



thought that some shift must have taken place, during that visit, which she did not remember. Some shift concerning where home was. It had stopped being at Whale Bay with Eric and had slipped back to where it had been before, all her life before.

Because it's what happens at home

that you try to protect, as best you can, for as long as you can.

And yet she had not protected Sara. When Sara had said, "Soon I'll see Juliet," Juliet had found no reply. Could she not have managed something? Why should it have been so difficult? Just to

say, "Yes." To Sara it would have meant so much—to herself, surely, so little. But she had turned away. She had carried the tray to the kitchen, and there she had washed and dried the cups and also the glass that had held grape soda. She had put everything away. ♦

## SILENCE

---

On the short ferry ride from Buckley Bay to Denman Island, Juliet gets out of her car and stands at the front of the boat, in the late-spring breeze. A woman standing there recognizes her, and they begin to talk. It is not unusual for people to take a second look at Juliet and wonder where they've seen her before. She appears regularly on the provin-

cial television channel, interviewing people who lead notable lives, and deftly directing panel discussions, for a program called "Issues of the Day." Her hair is cut short now, as short as possible, and has taken on a very dark auburn color, which matches the frames of her glasses. She often wears black pants, as she does today, and an ivory silk shirt, and sometimes a

black jacket. She is what her mother would have called a striking woman.

"Forgive me. People must always be bothering you," the woman says. She is about Juliet's age. Long black hair streaked with gray, no makeup, denim skirt. She lives on Denman, so Juliet asks her what she knows about the Spiritual Balance Centre.



"Because my daughter is there," Juliet says. "She's been on a retreat there, or a course—I don't know what they call it. For six months."

"There are a couple of places like that," the woman says. "They sort of come and go. I don't mean there's anything suspect about them. Just that they're generally off in the woods, you know, and don't have much to do with the community. Well, what would be the point of a retreat if they did?"

She says that Juliet must be looking forward to seeing her daughter again and Juliet says, yes, very much.

"I'm spoiled," she says. "She's twenty years old, my daughter—she'll be twenty-one this month, actually—and we haven't been apart much."

The woman says that she has a son who is twenty and fifteen- and eighteen-year-old daughters, and there are days when she'd pay them all to go on a retreat.

Juliet laughs. "Well, I've only got the one. Of course, I can't guarantee that I won't be all for shipping her back, given a few weeks."

She finds this kind of fond but exasperated mother talk easy to slip into (Juliet is an expert at reassuring responses), but the truth is that Penelope has scarcely ever given her cause for complaint, and if she wanted to be totally honest at this point she would say that one day without some contact with her daughter is hard to bear, let alone six months. Penelope spent a summer working as a hotel chambermaid at Banff, and she has gone on bus trips to Mexico. A hitchhiking trip to Newfoundland. But, in order to save money, she has always lived with Juliet, and there has never before been a six-month break.

*She gives me delight, Juliet could have said. Not that she is one of those song-and-dance purveyors of sunshine and cheer and looking-on-the-bright-side. But she has grace and compassion and she is as wise as if she'd been on this earth for eighty years. Her nature is reflective—not all over the map, like mine. Somewhat reticent, like her father's. She is also angelically pretty—blond like my mother but not so frail. Strong and noble. Molded, I should say, like a caryatid. And, contrary to popular notions, I am not even faintly jealous. All this time without her—and no word from her, because Spiritual Balance does not allow letters or phone calls—all this*

*time I've been in a sort of desert, and when her message came I was like an old patch of cracked earth getting a full drink of rain.*

"Hope to see you Sunday afternoon. It's time," Penelope's card had said.

*Time to come home*, was what Juliet hoped this meant. But of course she would leave that up to Penelope.

Penelope had drawn a rudimentary map, and Juliet shortly found herself parked in front of an old church—that is, a church building that was seventy-five or eighty years old, covered with stucco, not as old or nearly as impressive as churches often were in the part of Canada where Juliet had grown up. Behind it was a more recent building, with a slanting roof and windows all across its front, as well as a simple outdoor stage and some benches and what looked like a volleyball court, with a sagging net. Everything was shabby, and the once cleared patch of land was being reclaimed by juniper and poplars.

A couple of people—she couldn't tell whether they were men or women—were doing some carpentry work on the stage, and others sat on the benches in separate small groups. All wore ordinary clothes, not yellow robes or anything of that sort. For a few minutes, no notice was taken of Juliet's car. Then one of the people on the benches rose and walked unhurriedly toward her. A short middle-aged man wearing glasses.

Juliet greeted him and asked for Penelope. He did not speak—perhaps there was a rule of silence—but nodded and turned away and went into the church. From which there shortly appeared not Penelope but a heavy, slow-moving woman with white hair, wearing jeans and a baggy sweater.

"What an honor to meet you," she said. "Do come inside. I've asked Donny to make us some tea."

She had a broad fresh face, a smile that was both roguish and tender, and what Juliet supposed one would call twinkling eyes. "My name is Joan," she said. Juliet had been expecting an assumed name like Serenity, or something with an Eastern flavor, nothing so plain and familiar as Joan.

"I've got the right place, have I? I'm a stranger on Denman," she said in a way that she hoped was disarming. "You know I've come to see Penelope?"

"Of course. Penelope." Joan prolonged the name, with a certain tone of celebration.

The inside of the church was darkened, with purple cloth hung over the high windows. The pews and other church furnishings had been removed, and plain white curtains had been strung up to form private cubicles, as in a hospital ward. The cubicle into which Juliet was directed had, however, no bed, just a small table and a couple of plastic chairs and some open shelves piled untidily with loose papers.

"I'm afraid we're still in the process of getting things fixed up in here," Joan said. "Juliet. May I call you Juliet?"

"Yes, of course."

"I'm not used to talking to a celebrity." Joan held her hands together in a prayer pose beneath her chin. "I don't know whether to be informal or not."

"I'm not much of a celebrity."

"Oh, you are. Now, don't say that. And I'll just get it off my chest right away, how I admire you for the work you do. It's a beam in the darkness. The only television worth watching."

"Thank you," Juliet said. "I had a note from Penelope."

"I know. But I'm sorry to have to tell you, Juliet, I'm very sorry and I don't want you to be too disappointed—Penelope is not here."

The woman says those words—*Penelope is not here*—as lightly as possible, as if Penelope's absence could be turned into a matter for amused contemplation, even for their mutual delight.

Juliet has to take a deep breath. For a moment she cannot speak. Dread pours through her. Foreknowledge. Then she pulls herself back to reasonable consideration of this fact. She fishes around in her bag.

