

Postmortem Literature

Fiction

And why do you write? You'd better not tell me — I'm sure your answer will be more eloquent and convincing than mine.

— Roberto Bolaño

Mary Guthrie earned her degree in art history and moved back to North Carolina at the end of the summer. Even before Halloween, Bobby Duncan was miserable without her. By Thanksgiving he was a broken man. All Bobby kept of her was a note she wrote in the middle of their affair and a memory of the night before she left.

Handwritten on the expensive and heavy cream stationery her father had milled specially for her when she first went off to school, the note read:

Bobby, If I were to write all day I could never express myself as well as Henry James can for me, "Why, why have I made this evening such a point ... There comes a day when something snaps, when the full cup, filled to the very brim, begins to flow over. That's what has happened to my need for you — the cup, all day, has been too full to carry. So here I am with it, spilling over you — and just for that reason that is the reason of my life. After all, I've scarcely to explain that there are some hours which I know when they come because they almost frighten me that show me I'm even more so." Every hour I spend with you is such an hour. Today, something snapped, and I mark the time till I can be with you.

After that, she spent the summer explaining why she was leaving.

"I just want to get down there," she'd say, "and think things through. Take stock, you know? Away from this damn place. Spend Christmas with my folks. Go down to the ocean and walk along the beach until things get clear — the way I did when I was a kid."

On the eve of her departure they argued.

"I don't want to live in this town anymore. Around here I'll never be anything but the redhead who stole you from Jenny Duncan."

"Nobody pays attention to that shit in Iowa City," Bobby said. "It's full of writers. Everybody fucks everybody."

"And everybody talks about fucking everybody. I wish you'd come with me. Then you'd see. Why don't you? Come with me, I mean."

"I've got a job," he said.

"Which you hate."

"It's a job."



She gave Bobby her look.

"I'm just not ready yet," he said. "Too many loose ends."

"Yes. I know. Her."

"Mary, don't."

"My daddy wudn't like you much, anyway," she said, deploying her Deep South smile. "But my momma. Mother, she'd adore you."

"Yeah, I play hell with the old ladies."

"See Jenny, Bobby," she said, the smile exiled now. "Talk to her. Get it over with. I mean it. Don't do it for me. Don't do it for us. Do it for yourself."

Bobby had no response to that, and they went back to what they had been doing before the argument began.

When they finished, she said, "I love you."

"I know," Bobby Duncan said and rolled away. "I love you, too."

But he thought, with a feeling far too empty and far too direct for Henry James: *It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter.*

Turned out the difficult thing was not saying goodbye, not spending a final night together, not even sharing what Bobby feared was their last real kiss. The difficult thing was packing her car and leaving it parked in the lot. The stupid little Gremlin her father bought her along with her stationery and her degree sat out there all night that last night, filled with her clothes, with her makeup, with her books. Her things waited in the dark for her to wake up and take them away with her. When Bobby looked out at the overstuffed hatchback piece of shit (as Mary, long and luxuriant, slept naked on the bed behind him), the whole scene — the summer rain and the wet parking lot and the damn Carolina blue car — looked to him like desolation. Come morning, he watched her drive off, and he knew if he really wanted her, sooner or later, he would have to give up his life in Iowa City, his job at *New Midlands*, his hopes of salvaging his dissertation, and maybe more — maybe any hope of finishing the degree altogether, and of finding a sweet spot in academe with the leisure to write the astonishing books he once believed he had in him.

After she'd gone, Bobby took his bitterness out on Jenny. He sent a curt note to her down in Davenport (she never took his calls) explaining he had vacated their place, and she could move back in for school come fall semester if she wanted. He expected no response, got none, and let it go. Late one afternoon, he walked over to the old apartment to pick up a book he needed from among all the books he had left behind, and he saw a light shining in the living room window and the Delta 88 the two of them bought the year they got married parked out front. Bobby watched for a while till he spied Jenny's shadow, and then he headed back to Mary's, where he was sitting out the lease.

Each morning that fall, Bobby Duncan showed up at the office, and each afternoon he rushed back to Mary's afterward to check the mail and the message machine. The place did not even feel empty to him. It was comfortable, if a little lifeless. Nicely decorated digs done by a woman with taste. Bobby never called Mary, though he longed to call her, and he never bumped into Jenny, as he dreaded he might. Life stayed simple and sad. Days Bobby worked at the magazine; nights he drank, sometimes at home, sometimes at this bar or that.

Mary's letter came a week before Christmas:

Dear Bobby, I found a job teaching art history at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, which is not all that far from Raleigh. My father knew the president of the university and arranged for the interview, and that moved things along. The hardest part of all this is that I still love you, but I know I can't ask you to leave Iowa. It's home for you, like this is home for me. I don't know if that means you will try again with Jenny. If not, maybe you could visit me in the spring. I know how all this must sound to you. Cold, spoiled, selfish. I don't know what I imagine can happen. I daydream about you coming down here, but I know that's silly. We could not live here the way we lived out there. Everything is different in the real world. Please come see me in that world, if only for a while. I love you. Mary.

Two other missives Bobby Duncan got that week did not come through the mailbox. One arrived at the office, and the other was tacked to the door of the apartment. The one on the door was a notice to appear in court on the thirtieth of January to show cause why Jennifer Whittington Duncan's petition for divorce and certain property claims should not be honored. The other one surprised him — it was an invitation to attend a Christmas party to celebrate the naming of Carter Cooper, who had just won an award from the American Society of Arts and Letters for *All the Way In*, to the newly endowed John Frederick Chair of Regional American Literature. The ceremony was being held at the residence of Harvey Friedman, the University of Iowa's hotshot Dean of Liberal Arts, who not so long ago — so it was rumored — had enjoyed a fling with one of his graduate teaching assistants, a Southern girl by the name of Mary Guthrie.

