

LUNCH WITH RUTH

The morning of Greg's lunch date with Ruth dawned cool, wet and gray—one of those tropical winter days that reminded him of a New England October's first chill, and that he wasn't a native Floridian, but a transplant. The low clouds moved quickly, like a heavy rug being drawn overhead. He left Marathon early, hoping to arrive in Key West relaxed and well ahead of their noon-hour rendezvous. He had until 6pm—if lunch were to turn into *more than lunch*—when his was to pick up his brother Ray at the Key West airport and take him to the gallery. The story Greg had told his wife Laura was that he would be doing research for an article on stand-up paddle boarding. He would interview some of the young up-and-comers, and maybe shop for some new sandals, and was there anything she wanted? Something for the kids?

He had been alone in the bedroom when Ruth called the previous week. *How long has it been?* she asked. *Fifteen years*, said Greg, picturing her as he remembered her from college, the two years they lived together. *I was talking with Tara Mitts the other day. Remember her?* Ruth said. *Well, she's always going to the Keys for vacations—didn't she and her current beau stay with you one summer? Anyway, I'll be in Key West this weekend, and what say we get together?*

He covered the phone and walked down the stairs and checked the first floor to be sure Laura hadn't snuck back in after driving the kids to school. He did not ask Ruth why she was visiting the Keys, only when she was coming. *Meet me this Friday. Noon*, she said energetically. She spoke at a fast clip, the way she had when they first met. Her enthusiasm caught him off guard. Their love affair in college had been intense, and its demise abrupt and painful for Greg. She had announced she was pregnant, ignored his knee-jerk offer to marry her, and went missing for a week. When she returned she informed him that she'd had an abortion and didn't want to see

him. His entreaties failed. The breakup had coincided with graduation, and the separation gradually took on the patina of a faded photograph. With Ruth's unexpected phone call, the obvious enthusiasm in her voice, the image so long drained of color bloomed intensely again. He pictured himself beneath her, in bed, in her hotel room, her hair flying as she pounded against him like a hammer against a nail, an irresistible force transforming his desire into a harmonic energy. There had been no other woman in his life with such a consuming sensuality, before or since.

After hanging up he thought of their mutual friend Tara, with whom he had kept in touch, and to whom he could have turned in the intervening years for information on Ruth. He had not. She could have filled him in at any time, but he had resisted her attempts to do so, even during the week Tara and her lover spent in the Keys with him and Laura two years ago. Laura's knowledge of Ruth consisted of a few general strokes of the brush, wielded by Greg during an evening of confession early in their courtship. He had met the woman who would become his wife shortly after Tara had informed him—before he could object—of Ruth's marriage to a man she had met while working as a secretary in her first job after college. The news was like a knockout punch, and when he recovered from the initial shock, the painful remnants of their breakup were gone.

There were gaps in the clouds by the time Greg reached Loma Key. Spots of sunlight flew across the roadway south to north like bubbles. The chill was wearing off, and he rolled down the windows as the car began to heat up in the fast-rising temperatures. He stopped for fuel.

"Headed to the Festival?" said the wiry young man pumping gas into the car next to his. He was skinny but muscular, with a youthful, smoothly tanned complexion and bright brown eyes. His long blond hair blew sideways in the wind.

"What festival would that be?" asked Greg.

"The Gay Arts Festival. Today's a good day for music. You gotta claim your space early, though. That's what I'm doing." The more he spoke the younger he seemed to Greg, who would turn thirty-six soon.

"Forgot all about it," said Greg, which was true. It made sense now that Ray was coming in tonight to meet with the gallery owner concerning his upcoming one-man show. He speculated: Maybe *Ruth* was gay now. Maybe she had *evolved*, as they say. How bizarre would *that* be? But the thought of her sexuality only served to arouse him, and while he finished pumping gas he ignored the teen and pictured Ruth naked, approaching him, pulling him towards her, taking charge, her pliant flesh belying her forceful nature, his erection more hers than his.

