizable face, which was disconcerting. There were perhaps twenty-five people in the suite when she arrived, most already drinking, and most, it would appear, already bonded into clusters. Along

one wall, a table had been laid with hors d'oeuvres of a conventional sort. She set her purse under a chair by the door and walked to the bar. She asked for a glass of wine, guessing that the chardonnay would not live up to the rose coronation carpet or the bouquets as big as boys, and in this she was not wrong.

A woman said her name, and Linda turned to an outstretched hand belonging to a slight woman in a woolen suit, its cloth the color of irises. It was pleasant to see a woman not dressed in black, as everyone seemed to be these days, but if she mentioned it, this might be taken as insult for being provincial. Linda shook the proffered hand, her own wet and cold from her wineglass.

— *I'm Susan Sefton, one of the organizers of the festival. I am such a fan. I wanted to thank you for coming.*

— *Oh. Thank you,* Linda said. *I'm looking forward to it,* she lied.

The woman had feral teeth but lovely green eyes. Did she do this for a living?

— *In about half an hour, we'll all be heading down to the front of the hotel, where we'll be taken by bus to a restaurant called Le Matin. It's a bistro. Do you like French?*

The answer couldn't matter, though Linda nodded yes. The idea of being carted out to dinner put her in mind of senior citizens, an image not dispelled in the next instant when she was informed that dinner would be early because of the various reading schedules.

— *And then each author will be taken to his or her event. There are four separate venues.* A vinyl binder with colored tabs was consulted. *You're in Red Wing Hall, and you're reading at nine-thirty.*

Which would ensure a smallish crowd, Linda thought but didn't say. Most people with tickets to a festival – authors included – would be ready to go home by nine-thirty.

— *Do you know Robert Seizek?*

The name was vaguely familiar, though Linda could not then have named a title or even a genre. She made a motion with her head that might be construed as a nod.

— *You and he will be sharing a stage.*

Linda heard the demotion implicit in the fraction, a sense of being only half an entertainment.

— *It was in the program.* The woman seemed defensive, perhaps in response to a look of disappointment. *Didn't you get your packet?*

Linda had, but could hardly admit that now, it being inescapably rude not to have glanced at it.

— *I'll see you get one.* The feral teeth were gone, the smile having faded. Linda would be but one of many wayward writers Susan Sefton was in charge of, most too disorganized or self-absorbed to do what was expected. She looked pointedly at Linda's breast.

— *You have to wear a badge to all events. It's in the packet.* A rule against which writers surely would rebel, Linda thought, looking around at a room filled with white badges encased in plastic and pinned onto lapels and bodices. *Have you met Robert yet? Let me introduce you,* Susan Sefton added, not waiting for an answer to her question.

The woman in the iris-colored suit interrupted a conversation among three men, none of whom seemed to need or want interruption. The talk was of computers (Linda might

have guessed this) and tech stocks one might have bought if only one had known. Seizek had a large head – leonine one would have to say – and an even larger body that spoke of appetites, one of which was much in evidence in his nearly lethal breath and in the way he swayed slightly, as if attached to a different gyroscope than the rest of them. Perhaps she would be solo on the stage after all. One of the two remaining authors had an Australian accent that was pleasant to listen to, and Linda deduced (as if tuning into a radio broadcast that had already begun) that he was a novelist about whom it had been said just the Sunday previous in a prominent book review that his prose was 'luminous and engaging,' his insights 'brilliant and incisive.' (A novel about an Australian scientist? She tried to remember. No, an engineer.) And it was impossible, despite the overused and thus devalued words of praise, not to regard the man with more interest than she had just seconds earlier, a fact she despised about herself. One bowed to power conferred. And she saw, as she had not before, that the other two men were turned slightly in the direction of the newly anointed, as though their bodies had been drawn off course by a powerful magnet.

— *And you, Ms Fallon, would you say that your understanding of love came more from love itself or from reading about love?* Seizek spoke thickly, suggesting that she might at any minute be sprayed with sibilants.

Another conversation she had only bits of. The third writer looked at her not at all, as if she were invisible. It would not be fair to say that he was gay. How odd, she thought, that men would talk of love, had been talking of love before

she had even joined them, a topic it was supposed was of interest only to women.

She answered without hesitation. *Experience. No one has ever accurately described a marriage.*

— *A novel can't, can it?* This from the Australian, in broad antipodean accent. *A marriage doesn't lend itself to art. Certainly not to satisfying structure or to dialogue worth reading.*

— *You write of love*, the man who could not be called gay said to Linda, rendering her suddenly visible; and she could not help but be pleased that someone knew her work.

— *I do*, she said, not embarrassed to state her claim in this arena. *I believe it to be the central drama of our lives.* Immediately, she qualified her bold pronouncement. *For most of us, that is.*

— *Not death?* asked Seizek, a drunk looking for debate.

— *I count it as part of the entire story. All love is doomed, seen in the light of death.*

— *I take it you don't believe that love survives the grave*, the Australian offered.

And she did not, though she had tried to. After Vincent.

— *Why central?* asked the third man, who had a name after all: William Wingate.

— *It contains all theatrical possibilities. Passion, jealousy, betrayal, risk. And is nearly universal. It's something extraordinary that happens to ordinary people.*

— *Not fashionable to write about love, though, is it.* This from Seizek, who spoke dismissively.

— *No. But in my experience, fashion doesn't have a great deal to do with validity.*

— *No, of course not,* Seizek said quickly, not wanting to be thought invalid.

