



What should we talk about now?

By Stephen Gauer

Noreen had wheeled her husband into the patio garden of the nursing home and now they were sitting together in the bright June sunlight. She put a broad-brimmed Tilley hat on Bill's bald head to protect him from sunburn. To cover his blind, unseeing eyes, she gave him an old pair of wraparound sunglasses. This was for her benefit, of course. His eyes reminded her that he was blind because he'd stopped using the eyedrops, that he'd stopped using the eyedrops because he was demented, that he was demented because he'd suffered an aneurysm, that he'd suffered an aneurysm because he'd refused to see the doctor

regularly, and that he'd refused to see the doctor regularly because he'd been foolish and stubborn. This chain of cause and effect was irradicable, like a creeping vine that grew back every time she hacked it down.

Bill was talking, pushing words into sentences, but nothing made sense. "The men have come," he said, "The men have come from up above and when they finish, when they have done everything they have to do, they'll need help."

"What kind of help?" Noreen said.

"What kind of help? Well, you know. The help they need to do the job. To move everything from above to down below. Don't you know that? I've explained that."

Bill shook his head, as though she were too simple to understand. It was the same movement he used to make, before the dementia, when the topic was mathematical or technical or scientific and she would ask for a simpler explanation and he would just shake his head and say quietly, "But, Noreen, there is no simpler explanation." Perhaps there wasn't. She didn't care, really. She knew it pleased him to explain things; he was like most of the men she knew in that regard, and it required so little effort on her part. It was like pressing the button on the remote control. Every time you pressed, an answer came out.

Around them, in the garden, other couples were chatting and visiting, or simply sitting and enjoying the warmth of the sun. Noreen looked around and counted eight wheelchairs. She knew most of them because they lived on the second floor, which was Bill's floor. Mr. Chen, who spoke no English. Mr. Siebel, whose wife talked to him loudly in German. Mrs. Caldicott, a widow, whose three sons took turns visiting twice a week, a complex schedule flawlessly organized on the computer,

according to the eldest son. Mrs. Young was the youngest and saddest of the second floor residents; she had MS and had been abandoned by her husband the year before. Now her only visitor was her teenage daughter who came every day after school and sat with her in the garden, or the TV room, or the lobby on the second floor. Noreen could tell that this girl was a serious person because she wore loose clothes, mostly baggy jeans and sweatshirts, never exposed her midriff the way other teenage girls did, and always addressed Noreen as Mrs. Lambert.

Noreen looked at the girl now, as Bill was talking, and noticed she was holding her mother's hand and stroking her fingers. Noreen had never seen her do this before. As she watched, she heard another voice, a new voice, from somewhere behind her. A man was reading something, a letter perhaps. She could hear the phrases "love and affection, "if only we could be there with you, "we think about you."

Then Noreen heard a harsh, gnarled voice, saying "No, never, no." She turned around. She saw a slim, white-haired man with a piece of paper in his hand, sitting next to a woman in a wheelchair. Noreen didn't recognize the woman. She wore a thick brown sweater and beige slacks. She began to shout and move her arms. The man reached over and held one of her arms. Then the woman shouted "No!" and with her free arm swung at the man, hitting him in the face and knocking the sunglasses off.

They landed near Noreen's feet. She reached down and picked them up.

"I'm sorry," the man said. Noreen looked up. He was tall and had excellent posture. He smiled.

"There's no reason to apologize," Noreen said.

"My wife gets upset sometimes. It doesn't mean anything."

“No.”

“May I have my sunglasses?” the man asked.

Noreen, realizing she was still clutching them in her right hand, felt a split second of embarrassment and then laughed.

“Of course,” she said. She held the sunglasses towards him and he reached down and took them in a single smooth movement. His bare arm was freckled and well muscled. He put the sunglasses on and introduced himself. “Art Conroy.” His hand came back towards hers.

“Noreen,” she said. “Noreen Lambert. And this is my husband Bill.”

