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Opening Extract from...

Indiscretion

Written by Charles Dubow

Published by Blue Door

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INDISCRETION

CHARLES DUBOW

WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

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To Melinda

E cosi desio me mena
(And so desire carries me away)
PETRARCH

Great lovers lie in Hell . . .
JOHN CROWE RANSOM

INDISCRETION

PROLOGUE

The poet A. E. Housman wrote of the "land of lost content," and how he can never return to the place where he had once been so happy.

When I was younger, I greatly admired the poem's sentiment because I was not old enough to realize how banal it was. The young invariably cherish their youth, incapable of imagining life past thirty. The notion that the past is more idyllic is absurd, however. What we remember is our innocence, strong limbs, physical desire. Many people are shackled by their past and are unable to look ahead with any degree of confidence because they not only don't believe in the future, they don't really believe in themselves.

But that doesn't prevent us from casting a roseate glow over our memories. Some memories burn brighter, whether because they meant more or because they have assumed greater

importance in our minds. Holidays blur together, snowstorms, swimming in the ocean, acts of love, holding our parents' hands when we are very small, great sadnesses. But there is much we forget too. I have forgotten so much—names, faces, brilliant conversations, days and weeks and months, things I vowed never to forget, and to fill in the gaps, I conflate the past or make it up entirely. Did that happen to me or to someone else? Was that me who broke his leg skiing in Lech? Did I run from the carabinieri after a drunken night in Venice? Places and actions that seem so real can be entirely false, based purely on impressions of a story told at the time and then somehow subconsciously woven into the fabric of our lives.

After a while it becomes real.

SUMMER

1

ELEVEN IN THE MORNING. THE BACKYARDS OF HOUSES RUMBLE by. Here and there an aboveground pool, discarded patio furniture, rusting bicycles. Barking dogs tied with ropes. Dry lawns. The sky is a pale blue, the heat of early summer just beginning to unfurl itself. Every fifteen minutes or so the train stops. More people get on than off.

Day-trippers look for empty seats on the crowded, noisy, brightly lit train. They carry bags filled with sunblock, bottles of water, sandwiches, and magazines. The women wear bathing suits under their clothes, bursts of neon color knotted around their necks. The men, young, tattooed, muscular, the buds of iPods wired to their ears, wear backward baseball caps, shorts, and flip-flops, towels draped around their necks, ready for a Saturday at the beach.

Claire is joining them. But she is not with them. I am not

there either. We haven't met yet, but I can imagine her. If I close my eyes I can still remember the sound of her voice, the way she walks. She is young, alluring, hurtling to a destination that will change her life, and mine, forever.

She huddles against the window, trying to concentrate on her book, but puts it down every few moments to look out at the passing landscape. The jolting of the train makes her sleepy. The trip feels like it is taking longer than it is, and she wishes she were there already. Silently, she urges the train to go faster. Her backpack, the one she carried around Europe, is on the seat beside her, and she hopes no one asks her to move it. She knows it is too big, and it looks as though she is coming to stay for a week or a month and not just a night. Her roommate had taken the other bag, the one on wheels which they shared, on a business trip. She opens her book and tries again to focus on the words, but it's no use. It's not that it's a bad book. She has been meaning to read it since it first came out. The author is one of her favorites. Maybe she will read it on the beach later if there is time.

The conductor collects the ticket stubs. He has a thick, reddish mustache and is wearing a worn, light blue short-sleeved shirt and a round, dark blue cap. He has done this trip hundreds of times. "Speonk," he intones nasally, drawing out the last syllable. "Next station Spe-onnnk."

She consults the schedule in her hand. Only a few stations to go.

At Westhampton, the day-trippers begin to get off the train in small groups. Some are meeting friends with cars. High fives and laughter. Others stand around and gather their bearings in the sunlit parking lot, clutching their cell phones to their

ears. Their adventures are already beginning. She returns the schedule to her pocket. She has to wait another thirty-eight minutes before she reaches her destination.

At the station Clive is waiting. Go left when you come out, he had told her. I'll be there.

He is tall, blond, English. The tails of his expensive shirt untucked. She has never seen him in shorts before. He is very tan. It has only been a week since she last saw him, but he looks as though he has lived here his whole life. That the handmade suits he normally wears seem to belong to some other man.

He leans over to kiss her on the cheek and picks up her bag. "How long are you planning on staying exactly?" he asks with a smile.