"She said she hoped—"

"I know. I know," Joan says. "She did intend to be here, but the fact was she could not—"

"Where is she? Where did she go?"

"I cannot tell you that."

"You mean you can't or you won't?"

"I can't. I don't know. But I can tell you one thing that may put your mind at rest. Wherever she has gone, whatever she has decided, it is the right thing for her. It is the *right* thing for her spirituality and her growth."

Juliet decides to let this pass. She gags



## TRAIN IN VAIN

My father's agoraphobia made leaving the house a spooky and ritualistic process, ruled by mysterious tempers, but with enough drugs it sometimes happened, and we were off, the whole family, on vacation! The very drugs that loosened his nerves and made the big bad outside world navigable also made him a sloppy driver, weaving lackadaisically around the highway, and wherever we were going—California, Vancouver—would seem very far away. Invariably, our crappy car would catch fire on steep grades (my sister's job was to douse the transmission hump with water when she saw the carpet fibres smoldering), plus with the seven of us kids all piled on top of one another somebody was always carsick and ralping in the back seat. We kept an old dented saucepan called the "spit-up" pan back there, so my dad wouldn't have to pull over every time a child needed to vomit. Subsequently, I haven't been much of a vacationer. As a young man, I tried Europe, but the woman I was meeting, on our second day in Paris, said she needed time alone, and then went off to Barcelona with somebody else. For three days I walked to the Hôtel de Ville for reasons too stupid to admit and read an omnibus edition of Dashiell Hammett. I'd never been lied to like that, and I took my pain to mean I lacked Continental sophistication, and Paris sort of died inside me.

But! I loved hopping freight trains. It was cheap, dirty, loud, picturesque, illegal, athletic, dangerous, and, best of all, it didn't seem like a vacation. In fact, as far as I could tell, there was nothing in riding trains that even remotely resembled pleasure. It was hard work. You walked for miles on a crippling ballast of gravel, looking for an open boxcar, and slept on a cushion of cardboard, your feet forward, in the direction of travel, so that you wouldn't

break your neck in a derailment. You drank water from old Clorox bottles. You pissed out the door. The schedule was indifferent to your needs and the destinations were pointless. There might have been some romance to it—there might have been some road signs and red neon, some dead ends and diners, some hash browns—but really I was just skylarking. All the skills necessary for hopping trains were the sort you master by the time you get out of grade school—jungle-gym stuff, monkey bars and rings and ladders. If you could climb and run, if you liked jumping and bouncing and falling, then you could ride freight trains.

The minute you entered a yard, the bigness of the trains translated right into your bones. It sounds corny, but you got proxy thrills of power. Boxcars as wide as whales, locomotives roaming up and down the yard with the single white eye of a cyclops, grain hoppers overflowing with corn and wheat, gondolas piled with scrap metal and flatbeds loaded with raw logs or finished lumber, triple-deckers packed with import cars, empty deadheads and old rusting crummies shunted onto sidings. The dreamy size of the trains made your sense of trespass keen, and the noise of the yard was enough to knock you over. And yet for all the vagrant time I spent I never had any real hassles. The guys who work the trains are among that peculiar class of impassioned men in America, men who love their work and, loving it, want to share, as though they were holding a fable in trust and some part of America was stored inside their job. I'd wave collegially to the brakemen high up in the cupola of a caboose and talk easily to the men making up trains, who in turn would pull a manifest from their pockets and point out a decent ride, an empty box or gon on the next train out.

Boxcars were the best rides, offering a room with a view and some protection from the rain or sun or snow. I'd jam a stick or a discarded brake shoe in the door so it wouldn't rattle shut and make a sepulchre of the box while I slept. Most nights, though, I stayed up late, sleepless, because of all the bouncing. I liked the clangor of



crossing guards, candy-striped and flashing with warning lights, an idled car or two waiting in the dim red glow. After a few days, I would be filthy, carrying a funeral around on my face. The dirt wasn't unpleasant—it marked my travels like a stamp in a passport. I would pack along a pair of gloves, which kept my hands somewhat clean as I climbed over couplings, but in the main I liked being dirty and feeling, on some level, strange and unwelcome. It sharpened my longing and called upon stores of faith I didn't know I possessed. The dirt was like an account, a measure of wealth, and so, as the days and miles went by, I felt as though I were becoming someone.

—Charles D'Ambrosio



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on the word "spirituality," which seems to encompass—as she often says—everything from prayer wheels to High Mass. She had never expected that Penelope, with her intelligence, would get mixed up in anything like this.

"I just thought I should know," she says. "In case she wanted me to send on any of her things."

"Her possessions?" Joan seems unable to suppress a smile, though she modifies it at once with an expression of tenderness. "Penelope is not very concerned right now about her *possessions*."

Sometimes Juliet realizes, in the middle of an interview, that the person across from her has reserves of hostility that were not apparent before the cameras started rolling. A person whom Juliet has underestimated, whom she has thought rather stupid, may turn out to have strength of this sort. Playful but deadly hostility. Her rule then is never to show that she is taken aback, never to display any hint of hostility in return.

"What I mean by growth is our inward growth, of course," Joan says.

"I understand," Juliet says, looking her in the eye.

"Penelope has had such a wonderful opportunity in her life to meet interesting people—goodness, she hasn't needed to meet interesting people, she's grown *up* with an interesting person, you're her *mother*—but, you know, sometimes there's a dimension that is missing. Grownup children feel that they've missed *out* on something—"

"Oh, yes," Juliet says. "I know that

grownup children can have all sorts of complaints."

Joan has decided to come down hard.

"The spiritual dimension—I have to say this—was it not altogether lacking in Penelope's life? I take it she did not grow up in a faith-based home."

"Religion was not a banned subject. We could talk about it."

"But perhaps it was the *way* you talked about it. Your intellectual way. If you know what I mean. You are so clever," she adds kindly.

"So you say." Juliet is aware that any control she had over the interview, and over herself, is faltering, and may be lost.

"Not so *I* say, Juliet. So *Penelope* says. Penelope is a dear fine girl, but she came to us here in great hunger. Hunger for the things that were not available to her in her home. There you were, with your wonderful, busy, successful life. But, Juliet, do you not know that your daughter has known loneliness? That she has known unhappiness?"

"Don't most people feel that, at one time or another? Loneliness and unhappiness?"

"It's not for me to say. Oh, Juliet. You are a woman of marvellous insights. I've often watched you on television and I've thought, How does she get right to the heart of things like that, and all the time stay so nice and polite to people? I never thought I'd be sitting talking to you face to face. And, what's more, that I'd be in a position to *help* you—"

"I think that maybe you're mistaken about that."