Bobby Duncan was drunk. Drunk, dressed, and ready to go. Bobby's pal, the pint-sized Paul Danilov came by at eight. They shared a cab to the party, out beyond Hancher Auditorium, on the posher side of Iowa City. Downtown, Christmas lights, strung along street lamps, gave off faint, pulsating illumination through falling snow and gusts of wind.

It took a while to get to Harvey Friedman's house, which was one of those tasteless monstrosities built northwest of town in the twenties. Thoroughly un-American, resembling some sandcastle children with vivid imaginations might construct on a seashore. Out of place. Awkward. A thing of turrets and stucco walls and sweeping arches. Huge rooms inside. Faux pillars and foreign carpets. All of it screaming to be noticed. If it weren't the late 1970s, one would have expected boys in tuxedos bearing trays of drinks instead of hip girls on hire from the Mill and the Deadwood.

"I feel like I just walked into the Arabian Nights," Bobby said to Danilov.

"Don't let Mrs. Friedman hear you say that," Paul warned. "They tell me she files her teeth."

"She's proud of this place?"

Danilov shook his head at Bobby and snorted. Globes of people had formed here and there about the place, drinks in hand. A lean-faced woman, sporting dramatically bobbed black hair, expertly unmade-up eyes, full lipstickless lips, and a black silk dress most women would sell their souls for, slithered toward them, grinning her perfect hostess grin pinned between chic cheekbones. Her body, though, was a little younger than her face, which was younger than her years, and the dress made sure they noticed.

"Welcome," she said. "Dinner is about to be served. Why don't you join the crowd, have a drink, and we'll be calling for you in a few minutes. I'm sorry, I don't recognize you."

"Paul Danilov," Paul said.

"Robert Duncan."

"Oh," she said. Her smile popped closed for a fraction of a second, then spread wide again. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Did you come alone? The two of you, I mean."

"Mary Guthrie moved back to North Carolina," Bobby said.

"Mary Guthrie? Should I know her?"

"She worked under your husband," Bobby said.

"Oh, yes, yes, he did mention something about her leaving her, um, position. She was a close friend of yours?"

"About as close as she was to Dean Friedman," Bobby said.

Danilov quickly pulled Bobby Duncan away toward a crowd that included Bobby's committee chair Fred P. W. McDowell, some state legislator or the other and his pleasant, friendly wife, and the big-city poet Claire Sibley. Claire looked better, if possible, in tonight's midnight blue silk dress than she had the last time Bobby saw her when he ran into her and her girlfriends Tuesday night at Donnelly's celebrating her engagement to Bobby's old friend and former teacher Carter Cooper (who no doubt was behind tonight's invitation). She



tossed her dark, henna-colored hair, cut in the square style young French women were wearing these days, and turned to Bobby, a bit flushed.

"You mean to tell me," she said, "that you have not sobered up? I understand, I understand. It took me two whole days, and I only drank a fraction of what you drank."

"We'll have to do it again," Bobby said.

"Shhh. After I'm married. Then it will be harder for Carter to toss me out. He wants to talk to you, by the way."

Bobby snagged a drink from a passing beauty.

"Coop? That's novel. Where is he?"

"Off with his butch pixie, naturally," she said. She meant Cooper's agent, Wendy Hough, whose close-cropped hair denied her dainty features. "They are in some smoke-filled room making kissy faces at our host. You know, Bobby, I see less of him now that we're engaged than I did when I lived in Manhattan and was just his long-distance piece of tail."

"He's a fool," Bobby said.

"And I love him," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You know what I mean."

She touched Bobby's cheek with her hand and laughed.

"I've never seen you embarrassed before."

"I've never been embarrassed before."

They were both laughing when McDowell, trimmed in professorial tweeds and topped by a swirling white mane, maneuvered Danilov into his spot in front of the state senator, and himself between Claire and Bobby.

"Did I miss something?" Fred asked.

"We were just discussing the decor," Bobby said. Claire hooted.

"It is ghastly, isn't it?" Fred said, giving them his life-is-slightly-painful smile.

"Have you seen the beast who inhabits the place?" Claire asked, arch and catty and loving it.

"She took a bite out of me at the door," Bobby said. Then, looking at McDowell, who was a Jenny Duncan partisan, he added, "She wanted to know — she didn't ask — but she wanted to know about *that* woman. You remember *that* woman?"

"Yes," McDowell said uncomfortably. Claire watched him with bright, intelligent eyes, as he squirmed a little. "Did Miss — ?" He looked at Claire in a panic, having obviously forgotten her last name. Bobby could have helped him, but he didn't.

"I told him," she said ruefully.

"Mr. Cooper and I would like to speak to you before dinner, Bobby. About the Bagatelli book."



“What Bagatelli book?” Bobby asked blankly. He saw John Endicott headed their way. “Why, what do you know, Professor McDowell,” Bobby said. “Here comes the World’s Most Important Man.” Immediately McDowell moved off to intercept a man wearing blue jeans pressed to a crease, a white Gant stiff with starch, and a jacket so carefully tailored it hurt to look at it. Bobby understood what Fred was up to. There was bad blood between Bobby and Endicott, director of Iowa’s Writers Workshop, and their trading insults did not suit Fred’s purpose tonight.