She shook hands with Art. She thought they would talk some more, that he would explain who he was and why his wife was in the nursing home, why she had shouted, how often he came to visit, but he said nothing. He thanked her again and walked back to his wife in the wheelchair.

“That’s a new man!” Bill said. “That’s a brand new man.”

Her daughter Beth was the one who’d suggested she try relaxed fit jeans. Noreen had never worn blue jeans in her life, not even in the sixties when some of her friends began wearing them, and while she’d read about this newer, more comfortable style, she’d assumed they were for baby boomers, for people her daughters’ ages. Beth, married with two daughters of her own, was 44 this year. Sandra, divorced and living in Florida, on the Gulf side near Naples, was 42. Beth said, “Mom, the point is to be comfortable, to do what works for you.” Noreen agreed and went to the department store in the mall and tried on half a dozen pairs, by herself, with no help at all from any of the sales clerks. What was the point in waiting for someone to help you? You’d wait and wait, or you’d

go and find someone and they wouldn't be able to answer even the most basic questions. How could you work in a department store and not know what you're selling? Noreen couldn't understand that.

She was surprised by how comfortable the jeans were. She bought two pairs. Then she bought some t-shirts and a couple of solid colour sweatshirts, navy blue and burgundy. When she got home and tried them on in front of the mirror in the bedroom, she thought she looked younger. That wasn't why she was doing it, of course. It was partly about comfort, but it was mostly about trying something a little different, just for a change. She was simplifying, reducing choices, and that felt good. She even gave away some of her evening outfits that she knew she would never wear again. She kept three, because there was always Christmas and the two parties a year in the condo where she lived.

What had Beth said? "When I get up in the morning, I just want to get dressed. I don't want to actually have to think about it." And now that's how Noreen was doing it. She'd get up, put the water on to boil, fetch the newspaper from the hall, and then just grab a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

She was simplifying Bill's wardrobe, too. Every time she visited, she went through the small closet beside his bed and took one thing home with her. He was down to two pairs of pants, three shirts, and two sweaters. Did he even know what he was wearing anymore? Probably not.

Soon it would be the longest day of the year. Noreen was alone in the garden, resting while Bill had his nap. It was late in the afternoon and half of the patio was already in shadow. With Bill sleeping peacefully in

his bed, she allowed herself a small slice of happiness, or rather, not unhappiness, the clever double negative that was the best she could hope for now. Bill was mostly gone, and yet he was still here, he still needed her. And what did she need? She wasn't sure.

Art suddenly appeared in front of her and asked if he could sit down. She said of course, and he pulled up a chair beside hers and sat down. "Where's your husband?"

"Sleeping. He has a long nap every afternoon, after we visit."

"And you sit here to recharge?"

"Sort of," she said.

"I understand."

Without the sunglasses, his face seemed smaller and more vulnerable. He had short, intensely white hair, with matching eyebrows that needed trimming. A dark tan, as though he'd spent too much time in the sun. A nest of fine wrinkles across his forehead and two webs spreading out from the corners of his eyes. Noreen, who loved to guess people's ages, thought he must be at least 75, maybe a bit more. But the tan made it hard to be sure; too much sun meant more wrinkles so maybe he was quite a bit younger but looked older. She liked his smile.

She thought he would keep talking, but he didn't. She asked him a few questions about his wife and he answered them. Yes, Marjorie had just moved into the nursing home; no, she was not on the second floor, she was on the third floor; yes, she had advanced Alzheimer's Disease; no, the medications recommended by her doctors had not helped at all; and yes, they had a family, two sons, married, with families of their own, in Montreal and Vancouver. He asked her a few questions and she replied in more detail, telling him about Beth and Eric, and the two granddaughters, and Sandra and her glamorous executive head-hunting job in

Florida, and Bill's career in life insurance, which was not so glamorous, and the aneurysm he'd suffered five years earlier, and his slow but steady descent into dementia. As she spoke, he seemed to listen carefully. When she finished, he was quiet for a moment, and then he asked if she liked to cook.