Ray would no doubt spring the idea of Greg staying for the concert; he would urge Greg to call his wife. Laura would resist, then Ray would get on the phone and plead, *he was dying to see the kids*, and she would relent. Ever since moving to the Keys, after a lengthy warming-up period of yearly month-long visits, Greg and Laura had avoided the festivals and holiday periods in Key West; they inevitably brought that extra element of antagonism to the gay community which only huge conclaves of similarly-inclined souls can generate. The day-to-day conflict of gay residents versus tourists was a status quo—part of the charm of the town. Gay pride was a daily exhibitionistic ritual in Key West, and Ray loved to come into town and soak it up. He was not into the sex, he said, just the camaraderie and freedom of expression. "Everyone assumes we are all less inhibited, more liberal," Ray would remind his friends and family, "but there are plenty of uptight, bigoted, antisocial homosexuals in New York, and a fair share in Key West." For Ray, a celebration like the Gay Arts Festival was a perfect opportunity to battle conservatism within the gay community.

Greg pondered the coincidence as he resumed driving: meeting the first great love of his life—the heterosexual's typical definition of his or her coming of age—in the midst of a three-day affirmation of alternative sexuality. When Ruth and Greg first made love, Ray was nearing the end of his military tour of duty in Frankfurt, Germany. In his letters home, which Greg's parents shared tearfully with him, Ray had written of his first love affair with a man. Greg let his

mind entertain the possibility that—17 years later—events might repeat themselves. This musing was strengthened by remembering that it was his brother's letters home during his two years abroad—so eloquent in their defense of his life choice, so articulate in the rendering of his emotions—that turned Greg toward writing as a career.

As the road veered left, following the bridge that attached Loma Key to Key West, his heart pounded. Seventeen years ago his heart had thumped in a similar fashion as he rode his Kawasaki 350 the quarter mile off campus to Ruth's apartment, knowing he would not be returning to his own.

He noted the address of the Key West Holiday Inn, written on the same sheet as Ray's arrival time and the sizes of the Nike padded aqua-socks Greg was to buy for the kids. It was still early for Festival traffic and he had made great time—there was an hour to kill before meeting Ruth, plenty of time to search the various shops on Doral Street for the socks. The secret hope that sparks would fly when he and Ruth laid eyes on one another had no shape to it; the resurrected memory of her beauty came and went as he shopped. He imagined a lunch lasting for two hours, leading to—something; something that could be consummated before six o'clock, something hemmed in by his memories; his imagination was failing him, there were only still photos, no movies.

Like the dream in which he was falling but always woke up before he hit the ground, Greg could envision the exciting renewal of an old romance, but not its conclusion.

Not that he had any moral dilemma on his hands. Several years ago Laura had admitted to a short affair with Mel Gould, owner-operator of Go Fish Tropical Fish, Dive and Bait Shop in Marathon's Key Colony Beach. Greg had been on assignment for Sports Illustrated at the time—a month-long stay at the Colorado Springs Olympic Training Center. She had not tried to hide it from him. He did not get angry—nor did he pressure her when she offered details: *One night*, she said after Mel and his wife Sandy had come over for dinner and Mel had acted strange and Sandy had taken him home early. *One time. He smelled of cigars and scotch, and how can Sandy (his wife) stand it? He was so worked up and sexy, though. He was powerful. Not like me, eh?*

thought Greg at the time. *You were gone for so long! A month! You were gone! I was alone. Ever since Becky was born, you and I—He's got a passion for living, Mel does.* That's something you haven't got, she was inferring; so Greg just listened and never felt the need to ask her “why?”

Laura asked if he could forgive her, and his response was to make love to her that very night, her infidelity a strange aphrodisiac—perhaps because he knew he could wield her trespass as an advantage. It had given him a strength that nourished their languid mid-marriage sex life. He balanced the prospect of a one-time coupling with the passionate Ruth against the loss of his perceived advantage of moral superiority. How might it compare? A moment of weakness, then an appeal to Laura afterwards the way she had appealed to him?

Doral Street, as expected, was more crowded than usual. The gay couples, out-of-towners here for the Festival, offered exuberant displays of affection, thinking erroneously that to do so would mark them as “local talent.” Many men went topless, and hands were casually inserted in either the front or rear of each others jeans as the couples promenaded.

