

Out the county road

Originally a clapboard farm house just over the town line, the Livingstone Memorial Library had been moved twice before ending up on its present foundation next to the high school soccer field. Jean knew something of this history because of her regular visits to the library of late, but as she approached the building this September afternoon realized Phil had been right: that was about all she did know about the place. Nothing about what makes institutions like libraries tick, about budgets and bylaws and egos. Did she even know that much about books? Phil had added. She read a lot now, she'd countered to her husband. That's really why the library committee appealed to her. And with the twins off to college, and him working all those hours to meet tuitions, she certainly had the time.

At the circulation desk she was directed to the conference room in the basement, a part of the building she had never been to. When she entered, the four people seated around one end of a long table turned to her as one. Hans Henderson, at the head, rose partway.

“Ah, Jean, welcome aboard. Please.”

He gestured to the nearest empty chair, and sat back down.

“You all know Jean Wright, I'm sure. Phil's better half? But why doesn't everybody just
....”

As the three members identified themselves, Jean smiled and nodded in turn. She did know Marilyn Stein from the florist shop, but only barely recognized a Bill Thoms and a Grace Nelson. Older, both of them, by the looks. Earnest, all of them.

“Guess we’re a quorum,” Hans continued. “Those the minutes there, Gracie?”

Once they were approved, Hans started on the first agenda item - humidity in the Poetry Corner. As comments were offered, Jean struggled increasingly for something relevant to add. And when the conference room door suddenly banged open it was relief she felt, more than surprise.

“Bruce!” Hans exclaimed. “Man of the hour. Glad you could make it. Humidity.”

““What would the world be, once bereft of wet and of wildness?””

The new arrival sat down next to Jean, and proceeded to report on his meeting with a contractor who had told him that, as a general rule, dehumidification of antique buildings is only partially successful. As he went on about vapor barriers and special paints, Jean was able to observe him further – a short, rather weathered man, in his sixties, probably, with still a full head of sandy hair. Rumpled flannel shirt and corduroys. Patch of fresh dirt, it almost looked like, clinging to one sleeve.

After further discussion, the committee voted to ask for a formal work estimate, then proceeded through the rest of the agenda.

On her way out afterwards, Jean passed the latecomer leaning over the bike rack by the entryway. At the sound of her footsteps he turned, bike lock in hand.

“How are you and bureaucracy?”

She stopped. “Pardon?”

“Committee work. Going to like it, you think?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Interesting.”

“Yes. Should just raze the place, though, don’t you think? ‘Make it new’?”

“Wouldn’t that be....”

“Course it would. Why I haven’t brought it up yet. Maybe next time. See you then.”

He jerked the bike out from its slot, worked his leg over the high seat, and after one false start pumped off through the parking lot. As she watched him turn right onto the County Road she noticed that one pant leg was stuffed into the top of his sock. Just the way the boys used to do it when she was growing up back in Ohio in the sixties.

It wasn’t until a few days later that Phil asked about her meeting.

“Interesting,” she said, aware she meant it this time.

“Well, that’s good. Interesting is good. Proud of you.”

“Oh yeah? I thought you....”

When he didn’t continue, she went on, “You know a Bruce somebody? Short?”

“Bruce Short?”

“No. Somebody. Around our age? Little over? Rides a bike?”

“Bruce Manter? The communist?”

“Communist?”

“Well, I don’t know communist exactly. Only Bruce I know around here though. Why?”

“Oh, just... on the committee.”

“Sounds like Manter. Sold him the Strout place, what, five, six years ago. Cash.”

“Huh.”

Over the next three weeks Jean found herself wondering about Bruce whoever he was. Wet wilderness. Raze. Communist. Pant leg. Cash. That rumpled, comfortable look, such a

contrast to Phil's propriety. One morning after leaving the grocery store she detoured out the County Road. She knew the Strout farm had lain derelict, vulnerable to developers, since the last Strout died, but now as she passed she noticed solar panels on the roof, new fencing beyond the house, fresh boards striping the huge barn. When had all that happened?