"Oh yes," said Noreen, "that's one of my passions."

"I love to cook."

"Really?" She knew didn't many men her age who liked to cook. Bill was the kind of man who ate everything without complaint (or much praise) and never offered to help. On the other hand, he did all the vacuuming and that arrangement seemed fair.

"You don't believe me?" Art said. He was smiling. "Ask me about hand-ground pesto."

"What about it?"

"Ask me how I do it."

"Alright," she said, "how do you do it?"

He explained his technique, how you start with fresh basil, of course, then roll up the leaves two or three at a time, like a cigarette, and cut them into tiny pieces with the scissors, then grind the basil by hand with the garlic and pine nuts using a mortar and pestle, then add the grated Parmesan, olive oil and butter.

"How do *you* do it?" he asked her.

"I don't."

"You don't make pesto?"

"No," she said.

"Then you must try mine."

She laughed.

"Don't laugh! You must come to my house and try my pesto."

"I can't come to your house."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. Now excuse me, I have to go check on Bill."

She got up and walked away from him. He called her name, once, but she ignored him. She took the elevator up to the second floor. The door to Bill's room was closed, so she opened it very slowly in case he was still asleep. He was. She walked into the room and closed the door carefully. She removed the slippers from his feet and placed them at the side of the bed. She took his glasses off and put them on the bedside table. The photograph that Beth had given him at Christmas, showing Beth and Eric and the two girls at the steering wheel of a huge catamaran off the coast of Martinique, had fallen over so she propped it up again. As she leaned over to kiss Bill on the cheek, she could smell shaving cream and the slightly sour odor of his sweat. She decided she would buy him a new shirt. She kissed him a second time and left the room.

In the weeks that followed, she seemed to run into Art almost every time she went to see Bill. Even when she varied her visits, changed the day of the week, the time of the day, he seemed to be there. He started handing her pieces of paper containing recipes he'd clipped from newspapers and magazines, tested in his kitchen, and then added to his computer database. If the recipe didn't fit on one page, he reduced the font until it did. Some of the recipes were hard to read because they looked like bumpy ruler lines.

When she told Beth about Art, she exaggerated the humour in the situation, making him sound funnier and wittier than he actually was.

"I think he's flirting with you," Beth said.

“Oh, please, Beth!” Noreen said, although she knew it was probably true. She didn’t mind. She felt mildly flattered.

Art invited her to a barbeque at his house on Labour Day. Marjorie would be celebrating her 80th birthday, and Art had permission from the nursing home to bring her home for the day. There would be a few old friends and some neighbours they knew well. Noreen had no plans; Beth was busy getting the girls ready for school and Eric was out of town on business. She wasn’t sure, so she said yes, knowing that she could always leave early if she wasn’t enjoying herself. And he’s a friend, she thought. Wouldn’t I invite him if the tables were turned?

“It’s nothing elaborate,” said Art. “It’s just a backyard barbeque. You don’t have to dress up or anything. Just bring yourself.”

“And a bottle of wine?” she asked.

“Perfect,” he said.

He lived in a red brick bungalow on a dead end street not far from the nursing home. She’d spent a little extra on the wine, almost twenty dollars for a lovely Bordeaux, and held the bottle carefully in one hand as she got out of the car and locked the door. When she pressed the doorbell at the front of Art’s house, no one answered, so she went around the back where about a dozen people were standing on a large flagstone patio. The backyard was enormous, stretching past flowerbeds and fruit trees to two enormous willow trees in the back corners.

Art stood in the centre of the patio, beside a gas barbeque. He wore a white apron and large chef’s cap looking as though he’d just stepped out of the kitchen at a downtown restaurant. Noreen wanted to giggle at how silly he looked. He saw her and waved, gesturing skyward

with a stainless steel spatula. She could smell the meat grilling on the barbeque.