Greg stopped by Ray's gallery before visiting the store with the aqua-socks, and chatted up Arthur Newell, proprietor of the Newell Post Art Gallery, and his lover, Howard. Arthur was an ageless 60-something with deeply tanned skin that never seemed to wrinkle, and blue eyes the color of the sea just as it dropped off from a coral reef. The Newell Post was one of Key West's oldest and most prestigious galleries; set off from the street, visitors dropped in not because of any signs or special ads, but because of its reputation. Beautifully stained white pine columns and walls, oak floors, vintage sconces to compliment the rail lights, plants and flowers placed with Arthur's feng shui artistry, and paintings by renowned artists priced to eliminate the casual browser.

"Look at 'em," said Arthur from his vantage point near the window. "They wouldn't know love if it hit 'em in the ass."

"That's where it usually does," cracked Howard from behind the desk. Howard was in his twenties.

"They're young. They don't know any better," said Arthur, turning away. Arthur had always taken young lovers, imagining he could cure them of their wanderlust. Howard had been Arthur's paramour for two years—a "lifetime in New York," according to Arthur.

"*I'm* young, and *I* know better," said Howard, more to Greg than to Arthur.

"You know better *now*," Arthur said, turning his back to the crowded sidewalk outside. "But when I met you, you'd've humped the nearest statue and sworn it loved you back."

"Talk about a hard-on," Howard laughed. Arthur looked at him with creased brow, then at Greg. "Sorry, Arthur," said Howard, weakly.

Greg had known Arthur for ten years, ever since he'd been visiting the Keys and discovered by accident that Ray was selling his paintings there. The joking was part of Arthur's charm. Never heavy-handed, always light-hearted skewering of his own lifestyle.

A customer walked in with a dachshund on a leash.

"Is the dog okay?" asked the middle-aged man, with a tan darker than Arthur's, wearing a white tank top and white shorts. He appeared to have shaved his legs; there were tiny red spots all over his calves.

"Oh yeah," smiled Howard. "We love dogs. The smaller the better." He looked over at Arthur and Greg. "We're setting up a new show tomorrow. Ray Beasley. New oils. Are you going to be here over the weekend?"

Arthur smiled and nodded in affirmation as Howard escorted the gentleman around the gallery, giving him handouts and explaining the current show.

"Howard's working out pretty well," ventured Greg as he shook Arthur's hand and neared the door.

"Yeah... he keeps my spirits up. Among other things." Arthur smiled. "*And* he keeps me from straying." He held the door open for Greg. "If I acted on every fantasy I had, I'd be dead by now."

"That's a happy thought."

"Hey, love is a wonderful thing, Greg. It's way better than sex. Not!"

The streets had become more crowded since Greg entered the Newell Post. The majority of strollers were headed toward South Beach, where the main stage was. To the already dense flow of bare-chested gay couples walking together were added the outrageously dressed, barely dressed, and heavily made-up singles—transvestites in net stockings with blue eye shadow and purple lipstick, black leather butches with crew cuts and steel-toed boots.

Greg bought the aqua-socks at Sporting Chance, a small specialty shop next to the Holiday Inn's Patio Restaurant, where he now sat at the bar and waited for Ruth. He was confident of Jessica's size six—she had been a children's size five that winter—but unsure of Becky's size. The “two” he had initially scribbled seemed small; she was only three and a half years old, but big for her age, so he'd opted for a size three. He contemplated giving his wife a call to double-check on Becky's shoe size, but just as he was about to get up, Ruth entered the restaurant.

Her face was in shadow; the maitre d' pointed her Greg's way. As she emerged from underneath the canopy, he could see she was smiling broadly, and nearly jogging toward the bar. He stood up just in time for her to hug him tightly, before he even had a chance to see her face clearly. He smelled her hair, squeezed her nearly as hard as she did him, and looked around the restaurant as she pressed her hips, stomach and breasts into his. He was breathless. His heart raced.

"Ruth," he said, as they pulled apart, mere inches separating their faces.

"Greg," she said. He held her waist; she held his shoulders. "No trouble recognizing you!"

"Nor you," he said admiringly. He took a deep breath. “Wow!” She smiled in return.

Several moments passed without speaking. The sun was high, hot, and bright, and Greg was squinting slightly. Ruth's eyes were wide open and she scanned his face, moving hers from side to side as if examining a child for signs of some inner distress.