"I knew you were going to say that," she says, wrinkling her nose at him. "No need to panic. Dana took the good bag."

He laughs easily and starts to walk, saying, "I'm just parked over here. Thought I'd run you back to the house, and then we could all grab a spot of lunch."

She hears the mention of others and is surprised but tries not to show it. "Come out for the weekend," he had said, nuzzling her shoulder. "I want you to. It will be very quiet. Just us. You'll love it."

He opens the door of his two-seater and throws her bag behind them. She doesn't know anything about cars, but she can tell it is a nice one. The top is down and the rich-smelling leather is pleasantly hot against the bare backs of her legs.

Although he is older than she, he has the youthfulness that comes to men who have never married. Even if they travel with a woman, there is something unencumbered about them,

never having been weighted down by anything more than their own desires.

When she met him, at the party in a loft in Tribeca, then afterward at the restaurant and then bed, he had reminded her of a boy home from school for Christmas trying to squeeze in as much pleasure as possible before it is all over.

"So who else do you have out?" She doesn't mean to make it sound like an accusation.

"Oh, just the rest of my harem," he says with a wink. Reaching out, he puts his hand on her thigh. "Don't worry. Clients. They invited themselves at the last minute, and I couldn't really say no. Bad form."

They drive past high green hedgerows, behind which there are occasional glimpses of large houses. Workmen, Mexican or Guatemalan maybe, dart in and out, pushing lawn mowers, clipping branches, cleaning pools, raking gravel, their battered pickup trucks parked inoffensively on the side of the road. Other people are on the roads too. Men and women jogging, some on bikes, one or two nannies pushing strollers. Sunlight twinkles between the leaves. The whole world seems manicured, verdant, private.

They turn down a gravel drive lined with newly planted saplings.

"Can't tell you how long it's taken to get this bloody place ready," says Clive. "Nearly strangled my contractor when he told me it wouldn't be done by Memorial Day. They only just finished the pool last week. Can you imagine? Bought it over a year ago. Bloody nerve of some people."

They pull up to the house. It is modern, white. Several cars are parked in front. A Range Rover and two Mercedeses. She has never seen grass so green in her life.

Carrying her bag, Clive ushers her through the door into a large, dark, soaring room. A fireplace dominates one wall, a modern painting the other. She recognizes the artist. She had been to one of his shows that spring.

"Do you like it?" he asks. "Not really my thing. I know bugger-all about art. But my decorator said I needed a whacking great painting there so I bought it."

The ceiling must be thirty feet high. There is almost no furniture, only a long white leather couch and a number of cardboard boxes stacked in the corner.

"The rest should be here next week," he says. "We're just camping out now. Come on, let me give you the grand tour."

He sets down her bag and leads her through the house, showing her the dining room, the kitchen, a media room, and a game room complete with pool table, Foosball, Ping-Pong, and a pinball machine. In every room, a wide, flat television.

"Typical male," she says, knowing what he wants to hear. "You can't be bothered to furnish your new house, but you've already got all the toys set up." He grins, flattered.

"Let me show you where you'll be staying." They go back the way they came and he carries her bag into a large master bedroom, where the bed sits unmade, shoes kicked across the floor, clothes draped over a chair, and a laptop on the desk open to Bloomberg. Magazines and cell phones are scattered on the bedside table. On the dresser is a photo of Clive posing with skis and another with a young woman on what appears to be a sailboat. Without looking closely Claire can tell she is topless.

"Sorry, it's a bit of a mess. Didn't get a chance to tidy. Hope you don't mind." As if he hadn't expected her to answer, he turns and kisses her. "I really am glad you could come."

"Me too," she says, returning the kiss. She needs to pee. The trip out was long, and she is hot and uncomfortable. He places his hand on her breast, and she lets him. She likes the way he touches her and the way he smells. Leather and sand. That he is English. It is like being ravished by a Regency duke. His hand is now under her shirt and her nipples are hardening. She doesn't want to break away and decides she can wait. It is over quickly. He didn't even bother removing her top or his. Her panties are around one ankle, and she is sitting on the bed while he washes up in the bathroom.

"We've just inaugurated the bedroom," he calls to her.

Unfulfilled, she stares down at her naked legs and black pubic hairs, feeling vaguely foolish.

He comes back out. "Right, let's go meet the others, shall we?"

