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Goldie, my secretary, stands as I approach. She has her coat on, and I know she is eager to be off for her lunchtime workout.

“You need to wolf down your sandwich, Ned. You have to be at the Yale Club by 1:30.” She looks pleased at my surprise; she loves to change my schedule. “It’s Julia. She’s arriving on the 1:25 from New Haven. She’s been up at her mother’s clearing things out and will spend the night with you before flying back.” She shoulders her gym bag. “Full instructions summarized on a three-by-five in your overcoat pocket. Bye.”

Julia Flagg. Julia quit Yale after completing a year there and entered the Naval Academy the summer after 9/11. Now, seven years later, she’s an FA-18 pilot, just six days and a wake-up from her first deployment.

Julia’s hero picture is on my credenza: a Navy-issue, black-and-white of her suited up, hoses everywhere, helmet under her arm, standing in front of her jet. I look at it as I eat my egg salad sandwich.

Visitors notice the photo, of course, and ask my relationship to her. I say we’re like family, like favorite-uncle-to-favorite-niece. At first, I ventured to add that we were pals when she was growing up, but this seemed to confuse the matter, so I quit with the footnotes.

I study the other framed photo: one of the four of us maybe twelve years ago. Julia’s father, John, is on the left: a gangly, patrician George Plimpton look-alike, leaning on his cane, sick already but still cheerful. Julia’s mother, Eadie, looking radiant and every bit the leading lady, is

sandwiched between John and me, arms tight around our waists. Then me, Ned Rubin, an aging beach boy in a Parrothead T-shirt, looking faintly confused. My friends in the firm get a kick out of this image, for I'm a mergers and acquisitions attorney – buttoned-up, clubby, Yale Law. Julia, then twelve or thirteen, stands in profile on my right, arms around me, coltish, already inches taller than her mother, looking precocious. She's a woman to reckon with now, self-assured in the way of a natural leader, quick-witted and popular with her cohort. But I haven't been alone with her enough in recent years to know what else. About this, I am curious.

I exit the building onto Park Avenue and turn south, pleased to be outside, the wind at my back for the six blocks to where the avenue tunnels through the MetLife Building. Bracing late-October weather. Out at the tip of Long Island the surfing would be perfection. In high school I played hooky on Fridays like this, schlepping my surfboard out to Montauk on the train.

At Grand Central I take up a perch on the West Balcony overlooking the Main Concourse. The display board has the New Haven arriving on the lower level.

I came to know Julia and her parents as summer neighbors at Groton Long Point on the Connecticut shore. The Flaggs were among the few year-round residents. Eadie was the public face of the Mystic Seaport Museum, their head of fundraising. John taught at Yale–New Haven Hospital. Happily, over those dozen summers prior to Annapolis, Julia glommed onto me. I taught her to sail, and then to fly. I watched, alone and nervous, as she took off in my Piper Cub from a deserted grass airstrip on her first solo flight.

I watch the ramp at the far end of the concourse. The last time I saw her – ten months ago, when she got her wings – she was in full dress uniform the whole time. Today she'll be in

civvies, and I don't know what to expect. I don't spot her, in fact, until she is past the four-sided clock. Her outfit is an odd mash-up of merchant sailor and rodeo cowgirl: black wool cap, pea coat, and too-long Wranglers over tasseled roper boots. She shoulders an elaborate desert camouflage backpack, the broad waist strap buckled over her coat.

As she tops the stairs, I step in front of her. First a hard look, then recognition. We embrace.

“Ned! You were supposed to wait across the street. I wanted it to be like our old routine.”

We hug. “This is hardly routine, Julia. It's been a long time.”

“Indeed,” she says. She slurps my earlobe, puffs in my ear.

I let go of her, and my briefcase as well, muttering an oath in Yiddish. She laughs.

We have impeded traffic. An attractive well-dressed woman, my age, waits while I retrieve my briefcase. “Get a fucking room,” she says as she pushes by, leaving me blinking, but Julia takes me by the arm and turns me toward the Vanderbilt Avenue door.

Clear of traffic, I pull her aside. “Stop with the pranks, Julia. Please.”

