A Round-Heeled Woman

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Chapter 1

At the Movies

Love is a great comedy, and so is life,
when you are not playing one of the roles.

- Louise Colet, in a letter to Flaubert

Do you think you're a nymphomaniac?" Bill wants to know. We sit on my couch close enough for him to grab me should I offer the right answer. Bill obviously thinks there is a strong possibility, and inches closer. He is an attractive man of sixty-one, six years younger than I. He is rich, his jacket cashmere, his trousers a finely worsted wool. He drives a BMW and an Alfa Romeo, though not at the same time. He has brought me a bottle of expensive Chianti, a book he enjoyed, and a cactus fully in bloom. Shortly, we will walk out onto College Avenue and choose a restaurant where we will have dinner. Bill will order everything on the menu that looks interesting, and we will dip into four or five hors d'oeuvres and entrées. We will share a bottle of wine, French. We will return to my cottage, where Bill will continue to quiz me on my sex life.

A few months ago, I turned sixty-seven. My hair is mostly white, with glints of what once was: blond, brown, gray; my face is lined - with wisdom, ahem; my eyes - blue as ever they were - are bifocaled. My teeth, not as sparkling as they used to be, remain American: sturdy, straight, and made to last. Signs of age notwithstanding, dressed - with all of my clothes on - I look pretty good. Undressed is a different matter: my body is not twenty-five or forty-five; it's not even fifty-five; and, because it has never been interfered with by plastic surgery, what once was firm is loose, what once went up goes down. Intimations of mortality are all about me. Now, though, sitting fully clothed next to Bill, I have possibilities; I can see he thinks so, too. Still, I am an unlikely candidate for the title of Ms. Nymphomania. How is it I am even in the running?

I may turn out to be the hero of my own life or the villain, who knows, but this I know for sure right now: I am easily aroused. And I offer this as a partial answer to Bill's question. I am aroused by the sight of meadows, the sound of rushing creeks, by print. Not even erotic print. Sometimes, as I lie on my futon reading, say, the Times or The American Scholar, I will feel the familiar tickle between my legs. But mostly, I am aroused by men, parts of men. I love men's asses, even the ones that aren't perfect. I am aroused by the sight of John's neck, of Bill's forearm, of Sidney's

voice, Robert's hands, Graham's legs. Men have fabulous legs, no fat, long muscles. Walking down the street in the summertime, all those men in shorts, is a thrill for me. And I adore penises. They are different one from one another, straight and crooked, long and short, thick and thin, endlessly fascinating at rest or attention. They do wonderful things for me and I do wonderful things for them. Freud wrote that men desire women but women desire men's desire of them. I suppose so, but, to my mind, women are missing a lot if they're satisfied only with flared nostrils and heavy breathing.

MY HEELS ARE very round. I'm an easy lay. An easy sixty-seven-year-old lay. 'Twas not always so. As these pages will show.

PSYCHOLOGISTS SAY THAT a significant change in one's life is preceded by a particular, specific event or experience. So it was with mine.

IN THE FALL OF 1999, when I was only sixty-six, I sat in the darkened movie theater, malted-milk balls pulsing in their paper bag, and stared at the screen where Eric Rohmer's soignée heroine smiled coolly across the table at a gentleman clearly her inferior. I popped a ball and once again gave up the notion that I could make them last as long as the movie. With malted-milk balls, my urge was immediate, my discipline in short supply. Aided by the wisdom of advancing age, I no longer crunch the balls as I did when I was thirteen; now, to make them last, I suck on them until they begin to dissolve in my mouth. At exactly the right moment I will bite down (I would never do this to a man; they are so vulnerable there) on the small but rewarding hard center and smile inwardly at the little crunch. Malted-milk balls, like a lot of things, were better when I was young; today's balls have a chalky taste, and I swear they are smaller. I know they are bad for me, another reason I like them so much. I have become a historian of balls.

Lately - have you noticed? - old people, people living on fixed incomes, people like me, have started to bring their own food to the movies. This is tacky. And it is noisy. The paper bags they bring from home filled with cold popcorn they have popped in their microwaves make noise when the old people rustle around in them. Professional movie sacks, like the one that holds my malted-milk balls, are made of softer material; professional sacks are very quiet. Occasionally, I turn and stare nastily at the miscreant. Mostly, the offender just glares back and continues to rustle. Sometimes, it seems to me, they rustle even louder. And in the dark of the theater, when I shush them, they look at me and their eyes turn red, like wolves' eyes on nature programs, or like my grandmother's when I forgot to say thank you. These people are my age; they are my peers. Why do they persist in embarrassing me?