"You feel hurt. It's natural that you should feel hurt."

"It's also my own business."

"Ah, well. Perhaps she'll get in touch with you. After all."

Penelope did get in touch with Juliet, a couple of weeks later. A birthday card arrived on her—Penelope's—birthday, the nineteenth of June. Her twenty-first birthday. It was the sort of card you send to an acquaintance whose taste you cannot guess. Not crude or jokey or truly witty. Just a drawing of a small bouquet of pansies tied by a thin purple ribbon whose tail spelled out the words "Happy Birthday."

There was no inscription and no signature. At first, Juliet thought that someone had sent this card to Penelope, and forgotten to sign it, and that she, Juliet, had opened it by mistake. Someone who had Penelope's name and birth date on file. Her dentist, maybe, or her driving teacher. But when she checked the writing on the envelope she saw that there had been no mistake: there was her own name, indeed, in Penelope's handwriting.

Postmarks gave you no clue anymore. They all said "Canada Post."

Juliet went to see Christa, who was in Vancouver now, too, in an assisted-living facility in Kitsilano. She had multiple sclerosis. Her room was on the ground floor, with a small private patio, and Juliet sat with her there, looking out at a sunny bit of lawn and the wisteria in bloom along a fence that concealed the garbage bins.

She told Christa the whole story of the trip to Denman Island. She had told nobody else, and had hoped not to have to tell anybody. Every day, on her way home from work, she had wondered if perhaps Penelope would be waiting for her in the apartment. Or at least if there would be a letter, and then there had been—that unkind card—and she had torn it open with her hands shaking.

"It means something," Christa said. "It lets you know that she's O.K. Something will follow. It will. Be patient."

Juliet talked bitterly for a while about Mother Shipton. That was what she had finally decided to call her, having toyed, and become dissatisfied, with Pope Joan. What bloody chicanery, she said. What creepiness, nastiness, behind her second-

rate, sweetly religious façade. It was impossible to imagine Penelope's having been taken in by her.

Christa suggested that perhaps Penelope had visited the place because she had considered writing something about it. Some sort of investigative journalism. Field work. The personal angle—the long-winded personal angle—that was so popular nowadays.

"Investigating for six months?" Juliet said. "Penelope could have figured Mother Shipton out in ten minutes."

"It's weird," Christa admitted.

"You don't know more than you're letting on, do you?" Juliet said. "I hate to even ask that. I feel so at sea. I feel stupid. That woman intended me to feel stupid, of course. Like the character who blurts out something in a play and everybody turns away because they all know something she doesn't know—"

"No one writes that kind of play anymore," Christa said. "Now nobody knows anything. No—Penelope didn't take me into her confidence. Why should she? She knows I'd end up telling you. Just hold on. It's one of the trials of parenthood. She hasn't given you many, after all. In a year this will all be ancient history."

Juliet didn't tell Christa that in the end she had not been able to walk away from the Spiritual Balance Centre with dignity. She had turned and cried out beseechingly, furiously, "What did she tell you?"

Mother Shipton had stood there watching her, as if she had expected this. A fat pitying smile had stretched her closed lips as she shook her head.

During the next year, Juliet got phone calls, now and then, from people who had been friendly with Penelope. Her reply to their inquiries was always the same. Penelope had decided to take a year off from university. She was traveling. Her agenda was by no means fixed, and Juliet had no way of contacting her, nor any address she could supply.

She did not hear from anybody who had been a close friend. This might mean that people who had been close to Penelope knew quite well where she was. Or it might mean that they, too, were off on trips to foreign countries, had found jobs in other provinces, or had embarked on new lives, too crowded or chancy still to

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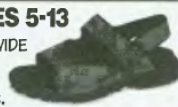
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allow them to wonder about old friends. (Old friends, at that stage in life, meaning somebody they had not seen for half a year.)

Whenever Juliet came home, the first thing she did was look for the flashing light on her answering machine. Each time, she tried some silly trick—to do with how many steps she took to the phone, how she picked it up, how she breathed. *Let it be her.*

Nothing worked.

After a while, the world seemed emptied of the people that Penelope had known—the boyfriends she had dropped and the ones who had dropped her, the girls she had gossiped with and probably confided in. Because she had gone to Torrance House, rather than to a public high school, most of her long-time friends had come from out of town. Alaska or Prince George or Peru.

There was no message at Christmas. But in June another card, very much in the style of the first. Not a word written inside. Juliet had a drink of wine before she opened it, then threw it away at once.

She had spurts of weeping, once in a while of uncontrollable shaking, but she emerged from these in quick fits of fury, walking around the house and slapping her fist into her palm. The fury was directed at Mother Shipton, but the image of that woman had faded, and finally Juliet had to recognize that she was really only a convenient target.

All pictures of Penelope were banished to her old bedroom, with the sheaves of drawings she had done before they left Whale Bay, her books, and the European one-cup coffeemaker with the plunger that she'd bought as a present for Juliet with the first money she'd made in her summer job at McDonald's. The door of her bedroom was shut and in time could be passed without disturbance.

Juliet gave a great deal of thought to leaving this apartment, giving herself the benefit of new surroundings. But, as she told Christa, she could not do it, because this was the only address that Penelope had, and mail would not be forwarded for more than three months.

After that, there would be no place where her daughter could find her.

"She could always get you at work," Christa said.

"Who knows how long I'll be there?" Juliet said. "She's probably in some commune where they're not allowed to communicate. Run by a guru who sleeps with all the women and sends them out to beg on the streets. If I'd sent her to Sunday school and taught her to say her prayers this probably never would have happened. I should have done it. I should have. It would have been like an inoculation. I neglected her *spirituality*. As Mother Shipton said."

When Penelope was barely thirteen years old, she had gone away on a camping trip to the Kootenay Mountains of British Columbia, with a friend from Torrance House and the friend's family. Juliet was in favor of this trip. Penelope had been at Torrance House for only one year, and it pleased Juliet that she had already made so firm a friend and been readily accepted by her family. Also that she was going camping—something that regular children did and that Juliet, as a child, had never had the chance to do. Not that she would have wanted to—at Penelope's age, she had already been buried in books—but she welcomed signs that Penelope was turning out to be a more normal sort of girl than she herself had been.

Eric was apprehensive about the whole idea. He thought that Penelope was too young. He didn't like her going on a holiday with people he knew almost nothing about. And now that she went to boarding school they saw too little of her as it was—so why should that time be shortened?