He called out her name. She smiled and moved forward into the group of people. She wasn't shy but she liked to make a good impression and that meant looking each person in the eye, smiling and remembering their names. Art introduced her to everyone, to all the friends and neighbours who had gathered to celebrate Marjorie's birthday. Some had been drinking; she could tell that from the way they spoke a bit too loudly and gestured too dramatically. One man, a next-door neighbour, asked questions about her husband and why he wasn't there and she had to change the subject to Art's garden and how beautiful it was. "Oh, you should see it in spring," said the man. "It would knock your socks off, it really would."

Noreen excused herself and went over to where Marjorie was sitting in her wheelchair, alone and silent. Art had said Marjorie could hear but no longer speak. Noreen thought about Bill, who could talk but not see. She said hello to Marjorie and introduced herself again. Marjorie looked straight ahead, clenching and unclenching her fists as though doing exercises of some kind. Noreen brought a chair over and sat beside Marjorie for a few minutes and told her about Bill and why he was in the home, and about her condo, and Helen, her next-door neighbour in the condo who had enjoyed Art's recipe for vegetarian moussaka so much. Marjorie said nothing but seemed to be listening. Noreen stopped talking, and in a gesture of tenderness put her hand on Marjorie's arm. Marjorie moved her arm away quickly.

And then Art was waving again with the spatula, telling everyone the shish kebabs and roast potatoes were ready. Noreen looked at Marjorie's closed face and then over at Art's open face and couldn't

connect the two. Art said they'd had a good life together. But she could make no sense of it, because Marjorie remained unknowable. Didn't every marriage have its own intrinsic logic? Of course it did. Wasn't it always possible to reveal that logic, somehow, to explain the attraction, the staying together, year after year through decades of changes that sometimes left you gasping for breath when you looked back on them?

Noreen wheeled Marjorie closer to the group. Art fed his wife while everyone ate, and drank more wine, and talked about gardening and cooking and real estate prices and mortgage rates and what the children and the grandchildren were up to. Noreen said little, but she was happy to be there, happy to feel included. Art hadn't said much to her, but he was the host, after all, and had to pay attention to all of his guests, not just her. Did she still like him? She decided she did.

Most of the guests left by eight. The van from the nursing home came and picked up Marjorie. Noreen stayed, to help with the cleaning up. She was alone in the kitchen, putting the bread plates away, when Art came in. He smiled, then walked right up to her, put his hand to her cheek to turn her head toward him, and leaned forward and kissed her, quickly and lightly, on the lips. He leaned back again and the kiss, the feeling of the kiss, disappeared so quickly she wondered if it had actually happened. She blinked her eyes. What was he doing? "No," she said.

"Yes," he said. "But don't worry, I'm very well behaved. If you say no again, I will stop."

"But Marjorie."

"She's not here. You're here."

"No," she said. "I can't."

Bill had never been unfaithful to her; she knew that as deeply as she knew her own bones. This was not a subject she could discuss with her daughters, of course, but it had come up a couple of times with Helen after her husband died of cancer. Helen said he'd confessed to two infidelities which suggested to Helen that he'd probably been guilty of at least two more.

"You never really know," said Helen. "If they confess, you forgive them. But each time, you lose something. I figure marriage is pretty much like maintenance on a car. The first couple of years are a cinch because everything's brand new, including the chrome, but then the cost of maintenance starts to go up. After forty years, what do you expect, especially if you marry a four-cylinder model?"

Noreen laughed at Helen when she said this because the analogy seemed so absurd. Marriage wasn't at all like a car. Noreen thought it was more like a custom-tailored winter coat, which, properly made, would last you a lifetime, protecting you from the cold, moulding itself to you, giving you confidence and a sense of style. Hadn't Bill always provided for her and the girls? How many husbands went from entry-level positions to senior vice-president in less than twenty years? You couldn't do that anymore, at least not without two or three university degrees after your name. Bill had been smart; he had worked hard, he had created something.