Then there is the talking, which they do whenever they damn well feel like it. At what age - I want to know - does one get to ignore everybody but oneself? How old do you have to be to be rude? With this talking, sometimes, it is a wife explaining the movie to her hard-of-hearing husband, who has refused to wear his hearing aids: "What did he say?" the man will shout, and the wife will answer, in tones loud

enough for the people back home to hear, "He said he's going to kill her." Then there are the ones who come in late: "I can't see a thing," one of them will call, though to whom is unclear since no one answers. And there are the folks who don't seem to realize the movie has begun and who continue the conversation they started in the parking lot: "I told her she should call her daughter, she lives right down the street. . . ." Once, by mistake, I went to a movie at noontime, unaware that this particular showing was for deaf people. It was the best audience I have ever been privileged to be a part of - totally quiet. I seek them out now.

This movie, this Autumn Tale, engaged my attention at once, so that the claws of the elderly scuttling along the bottoms of their popcorn sacks went unnoticed. I like French films. Everything about them - the scenery, the people, even the plots - is interesting to me. Where the French live, what a middle-class apartment looks like, a café, a hotel room, what the French wear, is fascinating to me. I trust French filmmakers to show me French life. I do not trust American filmmakers to render a true picture of American life. What I see on the screen - a small town, a farm, a prison - is what Hollywood thinks those places ought to look like. So we get the perfect small town in State and Main, not a real one. I don't learn anything except about Hollywood. The Matrix? The Sixth Sense? Traffic? It seems to me that French movies show the extraordinary in everyday people; American movies show extraordinary people who are, inside, just folks. So in France, in the film Belle de Jour, we have an ordinary, beautiful (she is, after all, French) woman living an or- dinary life, who, by virtue of her own ingenuity, lives a secret and very sexy other life. In America, we have Julia Roberts, who, as Erin Brockovich, foul of mouth and pushed-up of bra, wants what we all want: security with a little justice on the side. I'd rather have a sexy secret life. And I will. Watch me.

The French are grown up. The French are cool. They are understated, like in this film, Autumn Tale: a wedding, and the guests, all except for a bold young thing in red, are dressed in the colors of autumn. They are subtle. They are elegant. All the women are tall and thin; that's French, too. The men? Not one of them can hold a candle to the women even though they are married to them. That is definitely cool, making the men look ordinary, making the women smart to have seen beneath the surface to the steadiness below. Not one of those men is handsome, I thought, as I gazed at the screen. And all the women are. I love it.

The plot, the events of this movie that will change my life, is not unfamiliar: two best friends, women in their late forties, one married, one not. The married friend secretly places an ad in the personals column of the newspaper for her friend and complications ensue. In the vineyards of the Rhône Valley (a very cool place I have never been to), the movie ends happily, though maybe not. The French always leave room for the maybes; ambiguity is another sign of grown-upedness that the French do very well.

Though more than twenty years older than the women in the film, I identify with the unmarried one, the one for whom the ad was secretly placed. The woman is independent and stubborn; she is proud and she is lonely. Divorced and cynical, devoted to her work, she swears she wants nothing to do with men. And yet we see the downturn of her mouth, the nervous rubbing of her fingers, the torn cuticles, the careless tumble of her hair. My own cuticles will take a beating in the months to come. And I hear something of my own voice in the abrupt defensiveness of her speech, her insistence that her work is quite enough. All of us in the audience - young and old, noisy and not - know that the absence of men in her life, while bearable, is not desirable. We can see that she is just plain scared to do anything about it. I know the feeling.

I was divorced thirty years ago. Except for a few skirmishes with men that ended sadly, I lived a full and, in many ways, satisfying life. Teaching was my passion. I was lucky to have found it. It was work that demanded my energy and attention. A single parent, I had a son who demanded the same. And, just in case I found myself tempted, I got fat. No man would look at me. I was safe. Then came 1993. I retired from teaching. My son was grown up and gone. And I was no longer fat. However, men did not come flocking; no man came at all. My stage was bare; in fact, without a classroom I had no stage at all. At age sixty, I had put myself out to pasture after thirty-three years of thriving on a live audience: 150 kids during the day and one feisty son at night. So I was okay. Except there was no one for me to touch and no one to touch me.

Garrison Keillor once wrote that, of all the sensory deprivations, the deprivation of touch is the most severe. I was severely deprived. It was not that I had gone around touching my high school students; I was fully aware of the impropriety of touching kids, even at my advanced age and with my sound reputation. But with all those kids coming and going into and out of my classroom each day, there was bumping, there was rubbing, there was so much life that some of it rubbed off on me. I felt touched even if I wasn't.