"One moment." She goes into the bathroom now, carrying her underwear and shorts. There didn't seem any point in putting them on first. The bathroom is large and covered in marble. The towels decadently soft. There are two sinks, a bidet, and a shower with multiple heads in gleaming steel that probably cost her entire salary. There is another television screen, this one concealed behind the mirror. She splashes water on her face and wishes she had thought to bring in her toiletries. She has no hairbrush, no lipstick.

"Come on then," calls Clive. "I'm famished."

She walks out. "You look gorgeous, darling," he says, swiveling his hips. "Fancy another go?" He winks and gives her a peck on the cheek. "Here, thought you might like this." He hands her a glass of champagne like a reward. He is carrying another. "Don't want to get too far behind everyone else. They've got a head start."

By the pool are two other couples, the women reclining on

chaises and the men at a table with a champagne bucket on it. It is very hot now, and she blinks in the sunlight. She is introduced to Derek and a blond woman who makes no attempt to rise. Her name is possibly Irina, but Claire doesn't quite catch it. She looks for a ring and sees there isn't one. The woman has an accent Claire can't place, and looks quite tall. She is in good shape. Derek is stubby and also English and wears a red Manchester United shirt. On his wrist is a fat, diamond-encrusted watch. He was in the middle of telling a funny story and clearly didn't like being interrupted.

The other couple is married. "Larry," says a portly, balding man with glasses, "and this is my wife, Jodie." Jodie smiles at Claire, turning her head just enough to inspect her. She, too, is wearing an expensive watch. And several glittering rings. They are all wearing expensive watches. Claire doesn't wear a watch.

Jodie is around forty and has a taut, trimmed stomach that flattens into an orange bikini. Her breasts look too good to be natural. "So where did you two meet?" she asks, taking a sip of champagne. Claire notices that Jodie's fingernails and toenails are painted burnt gold. The veins on her feet and forearms stand out.

"At a party in New York a few weeks ago," says Claire. "It was . . ."

"It was love at first sight, wasn't it, darling?" says Clive with a laugh, sliding his arm around her waist.

"Speak for yourself," responds Claire playfully. "Handsome English hedge fund managers are a dime a dozen these days."

Jodie smiles. She has been here before. Has met his other women. Clive preens.

"Right, chaps," he announces. "I don't have a bite of food

in the house, and even if I did I'm a rotten cook, so I've booked lunch. Let's drink up and go."

Lunch takes most of the afternoon. There is caviar followed by grilled lobster and more wine. It is Clive's treat. "My shout," he said when they sat down. "Order whatever costs the most."

Even though it is hot, they sit outside under large green umbrellas looking over a harbor full of sailboats. Clive points out to Long Island Sound and, in the distance, Connecticut. It was an old whaling port, he says, once one of the biggest on the East Coast. "Settled by an Englishman, of course," he says. "A bit of a soldier of fortune named Lion Gardiner. The family still owns an entire island in the Sound that was given them by Charles the First. Must be why I feel so drawn to the place. I think old Lion and I would have been great mates."

Seagulls wheel overhead. Occasionally a particularly brave one lands and is then shooed away by a waiter. Claire is seated between Clive and Larry, but the men just talk across at each other, and there doesn't seem to be much point in trying to join in because most of the conversation is about either the derivatives market or English football, of which both Clive and Derek are big fans.

As a result Claire drinks more wine than she should and begins to wonder when she could get the earliest train back to New York. Would Clive drive her to the station or would she have to call a taxi? He would be annoyed. She is silently relieved when he proposes a trip to the beach. The other two women make vague noises about not liking the sand and can't they all just go back to the pool, but they are shouted down by Clive and the other men.

After a quick stop by the house to change, Clive piles ev-

eryone into his Range Rover—"I'm the only one with a beach sticker and the bloody cops like nothing better than handing out parking tickets on weekends in June"—and Claire sits in the back between Jodie and Larry. Derek sits in front with tall Irina perched comically on his broad lap. When they arrive at the crowded beach, Clive, carrying a cooler, marches down close to the water and stops on a tiny patch of unoccupied sand between two other groups. "You can still get a decent cell phone signal here," he says, opening a complicated nylon folding chair. Claire is holding the towels, a nanny visiting the beach with her employers. The others are straggling behind. Jodie is complaining. "My hat's going to blow away, dammit," she says. "Christ, why'd we have to come here?"