"Let's eat!" she exclaimed suddenly. Greg grabbed for his drink, and missed, as she took his hand and yanked him toward the tables.

They were halfway into a lunch of salad and fruit when Greg realized they'd spent all their time in the "remember when" mode. She: *Remember when you talked me into skinny-dipping in the school pool at midnight?* He: *Remember when we drove to Florida and those rednecks found us sleeping together in the car?* She: *Remember when we made love up in the church steeple and I got a splinter in my ass?*

They laughed in the way he had hoped they would; laughter had been their trademark. So much had turned on their adventurous sexual life, and laughter had helped balance her need to control him in bed. Not that he had ever objected. Just the opposite; he had felt admired, buoyed by her attraction to him physically. Although she looked older now—there was no glossing over the fact—her spirits seemed high, she was as energetic as ever, and she appeared to be in great physical shape. He congratulated her on looking so fit, and she complimented him in turn. But he found himself less aroused than he'd anticipated, considering the build-up, and both longed to—and feared to—ask more personal questions. He realized he needed her to become more than what he already knew.

"So," he ventured between sips of sun tea, struggling to find the most casual-sounding phrasing he could, "what the hell have you been doing for the last fifteen years?"

"The usual," she answered quickly, "law career, marriage, kid, drop career, resume career, divorce. You?" She smiled. *A lawyer, eh?* If Tara had mentioned it, he had forgotten.

"Well," he started, wanting to be witty, but failing. He did not want to talk about himself. "I haven't done anything remarkable. I'm just a writer."

"I knew *that*," Ruth giggled. He relaxed again. "Don't belittle yourself. It's not everybody who can make a living as a writer."

"The glow's worn off, Ruth. I used to feel special. Now I just want to get paid on time."

"Don't we all."

"So," he said, the word *divorce* in her speedy summation prickling his conscience.

"Details."

She explained how she'd done some work after college for a small legal-aid firm in New York City, where she'd met her husband, a lawyer for an advertising agency who volunteered at the legal-aid firm a few hours a week. He remembered vaguely a note that had accompanied her engagement announcement, which he had read quickly and thrown away. That job had led to part-time enrollment in law school, then full time. Her husband had encouraged her and helped her obtain her degree and subsequent acceptance by the bars of several states, including Florida. Then Winston & Strawn hired her at an initial salary higher than his.

"He basically went nuts," she elaborated. "He had much more free time than I, but wasted it on his male friends. Poker nights, fishing trips, long weekends skiing with his buddies. I worked, and took care of our house when I wasn't. He worked and just played. By the time Nolan was born, I'd already decided to take a leave of absence. But my decision to commit to a family did not affect his behavior. In fact, he spent less and less time with us the next year. We'd separated by the time my year off was over, and we divorced when I was transferred to Chicago."

The look of acceptance in her eyes—and the fact she had slowed the breakneck pace of her first few sentences—calmed him somewhat, and he felt the renewed tingling of arousal.

"That's it, in a nutshell," she sighed, picking up the last few pieces of her salad with her fingers. "Your turn."

Questions came to his mind. *What about the kid? Where is he? What are you doing here alone? Why are you here? With me?* He had to say something. She was still the energetic one in the relationship, he the reluctant but seducible partner. "Apart from my stories," he began, hesitatingly, "I, uh, have no identifiable markings."

"I know you're married. You've been married for fourteen years."

"Tara Mitts probably told you everything already."

"I talked to her, sure. But I knew when you got married."

"You knew?"

"I was disappointed I wasn't invited." She smiled sweetly.

"I didn't know where you were," Greg replied defensively, as if she had posed a question.

"You could've asked Tara," she said. He must've looked sad, or guilty. "But I forgive you," she added quickly. Again, the nonchalance. She was in a good mood and wasn't going to relinquish it.

"So how did you know I was still married?"

"I figured you'd tell me straight out if you weren't. I figured, as soon as I told you I was single, if you'd been single or separated you'd have let me know. That's the kind of person you are." Insightful Ruth. Always on the mark. How could she *not* have become a lawyer?

"Why did you come here, Ruth?" Greg asked—suddenly full of courage; the courage of young men going into battle, who know nothing of war.