“My, that’s some chip there,” Claire said after Fred left.

“I suppose you’re right,” Bobby said, shrugging. “But I can’t seem to do much about it.”

“*That woman?*” she asked.

“No,” Bobby said. “Fred’s on Jenny’s team all right, but this here just now doesn’t have anything to do with *that* woman. Except she’s gone, and I can’t get used to it, which makes me grumpier than usual, I suppose. Mary Guthrie, that’s her name.”

“Your tall gorgeous redhead?” she smiled.

Bobby laughed. “Yes. My tall gorgeous redhead.”

“One heard all about her,” she explained. “If I weren’t a soon-to-be-married woman, I’d have been jealous.”

“If Carter hadn’t decided to start speaking to me again, I’d have been glad you were.”

“A lot that will buy you,” she said with a — to Bobby, surprising — sharp edge. “He’s made it clear,” she sort of explained, “he doesn’t want me sitting next to him at the head of the table tonight. He says it’s because I’d have to be introduced *and* explained, and Wendy is worried about crowding the stage with an out-of-town poet. This is his night, he says she says, and she is here to celebrate the triumph of the client she helped put in this chair, not announce our dubious connubial plans. But I think,” Claire went on, her face lighting up in a way Bobby was coming to recognize, “*that the truth may be he simply can’t bring himself to admit publicly to his groupies he’s getting married at all, much less to someone more accomplished at penning pornographic verses about him than they are.*”

They broke away from each other’s eyes to find another drink.

“Look,” Bobby said. “You are about the only person here I don’t want to strangle slowly with my bare hands, you and Danilov, and I’ve been talking to him nonstop for a solid week. How about arranging to sit together at dinner? We can avoid both actually listening to the half-assed speeches and talking workshop gossip or English Department politics.”

“I’d love it,” Claire said.



That was about the time Wendy Hough walked over. “How would you like to join Carter and me and your thesis director for a little talk?”

“Talk’s free,” Bobby said.

“Nothing’s free,” Wendy said. “Not even you.”

“He’s busy,” Claire said, pointedly.

“Excuse us, Claire,” Wendy Hough responded, with exaggerated politeness.

“Oh, stick it, Wendy,” she said.

“You get used to that kind of thing,” Wendy said confidentially as they walked off down the hall. “Lot of competition between writing couples, which is why their marriages don’t last.”

“Sure,” Bobby said and made her wait a moment while he ran down another leggy looker bearing drinks.

It was a large room Dean Friedman probably called his study. It had big French doors, huge windows, dark, oversized furniture, a desk, a liquor cabinet. They stood, left to right: dapper Fred McDowell, Carter Cooper in baggy black and crumpled corduroy, and — surprise — the carefully constructed but ever so casual John Endicott.

“Jack’s pissed at you,” Cooper said.

“Jack’s always pissed at me,” Bobby said.

“Yeah, but this time he has good reason. Bobby, you know I gotta ask you.”

“About the Bagatelli book.”

Vincent Bagatelli was the Workshop’s big name, had been for almost a decade, around the length of time since he wrote his last novel, *Lost in the Rubble*. Fred McDowell and Carter Cooper had managed, over Endicott’s objections and much to his chagrin, to land Bobby Duncan a contract for a Twayne Modern Masters series book about Bagatelli, which would serve dual duty as Bobby’s dissertation in modern letters. It was a sweet deal, so of course he was about to screw it up.

Fred McDowell stepped into the conversation: “The Twayne people keep calling, wanting to know when they can see something.”

“A draft,” Cooper said. “A chapter. Hell, an outline. Anything.”

So the moment has finally arrived, Bobby thought. He had been dreading it since the night he walked out on Jenny, but here it was, and all he could do was come clean.

“Ain’t gonna happen,” Bobby said. McDowell seemed stunned and Cooper surprised, so Bobby went on. “Look, Coop, I tried. I really did. I read all of Bagatelli’s books, even that awful Kerouac imitation, *Young and Raw*. I actually started to write the thesis. But what I kept coming up with was this: Bagatelli represents the failure of the post-World War II novel. His books, Coop, are just no damn good. And if I write a Twayne book saying *that*, Jack here is not going to



sign off on it. Just ask him. And even if he did, the Twayne people won't take it. So I gave it up."

"You gave it up?" McDowell said.

"Yep," Bobby said. "Sorry, Fred."

"When were you going to tell us?"

"Well," Bobby said. "I guess about now."

"You little shit," Cooper finally said. "Are you ever going to grow up, goddamn it? Cynicism is not honesty, Bobby. Seeing through the game is not the same fucking thing as finding the truth."

"All I know is, you scratch Bagatelli, you get ersatz Norman Mailer, only Vince is even more an existential blowhard than Mailer, for all his limpid prose."

Wendy Hough laughed out loud. "You know, Carter," she said, "he's got a point."

But Carter Cooper wasn't listening, Bobby noticed; he was *performing for Jack Endicott*. "A revolution takes more than just dropping out," Cooper said.

"Yeah, save it for your next NEA grant application, Cooper," Bobby said.

"What about the advance?" Endicott asked.

Bobby looked at him. "I blew it on a beer and a pack of cigarettes," he said.

"There's no need to take that tone, Bobby," McDowell said.