“Sorry. Just that it's fun to be impulsive again, playful, civilian. We'll be adult now.”

The Yale Club is just across the street. Inside, Julia goes straight to the bathroom, still bundled in her wool cap and pea coat and I wonder if she might be ill. I wait for her in the Main Lounge, a grand, high-ceilinged room that somehow manages to feel warm and intimate. I settle in our traditional grouping of armchairs and order drinks.

The year she was at Yale, Julia would often accompany her mother on these Friday treks – after her fall rowing and until the spring collegiate season began – taking the same train as today,

meeting here. Eadie, Julia's mother, was my lover. She died of cancer fifteen months ago. Breast cancer, virulent, but in no hurry.

Julia appears at the far end of the room carrying her coat and shaking her hair out with a flourish. Without her hat, I hardly recognize her; she's let her hair grow since she got her wings. Though she's my height, six feet, she's always had a waif-style hairdo. This thick mane – like her mother's – suits her better. She's applied red lipstick, another look I've never seen. She has on a tight pale-green cotton sweater as well, one with vertical ribbing, a head-turner like her mother favored. Julia's always been of the baggy, rumped school of fashion. I am so thrown by Julia's transformation that I fail to stand as she takes her seat. A young man in an adjacent grouping of chairs lowers his newspaper and has a good look at her. Horny bastard. I shudder, recalling the ear business.

“Cheers,” Julia says, and raises her Manhattan in toast.

I raise my glass and take a reluctant sip. I've lost my taste for this cocktail, her mother's favorite. “How was it? Up at the house?”

“I've decided not to sell it. I'm told the rent for the summer will net more than my annual salary. I shit-canned all the personal stuff. Except for one box – framed pictures and albums, and her baby book, which I'd never seen. Lugged it up to the attic and sat there on the dirty floor with it, finishing off her Mount Gay Rum, just fiddling with what I'd kept. Ended up having a cry.” She rubs her hipbone. “Fell off the ladder coming down. Drunken sailor. Anyway Ned, how goes the lawyering?”

“Managing now . . . amounts to herding cats. I'm not suited to it. I said as much but had no choice in the matter.”

“You lose a bet?”

“No, the Old Man came in and quit one Monday. No warning. Chucked it all. Went to live with a female fishing guide he met in Montana. I didn’t want the job, which made me more attractive than the person who did.”

Ten years ago, when Julia’s dad died, I would have quit the firm myself, bought a Jiffy-Lube franchise or something, just to live with her mom. But Eadie wouldn’t have it; she needed her space. Never budged from that stance.

“So,” she says, “couldn’t you just step down and go back to what you were before?”

“No. I’d have to push my replacement aside. I have no stomach for that.” I perk up. “Sometimes, Julia, on Friday nights, with enough wine, I imagine myself repotted as Jimmy Buffett on a permanent Bain de Soleil vacation, sailing the Caribbean, flying my vintage seaplane into beautiful harbors, dancing the samba with women in Brazilian outfits.”

“You have the cash for it?”

“Couple of years. Four maybe. You? Will it be Admiral Flagg?”

“Maybe. We’ll see how I deal with the loneliness at sea. Right now, you buddy up with the opposite sex and the fraternization police create a file. The guys, especially, are spooked.”

“What would you do, Julia, if you got out?”

“Sell Long Point, cash the stocks, pitch a partnership with you in Margaritaville.”

“I wouldn’t count on me. More likely I would buy a surf shop in Montauk. Jello Jones called the other day. Wants to sell.”

“Well, that’s not quite as appealing.” She stretches her legs. “Squash tomorrow. Stand by to get your ass waxed!”

“Wax my ass? You’ll win, eventually. I’m twice your age.”

“Not after this year. Not from then on . . . less than twice, every year more so.”

I look at Goldie’s three-by-five card. *Saturday: Court at 10:00. Rubs after.*

In the car, Julia stares out the window for the first several blocks, then says: “Why did Goldie say you wouldn’t want to go with me to Ground Zero, but would, for me?”

“Old Jewish saying – ‘Why untie a sack full of snakes?’”

“Because you haven’t killed them off?”

“Maybe I’m a pacifist.”