"Short getaway. Pure and simple." But he did not think it was pure and simple.

"Without your son."

"I needed some time alone." She looked down at her empty salad bowl. "He's with his dad."

"But why here? Why call me, out of the blue, after fifteen years?"

"It's not out of the blue."

"It is for me. I'd forgotten all about you."

"I doubt that," she said aggressively. She smiled, like a flirt, shaking off his unintentionally cruel remark with a flick of her hair. But it was a fake smile, and was gone an instant later.

"Actually, I've thought about you from time to time," he continued nervously. A tear slid down her cheek, and he instinctively grabbed for her hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say anything to hurt you."

"You didn't," she assured him, her other hand now patting his. "I know what you mean. We do things—" she cut herself short.

They looked at each other, eyes scouring each other's faces, in what teenagers might jokingly call a soulful stare.

She continued, "It's just that every so often I think about what it might have been like to have had that baby. My life changed *so* much that day." Slowly, tearfully, she squeezed his hands. Her grip was uncomfortably tight, until she took a deep breath, and it relaxed. "Tell me about your girls," she said breezily, nipping at his salad with her fingers.

He was relieved she asked. "Jessica is nine. Becky is three and a half. They are beautiful. You can take my word for it, or I could be a real bore and show you pictures."

"Oh pictures, yes, show me," she said, clinging to some remnant of her previously exuberant mood.

He showed her small photos from his wallet. She fondled the pictures, cupped them in her hands like she was holding a baby mouse.

"I knew you'd have beautiful children. They look like you. When girls take on their father's features, it can be so exciting." She closed her eyes momentarily, as if she were making a wish, then handed the pictures back to him.

"How about your boy? How old is he?"

"Ten," she answered abruptly, fishing in her pocketbook. "He's with his father this summer."

"So you said. Part of the agreement, or whatever they call it?"

"The divorce settlement. Actually, he'd rather be with his father full time. I'm thinking of letting him."

"That would be tough."

She pulled out a picture and handed it to him.

"Nolan's his name?"

"Yes."

"Handsome," Greg said, smiling. But in truth he wasn't. He had none of her features. Instead of smooth light brown hair, his was all dark tangles. Instead of warmly tanned skin, his was pasty white. Her eyes were blue. His were brown. Her lips curled up at the tips, his down.

Her nose was short and thin—his wide and upturned. He was—a stranger. He had the unattractive smirk of an angry know-it-all.

"He's got a bit of my father in him—the nose—but otherwise he's all his daddy. Inside and out."

After putting the picture back, her smile returned. "I don't want to be unhappy, so maybe we could talk about other things, or go for a walk, take in some sights. You could show me around."

"All right," said Greg.

It was maddening, and unexpected. There would be no going up to her hotel room. No passionate romp between the sheets—or anywhere else. Only the look of her had drawn him close. They had been holding hands for several minutes. Her smile, her energy, her intelligence, and the brightness of her—the memory and his imaginings of the years since—were darkened by this cloud of unhappiness: a failed marriage, nearly-failed motherhood. And something else. Something she hadn't yet spoken of.

They walked along the waterfront, by the fishing boats, milk bars and turtle shops, holding hands occasionally when she reached out—balanced on rails or rocks—for his assistance. She commented on the "gay" atmosphere as they neared South Beach and the music stages. Several couples kissed and hugged provocatively on blankets; they zigzagged their way across the beach to the water's edge.

"At least they don't have to worry about making babies," said Ruth as they splashed barefoot in the shallows, carrying their shoes.

"They have other things to worry about," said Greg. After he'd said it, the inappropriateness of the response hit him. But it was too late.

"Don't we all," said Ruth. "We all make choices—even when we don't have a lot of room to." He knew what she meant. They were a hundred yards from crowded beach, approaching a rock jetty. He waited for her to continue. "I had that abortion to get back at you."

He stopped while she moved ahead. She climbed on the rocks agilely. He followed her. He had difficulty maintaining his balance behind her.

"I was angry," she went on, "because you changed me. I couldn't let it go. Until recently."

"I changed you? How?"

