



ALSO BY LEONARD MICHAELS

Time Out of Mind

A Girl with a Monkey

To Feel These Things

Shuffle

The Men's Club

I Would Have Saved Them If I Could

Going Places

Sylvia

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
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Sylvia

LEONARD MICHAELS

Introduction by Diane Johnson

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

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How unattainable life is, it only reveals
its features in memory
in nonexistence.

—ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI

INTRODUCTION

by *Diane Johnson*

Leonard Michaels was a presence in my life even before I met him, because I'd inherited his office at the Davis campus of the University of California, where I was a new assistant professor. It was 1968. He had begun teaching on the Berkeley campus, leaving all his graduate school notebooks and papers in the drawers of the Davis filing cabinet, and I would read them during my long, boring office hours when there weren't any students—notes about his classes on Romanticism and the eighteenth century; about his special interest in Lord Byron—foreshadowing, perhaps, one of his titles to come, *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (a quote from Byron upon seeing some people about to be hanged).

From the doodles in the margins, from his large and strong handwriting, I had the impression of a Byronic character, brilliant, funny, handsome, and desperate. This first impression proved to be true and also characterized Lenny's work. Unlike many writers, who surprise by being in person nothing like their books, his personality was inextricable from his work, two manifestations of a unique whole.

The events chronicled in *Sylvia* took place from 1960 to 1963. At Davis it was known that Lenny had had a first wife who committed suicide. He had told people only that it had happened. His old friends from graduate school at the University of Michigan added a bit more, but no one, I think, was prepared for the horror and emotional complexity of the account he eventually gives in *Sylvia*, nearly thirty years later. The shock of reading it is a bit like one's childhood reading of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* at the moment when the narrator's husband cries out that she has misunderstood and that he hadn't loved his first wife, Rebecca; no, he had hated her; and the reader understands that he too had misunderstood everything.

Rebecca was great storytelling, and so is *Sylvia*; clearly, in the intervening years, the artist Leonard Michaels had gained perspective enough to bring himself to write about this compelling tragedy, and the short, bitter story—he called it a “memoir in story form”—is still raw and vivid thirty years later. He captures the ambivalence and paralysis of the wretched narrator, but also now sees things the younger self could not have seen; most important of these, the mature artist recognizes, that the doomed figure of Sylvia Bloch (referred to only by her first name) could not have been saved though he would have saved her if he could. Yet his feelings of culpability and puzzlement are still vividly alive.

The narrator and Sylvia are in their twenties; she is an undergraduate and he has dropped out of graduate school. He is obsessed with writing, but has not begun to publish, though by the end of the book a few stories have come out in little magazines. As we know, he will go on to publish the acclaimed stories in *Going Places* and *I Would Have Saved Them if I Could*, and many other works including the controversial *The Men's Club*, a novel (eventually a film) that added to his reputation but in part for the wrong reasons.

In it, a group of men, deploring the poverty of men's emotional lives, decide to meet to talk about

things they normally can't, like love and loneliness. The point is the limitation of or restrictions on men's emotional expression, but the novel was seen by some, instead, as a clubby, antifeminist book about male bonding. I mention this because in *Sylvia*, we can see what Lenny's real attitude toward women was—sometimes baffled, but always supportive and equitable, without a trace of macho reservation; some of his best friends were women, in the phrase, and his collegial helpfulness to his writer friends was endless.

In marrying Sylvia Bloch, it was his bad luck to have to deal with an unusually disturbed woman while lacking the experience even to understand the spectrum of normal behavior. He almost thinks it's normal when she throws his typewriter against the wall, or bites and attacks him. "Another time she pulled all my shirts out of the dresser and threw them on the floor and jumped up and down on them and spit on them . . ." She takes to her bed; she smashes mirrors. He can never understand what she is she wants, nor does she appear to know.

In hindsight, her mental illness is obvious, but the young husband is emotionally inexperienced and must learn only slowly and painfully the truth about his situation. His moments of insight are rare at first, as when a friend tells him about his own difficult marriage:

I was grateful to him, relieved, giddy with pleasure. So others lived this way, too, even a charming, sophisticated guy like Malcolm. We laughed together. I felt happily irresponsible. Countless men and women, I supposed, all over America, were tearing each other to pieces. How great. I was normal.

Slowly, finding that nothing can please or satisfy the impossible Sylvia, in self-defense he begins to withdraw:

I recorded our fights in a secret journal because I was less and less able to remember how they started. There would be an inadvertent insult, then disproportionate anger. I would feel I didn't know why this was happening. I was the object of terrific fury, but what had I done? What had I said? Sometimes I would have the impression that the anger wasn't actually directed at me. I'd merely stepped into the line of fire.

From time to time, he has these crucial illuminations. He doesn't attempt to excuse himself, and he makes no attempt to psychoanalyze Sylvia or to explain her craziness by way of childhood trauma or abuse—or indeed, ever to call her crazy. The mature artist rigorously tries to avoid the temptation of self-vindication and retrospective understanding. (Whether he entirely succeeds in this will be a matter for the reader to decide. If there is blame, plenty is directed at himself.) He presents her as she presented herself, and as she appeared to the narrator's panicked but hopeful nature then, as a young man doing the best he could in a deeply unhappy—we would now say dysfunctional—relationship. Above all, this is a chilling portrait of the desperation and delusions of people trapped in situations they can't see beyond.

The young couple live in a disgusting tenement, with roaches, rats, and neighbors frightened by their compulsive fighting:

[The building] exuded odors and made noises. I smelled food cooking, incense burning, and the ~~gases of hashish and roach poison~~. I heard radios and phonograph players, the old Italian lady who screamed “Bassano” every day, and the boy’s footsteps running in the hall . . .