Claire looks out at the sparkling blue water and the small foam-tipped waves gently crashing against the sand. Children are playing, laughing and diving through the surf while parents and babysitters stand in the shallows and watch. It is still early in the season, and the water is too cold for most swimmers. The cloudless sky stretches endlessly back beyond the curve of the world. She wishes she were here alone.

"More wine?" asks Clive. He is filling glasses.

She shakes her head. "No thanks. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"There's a reason why these houses cost so much, love. See that one over there? It sold last summer for forty million. There's one down there that sold for twenty million the other year. The new owner tore it down and put up an even bigger one."

"You couldn't give me one of those houses," says Larry. "You know what the upkeep is on one of those things? Salt damage, dune erosion, hurricanes, taxes? Only an asshole with more money than brains would buy one."

"That's why I bought one well inland, old boy. I'm an asshole with money and brains," Clive adds with a wink.

Jodie walks up. "Do we have to stay? My hair is getting ruined."

Clive has taken off his shirt. His torso is as tanned as his face, the muscles lean. He is a fitness enthusiast, one who practices yoga every day, goes to the gym regularly, pops vitamins. Claire can see the other women admiring him, envying her. She knows that body, has felt it, tasted it. But she has never seen it outside the bedroom. In the sunlight. She looks away, conscious of her desire. Her own arms are pale. She has never been able to get tan the way Clive can. She freckles instead.

"Oh, don't worry about your hair, darling," Clive says. "The windswept look is very fashionable out here."

"You're a riot, Clive. I just had it done and it wasn't cheap." A light wind gusts and blows off her hat. "Shit! Larry!"

She glares at her husband, who goes scurrying after the hat.

"What did I tell you?" she says when he returns. It is all his fault. He is the man. He should have been protecting her. Larry grimaces and says, "Clive, can you drive us back to the house? Jodie really doesn't want to stay." Jodie stands a few feet behind him, victorious, her arms crossed against her torso.

Irina, who has been lying on a towel, says, "I want to go too. I am getting all sand everywhere."

"All right," says Clive, throwing up his hands in mock defeat. "Sorry, love. Day at the beach cut short."

Claire hesitates. "Can I stay?"

"Sorry?"

"I'd like to stay. It's just so beautiful, and I haven't seen the beach in so long. Do you mind? I could take a taxi back if

it's too much trouble. I just really want to go for a walk and a swim."

"Water's bloody cold for swimming," says Clive, looking at his watch and then toward the parking lot, where his other guests are now waiting. "Look, I didn't plan on spending the day playing chauffeur, but I could come back for you in half an hour or so, after I've dropped off this lot. That do?"

"Yes, thank you."

He is surprised, she can tell. It has probably been a long time since a woman failed to go along with his plans. In his world that sort of thing isn't supposed to happen. It's a black mark against her. She can tell he is already thinking who he should invite out next weekend. The others are almost back to the parking lot. He turns and follows them, lugging the cooler and the chairs. She feels lighter now.

With a sigh, she looks down the beach and removes her shirt and shorts until she is standing only in her bikini. The sun and wind feel good on her exposed skin. Although it is crowded here, she can see that farther down it thins out. That is where she wants to be, and she starts walking. The sand crunches pleasantly between her toes. The afternoon sun warm against her face. A wave bigger than the others crashes to her left, sending foaming surf rolling up over her feet. Involuntarily she lets out a little shriek and leaps aside. She had forgotten how cold the water could be, but after a few moments she becomes used to it.

When she was a child, her family would go to the beach every summer. The water was always cold there too. Maybe even colder. They would rent an old, thin-walled house on the Cape, near Wellfleet, for a week. There would be lobsters and

sailing and sand in the sheets, her father playing tennis with his old wooden racket and a smell of mildew that saturated the whole house that always made her think of summer. That had been a long time ago, before her parents' divorce.

She passes several surfers bobbing like seals in the small waves and watches them for a while. One of them starts paddling and gets up unsteadily as the wave begins to crest. He manages to stay upright for a few seconds before falling. A pretty girl with long sun-bleached hair claps her hands and whistles. Claire thinks it would be wonderful to know how to surf. If only there was time. She thinks she'd be good at it. She is a good skier and used to dance in high school, so she knows her balance is good and her legs are strong.

Crossing over a seaweed-covered stone jetty that juts out into the ocean, she comes to a stretch of beach that is almost completely deserted. Up ahead in the distance is another jetty, and beyond that what looks like a large lagoon. There are signs posted on hurricane fencing that warn against disturbing a breed of bird called piping plover. Imposing mansions occupy the dunes behind her, but for the moment she feels as though she has the beach all to herself.