But I didn't know that then. I knew I couldn't live on my pension, but I didn't know that my newly empty stage was another reason I took a part-time teaching job at a nearby college only months after retiring from high school teaching. I didn't know it was my own deprivation that made me eager to become a volunteer teacher at San Quentin State Prison across the bay. I didn't know this deprivation was present and serious until, at age sixty, I began a five-year journey through my unconscious aided by a skillful analyst. Although an M.D., my analyst would not prescribe drugs no matter that I wept and wailed, cursed him loudly, and begged to be hospitalized. It was surgery without anesthesia. It was, as a scholar has written, "no consolation but a sober and complex estimation of reality." It was the hardest and most important thing I have ever done in my life. But don't listen to me; listen to Emily Dickinson:

One need not be a chamber to be haunted,

One need not be a house;

The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.
. . . . . .
Far safer through an Abbey gallop,
The stones achase,
Than, moonless, one's own self encounter
In lonesome place.

Psychoanalysis has lately gotten a lot of criticism, often by people who would benefit from it. Talk therapy, under the guidance of a good analyst - and there are lots of them - is invaluable. It costs money, but so does lying flattened on your own bed, able to live a life only dimly lit. Analysis saved my life and made me rich. I had to learn to read the sober and complex book that was me. With the help of the best teacher I will ever know, I learned to appreciate me, to be analytical and sometimes critical of me, to not be scared of me. Learning all that made the world a different place, a place with plenty of room for me to live a full life.

At sixty-six, one year postanalysis, I felt good. Psychoanalysis had cleaned out a lot of gunk; it had insisted on teaching me to think, it had forced me to stop wallowing in the self-pity of narcissism, it had offered me its couch, and at the end of five years I was strong enough to rise and go forth. And try as I might to revert to a lifetime of repression, I could no longer pretend that my life was complete. One of the truths I had had to accept during my years on the couch was that pleasure was not bad, that it was natural for people to desire pleasure, that denying oneself pleasure was not healthy. This was contrary to the teachings of my mother; it was contrary to the mores of the small Ohio town in which I grew up, where the anhedonic life of the Mennonites formed my community. So it was no easy task to realize and accept the fact that I liked men. They are different from me. They are stronger, usually, their voices are deeper, they are taller, most of them. And lots of them are sexy. So I began to look around, and, oh god, failure and rejection waited just around the corner.

It was a dark and stormy night, New Year's Eve 1998. My friend Nathalie at the wheel, we were on our way into San Francisco to a singles party. This was all her fault. "Look," she said, "we can always leave." She had convinced me that anything would be better than one more New Year's Eve home alone. So here we were on our way to the Golden Eagle Bar and Grill. The wind howled, the rain pounded against the windshield. Nature was telling us to go home.

At the Golden Eagle Bar and Grill, some seven hundred people had braved the elements. The place was jammed. Where were the people my age? The range looked to be between thirty and fifty, and where the hell was I supposed to sit? To stand? To fall down? "Come on," said Nathalie, slim and youthful in her Paris black. Nathalie

bought her clothes in France; I bought mine in Berkeley. Nathalie was forty-three; I was sixty-two. This would be a long night.

At the bar, I asked for white wine. It came in a huge glass, practically a bowl. It was full of wine. I had two and the world looked better. I did what I had done before in large gatherings, fueled by alcohol. I began to shop for Nathalie. "Sit there," I told her. "I'll be back shortly." And off I went to introduce myself to young men presentable enough to squire Nathalie through the heterosexual world. I met lots of men that way. And then I saw a man my age. His hair was as gray as mine, his face as lined. Of course, as a man, he looked better; he looked great. And he looked scared. He stood, his back against the wall, as a pack of women - there they were, women my age - moved in closer and closer to their prey. He looked terrified. Who would save him? Not me. I turned away, embarrassed by my sex and ashamed deep within myself of the hunger that I knew was as strong as those women's. "Let's go," I begged Nathalie. We went.

It would be a long time before I could bring myself to try again, to go on hikes with the Sierra Club, to attend alumni association events, to agree to a blind date. The women at these functions outnumbered the men at least three to one. I grew tired of talking to interesting women, of watching women more aggressive than I tree the few men present. Finally, I gave up. Celibacy was better than humiliation.

So I returned to my longtime sexual partner, myself, and found comfort in the knowledge that at least I had tried. It wasn't my fault I was alone. I wasn't even especially lonely. Except for this: every once in a while, as I walked down the street or folded towels or filled my gas tank, this thought, completely unbidden, would leap into my brain lickety-split before I could repress it: What if I never have sex with a man again? It made my stomach churn, it made me dizzy, and it kept me awake sometimes like lightning flashes in a summer night.

IN THE DARKNESS of the Elmwood Theatre, I decided on a happy ending for the lonely woman in Autumn Tale. On my walk home, the cool evening invigorated me. Suddenly, the thought came to me: I could do that, just like in the movie. I could write an ad. I knew at once where I would send it. By the time I got to the corner of my street, I knew what I would write. It went like this:

Before I turn 67 - next March - I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me.

It was the absolute truth.