Lying in the dark land of the cucarachas, her Latin and Greek grammars thrown into chaos, radio playing softly, my Sylvia waited, seething . . .

Despite the constant domestic turmoil, the budding writer tries to steal moments for work. The brilliance of Leonard Michaels’s writing has always included a remarkable descriptive power; here is one of the best descriptions anywhere of the mystical and magical part of the writing process:

Writing a story wasn’t as easy as writing a letter, or telling a story to a friend. It should be, I believed. Chekhov said it was easy. But I could hardly finish a page in a day. I’d find myself getting too involved in the words, the strange relations of their sounds, as if there were a music below the words, like the weird singing of a demiurge out of which came images, virtual things, streets and trees and people. It would become louder and louder, as if the music were the story. I had to get myself out of the way, let it happen, but I couldn’t. I was a bad dancer, hearing the music, dancing the steps, unable to let the music dance me.

This intensity and precision is present in all of Leonard Michaels’s writing. Eventually, it would bear fruit with the distinguished works mentioned above. He would go on to receive a Guggenheim grant, awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pushcart Prize, nominations for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and many other honors. At the time of his early death at the age of seventy, from lymphoma, he had been publishing a new series of stories in *The New Yorker*, and had been happily living in Italy for seven years with his wife, Katharine Ogden Michaels. His death was a great shock. His friends will always mourn him. It’s some consolation that this new edition of his works will bring him new readers, and that from this his reputation can only grow.

Sylvia

I n 1960, after two years of graduate school at Berkeley, I returned to New York without a Ph.D. I had no idea what I'd do, only a desire to write stories. I'd also been to graduate school at the University of Michigan, from 1953 to 1956. All in all, five years of classes in literature. I don't know how else I might have spent those five years, but I didn't want to hear more lectures, study for more exams, or see myself growing old in the library. There was an advertisement in the school paper for someone to take a car from Berkeley to New York, expenses paid. I made a phone call. A few days later, I was driving a Cadillac convertible through mountains and prairies, going back home, an over-specialized man, twenty-seven years old, who smoked cigarettes and could give no better account of himself than to say "I love to read." It doesn't qualify the essential picture, but I had a lot of friends who got along with my parents, and women liked me. Speeding toward the great city in a big, smooth-flowing car that wasn't mine, I felt humored by the world.

My parents' apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, four rooms and a balcony, was too small for another adult, but I wouldn't be staying long. Anyhow, my mother let me feel like a child. It seemed natural. "What are you doing?" she said. "Washing dishes? Please, please, go away. Sit down. Have a cup of coffee."

My father sighed, shook his head, lit a cigar. Saying nothing, he told me that I hadn't done much to make him happy.

From their balcony, fourteen stories high, I looked down into Seward Park. Women sat along the benches, chatting. Their children played in the sandbox. Basketball and stick-ball games, on courts nearby, were in process morning and afternoon. On Sundays, a flea market would be rapidly set up in the corner of the park—cheap, bright, ugly clothing strewn along the benches. In the bushes, you could talk to a man about hot cameras and TV sets. At night, beneath the lush canopy of sycamores and oaks, prostitutes brought customers. Beyond the park, looking north, I saw Delancey Street, the mouth of the Williamsburg Bridge eating and disgorging traffic. Further north were the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. Ever since I was a little kid, I'd thought of them as two very important city people. A few degrees to the right, I saw the complicated steelwork of the 59th Street Bridge. To the west, beyond Chinatown (where Arlene Ng, age ten, my first great love, once lived) and beyond Little Italy (where they shot Joey Gallo in Umberto's Clam House on Mulberry Street), loomed Wall Street's financial buildings and the Manhattan Bridge. Trucks, cars, and trains flashed through the grid of cables, crossing the East River to and from Brooklyn. Freighters progressed slowly, as if in a dream, to and from the ocean. In the sky, squadrons of pigeons made grand loops, and soaring gulls made line drawings. There were also streaking sparrows, and airplanes heading toward India and Brazil. All day and night, from every direction, came the hum of the tremendum.

I talked for hours on the telephone, telling my friends that I was home, and I sat up late at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, reading, and smoking. Most of the city slept. In the quiet, I heard police sirens as far away as Houston Street. Sometimes, I was awakened around noon or later by the smell of my mother's cooking which, like sunlight, became more subtle as the hours passed. Days were

much alike. I didn't know Monday from Wednesday until I saw it in the newspaper. I'd forg immediately. After my parents had gone to bed, I'd step out to buy *The Times*, then stare at the columns of want ads. Among thousands upon thousands of jobs, none said my name. I wanted to do something. I didn't want something to do. Across the darkened living room, down the hall, in the bedroom with my mother, my father lay snoring.

Whatever my regrets about school—lost years, no Ph.D.—I wasn't yet damaged by judgment. I hadn't failed badly at anything—like Francis Gary Powers, for example, whose name I heard every day. His U-2 spy plane had been shot down over Russia, and he'd failed to kill himself before being captured. Instead, he confessed to being a spy. President Eisenhower, who claimed the U-2 was a weather plane, looked like a liar.

There were few heroes. Malcolm X and Fidel Castro, fantastically courageous, were figures of violent disorder. They had both been in jail. But even in sports, where heroes are simple, they could be the focus of violence. A mob swarmed out of the stands after a ballgame, surrounded the great Mickey Mantle, tore off his hat, clawed his face, and punched him in the jaw so hard they had to take X rays to see if the bone was broken.