The sun is strong and she decides to cool off by going swimming. It is too cold to wade in. She waits for a moment at the water's edge, timing the waves, gathering her courage. Seeing her chance, she runs in, lifting her legs awkwardly out of the foaming water, and dives into a breaker. The cold shocks her, but she kicks hard and comes out beyond the swells. As she treads water, tasting the salt on her lips, her body feels strong and clean. She starts swimming a breaststroke, but the current is stronger and pushes her back, and she realizes she isn't

making much headway. For a moment, she is anxious, concerned that she might not be able to get back to shore. Knowing that to fight the current would be to risk exhaustion, she swims parallel to the shore until she has escaped it. When she no longer feels its pull, she bodysurfs back to the beach, stumbling wearily out of the water.

"You should be careful out there."

She turns to see a man of about forty standing beside her. He is good-looking and well-built, with sandy hair slowly turning gray. There is something recognizable about him. It is a face she has seen before.

"There's a powerful riptide there," he says. "I was watching you when you went in, in case you got into trouble. But you looked like you could take care of yourself."

"Thank you. I wasn't so sure for a moment." She takes a deep breath and realizes her fear has passed. She smiles at him. He is an attractive man. "I didn't realize this was a full-service beach. Are you lifeguards salaried or do you work on commission?"

He laughs. "We work strictly for tips."

"Well, that's too bad. As you can see I'm not carrying any money."

"You'd be amazed how many times we lifeguards hear that. Maybe I should go into a more lucrative line of work."

"Well, you could start a line of bikinis that come with pockets."

"That's a great idea. I'll bring it up at the next lifeguard convention."

"You should. I hate to think of all those starving lifeguards, saving all those people for nothing. It just doesn't seem fair."

"Well, we don't do it for the money but for the glory—and for the gratitude, of course."

"In that case, thanks again for almost saving me."

He makes a little bow. "It was almost my pleasure. Well, so long. Stay out of riptides."

He walks down the beach in the direction of the lagoon. She watches him get smaller and sees him join a group of people by some canoes. A chill runs through her. She shivers, wishing she had brought a towel. She has to head back anyway. It is getting late. Clive will be waiting.

THAT NIGHT THEY ARE IN THE KITCHEN, READY TO GO OUT. "Where are we going?" Claire asks. She is wearing a simple white dress, low cut over her small breasts. Jodie appears serene. She has forgiven Clive.

"There's a party. Writer chap I know. Gorgeous wife."

"I want to go to nightclub," pouts Irina, applying lipstick while staring at the mirror in her compact. "My friend say they are very good here. You take me, baby?" This to Derek, whom she towers over, caressing his thinning hair. He grunts in assent. "'Ere, what about a nightclub then?"

"Things don't really get going at the clubs until midnight," answers Clive. "We'll have plenty of time."

"What's he written?" Claire asks.

"Who?"

"Your writer friend. What's he written? Would I have heard of it?"

"You may have done. He wrote something that came out the other year. Won a big prize too, I think. I never got around to reading it."

"What's his name?"

"Winslow. Harry Winslow. Have you heard of him?"

"Yes. He wrote *The Death of a Privileged Ape*. It won a National Book Award. I loved it."

"I didn't like it." It was Jodie. "You remember?" she says, turning to Larry. "I tried reading it in Anguilla? Bored the crap out of me."

"Yes, well, my taste in literature runs toward Dick Francis and Jackie Collins, I must say." Lowbrow Clive to the rescue, but Claire doesn't give up so easily.

"How do you know him?"

"Harry? He's a lovely chap. Terribly funny. Wife's smashing. Not sure how I know them. Just do. Met them at parties, I suppose. They have a house out here. Been in her family for years apparently, though I think that sort of thing means rather less here than in England."

"And after we go to nightclub, yes?" puts in Irina.

"Absolutely. After we'll go to a nightclub, and you and Derek can boogie until dawn."

THE HOUSE IS CHARMING. LIVED IN, LOVED. IT'S SMALL, TWO stories, the shingles brown with age, the trim white. Cars line the drive, some parked on the grass. A little boy, the son of the family, armed with a flashlight, helps direct them. Through the tall trees, an open field is barely visible in the twilight. The air smells of salt water, the sound of the ocean just audible. Claire wishes she could come back in the daylight. She can tell it would be marvelous.