“Maybe you’re a pussy,” she says, and the driver chuckles.

“Look, I can understand it being important for you – motivational. For me, I see no value.”

“It *is* important to me, and that you’re along. Think about it. I had to fill out that next-of-kin form last week. Guess who?”

“Oh,” I say, all I can manage.

She stares at me, her face a question, but then turns to look out the window, thinking better of some impulse. Still looking out the window, she says: “How are you doing about Eadie?” She has always referred to her parents by their given names. “You clear of her?”

“Mostly.” I loosen my tie and unbutton my collar. “Hard to get clear of those last months.”

“I don’t think there are many men that would have dropped everything for six months, nursed her like that.”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“Much older couples. Movies.”

“Yeah, well.”

“My last emergency leave, watching you with her.” She tears up. “I fell in love with you.”

More than a bit dramatic, this, coming from Julia. And crying always throws me, and I’ve never seen Julia cry – she didn’t at the funeral – so I struggle to make sense of this and decide it’s maybe about mortality and the next-of-kin bit. I search for words. “I’m blessed then.”

“You are,” she says, and after a beat or two her face brightens.

The driver drops us quayside in front of the American Express Building. We walk the extent of the marina. I walked here at lunch when Morgan Stanley was my client responsibility. Back then they were over in the North Tower.

I love the briny sea air, fresher today on the wintery wind, but still carrying traces of diesel ferry exhaust, creosote, and garbage. It reminds me of riding liberty boats to and from the carrier – Barcelona, Naples, Piraeus. What a cakewalk I had: a navy scholarship to Wisconsin, a party school; then two peace-time deployments to the Mediterranean. Julia will be shot at.

“Smells of liberty call,” I say.

“Yes.” She squints at the sky above the World Financial Center complex. “Were the Towers visible from here?”

“They were. Crane-your-neck high. Looming.”

She stares at the sky for a long minute, her jaw working, then takes a picture with her phone.

At the Memorial Preview Site, we stand at the windows in the viewing room and stare at Ground Zero, the vast bombed-out ruin of it, now littered with construction equipment and material. I lead her to the scale model and renderings of what the Memorial will look like when it's finished. Julia wants to review the pictures and videos of the crashes and collapses. I tell her to take her time. I'd wait inside St. Paul's Chapel, next door.

Out on the street, the noise and dust and diesel fumes, and the stalag look of the concertina-topped fence combine to make me feel faint. I sit on the filthy steps with my briefcase on my lap. I picture my former assistant, pregnant and planning to relocate with her husband out of the city to New Jersey. I arranged for Morgan Stanley to hire her. It would ease her future commute: there was a Port Authority terminal right at the Trade Center, a direct train in from Newark.

"You didn't make it to St. Paul's." Julia's voice. I reach for her hand and lever myself to my feet. She wipes away tears with the cuff of her coat.

I nod in the direction of the chapel. "Want to see it?"

She looks over at all the makeshift memorials surrounding it. "No," she says, "I've seen enough." She braces up like a hawk, her eyes hard. I see the warrior in her, palpable, unmistakable. I find this reassuring.

She hooks my arm and leans in. I lead her away, feeling loved. A pinch-me feeling, and it lingers as we walk down Church Street, six or seven blocks in silence, the wind buffeting us at the cross streets. As we approach Trinity Church, I suggest we stop there to warm up.

We kneel in a rear pew, and I drop my eyes momentarily, then stare blankly down the long narrow canyon toward the altar. I feel Julia's gaze and turn to it.

She says, "Were you praying?" She knows I'm not observant.



“In my own way.”

“What for?”

“That no harm comes to you.”

“That I not auger in, buy the farm?”

I’m surprised they still use those terms. “That you not get groped some night on the hangar deck, that you’re not shot down and taken prisoner.” She is silent, expressionless.

“And what would you wish for, Julia?”

“More that I don’t screw the pooch . . . that I perform well, that my squadron mates come to think of me as having the right stuff. Not, you know, as pretty-good-for-a-woman.”

“Amen.” I cross myself and rise and she laughs at that.

Outside, I point down Broadway to the Battery: “The Canyon of Heroes . . . ticker tape parades.”