The odor of fresh newsprint, an oily film on my fingertips, mixed with cigarette smoke and the taste of coffee. Pages turned and crackled like fire, or like breaking bones. I read that 367 were killed in traffic accidents during the Memorial Day weekend, and, since the first automobile, over a million had been killed on our roads, more than in all our wars. And look: Two sisters were found dead in the apartment on Gracie Square, in the bathtub, wearing nightgowns. A razor lay in the hand of one of the sisters. Blood wasn't mentioned. This was old-style journalism, respectfully distanced from personal tragedy. Nothing was said about how the sisters had arranged themselves in the tub. Their life drained away as the crowd vomited out of the stands to worship and mutilate Mickey Mantle. There were really no large meanings, only cries of the phenomena. I read assiduously. I kept in touch with my species.

About a week after I arrived, I phoned Naomi Kane, a good pal from the University of Michigan. We'd spent many hours together drinking coffee in the Student Union, center of romantic social life, gossip, and general sloth. Naomi, who had grown up in Detroit, in a big, comfortable house with elm trees all around, lived now in Greenwich Village, on the sixth floor of an old brick tenement on MacDougal Street.

"Push the street door hard," she said. "There is no bell and the lock doesn't work."

From my parents' apartment I walked to the subway, caught the F train, took a seat, and was stunned into insentient passivity. The train shrieked through the rock bowels of Manhattan to the West Fourth Street station. I walked up three flights of stairs in the dingy, resonant cavern, then out into the light of a hot Sunday afternoon.

Village streets carried slow, turgid crowds of sightseers, especially MacDougal Street, the main drag between Eighth and Bleecker, the famous Eighth Street Bookshop at one end, the famous Salsom Remo bar at the other. I'd walked MacDougal Street innumerable times during my high school days when my girlfriend lived in the Village, and, later, all through college, when my second girlfriend lived in the Village. But I'd been gone two years. I hadn't seen these huge new crowds, and new stores and coffeehouses all along the way. I hadn't sensed the new apocalyptic atmosphere.

Around then, Elvis Presley and Allen Ginsberg were kings of feeling, and the word *love* was like

proclamation with the force of *kill*. The movie *Hiroshima, mon amour*, about a woman in love with death, was a big hit. So was *Black Orpheus*, where death is in loving pursuit of a woman. I noticed graffiti chalked on the wall of the West Fourth Street subway station: FUCK HATE. Another reaction: Mayor Wagner is a lesbian. Wonderfully stupid, I thought, but then the sense came to me. I remembered a newspaper photo showing the city's first meter maids, a hundred strong, in slate blue uniforms. They stood in lines, in a military manner, as Mayor Wagner reviewed them. Ergo: a lesbian. Before 1960, could you have had this thought, made this joke? There had been developments: sensibility, a visionary contagion derived maybe from drugs—marijuana, heroin, uppers, downers—the poetry of common conversation. Weird delirium was in the air, and in the sluggish, sensual bodies trudging down MacDougal Street. I pressed among them until I came to the narrow, sooty-faced tenement where Naomi lived.

I pushed in through the door, into a long hallway painted with greenish enamel, giving the walls a fishy sheen. The hall went straight back through the building to the door of a coffeehouse called The Fat Black Pussy Cat. Urged by the oppressive, sickening green walls, hardly a foot from either shoulder, I walked quickly. Just before the door to The Fat Black Pussy Cat, I came to a stairway with an ironwork banister. I climbed up six flights through the life of the building. A phonograph played blues; an old lady screamed in Italian at a little boy named Bassano; a hall toilet was clattering and flushing, flushing, flushing. At the sixth floor, I turned right and walked down a dark hallway narrower than the one at street level. No overhead lights burned beyond the landing. There was the glow of a window at the end of the hallway. Brittle waves of old linoleum cracked like eggshells beneath my steps. Naomi's door, formerly the entrance to an office, had a clouded glass window. I knocked. She opened. With a great hug, she welcomed me into a small kitchen.

Behind her, I saw a refrigerator and stove. A half-wall partition separated the kitchen from the living room, with a gap that let you pass through. The partition served as a shelf for a telephone, papers, books, and pieces of clothing. A raw brick wall dominated the living room. The floor was wide, rough, splintery planks, as in a warehouse. It was strewn with underwear, shoes, and newspapers. Light, falling through a tall window, came from the west. The window looked over rooftops all the way to the Hudson River, then beyond to the cliffs of New Jersey. Another tall window, in the kitchen, looked east across MacDougal Street at a tenement just like this one. I supposed that Naomi's apartment, in the middle of Greenwich Village, must be considered desirable. Naomi said, "Don't make wisecracks. The rent is forty bucks a month." Then she introduced me to Sylvia Bloch.

She stood barefoot in the kitchen dragging a hairbrush down through her long, black, wet Asian hair. Minutes ago, apparently, she had stepped out of the shower, which was a high metal stall in the kitchen, set on a platform beside the sink. A plastic curtain kept water from splashing onto the kitchen floor. She said hello but didn't look at me. Too much engaged, tipping her head right and left, tossing the heavy black weight of hair like a shining sash. The brush swept down and ripped free until abruptly, she quit brushing, stepped into the living room, dropped onto the couch, leaned back against the brick wall, and went totally limp. Then, from behind long black bangs, her eyes moved, looked at me. The question of what to do with my life was resolved for the next four years.

Sylvia was slender and suntanned. Her hair fell below the middle of her back. Long bangs obscured her eyes, making her look shy or modestly hiding, and also shorter than average. She was five-six. Her eyes, black as her hair, were quick and brilliant. She had a high fine neck, wide shoulders, narrow hips, delicately shaped wrists and ankles. Her figure and the smooth length of her face, with its wide sensuous mouth, reminded me of Egyptian statuary. She wore a weightless cotton Indian dress with an intricate flowery print. It was the same brown hue as her skin.