At the next monthly meeting, the committee finally got around to books. Grace, who had spent thirty years teaching biology in a nearby town, headed a subcommittee that dealt with collection development. When she reported her statistics, everyone nodded approval. Except Bruce.

"I move a one-to-one ratio of classics to trash. You know we have only one Henry James?"

"Who reads Henry James?" Marilyn asked.

"Nobody, if we don't have him."

After a moment's silence, Jean leaned in, heart pounding. "Second?"

Hans made a long face, surveyed the group. "Any discussion?"

There being none, the vote was called: three to two against the motion.

Leaving the building, Jean again passed Bruce in the entryway.

"Gutsy," he called.

"That's me, all right."

She watched him pull the bike free, then, rather than mount, stand there fiddling with the handle bars. She approached.

"Oh, I was going to ask you, what was that wet wilderness something the other time?"

He smiled, crinkling the tan of his face. "*Wildness*. 'Bereft of wet and of *wildness*.'

Gerard Manley Hopkins. Know him?"

“Afraid not.”

“Nother classic we don’t have.”

Again he studied the handlebars, his broad hands now wringing them back and forth.

“But let’s work on it,” he added, looking up. “Shall we? Have a coffee sometime.”

“Well, I...”

“Ad hoc. We’ll be ad hoc. Tony’s? Tuesday?”

Jean didn’t know what to say. Tony’s was the popular diner in town, where she and Ellie, her walking buddy, often stopped. It was easy to run into people you knew there. Like your husband.

“Oh, all right,” she heard herself agree. “Ten-ish?”

“Tony’s, Tuesday, ten. Ish.”

The first thing Jean did when she got home was look up Hopkins on the Internet. A few clicks after the famous hospital she recognized the poet’s full name, then came to the very poem Bruce had quoted. She read it, and then again, and then out loud, and then louder. How muscular the words pulsing through the empty house, never mind their meaning – “...the groins of the braes that the brook treads through.” Da dah, da da dah, da da DAH DAH DAH!

Do you know him? Bruce had asked, as if she really might. As if she might be in a league not only with the lettered, but with Hopkins himself.

That evening at dinner she brought up the latest library meeting, adding that she had been assigned to a subcommittee. Ad hoc, she thought they called it.

“Really getting into it, aren’t you,” Phil replied.

“Hey, meets at Tony’s.”

Ten had been a good choice. The breakfast crowd had gone, including the counter regulars, and it was too early for the workmen grabbing their take-outs. Bruce was already there, at a booth by the window, cutting into a muffin. She slid in across from him.

“Read your poem,” she said. “Loved it.”

“Why?”

“Why? Did I love it? The words, I guess. Ended up reading it out loud. Don’t think I’ve done that since grade school.”

“He attacking capitalism, you think?”

“Gosh I...”

“Big threat to the natural world back then, too. ‘Let them be left, O let them be left.’ Remember? Sounds like a lefty to me.”

“Well, I hadn’t thought....”

The waitress arrived and took her order.

When she’d gone, Bruce said, “Thought I’d try to get some stats on the collection. But we’re going to have to work on the others. Who do you want?”

“I don’t really know them.”

“Flower lady be a good one. Aesthetic sense. I’ll take Thoms.”

Take? Jean felt uneasy. She’d never had to convince anybody, other than her daughters, of much at all, and couldn’t imagine trying to convince the local florist of something. But neither could she imagine trying to convince Bruce she wanted out. Or herself, for that matter, that she didn’t. The arrival of her coffee and pastry, the cream and sugar routine, gave her some time.

“Think it was your husband sold me my house,” Bruce was saying.

The change of subject brought relief, but only briefly. “He sells a lot of houses.”

“Probably know mine. Old farm out the County Road? Lot of square feet for one person, though. When you think of the Third World, twenty to a room.”

Jean nodded. Neither Ellie nor Phil had prepared her for conversations like this. Nobody had.

“One with the roof panels,” she said.

“Trying to minimize my footprint. 'Course, won't be long before I won't have any footprint to minimize.”

Jean frowned.