Inside is the detritus of generations. Family treasures cover the wainscoted walls. It is as though the contents of several

larger houses were spilled into one. Old portraits and photographs of men with mustaches and high collars, women with straw boaters and chignons, captains of industry, forgotten cousins; paintings of prized, long-dead horses; posters; books everywhere, on shelves and stacked in piles on the floor; and model airplanes and Chinese porcelain foo dogs and old magazines and fishing rods and tennis racquets and beach umbrellas jammed in the corners. Overhead a dusty, oversize hurricane lamp bathes everything in a soft glow. Children's toys, scratched tables and scuffed chairs and piles of canvas sneakers, moccasins, and rain boots. The whole place smells of years of mildew, the sea, and woodsmoke.

Claire is the last one in. The noise of the party pours out from other rooms. Clive puts his hand behind her back and brings her up to introduce her to a man with sandy hair. He is shaking hands with the rest of their group.

"It's my lifeguard!" He is taller than she remembers. He wears an old blazer with a button missing and frayed cuffs. "Saved anyone tonight?"

"Just a few. They were dying of thirst."

Claire giggles. "Clive, I met this man on the beach this afternoon. Apparently, I went swimming somewhere I shouldn't have and could have drowned."

"You didn't tell me."

"It was my good deed for the day, Clive," the man says. "Good thing she's a strong swimmer. I was afraid I was going to have to go in after her. Last year a teenage boy drowned there."

"So you're Harry Winslow?" Now she knows why he looked so familiar.

"I am. Who are you?" He smiles broadly. There is an old

scar on his chin. His eyes are gray. A faint trace of wrinkles. He holds out his hand, the nails clean, the fingers tapered. Golden hairs curl around his thick brown wrist.

His hand envelops hers as she introduces herself, a little less confident now. She is surprised that it would be so callused. He is no longer the same man she met on the beach. He has taken on substance in her eyes.

"Well, Claire, welcome. What can I get you to drink?"

"Excuse me," says Clive. "I see a chap over there. I'll catch up later, hmm?" Without waiting for Claire to answer, he is gone, smelling money.

"How about that drink, then?"

Claire follows Harry inside a small living room with an old brick fireplace, painted white. She notices large, worn sofas and comfortable reading chairs. He walks to a table piled high with bottles, glasses, and an ice bucket. On the floor, a faded Oriental carpet. The rest of the party is on the porch and the grass out back. She accepts a glass of white wine. He is drinking whisky on the rocks from a chunky glass.

"I read your book."

"Did you?" he responds. "I hope you liked it."

He is being modest. It is an act, she can tell. One he has repeated with varying degrees of sincerity. He has had this conversation before. Many people have read his book. It has won prizes. Thousands, maybe millions of people have liked it, even loved it. The success for him is a shield, a gift. It lends him an enviable objectivity.

"I did, very much."

"Thank you."

He smiles truthfully. It is like a parent hearing about the

achievements of an accomplished child. It is no longer within his control. It has taken on a life of its own.

He looks around. He is the host. There are others to attend to, other drinks to fetch, introductions to be made, stories to be shared. But she wants him to stay. She tries to will him to stay. Wants to ask him questions, know more about him. What is it like to have your talents recognized, to have your photograph on the back of a book? To be lionized by friends and strangers, to have your face, your hands, your body, your life? But she cannot find the words and would be embarrassed if she did.

"Where are you from?" He sips his drink. He asks the way an uncle asks where a young niece is at school.

"Just outside of Boston."

"No, I meant where do you live now?"

"Oh." She blushes. "In New York. I'm sharing an apartment with a friend from college."

"Known Clive long?"

"Not long. We met at a party in May."

"Ah," he says. "He's supposed to be very good at what he does. I must admit I don't know the first thing about business. I'm hopeless with money. Always have been."

Other guests come up. A handsome man and a beautiful woman with exotic looks and dark hair pulled tightly back. "Excuse us," says the man. They know him. "Darling," she says, leaning in to offer him her cheek. "Great party. I wish we could stay. Sitter," he explains. "You know what it's like."

They laugh with the intimacy of a private joke, the way rich people complain about how hard it is to find decent help or the expense of flying in a private plane.

The couple leaves. "Excuse me," Harry says to her. "I need to fetch more ice. Enjoy the party."

"I always do what the lifeguard tells me," she says, making a mock salute but looking him in the eyes and holding his gaze.