No, she was sure he had never been unfaithful. She would have known. He was a terrible liar. He blushed at the mention of sex. He couldn't keep secrets. But that wasn't completely true, was it? He'd never mentioned the enlarged aorta that caused the aneurysm. If he'd said something sooner, she would have insisted he see another doctor. And if he'd seen another doctor, everything might have been different.

But one kiss didn't mean you were unfaithful. Art had been drinking, hadn't he? She could smell it on his breath. She's been drinking too, although not as much. She hadn't enjoyed the kiss, not really, and besides it was over as soon as it began. Nothing really had happened.

She decided she could still be friends with Art. A couple of days later, on her next visit to the nursing home, she was on the patio with Bill when she saw Art standing in the lobby. She went inside and said hello and thanked him for the party. "I enjoyed myself," she said. "I enjoyed talking to your friends and I'm glad I had a chance to talk to Marjorie."

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure you two had lots to talk about." He smiled at her.

"Where is she now?"

"On the fourth floor. As the Alzheimer's gets worse, they move them up. Last stop is the fifth floor. After that, heaven." He smiled again. Did he think everything was a joke?

"I'm sorry, Art."

"Yes," he said. "I know. We're all sorry."

Noreen returned to the patio. Bill raised his head as though waking from a long sleep. When he reached out for her, she placed both of her hands around his. They held hands like this for a few moments, and then he began to shake his hand violently, as though she were the one who needed rousing.

"My mother," he said. "Isn't she coming? Where is she? Where is my mother?"

Noreen sighed. Bill had never talked about his mother before. Noreen stroked his hand. "Bill," she said gently, "your mother isn't coming. She can't come."

“Oh, no. No. No. She said she’s coming. Did you hide her? I think you’re hiding her. I think you’re hiding my mother.”

“I’m not hiding your mother, Bill.”

“Yes you are! You’re hiding my mother!” Bill was almost shouting. Other people on the patio were staring at them now.

“Bill, please,” she said. “Your mother’s dead. You know that. Your mother’s dead.”

“She’s not dead. You’re hiding her!”

She kept stroking his hand and then raised it to her lips and kissed his fingers. She touched his face, stroked his cheeks and then leaned towards him and kissed him once very lightly on the lips to silence him. She felt no pressure in return. He dropped his head down onto his chest for a moment and then pulled it back up again.

“Bill?” she said. “Are you alright?”

There was a long pause. “Well,” he said. “What should we talk about now?”

She knew the social obligation of a return invitation to Art for dinner at her place would not go away. Beth teased her about being old-fashioned but she couldn’t change certain rules. If you’re invited to someone’s house for a meal, then you must return the invitation. She thought of holding a party with a few friends in the building and making Art part of that but too many of them were away and besides she wasn’t sure if she wanted to be invited in turn to dinner parties in their apartments. Some of them already owed her a meal, so if she invited them again, the social obligation would be double and that might be awkward. No, it would be simpler to invite him for dinner and that would even things out. She had a new halibut recipe, coating the fillets with crushed papadams, that she

had tried once and it had been splendid. A trip to the market would mean plenty of fresh vegetables, and because it was still prime tomato season she could prepare a tomato vinaigrette with that new, more expensive Spanish oil olive she was trying out. She would buy some apples, Spy or Macintosh, and some rhubarb and make a fruit crisp for desert.

He showed up with a bottle of wine and paused before coming into her front hall as though he wasn't certain he was welcome. When she said, "Art, it's lovely to see you" he smiled and stepped forward. She took his windbreaker and hung it in the front closet beside two of Bill's sports jackets that she was donating to the cancer society.

For a few minutes it felt rather strange to be talking to a male friend in her own home. But then she relaxed. Art loved to eat. They sat in the dining room and talked about food and favourite recipes as they ate the halibut and tomatoes and the roasted vegetables that Noreen had decided at the last minute would be a welcome change from the usual salad. Art praised everything highly and quizzed her on the papadam coating for the fish, how had she applied it so evenly and how many minutes exactly had it cooked at 375? And where had she bought the Spanish olive oil that had been absolutely perfect with the tomatoes?