Juliet had another reason: she wanted Penelope out of the way for a couple of weeks, so that she could clear the air between herself and Eric. She wanted things resolved, and they were not resolved. She did not want to have to pretend that all was well, for the sake of the child.

Eric, on the other hand, would have liked nothing better than to see their trouble smoothed over, tucked out of the way. As he saw it, civility would restore good feeling, and the semblance of love would be enough to get by on until love



*"I'm two weeks away from my Pilates badge."*



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JOHNNY COHEN

*"Sounds great—have your people call your people."*

itself could be rediscovered. And if there was never anything more than semiblance—well, that would have to do. He could manage with that.

Having Penelope at home, forcing them to behave well—forcing Juliet to behave well, since she was the one, in his opinion, who had stirred up all the rancor—that would suit Eric very well.

Or so Juliet claimed, and created a new source of bitterness and blame, because he missed Penelope badly.

The reason for their quarrel was an old and ordinary one. In the spring, through some trivial disclosure—and the frankness or possibly the malice of their longtime neighbor Ailo, who had always had some reservations about Juliet—Juliet had discovered that Eric had slept with Christa again. She could not reasonably object to what had happened in the time before she and Eric were together. She did not. What she did object to—what she said had broken her heart—had happened after that. (Though still a long time ago, Eric pointed out.)

It had happened when Penelope was a year old and Juliet had taken her back to Ontario to visit her parents. To visit—as she emphasized now—her dying mother. While she was away, and loving and missing Eric with every shred of her being (she now believed this), Eric had simply returned to his old habits.

At first he confessed to once (drunk), but with further prodding, and some drinking in the here and now, he said that possibly it had been more than that.

Possibly? He could not remember? So many times he could not remember? He could remember.

Christa came to see Juliet, to assure her that it had been nothing serious. (This was Eric's refrain as well.) Juliet told her to go away and never come back. Christa decided that now would be a good time to visit her sister in California.

Juliet's outrage at Christa was actually something of a formality. She did understand that a few rolls in the hay with an old girlfriend (Eric's disastrous description, in an ill-judged attempt to minimize things) were nowhere near as threatening as a hot embrace with some woman newly met. And her outrage at Eric was so fierce and irrepensible as to leave little room for blame of anybody else.

Her contentions were that he did not love her, had never loved her, had mocked her, with Christa, behind her back. He had made her a laughingstock in front of people like Ailo (who, Juliet said, had always hated her). He had treated her—and the love she felt (or had felt) for him—with contempt. He had lived a lie with her. Sex meant nothing to



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him, or, at any rate, it did not mean what it meant (had meant) to her—he would have it off with whoever was handy.

Only the last of these contentions had the smallest germ of truth in it, and in her quieter states she knew that. But even that little truth was enough to pull everything down around her. It shouldn't have done so, but it did. And Eric was not able—in all honesty he was not able—to see why. He was not surprised that she should object, make a fuss, even weep (though a woman like Christa wouldn't have), but that she should really be damaged, that she should consider herself bereft of all that had sustained her—and over something that had happened *twelve years ago*—this he could not understand.

Sometimes he believed that she was shamming, making too much of it, and at other times he was full of real grief that he had made her suffer. Their grief aroused them, and they made love magnificently. And each time he thought that that would be the end of it, that their miseries were over. Each time he was mistaken.

In bed, Juliet told him lightheartedly about Samuel and Mrs. Pepys, inflamed with passion under similar circumstances. (Since she had more or less given up on her classical studies, she was reading widely, and nowadays everything she read seemed to have to do with adultery.) Never so often and never so hot, Pepys had said, though he also recorded that his wife thought of murdering him in his sleep. Juliet laughed about this, but half an hour later, when Eric came to say goodbye before going out in the boat to check his prawn traps, she showed him a stony face and gave him a kiss of resignation, as if he'd been going to meet a woman out in the middle of the bay under a rainy sky.

There was more than rain. The water was hardly choppy when Eric went out, but later in the afternoon a wind came up suddenly, from the southeast, and tore up the waters of Desolation Sound and Malaspina Strait. It continued almost until dark—which did not really fall until around eleven o'clock in this last week of June. By then, a sailboat from Campbell River was missing, with three adults and two children aboard. Also two fish boats, one with two men

aboard and the other with only one man—Eric.

The next morning was calm and sunny—the mountains, the waters, the shores, all sleek and sparkling.

It was possible, of course, that none of these people were lost, that they had found shelter and spent the night in any of the multitude of little bays along the coast. That was more likely to be true of the fishermen than of the family in the sailboat, who were not locals but vacationers from Seattle. Boats went out at once, that morning, to search the mainland and island shores and the water.

The drowned children were found first, in their life jackets, and by the end of the day the bodies of their parents were located as well. A grandfather who had accompanied them was not found until the following day. The bodies of the men who had been fishing together were lost, though the remnants of their boat washed up near Refuge Cove.

Eric's body was recovered on the third day. Juliet was not allowed to see it. Something had got at him, she was told (meaning some animal), after the body was washed ashore.

It was perhaps because of this—because there was no question of viewing the body and no need for an undertaker—that the idea caught hold among his old friends and fellow-fishermen of burning Eric on the beach. Juliet did not object to this. A death certificate had to be made out, so the doctor who came to Whale Bay once a week was telephoned at his office in Powell River, and he gave Ailo, who was a registered nurse and his weekly assistant, the authority to do it.

There was plenty of driftwood around, plenty of the sea-salted bark that makes a superior fire. In a couple of hours, all was ready. News had spread—somehow, even at such short notice, women began arriving with food. It was Ailo who took charge of this half-pagan ceremony—her Scandinavian blood, her upright carriage and flowing white hair made her a natural for the role of Widow of the Sea. Children ran about on the logs, and were shooed away from the growing pyre, the shrouded, surprisingly meagre bundle that was Eric. A coffee urn was supplied by one of the churches, and cartons of beer, bottles of alcohol of all sorts were left discreetly, for the time



being, in the trunks of cars and the cabs of trucks.