He turns but then, as though realizing he is leaving her all alone, says, "Wait. You haven't met Maddy. Let me introduce you. Come with me."

Reprieved, she follows him happily through the crowd to the kitchen. Unlike the living room, it is bright. Copper pots hang from the walls. Children's drawings decorate an aging refrigerator. A checked linoleum floor. There is a small, industrious crowd here, some sitting at a long, heavy table, others chopping, washing dishes. On a scarred butcher block table sits a large ham. It is an old kitchen. Worn and welcoming. She could imagine Thanksgivings here.

"Sweetheart," he says. A woman stands up from the oven, taking out something that smells delicious.

She is wearing an apron and wipes her hands on it. She is taller than Claire and strikingly beautiful. Long red-gold ringlets still wet from the shower and pale blue eyes. No makeup. A patrician face.

"Maddy, this is a new friend of Clive's." He has forgotten her name.

"Claire," she says, stepping forward. "Thank you for having me."

Maddy takes her hand. A firm grip. Her nails are cut short and unpainted. Claire notices she is barefoot.

"Hello, Claire. I'm Madeleine. Glad you could come."

She is dazzling. Claire is reminded of Botticelli's Venus.

"She liked my book," he says. "Must be nice to the paying customers."

"Of course, darling," she says. And then to Claire, "Would you like to help? As usual one of my husband's cozy little

get-togethers has turned into an orgy. We need to feed these people, or they could start breaking things." She shakes her head theatrically and smiles at him.

"The world's greatest wife," he says with an ecstatic sigh.

"I'd be happy to," says Claire.

"Great. We need someone to plate the deviled eggs. They're in the fridge and the platters are in the pantry. And don't worry if you drop anything, nothing's that good."

"You're a wonderful field marshal," says Harry, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek. "I need to get ice."

"Check the wine too," she calls out as he leaves. "We've already gone through two cases of white. And where's that other case of vodka? I thought it was under the stairs." She begins to plate the canapés from the oven onto a platter.

"Is there anything else I can do?" Claire brings out the deviled eggs.

"Yes. Phil," she says to the man with the dish towel, "let Claire do that for a while. Take these out and put them on the sideboard." She turns to Claire. "Is this your first time out here?"

Claire nods. "It's very beautiful."

"It's much grander now than when I was a kid," she says, slicing a brown loaf of bread, using the back of her wrist to push her hair away from her face. "Back then most of the land around here was farms. The place across the road was a dairy farm. We used to go help with the milking. Now it's a subdivision for millionaires. Hand me that plate, would you?"

"You've always lived here?"

She nods. "We came in the summers. This was the staff cottage. My family owned the big house up the drive."

"What happened?"

"What always happens. We—my brother, Johnny, and me—had to sell it to pay estate taxes, but we kept this place. I couldn't bear to part with it entirely. Isn't that right, Walter?"

This is where I come in. Every story has a narrator. Someone who writes it down after it's all over. Why am I the narrator of this story? I am because it is the story of my life—and of the people I love most. I have tried to be as scrupulous as possible in my telling of it. I wasn't a participant in everything that happened, but after I knew the ending, I had to fill in the missing pieces through glimpses that meant nothing to me at the time, memories that flash back with new significance, old legal pads, sentences jotted down in notebooks and on the backs of aging photographs. Even Harry himself, though he didn't know it. I had no choice other than to try to make sense of it. But making sense of anything is never easy, particularly this story.

I walk over, plucking up one of the canapés and popping it into my mouth. Bacon and something. It is delicious. "Absolutely, darling. Whatever you say."

"Oh, shut up. Don't be an ass." Then to Claire, "Walter is my lawyer. He knows all about it. Sorry, Walter Gervais, this is Claire. Claire, Walter. Walter is also my oldest friend."

It's true. We have known each other since we were children. I live next door.

"Hello, Claire," I say. "I see Maddy's already dragooned you into service here at the Winslow bar and grill. I refuse to lift a finger unless it's to join the other four wrapped around a glass tinkling with ice."

I fancy myself to be both witty and slightly indolent. I am

not really either, though. It's a persona, one I use to protect myself. In fact, I am quite boring and lonely.

"I don't mind. I don't really know too many people here, so it's nice for me to help," Claire says.

"You're lucky," I say. "I know far too many of the people here. That probably explains why I'm hiding out in the kitchen."