We sat in the living room until Naomi's boyfriend arrived. He was black, tall, light complexioned

Mixed couples were common, especially with Jewish women, but I was surprised. Conversation was awkward for me, determined not to stare at Sylvia. The summer heat and the messy living room with its dirty floor destroyed concentration, discouraged talk. Things were said, but it was dull obligatory stuff. Mainly we perspired and looked at one another. After a while, Naomi suggested we go for a walk. I was relieved and grateful. We all got up and left the apartment and went down into the street staying loosely together, heading toward Washington Square Park. Naomi came up beside me and whispered, "She's not beautiful, you know."

The remark embarrassed me. My feelings were too obvious. I'd been hypnotized by Sylvia's flashing exotic effect. Naomi sounded vaguely annoyed, as though I'd disappointed her. She wanted to talk, wanted to put me straight, but we weren't alone. I said "Ummm." Incapable of anything better, it was literally meaningless. Naomi then said, as if she were making a concession, "Well, she is very smart."

We were supposed to have dinner together and go to a movie, but Naomi and her boyfriend disappeared, abandoning Sylvia and me in the park. Neither of us was talking. We'd become social liabilities, too stupid with feeling to be fun. We continued together, as if dazed, drifting through the dreamy heat. We'd met for the first time less than an hour ago, yet it seemed we'd been together, in the plenitude of this moment, forever. We walked for blocks without becoming flirtatious, barely glancing at each other, staying close. Eventually, we turned back toward the tenement; with no reason, no words, slowly turning back through the crowded streets, then into the dismal green hall and up several flights of stairs, and into the squalid apartment, like a couple doomed to a sacrificial assignation. It started without beginning. We made love until afternoon became twilight and twilight became black night.

Through the tall open window of the living room we saw the night sky and heard the people proceeding along Mac-Dougal Street, as in a lunatic carnival, screaming, breaking glass, wanting to hit, needing meanness. Someone played a guitar in a nearby apartment. Someone was crying. Lights flew across the walls and ceiling. The city made its statement in the living room. None of it had to do with us. I was lying naked on the couch, just wide enough for two, against the brick wall. Released by sex in a simple confidence, we talked. Sylvia told me she was nineteen, and had recently left the University of Michigan, where she had met Naomi. Some years earlier, Sylvia's father, who worked for the Fuller Brush company, died of a heart attack. The doctors had told him not to smoke and he tried to give up, tearing his cigarettes in half, carrying the halves behind his ears until he couldn't not put one between his lips and light it. Her mother was a housewife who did well playing the stock market as a hobby. Soon after her husband's death, she became ill with cancer. Sylvia visited her in the hospital every day after high school. She said her mother became exquisitely sensitive as she declined, until even the odor of the telephone cord beside her bed nauseated her. After her mother died, Sylvia lived with an aunt and uncle in Queens. She had bad dreams and heard jeering voices, as if the loss of her parents had made her contemptible. To get out of New York, she applied to the University of Michigan and Radcliffe. Her boyfriend was at Harvard. She described him as very kind and nice-looking, a lean, fine-featured blond. She said she was brighter than her boyfriend, but Radcliffe turned her down. They didn't need her; they could easily fill every class with German Jews. Sylvia took the rejection personally. That was the end of her boyfriend. Her present boyfriend worked in a local restaurant. He was a tall, sweet, handsome Italian; very sensitive and loving. He would show up tonight, she said. His swimsuit was in the apartment and he'd come for it after work.

Sylvia was telling me how she'd met Naomi, and then telling me how much she loved Naomi. "But Naomi loves me in theory, not in practice," said Sylvia. "She's very critical, always complaining because she can't find a shoe or her glasses or something in the apartment. She sometimes threatens not to come home if I don't clean up."

"Really?"

I was listening without hearing.

The boyfriend would show up tonight. Sylvia hadn't mentioned a boyfriend before she let me take off her clothes. I felt deceived. I wanted to go. She had a boyfriend. I'd have done it anyway, maybe, but I felt suddenly distanced from Sylvia, as if I'd dropped through the darkness into a well, darkness more dense. I wanted to get out and I imagined my clothes on the floor beside the bed. I could reach down, grab my underwear and pants, dress, go. I didn't move.

"He has a key?"

"No."

"The door is locked?"

"Yes."

"Look, I should go. I'll phone you in the morning."

"Stay."

She got up. Without turning on a light, which would show in the glass window of the door, she moved quickly in the chaos of the apartment, shoving books and papers about, tossing pieces of clothing, and then she found it, with blind feel only, a rag amid rags. His swimsuit. She hung it on the doorknob outside the apartment by the jock, then returned to the bed.

We lay in the balmy darkness, waiting for him. I wanted to get dressed, but I didn't move. After a while we heard a slow trudge coming up the stairway. It was a man. He seemed to heave himself up from step to step, wearily. We heard him on the linoleum in the hallway. From the weight of his steps I figured he knew Sylvia had been unfaithful. He was big. He could break my head. His steps ended at the door, ten feet from where we lay. He didn't knock. He'd seen his swimsuit and was contemplating it, reading its message. He'd worked all day, he'd climbed six flights of steps, and he was rewarded with this disgusting spectacle. I supposed he wasn't stupid, but even a genius might kick in the flimsy door, and make a moral scene. He said, "Sylvia?" His quizzical tone carried no righteousness, only the fatigue and pain of his day. We lay very still, hardly breathing, bodies without mass or contour dissolving, becoming the darkness. From his tone, from his one word, "Sylvia," I read his mind. I understood his anguish. She'd done painful things before. He didn't want to prove to himself that she was in the apartment. He'd go stomping away down the hall. He'd fly down the stairs. Never come back. His voice was there again.