"You got me pregnant, and quietly, secretly, I blamed you. For not being careful enough. We were like two children tickling one another, tickling and tickling until one person gets hurt, and that person was me." She stood above him now, holding her hands out, waiting for him to take them, but he couldn't move." Like a child, I blamed you for something we both did. And like a child, I didn't want to be your friend anymore because you'd hurt me." Greg stood below her, dumbfounded, as her hands dropped to her sides. "You hadn't really hurt me, but in a way you did. My body changed. I felt it. I didn't like it. I wanted us to be the way we were. I was truly happy before I found out. I liked our life together."

"I did too." Now he reached out for her hand, which she grabbed, helping him to the flat top of the jetty. They walked out into the ocean, past gulls circling and alighting.

"It wasn't the abortion itself that was awful. That's what was so odd. It was having to have it. I was going to have the abortion, no matter what. But instead of telling me you'd do whatever it was that I wanted, you said you'd marry me and take care of the baby." She stopped abruptly and turned to face him. "My God, you didn't have any idea what I was feeling! I was shocked when you said that. Something just snapped."

"I thought I was saying the right thing. Giving you the option—"

"I felt I didn't know you. I waited for you to say something else."

"I didn't know what to say."

"That's what made me so sad. I cried for weeks after the abortion. Not for the baby—for us."

He still didn't know what to say.

"I don't think I've ever loved anyone since you," said Ruth, firmly, as if she expected the revelation to shock him. "Not like I loved you."

There was a long period of silence. Only the light whistles of the gulls could be heard.

"I got married fairly quick after college," she continued. "But then, so did you. I made myself a very busy person. My marriage consumed me at first, then my law career. I didn't know I'd feel this way until I was on the plane, until I'd kissed Nolan goodbye and realized I didn't really love him the way a mother should, and that was because I hadn't really loved my husband."

"Felt what way? What do you mean?"

An old man walked by briskly, fishing pole in hand, creel over his shoulder, smiling.

"Used to bring my honey out here, too," he said, giggling. "Nice to see a man with a woman for a change." He found a spot on the rocks a few yards away near the water line and began casting.

In the silence, Greg felt ashamed of himself. Ashamed of the fantasies he'd had. All he had wanted was the sex, or at least an exciting buildup. Now all he could manage was pity. And he was angry with himself for feeling that.

"Ruth, I'm so sorry," he found himself saying, looking out at the ocean. The heat of the day was beginning to dissipate. He searched for the horizon, but it was obscured by the humidity. For a moment, he felt dizzy. The old man was looking at Greg while he cast.

"Kiss me," Ruth whispered, cupping his head in her hands.

"Just a kiss," he whispered back. But as soon as their lips touched, he felt the desperation, or was it that? He could be misinterpreting her now as he had back then. She pressed against him as she had when they'd first hugged at the restaurant, her mouth open, and her hands pulling against his back in an attempt to close whatever gap remained between them.

He went limp, from the realization that he couldn't give her what she wanted. How could he tell her all he had wanted was the sex, maybe just the fantasy of the sex? Her desire gave her

a strength he could not match, but instead of succumbing to it as he had in college, he backed away. He felt withered rather than strengthened by her aggression.

She kissed him on the neck, sucking hard —there would be a mark there, hard to explain —and only by being even more passive, arms hanging limp by his side, was he able to get her to stop.

"Shit, you've become just what you swore you wouldn't," she panted, pulling away. "An unhappy, moralizing, middle class, uptight male. Where'd all that passion go?"

Free of her grasp, he regained some strength and composure. "It was never mine. It was always yours."

"Don't give me that shit. You were ready to have an affair with me. I know it. Conditions were perfect. I even knew your wife had been unfaithful."

"What? How?"

"Tara. I spoke with her at length. Remember? I grilled her last night. I needed an update. Do you think I'd have kissed you like I did if I didn't think there was some possibility of reciprocation?"

"Ruth, I'm sorry. I just bought aqua-socks for my kids. Jesus—"

"You complimented me on my body. You looked me up and down at the restaurant. You wanted it. I know you did. Admit it." She waited, her brow tensing. "Admit it!"

The old man's line whirred and splashed. Greg sensed the opportunity to explain his position. She was asking for it, wasn't she?