After dessert, they had coffee in the TV room. They sat on the navy blue sofa, Noreen in her usual place on the right side, Art sitting where Bill used to sit on the left side. Art took his coffee black.

As he took his first sip, she asked him how he met Marjorie.

He laughed. "That's a very long story from a very long time ago."

"Please," she said. "I just want to know a little more about her. If that's alright."

Art put his coffee cup down.

"Are you sure?"

“Yes.”

Art looked down at his hands for a moment. “I told you I grew up in Toronto, in the east end. We didn’t have much money when I was a kid. My father was a mechanic, diesel engines mostly. He worked steady enough in the thirties to afford a house, a small house, even smaller than mine if you can imagine that.

“We moved onto Marjorie’s street when I was five and my brother Frank was eight. She lived a couple of houses down. She was the same age as Frank. I can’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t know Marjorie. I’m seventy-seven in November, so that’s almost seventy-two years.

“The truth is that I loved her from the very moment I first set eyes on her. She was such a beauty! She loved Frank, of course, and Frank, well, I think he was just happy being loved. I think he thought love was all about taking and never about giving. They were going to get married right after high school but of course the war broke out and that changed everything, didn’t it? That changed everything.”

Art was silent for a moment. Noreen had been listening, of course, but she couldn’t help but think about September 1939 when she’d only been fourteen and the news about the war had come over the radio and her father had said, “May God help us all,” and her mother had burst into tears.

“Frank and Marjorie postponed the wedding. Frank volunteered. What a hero! My father was so proud. When Frank went to England to fly bombers, he was even prouder. My father was a tough old shit. He swore at the Germans every night at dinner. My mother would look down at her boiled potatoes and say grace and never say another word for the rest of the evening.

“Frank died somewhere over Berlin in a Lancaster bomber, blown to smithereens, as far as we know, because nothing came back to us from the RAF. No ID tags. Nothing. Just a letter. That’s all you got. Just a letter.

“Marjorie was devastated. She denied it later, but I think she tried to kill herself. But you know, as sad as I was that Frank was dead, I ... I made my play for her because I knew my love was better than his. I knew I loved Marjorie in a way Frank never could.”

“So you just married her,” said Noreen.

Art laughed. “Of course not. I was still in high school. I was only seventeen, for chrissakes. But I kept after Marjorie. I knew she would marry me in the end. It took two years but she finally did. She was the most beautiful bride in the whole wide world. That was forty-six. She’d already started teaching, that’s right, because we had to get married in the summer, during school vacation, to get away for a honeymoon.”

Noreen didn’t say anything. She thought about her honeymoon with Bill, a week in the Biltmore in New York City in the spring of 1948, which had been a silly choice because they’d spent the whole week in bed. Bill was so passionate he seemed like a different person to her, so different that it scared her a bit. When they made love, when Bill expressed his pleasure, he cried out in a voice she’d never heard before and held her arms down with such strength she almost cried out in pain. Her mother had told her nothing about this, making sex sound like a duty when in fact it was a glorious celebration. How could her mother have been so wrong, so hopelessly wrong?

“How much,” Art said, “do you love Bill?”

She was confused. What did he mean?

“Do you love him as much as he loves you?”

She didn't know what to say. You love each other equally, don't you? And, yes, if the love is not equal when you marry, then later on it becomes equal, it must become equal, otherwise things would not be in balance and wasn't balance the main thing, the most important thing that kept two people together? "Yes," she said, "I do."

"That's good," Art said. "I know I loved Marjorie more than she loved me, but that's OK. That's life, isn't it? Things never really balance the way we want them to."

Noreen began to cry then and she felt a bit ashamed that she was doing it in front of Art. He was such a kind, sensitive man, wasn't he? Perhaps it wasn't fair to cry in front of him. She usually only cried alone, in the morning, thinking about the long empty day that stretched ahead of her. A breakfast of cereal and tears, she called it.

"Noreen," he said. "Noreen."