She takes it in. “The old newsreels,” she says. “Cool.”

On the crowded subway, a man my age looks at Julia’s backpack and offers her his seat. She nods and he gives her a salute. I stand in front of her, straddling her pack. She isolates herself with her iPhone, a perfectly natural thing to do on New York public transportation, but the connection I’d felt with her is gone, and I feel an age gap I hadn’t earlier. I glance at my reflection in the window. The age is there, the grey, the squint-lines. Gravitas, I decide finally, it suits me. My morale improves.

I think of our destination, the restaurant Syrah. One night, maybe fifteen years ago, we came in as a threesome for the first time – Eadie, John and me. Before that it had been just Eadie

and me. She introduced John as her husband, to which Manny, the owner, must have shown a flicker of awkwardness, and John, the psychoanalyst, picked up on it, and, as always, was eager to expound on our unconventional relationship. He launched into his spiel: “Relax my man, I’m thirty years the senior of this luscious woman and in need of a succession plan. So we’re sharing her until I check out, and Ned here – a fine man, as I’m sure you agree – has a chance to get up to speed.”

I step aside to let a passenger with a stroller exit. Julia grabs my arm. “Ned! Don’t we change at Grand Central?”

We scramble for the doors, and they shut on her backpack, but reopen to a recorded message about blocking the doorways. Julia aggressively opens zippers to check for damage. There doesn’t seem to be any, but she glares at me. “What the hell?”

“My mind wandered. With you gone millennial, checking Facebook or whatever.” I feel hurt by her tone, but I try to hide it by looking angry.

“I was sending a request to extend my leave a day. Imagine that, wanting to linger with your sorry ass.”

She has more fighter instinct than I ever did. Certainly more swagger. A train approaches: the Six. “This is ours.”

Seated, I say: “We get off at Seventy-seventh, in case you’re through talking to my sorry ass.” She gives me a narrow look, turns away and is silent. I remember being stressed before deployments, thinking about night catapult shots and arrested landings. But I know better than to ask. Carrier pilots don’t talk about the fear. It’s there, unavoidable. You handle it.

I break the silence. “I was just remembering you up in Long Point. You were maybe seven. Dinner outside. Long teak table, Citronella candles. Some colleague of your dad was holding forth about the uprising in Poland, where he’d just done a lecture tour. You were bored I’m sure, the only kid. Suddenly you were on your feet, standing on your chair, tinkling my wine glass with a spoon. When you had everyone’s attention, you cleared your throat and said: ‘Ned here,’ nodding at me, ‘wants me to call him Uncle Ned. Anything I want actually. Well, he’s not my uncle, he’s my best friend Ned, and he will be for the rest of my whole life. Right, Ned?’ Then you downed a big gulp of Sancerre.”

“I don’t remember this.”

“Your father stood and raised his glass in toast and said: ‘To Julia, and to Ned, and to friendship.’ Then you curled up in my lap and fell asleep in my arms.”

“Adorable,” she says. “In Eadie’s things I found a handful of cufflinks, none with a mate. John didn’t wear them. They have to be yours. I assume you were her only lover.”

“This is our stop.”

We come up from the subway to darkness and damp cold. At First Avenue, we huddle close, waiting for the walk signal. “The cufflinks,” she says. “The Grumman Mach II pin is obviously yours. Did you get pinned, Ned, like a frat boy in heat?”

“She stole things like a packrat. She’d hide the item in a sock, my briefcase, or toiletries kit. I would put it somewhere where it would surprise her back, make her smile and miss me.”

“You have the mates to the cufflinks?”

“Tossed them after she died. Tossed everything. Figured it would help with the letting go.”

“The cufflinks are like us, Ned – only-children, and mate-less.” She laughs. “Mate-less in Manhattan.”

The tiny restaurant is always cozy and welcoming, but in the winter even more so. One wall of the restaurant has a bench running the length of it and the narrow tables-for-two are arranged close together. My usual spot is in the center, on the bench, facing the room. I offer it to Julia, but she prefers the chair. The hostess sets three smallish glasses of red wine in front of each of us, on paper coasters with the name of the wine. “Three Shirazes from South Australia. Enjoy.”