They waited. Jack Endicott looked irate. Carter Cooper appeared to be deeply concerned, but Bobby knew that was an act. Wendy Hough, on the other hand, could hardly contain herself. *She loves seeing me self-destruct*, Bobby thought. McDowell, well ... McDowell Bobby felt bad about. Fred was obviously dismayed, looking at Bobby as if he had just trampled one of Fred's famous daylilies. Bobby had always been one of Fred's favorites, often invited for tea with his family to watch the lily garden grow. But what could Bobby say? He simply was not going to write the book.

"Aww, and it was such a *nice* party," Bobby said as he walked casually over to the liquor cabinet, filled his empty glass with first-rate scotch, and left heading for the dining room.

Bobby did not pay much attention to the couple standing back in the door to one of the bedrooms, until she spoke. It was Mrs. Friedman, her unadorned eyes red and wild, her unpainted lips twisted in mockery of a smile suspended between sharp cheekbones.

"So he's the one," she said to the man in the shadow of the doorway as she glared with raw hate at Bobby. "He's the one who stole your whore."

A beautifully manicured hand, nestled by a French cuff with a silver cufflink embossed by the letter *F*, came out of the shadows and took

hold of her — hard — by the arm and jerked her back into the room and closed the door.

Bobby Duncan joined the crowd at the banquet.

A dozen or so sat around the large table and listened to the rumors about the number of people who had been invited for the doings after dinner. The Friedmans had made some concession to the Christian holidays, and if Bobby looked very closely he could make out small arrangements of holly and mistletoe along the cherry wood paneling. When the guest of honor, his still-smiling agent, and his two grim cohorts walked in, Claire went over to talk to him. She stayed a while, but finally she came back to where she had been sitting next to Bobby.

“Now he wants me up front with them,” Claire said. “But I told him there would be plenty of time for that after the wedding.”

“You’re being polite,” Bobby said.

“I know. But he can be so ugly sometimes. He used to be your friend.”

“It happens,” Bobby said.

“The view is better from here, anyway.”

Bobby bumped her knee with his, hard.

“I’m going to do that,” he said, “every time you tell a polite lie.”

“Please,” she said. “I’ve got to get in practice.”

Carter Cooper’s aura filled the room with its distinguished glow as he gave — when urged — a little speech, off the cuff and brilliant, lasting about as long as it should last. Throughout the whole thing, Claire would squeeze Bobby’s arm when Cooper made a good point or said something clever, and he was glad for her. But Bobby had seen the crack in their golden bowl. He thought about Jenny, and he hoped Coop and Claire would be happier than he and Jenny had been. At one point Bobby squeezed Claire’s arm in return. She noticed and, for the first time, took her eyes off the head of the table and looked at him. The question disappeared from her face as soon as it formed itself. She turned back to Cooper.

Dinner was, naturally, delicious, and the table talk, generally, dull. Over coffee, while Cooper dawdled with Wendy Hough and Dean Friedman, Claire looked Bobby over carefully and said, “Let’s go get drunk.”

“Surprisingly good idea,” he said.

“They said the crowd arriving late, the after-dinner bunch, is back in the back room. That’s where the party is. Come on.”

She went to tell Cooper where they were going. He nodded his head curtly and turned back to Friedman and company. Wendy Hough caught Bobby’s eye and shook her head slightly. He raised his shoulders in his customary half-shrug. She laughed to herself and



re-entered the conversation. Claire was angry when she swept Bobby away to the back. Two or three drinks later, and three or four brushoffs to those who tried to talk to them, she grabbed Bobby by the arm and moved closer to say, "You think he's sold out, don't you?"

"Does it matter?" Bobby asked her.

"I'd rather you didn't think that. Not because I care much one way or the other about awards and honors, but because I care about being Carter's wife."

"Then it doesn't matter what I think."

"You bastard," she said. She stepped away. She was no longer smiling. She walked off and joined another group of guests. Bobby saw Dean Friedman working the crowd now. Bobby leaned against the wall and grabbed a fresh glass of wine as it passed. Claire returned.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I," he said. "No, I guess I don't really think he's sold out. But who knows?"

"They want something from you?"

"That's right," Bobby said. "I have embarrassed him by not producing a book he helped sign me up for."

"And you're not going to do it?"

"Nope," he said. "I'm not."

She waited for Bobby to explain, and when he didn't, she said, "I'm a little infatuated with you, you know. That's why —"

"I know," he said.

"Did I tell you I was married before?"

"No, you didn't."

"Yes. To a preacher from Kansas. He went to Union Theological Seminary in New York and I attended college there, not at the seminary, I mean, but in the city, at Barnard. For about a year. I fell in love with my English teacher. He was the first man I — well, I fucked him once before I met the minister and we got married. The honeymoon was hell, and I left the preacher pretty damn quick. And school, too. He still calls me sometimes."

"The English teacher or your ex-husband?"

"My ex-husband. He hasn't changed. Would you kiss me?"

"Not here," Bobby said.

"I don't care."

"I do."

"We're both too drunk to be talking to each other," she said, wistfully.

"Or not drunk enough."

"I had the marriage annulled. Nobody knows, just Carter."

Bobby found them both another drink, but before they could do either any damage, Carter Cooper showed up. He looked desperate when he came into the room, but, after he saw Claire, command



flushed back into his features. By the time he reached the two of them, it had grown into something akin to righteous indignation. "Get away from him," he said. "I don't want you talking to him."

"Carter," she said. "Stop it."

"Right, Coop. You know you don't want to make a scene," Bobby said, perversely.

"Stay away from my woman, you goddamned satyr!"