"Sylvia?"

Then he did it, he went away, stomping down the hall, down the stairs. His voice stayed with me. I felt sorry for him, and responsible for his disappointment. Mainly, I was struck by Sylvia's efficiency, how speedily she'd exchanged one man for another. Would it happen to me, too? Of course it would, but she lay beside me now and the cruel uncertainty of love was only an idea, a moody flavor, a pleasing sorrow of the summer night. We turned to each other, renewed by the drama of betrayal, and made love again.

Afterwards, Sylvia sat naked on the window ledge, outlined against the western skyline of the city and the lights of New Jersey. She stared at me and seemed to collect a power of decision, or to wonder what decision had been made. What had we just done? What did it mean? Years later, in fury, she

would say, “The first time we went to bed. The first time . . . ,” resurrecting the memory with bitterness, saying I’d made her do extreme things. She said nothing about her boyfriend, and remembered only the sex, the indulgences. I’d wanted too much. She’d given too much. Years later, she still owed her something. It couldn’t be estimated, or even fully expressed. An infinite debt of feeling.

At dawn, having slept not one minute, we went down into the street. The shining residue of night was strewn along the curb and overflowing trash cans, beginning to stink in the early light and heat. Broken, heaving sidewalks, the crust of a discontented, restless earth, oozed moisture and a steamy glow. There was no traffic; no people. Between dark and day, the city stood in stunned, fetid slumber. It had been deeply used. On a bench, in a small grassy area set back from Sixth Avenue, we sat and stared into each other’s eyes, adoring, yet with a degree of reserve, or belated concern to see who we had been to bed with for the last ten hours.

Sylvia said she was leaving for summer school at Harvard the next day. Instantly, I thought of her former boyfriend. He would be there. I felt jealous. I had no claim on Sylvia’s fidelity and perhaps didn’t want it, but I felt jealous. She’d said she liked his blond looks, his gentle and Gentile old-money manners. I supposed, Sylvia being so dark, she found the blond irresistible. It wasn’t obvious between them. He was in Cambridge; she wasn’t—and that was all. They’d soon be together. She would see him. Old sentiments would revive. I’d lose her. Then she asked if I would come up to Cambridge and live with her. She held her face high, stiff with anticipation, as if to receive a blow.

I see her. Maybe I know what I’m looking at.

I was taken by highlights along her cheekbones and the luscious expectancy in her lower lip. I liked the Asian cast of her face, its smoothness, length, and tilt of its bones. Her straight black hair against a look of cool dark blood, seemed to bear on the question of me in Cambridge. I sensed that she expected to hear me say no, expected to be hurt. But the way she held herself was imperial. She had told me the story of her life, eliminated a boyfriend, and asked me to live with her. I don’t remember saying yes or no.

There was much to think about. None of it had to do with how Sylvia’s cheekbones caught the light, or the luscious weight of her lower lip, or the cool focus of her eyes. But I kept seeing her face. I didn’t think. I also saw the swimsuit turned inside out, hanging by the jock, like the carcass of a chicken disemboweled.

A week later I took the train to Boston. Sylvia moved out of her dormitory. We found a room near the university in a big house with shadowy passages.

I took the train. We found a room . . .

The truth is I didn’t know what I was doing exactly, or why I was in Cambridge. Sylvia wanted me to be there. I had no immediate practical reason to be elsewhere—no job, nothing to do. My desire to write stories was nothing to do. It wouldn’t pay. It wasn’t work. When I looked at Sylvia’s face, I liked what I saw, but I still wasn’t sure why I was in Cambridge. I was sure of little. I missed her during the week she was gone from New York, but my feelings were only as strong as they were uncertain. Being with her in Cambridge, I felt no urgency to be anywhere else. It would be a brilliant blooming, fragrant summer. I had a girlfriend. No obligations. I had only to be.

The room was in a house full of heavy, stolid things with white sheets thrown over them. Blinds were drawn, doors shut, defending against light and air. A man in his sixties lived in the house, creeping amid masses and shadows. He used almost nothing, apparently, and kept things undisturbed, hidden as if waiting for the true owner of the house to return and pull away the sheets, use the furniture, live here. It came to me that someone close to him had died, and the man's life had stopped, too, or he feared death extremely, and so brought about this eerily reduced condition, using less and less, changing nothing, moving only in the shadows. He wasn't guilty of being in this world. Since he didn't exist, he'd never die.

The room was on the second floor. It had gray floral wallpaper, a mahogany dresser, two lavish upholstered chairs—all wood surfaces veneered in hard slick brown—and a giant bed that stood high off the floor. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Sylvia's feet dangled in the air. She looked like a child. Pulling back the bedcovers demanded a strong grip and snap. Sheets were tucked in tight, making a hard flat field, perfect for a corpse. The mattress, unusually thick, like a fat luxurious heart, was sealed, lashed down by bedcovers and sheets. Basically, an excellent bed, but resistant to the pressure of a living human shape. It was an excellent, principled bed with a hatred of comfort. We used it most of the night, high above the floor, to make love.

When we came down in the morning, the man sat waiting in a straight-backed chair in the parlor. He was bald, gaunt, lean as a plank. His long platter face stared at the floor between his knees, as if into a pool of trouble.

"You two will have to go," he said. The command was drawn from a strange personal hell of New England propriety and constipation. In the middle of the night, maybe, he heard us. It occurred to him that Sylvia and I were touching, doing evils to each other's body, though we labored to be quiet, and fucked with Tantric subtlety, measuring pleasure slow and slow, out of respect for his ethical domain. He'd begun thinking things, driving himself to this moral convulsion. We didn't ask why we had to go. It was clear and final. We had to do it—go. We went back up to our room, packed, made no fuss, and were soon adrift in the busy, hot, bright streets around Harvard Square, carrying our bags.