Linda drifted to the edges of the talk, assaulted by a sudden hunger. She hadn't had a proper meal (if one didn't count the small, trapezoidal carton of nachos) since breakfast in her hotel room in a city seven hundred miles away. She asked the men if they wanted anything from the buffet table, she was just going to get a cracker, she was starved, she hadn't eaten since breakfast. No, no, the men did not want, but of course she must get herself. The salsa was decent, they said, and they wouldn't be eating for another hour anyway. And, by the way, did anyone know the restaurant? And she reflected, as she turned away from them, that just a year ago, or maybe two, one of the men would have peeled away, followed her to the buffet table, would have viewed the occasion as opportunity. Such were the ironies of age, she thought. When the attention had been ubiquitous, she had minded.

Small bowls of colored food left the guest to guess at their identity: the green might be guacamole, the red was doubtless the decent salsa, and the pink possibly a shrimp or crab dip. But she was stumped as to the grayish-beige, not a good color for food under the best of circumstances. She reached for a small paper plate – the management had not provided for large appetites – and heard the hush before she understood it, a mild hush as if someone had lowered the volume a notch or two. From the corner, she heard a whispered name. It couldn't be, she thought, even as she understood it could. She turned to see the cause of the reverential quiet.

He stood in the doorway, as if momentarily blinded by the

unfamiliar. As if having been injured, he was having to relearn certain obvious cues to reality: pods of men and women with drinks in hand, a room attempting to be something it was not, faces that might or might not be familiar. His hair was silver now, the shock of that, badly cut, atrociously cut really, too long at the sides and at the back. How he would be hating this, she thought, already taking his side. His face was ravaged in the folds, but you could not say he was unhandsome. The navy eyes were soft and blinking, as if he had come out of a darkened room. A scar, the old scar that seemed as much a part of him as his mouth, ran the length of his left cheek. He was greeted as a man might who had long been in a coma; as a king who had for years been in exile.

She turned around, unwilling to be the first person he saw in the room.

There were other greetings now, a balloon of quiet but intense attention. Could this be his first public appearance since the accident, since he had taken himself into seclusion, retired from the world? It could, it could. She stood immobile, plate in hand, breathing in a tight, controlled manner. She raised a hand slowly to her hair, tucked a stray strand behind her ear. She rubbed her temple softly with her finger. She picked up a cracker and tried to butter it with a crumbly cheese, but the cracker broke, disintegrating between her fingers. She examined a fruit bowl of strawberries and grapes, the latter gone brown at the edges.

Someone said, too unctuously, *Let me get you a drink.* Another crowed, *I am so pleased.* Still others murmured: *You cannot know*, and *I am such.*

It was nothing, she told herself as she reached for a glass of water. Years had passed, and all of life was different now.

She could feel him moving toward her. How awful that after all this time, she and he would have to greet each other in front of strangers.

He said her name, her very common name.

— *Hello, Thomas*, she said, turning, his name as common as her own, but his having the weight of history.

He had on an ivory shirt and a navy blazer, the cut long out of style. He had grown thicker through the middle, as might have been anticipated, but still, one thought, looking at him, A tall man, a lanky man. His hair fell forward onto his forehead, and he brushed it away in a gesture that swam up through the years.

He moved across the space between them and kissed her face beside her mouth. Too late, she reached to touch his arm, but he had retreated, leaving her hand to dangle in the air.

Age had diminished him. She watched him take her in, she who would be seen to have been diminished by age as well. Would he be thinking, Her hair gone dry, her face not old?

— *This is very strange*, he said.

— *They are wondering about us already.*

— *It's comforting to think we might provide a story.*

His hands did not seem part of him; they were pale, soft writer's hands, hints of ink forever in the creases of the middle finger of the right hand. *I've followed your career*, he said.

— *What there's been of it.*

— *You've done well.*

— *Only recently.*

The others moved away from them like boosters falling from a rocket. There was conferred status in his knowing her, not unlike the Australian writer with the good review. A drink appeared for Thomas, who took it and said thank you, disappointing the bearer, who hoped for conversation.

— *I haven't done this sort of thing in years,* he began and stopped.

— *When are you reading?*

— *Tonight.*

— *And me as well.*

— *Are we in competition?*

— *I certainly hope not.*

It was rumored that after many barren years, Thomas was writing again and that the work was extraordinarily good. He had in the past, inexplicably, been passed over for the prizes, though it was understood, by common agreement, that he was, at his best, the best of them.

— *You got here today?* she asked.

— *Just.*

— *You've come from . . . ?*

— *Hull.*

She nodded.

— *And you?* he asked.

— *I'm finishing a tour.*

He tilted his head and half smiled, as if to say, Condolences.

A man hovered near Thomas's elbow, waiting for admission. *Tell me something,* Thomas said, ignoring the man beside him and leaning forward so that only she could hear. *Did you become a poet because of me?*

She remembered that Thomas's questions were often startling and insulting, though one forgave him always. *It's how we met,* she said, reminding him.

He took a longish sip of his drink. *So it was.*

— *It was out of character for me. That class.*

— *In character, I think. The rest was fraud.*

— *The rest?*

— *The pretending to be fast.*

Fast. She hadn't heard the word used that way in decades.

— *You're more in character now,* he said.

— *How could you possibly know?* she asked, challenging him.

He heard the bite in her voice. *Your body and your gestures give you the appearance of having grown into your character, what I perceive to be your character.*

— *It's only middle age,* she said, at once devaluing both of them.

— *Lovely on you.*

She turned away from the compliment. The man beside Thomas would not go away. Behind him there were others who wanted introductions to the reclusive poet. She excused herself and moved through all the admirers and the sycophants, who were, of course, not interested in her. This was nothing, she told herself again as she reached the door. Years had passed, and all of life was different now.