“Sorry. I'm not really that dark. There's the garden, birds, little carpentry, Hopkins....”

“Sounds lovely.”

“Hmm. Show you sometime.”

He went on to tell her about his projects at the house, the hydroponics he was reading up on. When they were finished eating he signaled the waitress for the check and let Jean split it with him. Outside, he unlocked his bike from the downspout at the corner of the building, and as Jean headed to her car she heard him call out, “Same time, next week!” No question mark, by the sound of it.

At home, Jean made herself put a load in the dryer, then look through the mail. At two she was walking with Ellie, but until then? After the pastry, she wasn't all that hungry. She should go visit Marilyn about the library. Get that over with. But had she actually agreed to visit Marilyn? Could she stand visiting Marilyn? She was under no obligation. Yet she'd be meeting with Bruce next week and should have something to report. Or she could not be meeting with Bruce next week. She could call him up and say she wasn't comfortable visiting Marilyn. Wasn't comfortable generally.

Tuesday at ten he was sitting in the same booth. Jean admitted she hadn't gotten around to Marilyn, but he said that was OK – reluctance to confront, that is. He hadn't gotten to Thoms, either - out of town. But he had done a random sampling of the books in Fiction: five to ten percent were what he would call classics, or at least worthy. He didn't know how that compared to other libraries, but it sounded low to him.

“And what exactly are we calling a classic?” Jean asked.

“Aha! You've put your finger on it there. Let's think about that, shall we?” And he turned to look out through the window, squinting into the morning glare, thinking.

Jean tried to think too, about classics, but it was like the old days in church when she was told to meditate. All she came up with was the fact that she was sitting in a diner booth across from a man who wasn't her husband, who wasn't her anything. She glanced at the head of hair, poorly combed. At the tanned backs of the hands with their age spots. At the worn collar of the work shirt.

“Are you a communist?” she asked.

He turned back to face her again. “Interesting the way we say that word, isn't it? With a long u – com *you* nist - it sounds like living in a commune, sharing. Not all that bad. But *caw* munist – caw, caw - sounds nasty, subversive. But no, I'm no totalitarian. How about you?”

“A communist?”

“A anything.”

“Housewife?”

“That's anything. Unappreciated anything. I'd have all paychecks go half to the worker, half to the spouse. Did that with my wife.”

Jean waited for more about the wife, but there was only distant kitchen clatter for what seemed like a very long time, until Bruce spoke again.

“I don’t think we’re picking each other up, do you?”

“Of course not,” she laughed, more quickly than she meant to.

“At our age. Mine, I mean. Anyway, tell me about your kids. If you have any.”

Still unsettled by the previous question, Jean told about the girls, one sporty, the other aloof, so different in spite of being twins. Bruce nodded, praised their college choices, then went on about their generation, the technology they embraced more than he could.

When they left the diner, there was no mention of another meeting.

Jean definitely wasn’t calling Marilyn. The whole idea of challenging the library routine seemed unseemly, especially for a newcomer like her. Almost as unseemly as these rendezvous, if that’s what they were. On her walks with Ellie, she came close to mentioning them, but though at times over the years their conversations had turned confidential, even confessional, she didn’t. Somehow, that would have been the most unseemly of all.

At the next committee meeting, more members were present than before, but not Bruce, even though the contractor’s estimate was on the agenda. Jean managed to comment during a discussion of the children’s story hour, then felt entitled to sit back and listen. When the meeting adjourned, Hans thanked her for her input and she went up to the main reading room to look for a new book. As she walked the stacks, she couldn’t help wondering what Bruce would suggest, finally selecting the James he had mentioned at her first meeting.

And then when she left, there he was, standing by her car with his bike.

“Didn’t make it,” he said. “Appointment.”

“Didn’t miss much.”

“No, probably not. Got a good book there?”

“Oh, just a novel,” she said, not showing it to him.

Bruce glanced briefly toward the road. “I’m heading back to the house. Want to come along?”

“To your house?”

He nodded.

“To...?”

“Coffee? I don’t know.”