Sylvia refused to return to her dormitory, though we had no place to go if we stayed together. We couldn't reason with her, couldn't argue. As far as she was concerned, she had no dormitory room, no place but here in the street with me.

The glorious summer day made things more difficult. Storefronts and windshields flashed threats. Everyone walked with energetic purpose. They belonged in Cambridge and were correct. We'd been thrown into the street. For this to have happened, one must have done something wrong. We were embarrassed and confused, squinting in the sunlight, carrying bags, the weight of blighted romance. We expected to spend the night in a sleazy hotel or in a park, but then, after phoning friends, we heard about a house where three undergraduates lived, in a working-class neighborhood, a long walk from the university. Maybe they'd rent us a room. We didn't phone. We went there, just showed up with our bags.

It was an ugly falling-down sloppy happy house. One of the men began talking to Sylvia, the moment he saw her, in baby talk. She said, "Hello." He said, "Hewo," with a goofy grin. She thought he was hilarious, and she loved being treated like a little girl in a house full of men. They all treated her the same way, affectionately teasing. She inspired it: shy, hiding behind long bangs, dark, sensuous. There was one empty room in the house. Nobody said we couldn't have it.

In the mornings Sylvia went to class and I tried to begin writing stories. Our room, just off the kitchen, was noisy with refrigerator traffic and running water. Sometimes people stood outside the door talking. I didn't mind. After our night in the mausoleum, I liked noises. The soft suck and thud of a refrigerator door was good. The sound of talking was good.

Sylvia was gone during the day, in class or studying in a library on campus. At night there were some irascible moments, heavy sighs, angry whispers, but the room was narrow, hot, airless. There were mosquitoes. Nothing personal. Through most of the slow, lovely summer, we were happy. Sylvia was taking a class in art history. We went to museums, and worked together on her papers. I didn't write any stories that I didn't tear up and throw away. The writing was no good, but I liked being with Sylvia and this life in Cambridge.

One afternoon, sitting on the front steps, waiting for Sylvia to return from class, I spotted her far down the street, walking slowly. When she saw me looking at her, she walked more slowly. Her right sandal was flapping. The sole had torn loose. At last she came up to me and showed me how a nail had poked up through the sole. She had walked home on the nail, sole flapping, her foot sloshing in blood. What else could she do? She smiled wanly, suffering, but good-spirited.

I said she could have had the sandal fixed or walked barefoot or called for a taxi. There was something impatient in my voice. She seemed shocked. Her smile went from wan to screwed up, perturbed, injured. I couldn't call back the impatience in my voice, couldn't undo its effect. For days thereafter, Sylvia walked about Cambridge pressing the ball of her foot onto the nail, bleeding. She refused to wear other shoes. I pleaded, I argued with her. Finally, she let me take the sandal to be repaired. I was grateful. She was not grateful. I was not forgiven.

"Go, I don't love you. I hate you. I don't hate, I despise you. If you love me, you'll go. I think we can be great friends and I'm sorry we never became friends."

"Can I get you something?"

"A menstrual pill. They're in my purse."

I found the little bottle and brought her a pill.

"Go now."

I lay down beside her. We slept in our clothes.

JOURNAL, DECEMBER 1968

At the end of the summer we returned to New York. Naomi moved out of the MacDougal Street apartment. Sylvia and I moved in. By then, fighting every day, we'd become ferociously intimate.

Like a kid having a tantrum, she would get caught up in the sound of her own screaming. Screaming because she was screaming, screaming, screaming, as if building a little chamber of rage for herself at the center. It was all hers. She was boss. I wasn't allowed inside. Her eyes and teeth were bright blacks and whites, everything exaggerated and contorted, like the maelstrom within. There was nothing erotic in this picture, and yet we sometimes went from fighting to sex. No passport was required. There wasn't even a border. Time was fractured, there was no cause and effect, and one thing didn't even lead toward another. As in a metaphor, one thing was another. Raging, hating, I wanted to fuck, and she did, too.

Fights often began without warning. I'd be saying something ordinary and neutral, but Sylvia would suddenly rigid, staring at me. She knocked the telephone off the shelf. I stopped talking, startled, jerked to attention. She knocked the cup and saucer that had been sitting beside the telephone to the

floor. They smashed to pieces. Now she was screaming, denouncing me, and I was screaming back at her. ~~She went for the radio, to fling it against the wall, and I lunged at her, trying to stop her.~~ She twisted loose and came at me. Then it was erotic; anyhow, sexual. Afterwards, usually, she slept. Neither of us mentioned what had happened. From yelling to fucking. From unreal to real was how I felt.

Ordinary or violent, the sex was frequent, exhausting more than satisfying. Sylvia said she'd never had an orgasm. As if I were the one who stood between her and that ultimate pleasure, she announced "I will not live my whole life without an orgasm." She said she'd had several lovers better than I was. She wanted to talk about them, I think, make me suffer details.

I began trying to write again. Sylvia began taking classes at NYU, a few blocks away across Washington Square Park, to complete her undergraduate work. She asked me what she ought to declare as her major. I said if I were doing it over, I'd major in classics. I should have said nothing. She registered for Latin and Greek, ancient history, and a class in eighteenth-century English literature. She had to learn the complex grammars of two languages, read long poems and fat novels and write papers, all while living in squalor and fighting with me every day. It seemed to me a maniacal program. I expected confusion and disaster, but she was abnormally bright and did well enough.