We raise the left-most glass in toast, but neither of us slurps, sniffs, squints, and all that; we just gulp it down.

“Whew!” Julia says. “That’s good.”

The Romanian owners, Natalia and Manny, approach our table and we stand to embrace.

Manny says to Julia, “What a babe you’ve become, lieutenant.”

“Sub-lieutenant, Manny.” She taps her sleeve. “One and one-half stripes. Junior grade.”

They leave us and we sit again, and Julia takes my hand. “*Babe! Lieutenant!* That’s totally throwback . . . Casablanca or something.” She beams. “Oh, Ned, it’s just so good to be here.”

“Ditto.” I raise my glass. “May the skin of your ass never cover the head of a banjo.” This is an old RAF toast. She knows that; I used it at the Officer’s Club bar after she got her wings.

She smiles. “Remember when you flew all the way to snake-bit South Texas to pin on my wings? You pinned them about three inches above where they belonged. My classmates thought you were hilarious, afraid you’d cop an accidental feel. They couldn’t believe a man with such shaky hands had bagged three-hundred carrier landings.”

“That’s unfair. Those kids wouldn’t know gravitas if it bit them on the ass.”

Manny asks which Shiraz we like best. I look to Julia, and she says, “The first, though we were thirsty.”

I read the slip of paper under the third one. “The Eileen Hardy, 2004.” The last-tasted is always the strongest.

“*Bună*. Please to accept a bottle from a place of gratitude. Without freedom, a person has nothing.”

He whisks away. We are silent for a moment.

“You’re hyperventilating, Ned.”

“Spooks me a bit. How much you look like your mother.”

“It’s the sweater. She wore this kind a lot when you were around.”

“More to it than that,” I say. Still, I think of Eadie sitting close to me on the sofa, back before Nora left me. We were watching a Patriots pre-season game at Groton Long Point, and she wiggled closer to nestle under my arm, then made a bit of a project of brushing Dorito crumbs off her breasts, and her nipples showed through her sweater, and – whoosh! – I got an air-bag erection. She watched this and the spot of seepage soaking through my chinos. Just at that moment Nora called from the kitchen asking for my help. I was trapped, but Eadie rushed to Nora’s side. I was able to scurry off to change trousers. That sweater! Oh, my.

Manny uncorks our bottle and recommends the lamb chops and garlic mashed potatoes on a bed of spinach. We order that.

“Eadie’s memorial service,” she says. “I never told you this. The boys didn’t want you to have a role, but Eadie specified in writing that you not only speak but preside.”

The boys were Julia's half-brothers, older, and beholden to their own mother's money. They hated Eadie, but she waved that off.

She continues. "I had to threaten to involve Eadie's lawyer. They thought your mere presence was disrespectful to their father."

"John had been gone for ten years."

"Well, yeah, but they thought you'd been boinking – their word – for years before that, and that the triangle of friendship stuff was a smokescreen that John was complicit in because he was too pussy to call you out."

I laugh. "And what did you think?"

"I was uncertain when it started. Didn't think it mattered. We were all friends. The boys were just tight-asses like their mother."

She takes a sip of her wine. "When did it start?"

"I thought it didn't matter."

"Probably not, but I'm curious now."

"Way back. Even before Nora left." Nora, my former wife, was a lipstick model when we married, a Revlon regular. In due course she broke into television spots, with shoots everywhere from Tokyo to Tahiti. I'm essentially a nester. Nobody was surprised when we split up.

"Something you should know. It was actually John's idea."

"What was?"

"Your mother went to him one day and said that she'd seduced me, and that I was spooked about it and intended to come clean with him, and that she'd probably lost both of us. He told her that he wasn't surprised, nor displeased, and proposed that she have it both ways. He wrote me a

letter proposing this arrangement, reiterating his professional opinion that my former wife and I were a no-hoper. He even suggested that Eadie and I start out with romantic getaways, though he wouldn't object to trysts nearby – he just didn't think the latter would work for me. He was an extraordinary man. I showed the letter to Eadie.”

No surprise or wonder from Julia, just a smile and a faint nod. “I know,” she says after a long pause, “Eadie saved the letter. I read it.