Carter said it much louder than a guest of honor should ever say anything, and Bobby grabbed him by his dark rumpled shirt.

"Don't go holy on me, Carter," he growled. "This is your town, too, so don't go holy on me." Bobby flung him backwards, and Coop stumbled, straightened himself up, and stomped off. That did it. He had run the gamut, done everything but fall on his face dead drunk. It was time to leave. He had to hand it to the crew from the Mill and the Deadwood. They were extremely cool. One of them waited for Bobby at the door, his coat in hand. She helped him on with it and said "Good night, Bobby" just as Claire walked up to see him out.

"How about that kiss?" Bobby asked.

"Too late," she said. "I lost the mood."

Bobby vaguely planned to walk to the nearest store and call a taxi, but this side of campus there was not a single commercial establishment. The snow was coming down fast now, and he kept telling himself it would be absurd to die of exposure after all this, frozen and curled under by the side of the road. He had just about made up his mind to suffer the indignity of flagging down someone from the party who had decided to leave early when a new Land Rover pulled up behind him and honked.

"Climb in?" Claire asked. Bobby did, and before Claire pulled away, she got a fit of giggles. "You made a fool of yourself, you know," she said. Bobby didn't laugh. "No, no," she said. "It was very poetic, really." She laughed some more. "What you said, I mean."

"Take me home," he moaned, almost smiling.

"Where's home?" she laughed, spinning drunkenly from the curb.

"Won't Coop be upset?" Bobby asked.

"He won't even notice," she said, with blithe bitterness. "He's got Wendy and Jack and Fred and Harvey. Everybody is talking about you, and I grew bored. Carter's too busy repairing his reputation at your expense. By the time he notices I left, it'll be too late to seem odd. I'll tell him tomorrow to pay more attention to me."

When they reached Mary's, Bobby got out and walked round to Claire's side of the Land Rover and leaned in when she rolled down the window and gave her the kiss they had talked about all night.

"I shouldn't do this," Bobby said. "I don't exactly know how to say



it. I've been dead drunk for I can't remember how long. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I'm mad at Coop. So are you. And that's no good, no good for either of us. I miss Mary, and I can't sleep nights thinking about her. All that, all that," Bobby hung his head down by the side of the Land Rover for a moment. "All that means I shouldn't ask you to come up. But, will you come up?"

"I said I was a little infatuated with you," she said, watching the dials on her dashboard. "I didn't say I wanted to fuck you. And I know I don't want to wreck my life over it, do you understand?"

"I know," Bobby said. "It's silly. Stupid. I shouldn't have asked."

Claire cut the engine. She opened the door. She took hold of Bobby's arm. "Anyway," she said, looking away. "I owe this one to myself. This once."

"This once," Bobby echoed, stumbling along beside her into the building.

Inside the apartment, she said: "Nice. This must be hers."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Stop apologizing. It's nice."

"Sit down," he said. "I'll make us a drink."

When Bobby handed it to her, he said, "Let me ask you, you still plan to marry Coop?"

"Yes," she said and shrugged. Looking around the room she added, "We are only going to get along, you and I, because we both know we are not going anywhere together."

Later, after a little blow, they went into the bedroom together.

Some stuff Bobby Duncan thought that night: *Does she fuck better than Mary? She seems so small, so compact, her skin so dark, much darker than Mary's. Why did I ask her to come up? Does this qualify — technically — as cheating? Some men might find her better looking than Mary. We do not fit like Mary and I did. Is she thinking about Carter? Did she mean that about doing this only once? Does she think I'm too tall?*

Other things he noted: *the way her dress, blue silk, drifted to the floor; the simple surrender of her small, neat, elegant body; her lips (fuller than Mary's); her breasts (rounder, larger actually, given how small she was, than Mary's); her gem-deep navel; her thin ankles as she stepped away from the free fall of her dress after she slipped off her boots; the curve of her back into boyish hips; the thatch of pubic hair (dark, not henna).*

A few observations he made to and questions he asked of himself: *I'm uneasy because I find her so exciting. Mary would be whispering to me now. Why do some women make only sounds, others use words? Why does this have to feel as good as it does, damn it, damn it? Does she think it's good?*

A dozen things Claire Sibley said to Bobby Duncan that night:

1) Did anyone ever tell you you make love a little like a woman? No, no, it's very, very nice. I like it. A lot. It might even have been wonderful, if your heart had been in it, too.

2) It's sort of refreshing to fuck someone who is as self-conscious as I am. It's always a little embarrassing the first time, right?

3) Did you ever want something badly, and then when you got it, not want it anymore? No, not not want it exactly, but not be sure you wanted it? I mean, you want it so badly for so long, and suddenly you have it, and having it, well, frightens you? It makes you think, is this it, then? Is this all there is? Don't look at me like that. I'm not talking about you. About us doing this. This is nice. I'm trying to explain the way I feel about getting married to Carter. Suddenly I find I have developed a deep, abiding satisfaction with the state of being single. Otherwise, maybe I wouldn't be here.

4) I think it might be hard to stick with the just-this-once thing. I don't know what it is about you. One hears about you and women. You know you're good-looking. I don't have to tell you that. But it's not that. There are a lot of men better looking. And it's clearly not your sterling personality. You proved that tonight. Or your strength of character. You proved that tonight. So what is it? You strike women as kind of loose, but that makes it sound too seedy. Listen, I'm not trying to psychoanalyze you. It's just that I think I want to see you again, fuck you again to be exact — maybe fuck you a lot — and I'm trying to decide why. So I think, maybe, it has to do with looseness. One look at you and any woman would know you were available. You just look like you don't care about any of it, you know, the bullshit. And that turns us on, I guess. Turns me on at least. How about Wednesdays? Maybe I can see you Wednesdays. Carter's always tied up on Wednesdays. He teaches his workshop then. I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe I shouldn't. Damn, it's almost too easy.