There was no desk in the apartment, but Sylvia didn't need such conveniences, didn't even seem to notice their absence. I don't think she ever complained about anything in the miserable apartment, not even about the roaches, only about me. She studied sitting on the edge of the bed in a mess of papers. Her expression would go flat, her body limp. She would be utterly still except for her eyes. She didn't scratch, didn't stretch. She was doing the job, getting it over with. I'd sit with her sometimes for hours, reading a novel or a magazine. We ate together in bed, usually noodles, frozen vegetables, and orange juice, or else we went out for pizza or Chinese food. Neither of us cooked. My mother often gave us food. I'd carry it back to MacDougal Street after our visits downtown, two or three times a month.

One night, after dinner at my parents' apartment, my mother slipped away to the bedroom with Sylvia's coat and sewed up a tear in the sleeve. As we were about to leave, she surprised Sylvia with the mended coat. Sylvia seemed grateful and affectionate. In the street, however, she became hysterical with indignation, saying she'd been humiliated. I tried to make her understand that my mother was being sweet, doing something good for Sylvia. My mother intended kindness, not a comment on Sylvia's coat. I didn't say that Sylvia made a pitiable, waiflike impression in the torn coat. I said my mother wanted Sylvia to like her. Saying such things, I embarrassed myself. Then she became angry. What difference did motives make? Sylvia wanted to be pitied; my mother wanted to be liked. Who could care? What mattered was that my mother's gesture had been affectionate. To defend her against Sylvia brought up questions of loyalty. Maybe that was the point. But, to my mind, my mother needed no defense. I was wrong to defend her. I shut up. Sylvia could interpret things however she liked. I couldn't instruct her in feeling, and I refused to sink into a poisonous and boring morass of motives.

Thereafter, I visited my parents alone.

Sometimes, as if I were visiting out of bitter determination rather than a simple desire to be with them, I sat at the table and ate like a solemn pig. You like to feed me? Good, that's why I'm here, I'd

eating. In my own eyes, I seemed irrational, ill-tempered, spiteful, and unhappily confused about everything in my life. My mother had done too much for me, beginning when I was a little kid who never went two weeks without an ear infection or lung disease. She carried me through the streets to the doctor because I couldn't walk, always too sick, too weak. She sat beside my bed all night lest I were kidnapped by death. It's hard to forgive self-sacrifice. As for Sylvia's sensitivity to imagined insult, that was pathological, not on the side of life. My mother's cooking was life.

"Who needs restaurants?" said my father, slurping his soup. "You can't find better food no place."

My mother sewed up the tear in the sleeve of Sylvia's coat. She didn't ask first. Big deal. She'd never do that again. I told her it was a mistake. I knew she would be shocked and her feelings would be hurt, but I had to tell her. I wanted to tell her. She didn't in the least understand. I tried to explain how a person might be annoyed if you make a fuss over her torn clothing. It is important not to notice such things. Her personal business, not yours. The more I talked, the more exasperated I felt. I raised my voice, as if I were criticizing her for doing what she believed was nice. What did I believe? I also believed it was nice. I was criticizing her for doing what I believed was nice.

Barely five feet tall and always cooking, cleaning, shopping, sewing. To criticize "the Mommy"—my father's expression—was, even if correct, incorrect in the eyes of God. It was close to evil. In the background with his cigar, watching television, brooding, he made gloomy, silent judgments. ("That's how you talk to the Mommy? What's the matter with you? Don't you know better?")

I rode the F train to West Fourth Street, then hurried through the garish carnival of MacDougal Street, where tourists came nightly from all over the city to sit in neighborhood coffee shops like Cafe Bizarre, Cafe Wha?, Take Three, Cock and Bull, and Cafe Figaro, where they could listen to somebody strum a guitar and sing through his sinuses like a hillbilly. I entered our building and, without getting winded, though I smoked plenty, I ran up six flights of stairs. Lying in the dark land of the *cucarachas*, her Latin and Greek grammars flung into chaos, radio playing softly, my Sylvia waited seething.

"I brought fried chicken, pickles, potato latkes, and mandel bread. Turn on the light. Sit up. My mother also knit a sweater for you." I always brought food back to MacDougal Street. Sylvia would eat.

Once, when I was at my parents' apartment, Sylvia phoned to say that she'd slit her wrists. She hadn't wanted me to go alone to visit my parents for a few hours, and she had refused to come with me.

I picked up the phone and said, "Hello, Sylvia?"

A tiny voice said, "I just slit my wrists."

I left my parents' apartment, but not before my mother had packed a bag with a dozen bagels, two jars of gefilte fish, and a salad she made of onions and radishes.

I didn't want to go rushing back to MacDougal Street, intimidated by Sylvia's threats of self-destruction or her announcement of the *fait accompli*. I didn't believe she had slit her wrists. But I couldn't be certain. (She had a small, fine, nearly imperceptible scar on one wrist, and claimed she had once tried to kill herself.) In my frustration—refusing to be intimidated, yet feeling terrified—I became angry at my mother for detaining me as she packed food. She suspected things were bad

MacDougal Street, but if I left without the food she'd know they were very bad. I was ashamed and didn't want her to know how Sylvia and I lived, but I didn't want Sylvia to bleed to death. I waited for the food, then ran to the subway, then ran from the subway to MacDougal Street, through the crowd up the six flights of stairs to our apartment, and I burst in hot and wild, the bag of food in my arm shouting, "I don't give a damn if you slashed your neck."

She had sliced her wrists very superficially. Having done it before, she was good at it. There was almost no bleeding. There'd be no scars. She began picking at the food. She liked gefilte fish. I was pleased to see her eat. There was hope if Sylvia ate gefilte fish, homemade, delicious, nothing to fight about. She ate as if she were doing me a favor I didn't deserve.