The question arose of who would speak and who would light the pyre. The men who headed the preparations asked Juliet if she would do it. And Juliet, brittle and busy, handing out mugs of coffee, told them that they had it wrong—as the widow, she was supposed to throw herself into the flames. She actually laughed as she said this, and those who had asked her backed off, afraid that she was getting hysterical. The man who had often been Eric's partner in the boat agreed to do the lighting, but said that he was no speaker. It occurred to some that he would not have been a good choice anyway, since his wife was an evangelical Anglican, and he might have felt obliged to say things that would have distressed Eric, if he had been able to hear them. Then Ailo's husband offered. He was a little man who had been disfigured by a fire on a boat, years ago, a bitter socialist and atheist, and in his talk he rather lost track of Eric, except to claim him as a Brother in the

Battle. He went on at surprising length, and this was ascribed, afterward, to the life that he led under the rule of Ailo. There was some restlessness in the crowd before he finally stopped speaking, some feeling that the event was not as splendid, or solemn, or heartrending, as had been expected. But when the fire began to burn this feeling vanished, and there was great concentration, even, or especially, among the children, until the moment when one of the men cried, "Get the kids out of here." This was when the flames had reached the body, and there was a realization, rather late, that consumption of fat, of heart and kidneys and liver, might produce explosive or sizzling noises that would be disconcerting to hear. A good many of the children were hauled away by their mothers—some willingly, some to their dismay. And the final act of the fire became a mostly male ceremony. Slightly scandalous, though not in any way illegal.

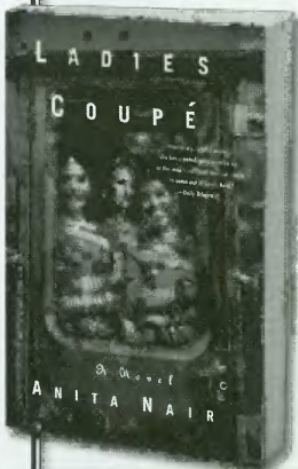
Juliet stayed, wide-eyed, rocking on her haunches, face pressed against the

heat. She was not quite there. She thought of whoever it was—Trelawny?—snatching Shelley's heart out of the flames. The heart, with its long history of significance. Strange to think how even at that time, not so long ago, one fleshly organ had been thought so precious, the site of courage and love. It was just flesh burning. Not Eric.

Penelope knew nothing of what was going on. There was a short item in the Vancouver paper—not about the burning on the beach, of course, just about the drowning—but no newspapers or radio reports reached her, deep in the Kootenay Mountains. When she got back to Vancouver, she phoned home, from her friend Heather's house. Christa answered—she had got back from California too late for the ceremony, but was staying with Juliet, and helping as much as she could. She told Penelope that Juliet was not there—it was a lie—and asked to speak to Heather's mother. She explained what had happened, and said that she

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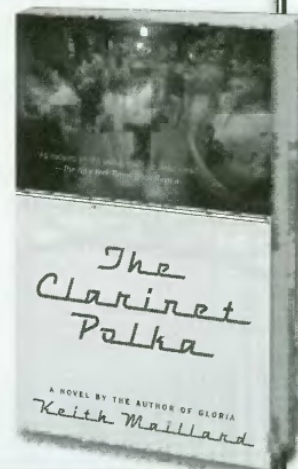
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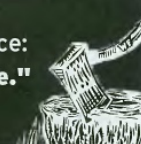
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**David Foster Wallace:**  
**"In a word, terrible."**



would be driving Juliet to Vancouver—they would leave at once—and Juliet would tell Penelope herself when they got there.

Christa dropped Juliet at the house where Penelope was, and Juliet went inside alone. Penelope was waiting in the sunroom. She received the news with an expression of fright, then—when Juliet put her arms around her—of something like embarrassment. Perhaps in Heather's house, in the white-and-green-and-orange sunroom, with Heather's brothers shooting baskets in the backyard, news so dire could hardly penetrate. The burning was not mentioned—in this house and neighborhood it would have seemed uncivilized, grotesque. In this house, also, Juliet's manner was more sprightly than she intended.

Heather's mother entered after a tiny knock, with glasses of iced tea. Penelope gulped hers down and went to join Heather, who had been lurking in the hall. Heather's mother then had a talk with Juliet. She apologized for intruding with practical matters but said that time was short. She and Heather's father were driving east in a few days' time to see relatives. They would be gone for a month, and had planned to take Heather with them. But now Heather had decided that she did not want to go; she had begged to stay here in the house, with Penelope. A fourteen-year-old and a thirteen-year-old could not be left alone in the house, and it had occurred to her that Juliet

might like some time away from Whale Bay, a respite, after what she had been through. After her tragic loss.

So Juliet found herself living in a different world, in a large spotless house, brightly and thoughtfully decorated, with what are called conveniences—but to her were luxuries—on every hand. This on a curving street lined with similar houses, behind trimmed bushes and extravagant flower beds. Even the weather, for that month, was flawless—warm, breezy, dazzling. Heather and Penelope went swimming, played badminton in the backyard, went to the movies, baked cookies, gorged, dieted, worked on their tans, filled the house with music whose lyrics seemed to Juliet sappy and irritating, sometimes invited girlfriends over, did not exactly invite boys but held long, taunting, aimless conversations with those who passed the house or gathered next door. By chance, Juliet heard Penelope say to one of the visiting girls, "Well, I hardly knew him really."

She was speaking about her father.

How strange.

She had never been afraid to go out in the boat, as Juliet was, when there was a chop on the water. She had pestered Eric to take her and was often successful. Following after him, in her businesslike orange life jacket, carrying what gear she could manage, Penelope always wore an expression of particular seriousness and dedication. She took note of the setting of the traps, and became skillful, quick,



*"Would you like the extended service plan with that?"*



and ruthless at the deheading and bagging of the catch. At a certain stage of her childhood—say, from eight to eleven—she had always said that she was going to have her own boat when she grew up. And Juliet had thought it was possible that Penelope would choose that life, since she was bright but not bookish, and exuberantly physical and brave. But Eric, out of Penelope's hearing, said that he hoped the idea would wear off; he wouldn't wish the life on anybody. He spoke about the hardship and uncertainty that he had chosen, although, at the same time, he took pride, Juliet thought, in those very things.

And now he had been dismissed. By Penelope, who had recently painted her toenails purple and was sporting a temporary tattoo on her midriff. He who had filled her life. She had dismissed him.

But Juliet was doing the same thing, in a way. Of course, she was busy looking for a job and a place to live. She had already put the house in Whale Bay up for sale—she could not imagine staying there now. She had sold the truck and given away Eric's tools, and the traps that had been recovered, and the dinghy. Ailo had come and taken the dog.

Juliet had applied for a job in the reference department of the university library and a job at the public library, and she had a feeling that she would get one or the other. She began to look for an apartment. The cleanness, tidiness, and manageability of city life kept surprising her. This was how people lived where men's work did not take place out-of-doors, and where the various operations connected with it did not end up indoors. Where the weather might be a factor in your mood but never in your life, where such dire matters as the changing habits and availability of prawns or salmon were merely interesting, or not remarked upon at all. The life she had been leading at Whale Bay, such a short time ago, seemed haphazard, cluttered, exhausting, by comparison. And she herself was cleansed of the moods of the last months—she was lively and capable, and better-looking.