5) I think you should think seriously about running off to Mary.

6) It's funny. I don't know her but I seem to admire her. For you to feel the way you do about her — she must be some woman. Makes me think I'd like her. Weird, huh?

7) Maybe it's because the only time I've seen you express anything, I don't know, honest, well at least, *uncalculated*, was tonight when you told me her name and said she was gone, and you did not know what to do about it. You looked almost surprised. I think you were telling the truth and that surprised you.

8) Do you — do you want to see me again?

9) After we're married, I think I'm going to have to tell Carter about us. Not to get back at him or make him jealous or, so help me God, anything at all to do with that fucking asshole, Sigmund Freud. But I want to try to be honest with him.



10) I wonder if they are still talking about you at the party?

11) I wonder if Carter ever noticed I left? I don't care. See, I go to bed with you once, and already I'm beginning to sound like you.

12) That's nice. That's very nice. This time, hey, this time? Try to put a little heart into it along with your dick.

Before morning, they had taken their measure of each other. Twisting her compact, supple body like a serpent on a grill, Claire let him know her lips would always be wet for him. With her smooth arms and her hard-biting lust, she could bury what traces remained of Bobby's antique conscience in the bedding they shared. On those days they would find for each other before Bobby deserted her, Claire would strip him of his clothes and his soul, replacing on mattresses sagging in ecstasy the notion of himself he lost tonight in the cascade of silk.

When Bobby went to kiss her before she slid from white sheets to blue dress, the light of a surprise dawn caught her thin, ribbed body in a certain way, and he imagined he saw her skeleton underneath the skin, and the marrow froze in him from the thought of it lying there under him, working to a frenetic and dry climax, clacking, bone on bone. It vanished as it came, and there was Claire Sibley again, her body fully fleshed, a poet in love with another man, confused and giving, aggressively, almost childishly — exuberantly — sinning.

It was time to leave, he knew. Time to flee Iowa City. For Bobby Duncan, now, here, there was nothing.

The January thaw, with its hint of spring, made water gush in the gullies of the street again, and the lifeless, brown grass beneath the vanishing snow spongy to the step. Bobby stood behind a group of youngsters on the steps of Iowa's Old Capitol Building and watched Jenny Duncan climb out of some guy's car — a sensible and fairly new Chevy — and peck a morning goodbye before heading with determination down the damp sidewalk toward second semester classes. She watched as she walked, dancing lightly once or twice to avoid the mud. She saw Bobby approaching, and she slowed her walk to keep pace with his.

"The lawyer warned me you might try to get in touch," Jenny said.

"Professional caution," Bobby replied. "The more I agreed to everything, the more suspicious he became."

"You always have a smooth explanation," she said. She stopped walking. She put her hands in the pockets of the open camelhair coat. The sweater underneath Bobby remembered from some other Christmas, but the somber wool skirt she wore was new. She had pulled her corn-silk yellow hair away from her face and clipped it tight behind her ears. The intent written in her walk as she crossed



the quadrangle, and, now, the long range of her blue eyes, reminded Bobby why he once fell for her.

"You look the same," she said politely. "Is it true you quit your job?"

"I gave notice," he said.

"Still drinking?"

"Yes," Bobby said.

"How do you eat? You didn't have that much in savings. The lawyer said he had never met a man your age and with your financial history who had accumulated so little. He refused to believe I wasn't demanding alimony. I'm not, so don't worry."

"I'm not worried, Jenny," Bobby said. "I'm still collecting salary till the next issue comes out, and I've got vacation coming and sick leave. That's getting me through."

"I have class," Jenny said. She seemed surprised, as if it hadn't occurred to her Bobby might breach campus to find her. "Funny. I thought you would be bitter."

"Yes," he said.

She paused. Looked at him.

"You can wait at Bushnell's Turtle or the Hamburg Inn, I don't care. It shouldn't be too crowded right now and you can get coffee. I'll join you when I'm finished."

"I'll do Hamburg Inn."

A group of coeds strolled by, and one — a bit taller than the others, with bouncing red hair — looked back at Bobby as he watched her.

"See you there," Bobby said to Jenny just to say something.

Jenny had noticed the girl, too. She hooked her head to one side as she looked, and she seemed thoughtful. She said sarcastically: "I had forgotten about all that —"

"I'll meet you at Hamburg Inn," he said.

Bobby waited an hour. The joint was too small to be comfortable, but the students loved it. The puny tables and booths were rickety. The old wood chairs wobbled. When Jenny strolled in, one of the cooks behind the cashier chatted with her as she paid for her coffee. She sat down without a word, then said abruptly, "What did you want to talk about?"

"I didn't want to talk so much as take leave."

"You're leaving Iowa City? My, oh my!"

"In a few months," Bobby said. "As soon as I save up enough money to buy a used car." She watched her coffee, stuck for what to say next. Her face was flat, expressionless, and the expanded seconds ticked tediously by, weighing them down with their oppressive passing. Bobby felt as if they both were participating in some unwelcome ritual, only a fraction of each present, the way he remembered feeling as a child when he went to church with his parents.