“So those trips,” she says, “the three of you.”

“On our third vacation together, your mother and I went to a tiny fishing village on the Italian Riviera. We'd only been there a day, and we were watching the sunset after dinner and finishing the Chianti, feeling good about life. And I told Eadie I wished John was with us and she said that he'd come if we invited him. So we drove our Vespa to the telephone exchange in town, called and invited him. Two nights later the three of us sat together, staring into a wood fire, listening to the tremolo of a mandolin somewhere upwind.”

“The sleeping arrangements on these vacations . . . a *menage*?”

“No. John went to bed early and rose early. She went to bed with me and woke up with him. He took an afternoon nap. We did not.”

“Whew,” she says. “This could be a movie.”

The woman at the table next to us, the one facing me, coughs, catches my eye and arches her eyebrows.

I give voice to her expression. “No shit!”

Julia turns pensive. “You had it made, Ned, seems to me.”

I take a minute. I sense our table neighbors leaning in now. “No,” I say finally. “When I was with her, or with the two of them, I was fine – in the moment, as they say. Alone, here in my apartment, I’d get pretty squirrely. I didn’t trust that John was totally at peace with the arrangement. I couldn’t have borne a cuckolding, let alone broadcast it. And I resented that he got to nest with her. And after John passed away, and she decided to live alone . . . that stung.”

“Maybe she wanted to hold on to the excitement of having a visitor.”

“Not very comforting, that. Like I wouldn’t generate sufficient excitement otherwise.”

Julia takes my hand, squeezes it, and holds on tight. “I doubt that very much, Ned.”

I’m too embarrassed to look at her right away, but when I do there is something like admiration in her eyes, not pity.

“But I think you make too much, Ned, of the marriage stuff.”

“It’s not that. It’s the sharing, the commingling of laundry, getting into a tender sort of day-to-day dance with one another. I wouldn’t have hovered or crowded her. She knew that.”

We are silent for some time. She still has my hand in hers.

“Did Eadie like to sleep touching, snuggling?”

I pull my hand away. “Holy snikey, Julia. This is getting weird.”

“Work with me, Ned. I’m curious about the private details – to what extent I’m wired like Eadie. I see it as a way of completing my connection with her, clearing the decks, if you will.”

“She did like to cuddle, but she couldn’t sleep that way.”

We order Manny’s signature malted milk ball ice cream.

“Julia, there are zero surprises in all this. We were true to our personalities. John too. You can fill in the dots yourself. Your mother came and went at her whim – like a cat.”



We eat Manny's ice cream in silence, giving it the reverence it deserves.

Finally, she says, "Okay, Ned, you're a Golden Retriever. But what am I?"

"I'm still in discovery phase on that. Dunno. Maybe a fawn crossed with a Hummer."

"Ha. I confuse myself, actually. Maybe I'm still a work in progress. In the context of co-sleeping, I'm a fawn."

We drink tawny port in my living room, not talking much, staring at the candle in the hurricane globe and at maritime traffic on the narrow East River. She has on her bulky Navy Crew warm-ups, and I'm grateful, for the memory of the sweater lingers.

A coastal tanker comes racing by, riding the outgoing tide south. The ship's bridge is at our eye level and no more than seventy yards away from us. We can see the pilot sip from his coffee mug in the red light of the wheelhouse.

We are silent, and she seems comfortable with that. I am in a state of well-being that I haven't felt for several years. Not sober anyway. Julia's eyes are closed now, her head swaying to the bossa nova on the stereo.

I catch myself nodding off. When the song ends, I kiss her cheek and say good night.

I wake with the dawn.

I fell asleep easily and slept soundly, drained, I guess, from all the drama. And it seemed like I was always at least a step behind, and off-balance. I'll need to do better at squash today.

Seeing the sun light up the side of the apartment opposite, I recall the first time I saw Eadie: I was sitting on the side of my bed up in Long Point, blinking at the early summer sun, stretching my arms overhead. On the porch next door was a woman deadheading geraniums in a flannel nightgown, down vest, feet stuck into LL Bean boots. Beside her, a girl, similarly dressed, gathering the trimmings and dropping them in a bucket.