Sylvia never read a newspaper. I told her what was happening. She didn't care one bit. I told her anyway. She listened suspiciously, as if I had some dubious motive for obliging her to hear what I read in the newspaper. Mainly it was innocent chatter, but I admit I had a vague notion that mental health is more or less proportional to the attention you give to matters outside your head. It couldn't be bad for her to hear about politics, scientific developments, sports, art, fashion, crime, various disasters, etc. The worst news—if it's in a newspaper—probably didn't happen to you, and it offers a reassuringly normal connection to daily life. The world goes on. Earthquakes, fires, airplane crashes, murders—whatever else they may be—are news, part of the flow of days, weeks, eras.

I told Sylvia that Russian scientists said the core of the earth is pure iron, and the temperature 1,800 miles down, is about 12,000 degrees centigrade, much hotter than had been supposed. I told her that Nina Simone is at the Village Gate, and Thelonius Monk is at the Jazz Gallery. I told her that an eighteen-year-old light heavyweight boxer, Cassius Clay, won a gold medal at the Rome Olympics. Rafer Johnson won the gold in the decathlon.

I read her the report about a New York magistrate, an early feminist, who ordered the names of two men put into the record in a vice case. He said, "You have the girls' names here. Put the men's names in, too." So the names Whitey Doe and Larry Doe were changed to Whitford May and John Sleeper. Coincidentally, it was reported the same day that The International Society for the Welfare of Cripples changed its name to The International Society for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled.

I told Sylvia that Americans were dying in Vietnam. Every other week, in 1961, one of our military advisers was kidnapped, or an American contractor was shot. We were building airfields there and giving other forms of humanitarian aid to South Vietnam. Our efforts were impeded by the Vietnam Cong. Sylvia listened, and occasionally responded. I told her that a British physicist said Einstein's idea of matter as a form of energy, $E = MC^2$, was too simple. New atom-smashing technology had revealed that matter consisted of two major categories, leptons and baryons, which is to say light and heavy. Sylvia said, "He says Einstein is too simple?"

I told her that below the ice of Antarctica, huge trees had become coal, which meant the theory of continental drift was true; that Norell, an American designer, had introduced culottes—pants that looked like a skirt—for city street wear; and that American Orientalists had left for Egypt to save the temple of Ramses II from the waters of the Aswan High Dam, built by Russian engineers.

I wanted to see Marcel Marceau and his mime company at City Center, and *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Province-town Playhouse, just down the street at 133 MacDougal. Sylvia enjoyed both performances. I had to make the suggestion, buy tickets, and, when it was time to leave for the theater, say, "Come on, come on, let's go. We'll be late."

She didn't like to commit herself, far in advance, to leaving the apartment at a particular moment. ~~Who knows how you'll feel when the moment comes? Besides, it could be more pleasing to read reviews than actually go to a movie or a play.~~

I told Sylvia that Dr. Menges, professor of Central Asian languages at Columbia University, had been stopped by a gang of kids while taking his evening walk on Morning-side Drive and knocked down the pavement with a heavy board. He rose, flailed at them with his cane. They ran away. He spoke to a reporter and was quoted at length. "I have traveled alone through the interior of the Caucasus . . . among primitive tribes. I have gone among bandits. But in a so-called civilized city," he said, "near a large university, I am attacked by jungle beasts." It was clear he meant "Negroes." In the early sixties the word appeared with increasing frequency in the newspapers.

Awakened affectionately by Sylvia. She looked at my cigarettes beside the bed and said, "You shouldn't smoke so much. For my sake." I said, "I smoke because we fight." She began biting my arm. I yelled. She leaped out of bed and announced, "That's the beginning and the ending of a day." I lay there a long time. Finally, I dragged myself out of bed and turned on fire for coffee, got bread, honey and an orange. Sylvia went back to bed and said, "You really take good care of yourself." I ate a slice of bread and put everything else back. Then I sat on the bed beside her. I was about to make amends. She sat up, slapped my face, and said, "Have a cigarette." Later, still in bed, me sitting beside her, Sylvia brought up the New Year's Eve party we'd gone to in the Brooklyn tenement. She said that when Willy Stark kissed her, she had turned her face at the last moment so that he kissed her on the cheek, not the lips. She said she should have necked with him so I could have seen it and had my evening ruined. I said, "I would have left and never seen you again." She said, "That's impossible. You love me. Besides, your mother would make you return to me."

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Almost all of our friends were Jewish, black, homosexual, more or less drug-addicted, very intelligent, very nervous, or a combination of two or three of these things. Willy Stark was from Mississippi, very black, very handsome. We met at the University of Michigan. When he moved to New York, we'd go out to jazz clubs and sit for hours, listening to the music, hardly talking. He never said very much. We heard Charlie Mingus at the Five Spot. Another time, we heard Miles Davis at Basin Street. It was a rainy night in the middle of the week, and there were few people in the audience. After one of Davis's solos, performed with his back to the audience, Willy whispered, "He's a poet." Though I couldn't say exactly what Willy had in mind, I was moved by his comment. The university hadn't made his feelings thin and literary. He'd been raised on a farm. He knew about guns, wild weather, snakes, jazz, and much else that was real. Compared to Willy, I considered myself effete. He hardly talked; I talked too much and too easily. He made me wonder if I'd believe the things I said, let alone think them in the first place, if I didn't get caught up in the momentum of talk. Sylvia never objected to me spending time with Willy. He was among the few exceptions to her rage.

Willy invited us to a New Year's Eve party in Brooklyn. At midnight, everyone kissing, Willy kissed Sylvia. Later, back on MacDougal Street, as we fell asleep, Sylvia said he had wanted more than a kiss. "He said you wouldn't mind. He said you were hip."

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