“It’s her, isn’t it?” Jenny sneered.

“*That* woman,” Bobby said, as much to himself as to Jenny. “Her name’s Mary, Mary Guthrie.”

“I don’t care what her name is.”

“I saw you with your pal this morning,” he said to head her off.

“That’s creepy,” she said. “You spying on me.”

“I wasn’t spying. I was waiting.”

They sat, not speaking. Jenny sighed. She clacked her polished nails against the ceramic cup. Then she said as if it were pointless, but required: “I suppose it must have been bad for you, but I wasn’t thinking about you, I was thinking about me. I’m sorry, I didn’t actually know how to handle it, and I don’t think I could have dealt with it any other way, *then*. *Now* — it’s different. I don’t care, so I think maybe I could have done it some other way. But I guess we never really know how to handle things, even when we think we do.”

“I suppose not,” Bobby said. Jenny made a sour face and drank her coffee.

“Look,” she said, exasperated. “I know I did a lot of stupid things. But one gets confused, you know? It’s hard, sometimes, to tell the difference between your own life and — well, whoever you happen to be with. Like tearing up your thesis on Vince Bagatelli. That was dumb. And it didn’t fix the pain you put me through.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bobby said petulantly. “I haven’t missed it.”

“Just the same,” she snapped, “it was a stupid thing to do ... excuse me a minute.”

A couple of coeds Bobby didn’t recognize from his days in the English/Philosophy Building had come into the place and taken a table near the window. Jenny excused herself for a moment and sat down with them, and all three dropped into the conspiratorial crouch of female friendships. During the time Bobby spent finding the courage to see her again, he imagined he would feel all kinds of things at this moment, especially the self-serving hatred for her that got him through the nights when he thought more about the past than about Mary. But actually seeing Jenny, Bobby felt nothing so complicated, nothing intense or unbearable, only a peculiar, almost relaxed, regret. The fact that she seemed indifferent and acted put out by their meeting helped. Bobby did not fully believe in her mask, but he was willing, for convenience, to accept it, if they could manage to make the mask permanent, final. It was true, as folks always said, most things become flattened by time, and like them Bobby was willing to phrase it more comfortingly and to call it healed instead of flattened.

When Jenny sat down across from Bobby again, she began talking about her classes, as an expedient way, he thought, to get through this, their last conversation. She said she was taking a philosophy

class as well as her lit courses. She had signed up for a seminar in existentialism, she said, believe it or not. She had gotten interested in the existentialists over the winter in Davenport (an absurd notion) after some friend of her mother's mentioned at a party that Nietzsche had really been a godsend when she (her mother's friend) had split up with *her* husband. She had come up to Iowa City a few days at the end of last semester (Bobby didn't tell her he had seen her in the apartment) specifically to sit in on some classes by a guy named David Lachterman she had heard a lot about who taught a course in the subject. She liked him, she said. He was smarter than Bobby, she said. Finding a man she thought was smarter than him, she said, helped as much as anything, even more than her new relationship with Edward, whoever Edward was. He probably drove a Chevy, Bobby thought.

When Bobby had enough of her patter, he cut her off, asking her abruptly: "Why did you act like that before I left?"

"Why do we have to talk about it?"

"The way you handled it may be fine for you, but it's not for me. It makes me feel as if things are suspended somehow. I'm not talking about the fucking divorce. I don't care about the damn divorce. I just need some sense of finality. That's why I wanted to say goodbye. I thought I could put an end to all this."

"You want to write an end to our life?" Jenny glared.

"It's better than the self-deluded drivel you've opted for," Bobby said. She took careful control of herself, obviously determined not to lose her composure.

"What is it you want to know?" she asked, wearily.

"I don't know," Bobby said. "Why you ripped up the thesis, I guess. I mean, Jesus, *every* copy, Jen? Wasn't destroying the original enough a gesture?"

Jenny huffed, as if it were useless to go on. She frowned. She sipped her coffee. She clattered her fingernails on the cup. She acted as if she carried the tiresome burden of all knowledge on her small shoulders and Bobby was supposed to notice. She was world-weary, disaffected with all conversation, all facts, all truth. "OK," she said, "I'll tell you. It doesn't matter to me. But it's not going to be very pleasant.

"Our life, you, the marriage, it just got to seem, well, *seedy* is the word I come up with. Decadent. It simply struck me, the way a curious fact in a magazine piece strikes you. It struck me why you would never be a real writer, why it would never be like we always used to talk about it being. You were decadent, corrupt. I'm sorry, I don't especially want to hurt you — I'm happy and I'd just as soon you be, too, though I don't care *that* much. But that's how I felt. Like the little redhead this morning. They are all fascinated by the pretty face of corruption."



When Bobby laughed, Jenny said, “Go ahead, shrug it off like always. When did we stop talking about all the things you were going to do, Bobby? God,” she said to herself, “you can waste so much time on hopeless causes. All those days I would think: if the little things would improve, if you would stop drinking, or dropping your clothes on the floor, or offer to cook dinner, just once — anything — then I could take it. Then I could take having maybe made a mistake when I married you. If you would just write, just do something. How long can you keep going telling yourself you plan to write someday? When, when, *when*?”

“And then you let Carter Cooper con you into doing a book about Vincent Bagatelli, whose work you actually loathed. It just struck me: you had given up trying. You had been polluted somehow. By fear of failure. By drinking too much. By reading too much Derrida. By the job at *New Midlands*. I don’t know. But I didn’t want to be a part of the corruption any longer. So when you started fucking her, this latest one, I just ripped up your little life like you had ripped up mine.”