Remembrances of a healthy Eadie. And a full night's sleep. Good, all this, promising.

While the coffee steeps in the French press, I soap up in the shower, singing Jimmy Buffett, forgetting that I have a guest. I'm starting through "No Plane on Sunday" a second time, when I hear the click of the shower door and feel her breasts swing against my back and she's got ahold of me. Then, somehow, I'm against *her* back and my soapy hands are full and she's fluttering, touching herself. Who knows how long, until I feel her body tense up, and that sets me off. And then we bend at the waist, catching our breath like middle distance runners just past the finish line. Finally, she straightens up, turns and steps back, and once she sees I've had a good look, her arms are around me and she says: "Kiss me Ned, light, back and forth, like you were ---"

Some instinct makes me resist. I'm not sure where it's coming from, but I wonder at the power of it. "No," I say. "This is a good place to stop." I hold her tight, avoiding any friction that might get me going again. "Let's stop."

She stiffens. "Oh boy. I was afraid this would happen."

"I would be sleeping with your mother. To some extent or other, still. Not fair to you." This is all I can come up with, though there is truth to it.

“Fucking men.” She frees herself and steps out of the shower, grabbing a towel. “Always the star of their own movie.” She pulls on her warm-up suit and turbans a towel over her hair. “I am not my mother.”

She isn’t, of course, but I don’t want to get drawn into that.

I take her hand and squeeze it, but she doesn’t squeeze back, and I’m suddenly afraid of a messy – and maybe final – farewell. My resolve weakens – after all, she’s an adult, and she ambushed me – but she decides for me: she goes to her room without a word.

I dress in a daze.

Her door is closed, and I knock.

“Come in.” A whisper.

She is sitting up in bed, the duvet over her legs, her hair wild and still damp. She may have been crying. “I’ve screwed the pooch, haven’t I?” I’m surprised at the vulnerability.

“Not as far as I’m concerned, Julia.”

“Well, to borrow from your song, we can’t go back to just being friends.”

“No. Friends-plus. Something, whatever . . . something just fine, as far as I’m concerned.”

“A work in progress.”

“Yes,” I say. “No use worrying about it.”

She bites her lip. “I wanted more than sex. I wanted to wake up in your arms. Something quaint and conventional.”

“For me, it was wonder enough to have a look at you – an image to squirrel away.”

“Maybe I won’t make you so nervous now.”

“One can only hope.”

She rearranges the duvet so we are both under it.

I search for other ways to soften the rejection. “Actually, Julia, for what it’s worth, by that final summer before Yale, I didn’t trust myself alone with you.”

“And now, minutes after soaping the twins, you trust yourself?”

“Yes. But, as you say, work with me here.”

She holds my gaze for several beats. “Then let’s nap. It can be our *rapprochement*.”

We slide down under the duvet. She rolls me away and spoons my back. I feel a stirring but force my mind elsewhere. I do the Greek alphabet several times through, and then, somehow, I’m out at Montauk Point, straddling my surfboard, slow dancing with the swell, watching the horizon for the next set. I remember the animal pleasure of pissing in my wetsuit, feeling the warmth spread. I chuckle at the memory.

“What?” Julia says, a whisper.

“Time to get out to my cottage in Montauk. Surf.”

“Umm. What color are my eyes?”

“Brown. Flecked with blue.”

“You surprise me, Ned. And it’s cool, I guess, you pushing back.”

“Yes?”

“I’m thinking R&R in Montauk next fall, learning to surf.”

“Piece of cake.”

“Promise me, Ned, you’ll get back on the water. And dating again.”

“Sure,” I say, feeling at peace, finally, about the two of us.

I yawn, and I feel her do the same. She nestles closer.

“But don’t go squandering my inheritance,” she says. “Save part of yourself for me.”

“Mummph,” I say, though I’m alert again. I slow my breathing, feigning sleep, and wait for what seems an eternity.

But she’s done; said her piece.

Her breathing becomes audible, husky. I settle easily into matching her rhythm.

The phone snaps me awake: the squash pro.

On the side table: my Mach II pin stuck in a tangerine.