Eric should see her now.

She thought about Eric in this way all the time. It was not that she failed to remember that he was dead—that did not happen for a moment. But nevertheless she kept referring to him, in her mind, as

if he were still the person to whom her existence mattered more than it could to anyone else. As if he were still the person in whose eyes she hoped to shine. Also the person to whom she presented arguments, information, surprises. This was such a habit with her, and took place so automatically, that the fact of his death did not seem to interfere with it.

Nor was their last quarrel entirely resolved. She held him to account, still, for his betrayal. When she flaunted herself a little now, it was in response to that.

The storm, the recovery of the body, the burning on the beach—that was all like a pageant that she had been compelled to watch and to believe in. It still had nothing to do with Eric and herself.

She got the job at the university reference library; she found a two-bedroom apartment that she could just afford; Penelope went back to Torrance House as a day student. Their affairs at Whale Bay were wound up, their life there finished. Even Christa was moving out, coming to Vancouver in the spring.

On a day before Christa or spring had arrived, a day in February, Juliet stood in the shelter at the campus bus stop after work. The day's rain had stopped, there was a band of clear sky in the west, red where the sun had gone down, out over the Strait of Georgia. This sign of lengthening days, the promise of a change of season, had an effect on her that was unexpected and crushing.

She realized that Eric was dead.

It was as if all this time, while she was in Vancouver, he had been waiting for her somewhere else, waiting to see if she would resume her life with him. As if being with him were an option that had stayed open. Her life since she came to Vancouver had been lived against a backdrop of Eric, without her having quite understood that Eric did not exist. That nothing of him existed. That even the memory of him, in the daily and ordinary world, was in retreat.

So this was grief. She felt as if a sack of cement had been poured into her and quickly hardened. She could barely move. Getting onto the bus, getting off the bus, walking half a block to her building was like climbing a cliff. And now she had to hide this from Penelope.

At the supper table she began to shake. She could not loosen her fingers to

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Something was pouring out. Filling the field and making it vacant. A wind blowing them sideways as they moved forward. The crying as before. Suddenly I understood why they left the empty bowls on the table, in the empty hut overlooking the sea. And knew the meaning of the heron breaking branches, spreading his wings in order to rise up out of the dark woods into the night sky. I understood about the lovers and the river in January. Heard the crying out as a battlement, of greatness, and then the dying begin. The height of passion. Saw the breaking of the moon and shattering of the sun. Believed in the miracle because of the half heard and the other half seen. How they ranged and how they fed. Let loose their cries. One could call it the agony in the garden, or the paradise, depending on whether the joy was at the beginning, or after.

—Linda Gregg

drop her knife and fork. Penelope came around the table and pried her hands open. She said, "It's Dad, isn't it?"

Juliet afterward told a few people—Christa was one—that these seemed the most utterly absolving, the most tender words that anybody had ever said to her.

Penelope ran her cool hands up and down the insides of Juliet's arms. She phoned the library the next day to say that her mother was sick, and she took care of her for a couple of days, staying home from school until Juliet had recovered. Or at least until the worst was over.

During those days, Juliet told Penelope everything. About Christa, the fight, the burning on the beach (which she had so far managed, almost miraculously, to conceal from her). Everything.

"I shouldn't burden you with all this."

Penelope said, "Yeah, well, maybe not." But added staunchly, "I forgive you. I guess I'm not a baby."

Juliet went back into the world. The sort of fit she had had at the bus stop recurred, but never so powerfully.

Through her work at the library, she met some people from the provincial television channel, and took a job they offered. She had worked there for about a year when she began to do interviews. All

the indiscriminate reading she'd done for years (and that Ailo had so disapproved of, in her days at Whale Bay), all the bits and pieces of information she'd picked up, her random appetite and quick assimilation now came in handy. She cultivated a self-deprecating, faintly teasing manner that seemed to go over well. On camera, few things fazed her. But at home she would march back and forth, letting out whimpers or curses as she recalled some perceived glitch or fluster or, worse still, a mispronunciation.

After five years, the birthday cards stopped coming.

"It doesn't mean anything," Christa said. "They were just to tell you that she's alive somewhere. Now she figures you've got the message. She trusts you not to send some tracker after her. That's all."

"Did I put too much on her?"

"Oh, Jule."

"I don't mean just with Eric dying. Other men, later. I let her see too much misery. My stupid misery."

For Juliet had had two affairs during the years that Penelope was between fourteen and twenty-one, and during both of these she had managed to fall hectically in love, in a way that left her



ashamed afterward. One of the men was much older than she, and solidly married. The other was a good deal younger, and alarmed by her ready emotions. Later she wondered at these herself. She really had cared nothing for him, she said.

"I didn't think you did," said Christa, who was tired. "I don't know."

"Oh, Christ. I was such a fool. I don't get like that about men anymore. Do I?"

"No, Jule. No." Christa did not mention that this might be due to a lack of candidates.

"Actually, I didn't do anything so terrible," Juliet said then, brightening up. "Why do I keep lamenting that it's my fault? She's a conundrum, that's all. I need to face that. A conundrum and a cold fish," she added, in a parody of resolution.

"No," Christa said.

"No," Juliet said. "I know that's not true."

After the second June had passed without any word, Juliet decided to move. She found an apartment in a high-rise building in the West End. She meant to throw away the contents of Penelope's room, but in the end she stuffed it all into garbage bags and carried it with her. She had only one bedroom here, but there was storage space in the basement.

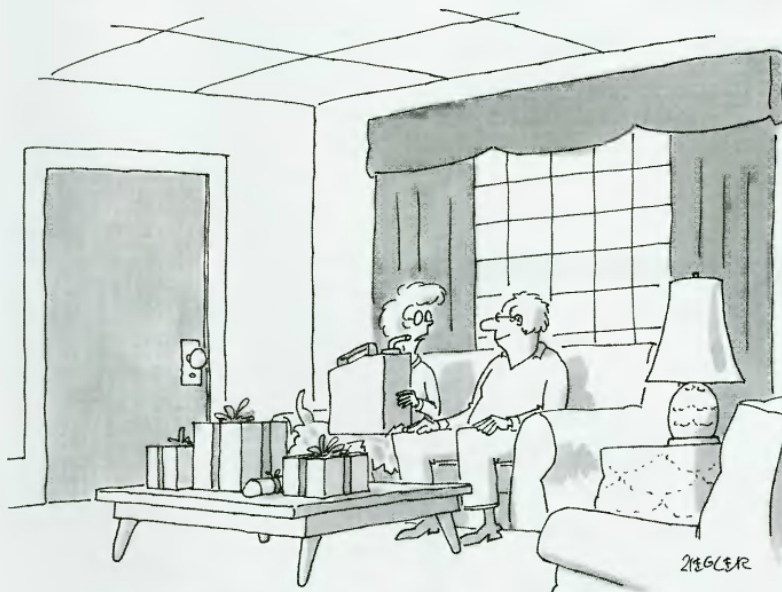
She took up jogging, in Stanley Park. She seldom mentioned Penelope, even to Christa. She had a boyfriend now, who had never heard anything about her daughter.