She could not stop crying. What was wrong with her? "I'm sorry, so sorry," she said, as she pulled a kleenex from the pocket of her jeans and blew her nose.

"Please," he said. He drew her to him. When his arms went around her, she felt such a shock of comfort and safety that she began to cry even harder. She buried her face in his shoulder and breathed the cleanness of his skin as he held her tightly in the embrace.

Then he released her and began to dry her tears. Their faces were very close, too close. His handkerchief was soft but her eyes had gone puffy and she couldn't seem to see. He was a blur. He wiped her cheeks dry and then began to kiss her.

"Please," he said again. "Please, Noreen."

She didn't know what she doing. She liked the pressure of his lips, the taste of dinner and wine and apple from his mouth. She liked the

tenderness of his movements, the pressure of his hand as he held her face kissing her. She liked the feeling of her face on fire and the warmth coming up through her body. This is how it feels, she thought, or no, this is how it used to feel and now I am feeling it again.

But when he touched her breast the spell broke. She pushed his arm away. No.

“Please,” he said, “I’ll be gentle.”

She pushed him away.

At the beginning of October, Marjorie suffered a stroke and died in the hospital two days later. Noreen heard the sad news from the nursing home receptionist when she asked about Art. She hadn’t seen him in days, not since the dinner.

“He’s here, today,” said the receptionist. “Second room on the right, fourth floor.”

Noreen had never been up to the fourth floor. When the elevator door opened she saw a solid line of people in wheelchairs, most of them looking like Marjorie that day at the barbeque, with closed angry faces. Some were asleep. Some had no teeth and looked like their faces were imploding. No one was talking. She could hear soap opera voices coming from a television set. She noticed a poster on the wall, the logo of the nursing home chain with the motto “Making the most of your senior years” in large red letters underneath.

Art was in the room, packing clothes into a suitcase.

“Hello, Art,” she said. “I’m sorry to hear about Marjorie.”

“Yes,” Art said.

Noreen had always believed memory was the best form of consolation, that if you could share something from the dead person’s

life, a story or anecdote, something funny or dramatic or sad, then that memory could create a connection, a triangle, linking you with the survivor and the person who had died. She'd talked to Marjorie at the barbeque. What could she say about that? "That was a lovely birthday party you threw for Marjorie," she said. "I'm glad I was there."

Art smiled at her.

"I have been a complete and utter fool," he said.

"No," she said.

"If I offended you, I apologize."

"No," she said. She knew there was more to say. Not just that life was complicated, because everyone knew that, but perhaps that grief, or at least the special grief they had both gone through, for years now, pushed them in directions that were confusing and strange. Did everyone know this too? She thought she needed to explain this to Art, but she would have to clarify it first, get it completely straight in her mind.

Instead she said, "She was the most beautiful bride in the whole wide world."

"What?" Art said.

"Marjorie. That's how you described her."

"Yes," he said. He closed the suitcase, picked it up and moved towards the door.

"Will I see you again?" she asked.

"I don't know," Art said. "We're having the service on Saturday. You're welcome to come. Then I fly to Montreal with my son. I don't know after that."

Art said goodbye and walked out of the room. Noreen felt light-headed so she sat down on the bed. He was abandoning her. But she'd

promised herself she wouldn't cry again, at least not in public. She knew now she'd wanted to kiss him, one last time, on the lips.

Downstairs, on the second floor, Bill was already in his wheelchair, ready for the trip to the patio. She said hello and kissed him very lightly on the cheek. She wheeled him around the corner and into the elevator. When the elevator got to the ground floor, she wheeled him across the lobby and out the door and down the ramp.

The patio was deserted. The sun had fallen behind the roofline and the afternoon air was cooling rapidly. There was no need for a hat. There was no need for sunglasses. Noreen sat facing Bill and looked directly into his eyes as though for a moment he might be able see her back.

"Well then," he said. "Who are you?"

"Noreen," she said. "I am Noreen, your wife."

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