"I fantasized about the sex, Ruth. At least I tried to. But I imagined you as a happy person—even happier than me. I didn't realize until now, but I wanted you to want me just physically, the way it was back then. I guess I wanted our lives to have run parallel courses so that when we met we'd be on the same wavelength. We'd go to your hotel room, have hot, passionate and meaningless sex, go our separate ways again, back to our respective happy lives. I couldn't picture it any other way. But you haven't had a happy life, so everything's out of whack. That's the best explanation I can come up with. I'm sorry."

She stared at him for the longest time, hands on her hips. He could barely look at her. The old man was casting away nonchalantly, smiling at them periodically. Finally she took a deep breath. He tensed, like a boxer waiting for a punch to the stomach.

"Fuck you," she said, and walked away.

She stepped gingerly, athletically, from rock to rock, as gyroscopically balanced as a mountain goat. He admired her grace, her streamlined body. In no time, she was gone.

He clutched the bag holding the aqua-socks tightly, and looked at his watch. 4:45.

An hour and a half later, he met his brother at the airport. After exchanging pleasantries and collecting Ray's bags, Greg offered to take him by the gallery, and—in anticipation of the as yet unasked question—stay for the Festival, if he could phone Laura first.

"I thought you'd want to get right home, Greg. Y'know—wife, kids." He smiled the smile of the unencumbered. He said he'd only thought about the Festival after a passenger on his flight had reminded him; he doubted the Newell Post would be open still and would accept being dropped off at Arthur's cottage on the eastern shore of the island. Greg opined that, having dropped by the gallery earlier, he thought Howard and Arthur would be waiting for him at the gallery, ready to take in a night of music and people watching.

"Howard's still with Arthur?" asked Ray as Greg parked the car at the northern stretch of Duvall.

"Apparently."

"I love it that they still love each other. They're so different, and I don't just mean age-wise."

"It's only been two years."

Greg continued to idle the car after maneuvering it into a narrow parking space. "C'mon, Greg. Didn't you know that in a gay relationship, one year equals ten hetero years?" Ray laughed at his own joke, and Greg laughed too. Not because he understood it to have a grain of truth, but because Ray was laughing so heartily. The levity put Greg's failed assignation with Ruth into perspective.

"Sometimes two years can seem like a lifetime to us too, Ray."

"Don't get serious on me now, Greg. I was just kidding. Did you have a fight with Laura? She didn't lock you out? That why you have all this time?"

"No, no, no," I interjected quickly. "We're fine. Kids are fine. Everything's fine. Just was thinking about another couple I knew."

They walked south in silence for a few minutes; Ray probed Greg to determine if he really was up for second-rate rock-and-roll, and a night of rubbing shoulders with a "bunch of fags—which I can call myself by the way, and you cannot."

"Don't forget the dancing," Greg added.

"My point exactly," said Ray.

Though he was only four years Greg's senior, Ray seemed even older tonight. Greg had always thought as they aged that the difference would show less. But by acting out his sports and adventure fantasies through his writing, he had avoided the wear and tear of an adventurous, life, while Ray had embraced it.

"OK, Ray. You want to stay at our house tonight?"

They turned around and walked back north to the car. Ray called Arthur, and told him that he'd be at the gallery the next morning. He looked over at Greg, just as they reached the car, mouthing the question: *You'll drive me tomorrow?* Greg nodded his head, and Ray said goodbye to Arthur.

"The kids are dyin' to see me, I bet."

"Yeah," said Greg, starting up the engine. He pictured Ruth—back turned toward him, departing the jetty—as they pulled out into traffic. Then he tried to picture her turning around to look at him. He tried to imagine her face, and could not. In its place was Laura's face, beaming as she embraced Ray. That was a scenario he *could* play out, a movie he could watch before it happened, and he consoled himself with the thought that he had not cheated on Laura; and that they would make love that night. She would let him do as he pleased with her, because his love for her had not diminished. And he had earned that right, after her *thing* with Mel.

He placed his hand on the bag between himself and Ray, the bag containing the aqua-socks, and turned onto Highway 1, heading home. He marveled at how little traffic there was heading east, and how bright the sun—just touching the horizon in his rearview mirror—blazed after such an unpromising dawn.