Christa grew thinner and moodier. Quite suddenly, one January, she died.

You don't go on forever appearing on television. However agreeable the viewers have found your face, there comes a time when they'd prefer somebody new. Juliet was offered other jobs—researching, writing voice-overs for nature shows—but she refused them cheerfully, describing herself as in need of a total change. Her boyfriend got a teaching job in China. She went back to classical studies—an even smaller department than it used to be. She intended to resume writing her thesis, to get her Ph.D. She moved out of the high-rise apartment and into a bachelor flat to save money.

The flat was in the basement of a house, but the sliding doors at the back opened out at ground level. And there she had a little brick-paved patio, a trellis with sweet peas and clematis, herbs and flowers in pots. For the first time in her life and in a very small way, she was a gardener, as Sam had been.

Sometimes people said to her—in stores or on the campus bus—"Excuse



*"Why, thank you, dear—I suppose five gallons of gas is a thoughtful birthday gift."*

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me, but your face is so familiar," or "Aren't you the lady that used to be on television?" But after a year or so this passed. She spent a lot of time sitting and reading, drinking coffee at a sidewalk café, and nobody noticed her. She let her hair grow out. It was a silvery brown now, fine and wavy. She was reminded of Sara, of her soft, fair, flyaway hair, going gray and then white.

She did not have room to have people to dinner anymore, and she had lost interest in recipes. She ate meals that were nourishing enough, but monotonous. Without exactly meaning to, she lost contact with most of her friends.

It was no wonder. She lived a life now that was as different as possible from the life of the public, vivacious, concerned, endlessly well-informed woman she had been. She lived among books, reading through most of her waking hours, often being compelled to deepen, to alter whatever premise she had started with. She sometimes missed the world news for a week at a time.

She had given up on her old thesis and become interested in some writers referred to as the Greek novelists, whose work came rather late in the history of Greek literature (starting in the first century B.C.E., as she had now learned to call it, and continuing into the early Middle Ages). Aristides, Longus, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius. Much of their work was lost or fragmentary, and was also reported to be indecent. But there was a romance written by Heliodorus, called the Aethiopica (originally stored in a private library and retrieved during the siege of Buda), which had been known in Europe since it was printed, in Basel, in 1534.

In this story, the Queen of Ethiopia gives birth to a white baby and is afraid that she will be accused of adultery. So she puts the child, a daughter, in the care of the gymnosophists—that is, the naked philosophers, who are hermits and mystics. The girl, who is called Charicleia, is eventually taken to Delphi, where she becomes one of the priestesses of Artemis. There she meets a noble Thesalian named Theagenes, who falls in love with her and, with the help of a clever Egyptian, carries her off. The Ethiopian Queen, as it turns out, has never ceased to long for her daughter and has hired this very Egyptian to search for

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her. Mischance and adventures continue until all the main characters meet at Meroë and Charicleia is rescued—rescued once more—just as she is about to be sacrificed by her own father.

Interesting themes were as thick as flies here, and the tale had a natural continuing fascination for Juliet. Particularly the part about the gymnosophists. She tried to find out as much as she could about these people—who were usually referred to as Hindu philosophers. Was India, in this case, presumed to be adjacent to Ethiopia? No—Heliodorus came late enough to know his geography better than that. The gymnosophists were wanderers, far spread, attracting and repelling those they lived among, with their ironclad devotion to purity of life and thought, their contempt for possessions, even for clothing and food. Whatever happened to her later, a girl who had spent time among them might well be left with some perverse hankering for a bare, ecstatic life.

Juliet had made a new friend, named Larry. He taught Greek, and he let Juliet store the garbage bags full of Penelope's belongings in the basement of his house. He liked to imagine how they might make the Aethiopia into a musical. Juliet collaborated in this fantasy, even to the point of making up some marvelously silly songs and preposterous stage effects. But she was secretly drawn to devising a different ending to the story, one that would involve renunciation, and a backward search, in which the girl would be sure to meet fakes and charlatans, impostors, shabby imitations of what she was really looking for. Which was recon-

ciliation, at last, with the erring, repentant, essentially greathearted Queen of Ethiopia.

Juliet was almost certain that she had seen Mother Shipton here in Vancouver. She had taken some clothes that she would never wear again (her wardrobe had grown increasingly utilitarian) to a Salvation Army thrift store, and as she set the bag down in the receiving room she saw a fat old woman in a muumuu, fixing tags onto trousers. The woman was chatting with the other workers—she had the air of a supervisor, a cheerful but vigilant overseer, or perhaps the air of a woman who would assume that role, whether she had any official superiority or not.

If she was in fact Mother Shipton, she had come down in the world. But not by very much. For if she was Mother Shipton would she not have such reserves of buoyancy and self-approbation as to make real downfall improbable?

Reserves of advice, pernicious advice, as well.

*She came to us here in great hunger.*

Juliet had told Larry about Penelope. She had to have one person who knew.

"Should I have talked to her about a noble life?" she said. "Sacrifice? Opening your heart to the needs of strangers? I never thought of it. I must have acted as if it would be good enough if she turned out like me."

Larry wanted nothing from Juliet but her friendship and good humor. He was what used to be called an old-fashioned bachelor, asexual as far as she could tell (but probably she could not tell



far enough), squeamish about any personal revelations, endlessly entertaining.

Two other men had appeared, who wanted more from her. One of them she had met when he sat down at her sidewalk table. He was a recent widower. She liked him, but his loneliness was so raw and his pursuit of her so desperate that she became alarmed.

The other man was Christa's brother Gary, whom Juliet had met several times while Christa was alive. His company suited her—in many ways he was like Christa. His marriage had ended long ago, and he was not desperate—in fact, she knew from Christa that there had been women ready to marry him, whom he had avoided. But he was too rational—his choice of her verged on being cold-blooded. There was something humiliating about it. But why humiliating? It was not as if she loved him.