"Walter's a big snob. I don't think he's made a new friend since he was in prep school," Maddy says.

"You know, I think you're right. I already knew all the people worth knowing by then anyway."

"Claire came with Clive."

"Right, see? There you go. Just met him. Don't like him."

"You don't know me," says Claire.

"You're right. I don't. Should I?"

Here's the thing about Claire: she is actually quite beautiful, but there is something else about her that makes her stand out. In this world, beauty is as common as a credit card. I will try to put my finger on it.

"That's up to you. But we didn't go to prep school together so it looks like I don't have much of a shot." She smiles.

I smile back. I like her. I can't help myself. I tell Maddy to stop working. Maddy is always working. She is a fiend for activity.

"All right." She puts down the knife. "That's all the food we have in the house anyway. Just about the only thing left is the bluefish in the freezer."

"And those are only any good if you pickle them in gin. Just like me."

Why do I always play the bloody fool around her? It can't

be that I am showing off. No, it is Claire I am showing off for now.

"Walter, stop standing around sounding like a moron and go get Claire and me something to drink." Maddy turns to Claire while I'm still in earshot. "You wouldn't know it, but he's actually a hell of a good lawyer."

I could have left this out but I didn't. It appeases my ego. My education was very expensive, and I am a good lawyer. I make a lot of money at it too. I don't really like it, though. Other people's problems at least keep me from thinking too much about my own.

I come back carrying a wine bottle. "Let's go outside and get away from this crowd," I say to Claire. "You come too, Maddy."

The three of us go out the kitchen door. We stand on the damp grass. Claire has removed her shoes now too. Madeleine lights a cigarette. She is trying to quit. The party is roaring on the other side of the house. It is darker here. A large tree with a swing looms in shadow in front of us. The moon and millions of stars fill the night sky. In the distance we can see the lights of a much bigger house.

"Your parents' house?" asks Claire.

Madeleine nods. "And to the left is Walter's. We grew up next door to each other. But he still owns his." It's too dark to see my house through the thin brake of trees.

"The law may not be as glamorous as writing books, but it is more consistently remunerative," I say.

"Don't believe it," says Madeleine. "Walter's rich as sin. Even if he wasn't a lawyer."

My great-grandfather was a founder of Texaco. Unlike

many other families, though, we were able to hold on to our money.

"Don't give away all my secrets, Maddy. I want Claire to fall in love with me and not my money."

"Too bad your money's the most lovable thing about you."

Claire says nothing. She is enjoying herself, I can tell. It is like standing next to a fire; she feels warmed by our friendship and grateful we are sharing it with her. She feels she could stay here all night listening to our intimate banter, not wanting to let it go and return to the world that exists outside this house.

But what is she really thinking? It is always so easy to know what's on Maddy's mind. There isn't a deceptive bone in her body. This one, though, is more difficult. She is more concealed.

MIDNIGHT. THE CROWD HAS THINNED OUT. A SMALL GROUP has gathered on a cluster of old wicker furniture in the corner of the porch. Harry is in the center. Also, a couple named Ned and Cissy Truscott. Ned was Harry's roommate at Yale. A big man, a football player. Now a banker. I have expensively represented his firm on several occasions. In spite of that, we get on quite well. I am fond of them both. Claire is with them, listening like an acolyte. Laughing loudly, showing pretty teeth. She has a lovely laugh. It reminds me of silver bells. Harry is talking. He is a very good storyteller, unsurprisingly.

Clive approaches. He hovers before them, maybe a bit unsteadily, waiting for an opportunity. By this time everyone's had plenty to drink.

"Hello, Clive!" Harry roars. "Come sit down." Harry is

drunk now too, but he handles it well. Always has. Tomorrow he'll be up at six, whistling in the kitchen.

"No thanks," says Clive. "Thanks for the party. Claire, we have to go. I promised this lot we'd go dancing, remember?"

"Oh, can't we stay? A few more minutes. I'm having such fun."

"C'mon, stay for one drink," calls Harry. "What do you want to go dancing for? You can dance here."

"Thanks," says Clive with a forced smile. "Houseguests. They want to see all the hot spots. Do the Hamptons properly."

"Suit yourself."

"Come along, Claire."

Reluctantly, she rises. "Thank you very much, Harry. Please tell Maddy how much I enjoyed meeting her."

Harry stands up too. "Of course. Glad you could come. Watch out for riptides."

They depart, and Harry begins to tell another funny story.