She gulped her coffee and set it back on the table with finality, looking at Bobby with the blank expression she had used throughout her explanation. Then her face twisted up into a half sneer. “Are you in love with *that* woman?”

“Yes,” Bobby said. “Well, was, maybe. But it seems unreal now that she’s gone.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s not here.”

“Are you seeing someone else?” Jenny asked, knowingly. “Now. Here, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“I feel sorry for her,” she said. She gathered up her things in the booth to go. She gave Bobby her unyielding look. “For this Mary Guthrie, I mean. She doesn’t know yet you will always betray her. That’s what true corruption means, Bobby, for you. You just can’t help betraying the people close to you. And still lots of them just adore you. Amazing. I did. Despite everything. For far too long. And now I’m done. I hope this is final enough for you: You are dead to me. The end. Period.”

In the months before Bobby Duncan left Iowa City, he became hooked on daytime television, never missing if he could help it an episode of *All My Children* or *General Hospital*. He spent a few hours each week at the magazine, working off the time his checks covered that weren’t leave days he had to use or lose before he left. Some nights he wasted drinking with Paul Danilov and listening to Paul gossip about the American Studies crowd. Wednesdays, after the soaps, Bobby spent with Claire.



Meanwhile, he corresponded with Mary, and the avalanche of letters and growing number of late night calls finally convinced her he truly planned to move from Iowa to North Carolina. She looked around for work for him nearby, and she wrote she had found him a good job possibility with the North Carolina Historical Society. She knew the director, she said, who was seeking an assistant he could trust, someone who knew how to think and how to research and how to write. She had told him all about Bobby, she said, and he was most anxious to discuss the position of editor for the society's publications. Bobby got in touch with him, and they exchanged credentials. At length, he asked Bobby out for an interview in late August.

On the last Wednesday afternoon Bobby Duncan spent in Iowa City, Claire rolled over, across his chest, holding her face in front of his with unaccustomed seriousness, and asked, "Do you think you'll marry her?"

"I don't know," Bobby said. "We haven't talked about it."

"I think you'll marry her," she said sullenly. She and Coop had been married in the early spring. She had not told Carter about her and Bobby as she had once thought she might, but Bobby had pointedly not been invited to the ceremony. Wedded life became Claire. She slid into it, despite her doubts, with enviable grace and assurance, and they never mentioned Carter Cooper again — or love for that matter.

"I think," Bobby said, "that you don't marry a woman. Or a man, in your case. You go to bed with her; you make love to her; but you don't marry her. You marry the circumstances she finds herself in, the situation that contains both of you. If the situation is right, I'll marry her."

It was bullshit, of course, but Claire Cooper seemed consoled, or so Bobby thought.

Mostly, he sat home watching TV, letting money build up in his bank account. After a while he paid the Modern Letters program back the advance from the Twayne Series and even bought a car, a used Buick due any day to die on the street, victim of a badly creaking universal joint. The car would get him as far as Carolina, Bobby figured, and maybe run for a day or two longer.

It was summer — and hot — when Bobby Duncan left Iowa City for good. It would be autumn before he fully settled in the South with Mary Guthrie. Maybe he was corrupt; he accepted the possibility. But Bobby had come to believe, Bobby had convinced himself, that corruption was just a nasty word some people used for the choices they saw other people make.

The water off Jekyll Island was very blue. There was no ice here, no sub-zero coldness, only sand, cypress, and a few black people who

spoke a strange language mixed with their English. Mary's father owned an impressive vacation house bordering the beach on the north end, and — since Bobby had aced his interview and spent a month settling into his new job, finding a place to live, and buying a new set of clothes more suitable to the South — he and Mary were celebrating their reunion by hiding out on the island with each other for a week.

Mary came in from a late afternoon swim and left her bathing suit on the patio as she showered behind the weathered cypress wall fencing them off from the outside. Tanned a coppery red, she was better looking than ever. They sat on lounge chairs, drinking Pimm's, and watched the sun go down.

"How did we ever stand it," she said, "in that awful little city?"

"Don't be too hard on the place," Bobby answered. "I was born nearby, and some of my friends still live there. They can't stop the days from turning cold or the competition from turning cutthroat."

"Don't you like it here?"

"It's a dream," he mumbled.

She stretched her body, languorous, sensual. "You do seem happy," she laughed. "And that's odd. I never imagined you happy."

"It's the final corruption," he smiled, sounding cynical but feeling uneasy. "Happiness. Compared to it, all other sins pale. You'll never — never — meet a happy poet. Not one who's any good."

Slowly she sank into a sweaty slumber. She drifted in and out, but when she finally woke, it was almost dark, and the mosquitoes had started to bite. She seemed much more serious now for some reason. She knitted her brow. She looked at him.

"Bobby," she said, almost angrily. "*Will* we be happy?"

Bobby glanced at the sun, red-eyed from its work, drowning itself off the west side of the island in Jekyll Sound. He looked at her body, traced by the sun's redness, an image for him of pure pleasure. He liked the way the trees and the Spanish moss and the ferns grew new colors in the dusk — dusky dark, they called it around here. He watched her eyes, colorless now that the light was going. He smiled. He shrugged. He said nothing. Maybe he could have said yes. Bobby suspected the language to say yes was growing in him like the surprising wish for the child Mary may already have been carrying, but he believed it was still too delicate, too fragile, to expose it to syllable and syntax and time.