It was while she was still seeing Gary that she ran into Heather, on a downtown street. Juliet and Gary had just come out of a cinema where they had seen an early-evening movie, and they were talking about where to go for dinner. It was a warm night in summer, the light not yet gone from the sky.

A woman detached herself from a group on the sidewalk and came straight at Juliet. A thin woman, perhaps in her late thirties. Fashionable, with taffy streaks in her dark hair.

"Mrs. Porteous. Mrs. Porteous."

Juliet knew the voice, though she did not quite know the face. Heather.

"This is incredible," Heather said. "I'm here for three days and I'm leaving tomorrow. My husband's at a conference. I was just thinking that I hardly know anybody here anymore and then I turn around and see you."

Juliet asked her where she was living now and she said, "Connecticut. And just about three weeks ago I was visiting Josh—you remember my brother Josh?—I was visiting Josh and his family in Edmonton, and I ran into Penelope. Just like this, on the street. No—actually, it was in the mall, that humongous mall they have. She had a couple of her kids with her—she'd brought them down to get uniforms for that school they go to. The boys. We were both flabbergasted. I didn't know her right away, but she recognized me. She'd flown down, of course. From that place way up north. But she

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says it's quite civilized, really. And she said that you were still living here. But I'm with these friends—they're my husband's friends—and I really haven't had time to ring you up."

Juliet made some gesture to say that of course there had not been time and she had not expected to be rung up.

She asked how many children Heather had.

"Three. They're all monsters. I hope they grow up in a hurry. But my life's a picnic compared with Penelope's. *Five*."

"Yes."

"I have to run now—we're going to see a movie. But it was great meeting you like this. My mom and dad moved to White Rock. They used to see you all the time on TV. They used to brag to their friends that you'd lived in our house. They say you're not on anymore. Did you get sick of it?"

"Something like that."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." She hugged and kissed Juliet, the way everybody did now, and ran to join her companions.

So. Penelope did not live in Edmonston—she had *come down* to Edmonston. Flown down. That meant she must live in Whitehorse or Yellowknife. Where else was there that she could describe as "quite civilized"? Maybe she was being ironical, mocking Heather a bit, when she said that.

She had five children, and two, at least, were boys. They were being outfitted with school uniforms. That meant a private school. That meant money.

Heather had not known Penelope at first. Did that mean that she had aged? That she was out of shape after five pregnancies, that she had not *taken care of herself*? As Heather had. As Juliet had, to a certain extent. That Penelope was one of those women to whom the whole idea of such a struggle seemed ridiculous, a confession of insecurity? Or just something that she had no time for—far outside of her consideration?

Juliet had thought of Penelope as being involved with transcendentalists, as having become a mystic, and spending her life in contemplation. Or else—rather the opposite, but still radically simple and pure—earning her living in a rough and risky way, fishing, perhaps with a husband, perhaps with some husky little children, in the cold waters of the Inside Passage off the British Columbia coast.

Not at all. She was living the life of a prosperous practical matron. Married to a doctor, maybe, or to one of those civil servants who were managing the northern parts of the country just as their control was being gradually, but with some fanfare, relinquished to the native people. If she ever met Penelope again they would laugh about how wrong she had





been. When they talked about their weird separate meetings with Heather, they would laugh.

No. No. The fact was that she had already laughed too much around Penelope. Too many things had been jokes. Just as too many things—personal things, loves that were maybe just self-gratification—had been tragedies. She had been lacking in motherly inhibitions and propriety and self-control.

Penelope had told Heather that she, Juliet, was still living in Vancouver. She had not said anything about the breach. Surely not. If she had, Heather would not have spoken so easily.

How did Penelope know that she was still here, unless she had checked in the phone directory? And, if she had, what did that mean?

*Nothing. Don't make it mean anything.*

She walked to the curb to join Gary, who had tactfully moved away from the scene of the reunion.

Whitehorse, Yellowknife. It was painful indeed to know the names of these places—places she could fly to. Places where she could loiter in the streets, devise plans for catching glimpses.

But she was not so mad. She must not be so mad.

At dinner, she realized that the news she had just absorbed had put her into a better situation for marrying Gary, or living with him—whatever it was that he wanted. There was nothing to worry about, or wait for, concerning Penelope. Penelope was not a phantom. She was safe, as far as anybody is safe, and she was probably as happy as anybody is happy. She had detached herself from Juliet and very likely from the memory of Juliet, and Juliet could not do anything but detach herself in turn.

But she had told Heather that Juliet was living in Vancouver. Had she said "Juliet"? Or "Mother"? "My mother"?

Juliet told Gary that Heather was the child of old friends. She had never spoken to him about Penelope, and he had never given any sign of knowing about Penelope's existence. It was possible that Christa had told him, and he had remained silent out of the feeling that it was none of his business. Or that he had forgotten. Or that Christa had never mentioned anything about Penelope, not even her name.

If Juliet were to live with him, the fact

of Penelope would never surface—Penelope would not exist.

Nor did Penelope exist. The Penelope that Juliet sought was gone. The woman Heather had spotted in Edmonton, the mother who had flown down with her sons to get school uniforms, who had changed in face and body so that Heather did not recognize her, was nobody Juliet knew.

Did Juliet believe this?

If Gary saw that she was agitated, he pretended not to notice. But it was probably on this evening that they both understood that they would not be together. If it had been possible for them to be together she might have said to him that night:

*My daughter went away without telling me goodbye, and in fact she probably did not know then that she was going. She did not know that it was for good. Then gradually I believe it dawned on her how much she wanted to stay away. It was just the way that she found to manage her life.*

*It's maybe the explaining to me she can't face. Or has no time for, really. You know, we always have the idea that there is this reason or that reason. And I could tell you plenty about what I did wrong. But I think the reason may not be something so easily dug out. More like some kind of purity in her nature. Yes. Some fineness and strictness and purity, some rock-hard honesty in her.*

*My father used to say of someone he disliked that he had no use for that person. Couldn't those words mean simply what they say? Penelope does not have a use for me.*

*Or can't stand me.*

Juliet has friends—not so many now, but friends. Larry continues to visit and to make jokes. She keeps on with her studies. The word "studies" does not seem to describe very well what she does—"investigations" would be better.

And, being short of money, she works some hours a week at the café where she used to spend so much time at the sidewalk table. She finds this job a good balance for her involvement with the old Greeks—so much so that she believes she wouldn't quit even if she could afford to.

She keeps on hoping for a word from Penelope, but not in any strenuous way. She hopes, as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, or things of that sort. ♦

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