I don’t know. Ambiguous, yet not exactly threatening. The sun was still shining. Cars were still passing on the road. Her cell phone was charged.

“For a few minutes. I’ve got....”

Without waiting for details, Bruce mounted his bike and headed off. Jean followed, passing him soon on the open road, neither waving. Was this really she doing this? She could imagine her girls’ disbelief. Phil’s perplexity, at least. She could imagine her own outrage if she learned Phil was doing something similar. Through twenty five years of marriage, she’d never once suspected him, though maybe now she should have. It was all so easy.

When she reached the farm, she turned onto the rocky track leading to the barn, parked in front of its sliding door, and got out. It was a classic old farm house, all right, extending back from the road in the mismatched additions and odd ells of many generations. And it did need work – loose storms, peeling clapboards, cockeyed chimney. Beyond the house the gardens were plowed under for winter, except for a pumpkin patch where a few orange gourds peeked out from the green.

Bruce said nothing when he arrived, but led her in by a side door and then past a cluttered kitchen to a sunny sort of study furnished with old couches and a plank table piled with books and magazines. Either side of a large bay window shelves sagged with volumes of all sizes, a few framed photographs. In one corner an impossibly long cat was draped like a stole over the top of a wooden filing cabinet.

Bruce indicated the couch with the view. "Coffee?" he asked. "Tea? Booze?"

"Uh.... Coffee?"

While he was away in the kitchen, Jean ran through excuses for leaving. So awkward sitting there on that couch, listening to sounds of preparation, but for what? Maybe, if she was lucky, this was all just a nightmare. The house, the committee, everything.

Bruce returned a few minutes later with a tray: two mugs, a sugar bowl and jug of milk.

"You don't have to stay, you know," he said as he arranged things on a low table.

Of course she knew that, just not why he thought she might not, and why the knowledge hardly helped. Somehow, though, his intuition did. His rumpled shirt, his half smile, his casual proximity now on the couch.

Or was she kidding herself? He'd brought her here for sex hadn't he? She didn't think of herself as a sex object any more, if she ever had. Had he tried everybody else in town? Was it possible that she was, in spite of her age, attractive to him, special in some way? She hadn't felt particularly attractive or special to Phil for years, their sex having long since become routine, as well as less appealing to her. Whether still appealing to Phil, or become obligatory to him, too, she had no way of knowing. No easy way at least.

Bruce put down his mug. "Let me get my Hopkins for you." He stood and, stroking the cat as he passed, went over to the bookshelves.

If he wanted sex, he was being awfully indirect about it. As indirect as she was blasé. And what might the advance consist of when it came? How would she respond? Stand her ground? Comply? Scream? Bolt? She glanced around for possible weapons.

Bruce returned to the couch, sitting perhaps slightly closer this time. He opened the book on his lap, cradling it in a reverent, almost intimate way. She watched him run the titles with his fingertip until, sensing her gaze perhaps, he turned to her. Only when she lowered her eyes did he begin to read, or quote, the words vibrating through her from the nearness. When he was done he set the book down beside him on the couch. For several minutes they sat there in the warmth of the sun, content with the flashy back and forth at the feeder.

“And you don’t have to worry,” he said at last, as if the Hopkins hadn’t intervened.

“Hmm?”

“You don’t have to worry. This is all there’ll be.”

“It’s all right. I’m not worried.”

“All there *can* be, I mean.”

She turned to look at him.

“I’m afraid I’m just a ‘tattered coat upon a stick,’ Jean.”

She pulled away, then abruptly stood.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurted, turning and rushing back through the kitchen and out.

Fields, barns, woods, cars flashed by. Sorry? Sorry? What sorry? That she’d misled him? Misread him? Disgraced herself? Deluded herself? Sorrow had nothing to do with it. Only stupidity. Cruelty. Conceit. Disgust. Disappointment. God knows what.

The County Road lead south, where, she didn't care, just far. From Bruce. From Phil. From herself. She'd betrayed her husband. That's all there was to it. Her faithful, provident, working-this-very-moment-in-her-behalf husband. She'd never be able to face him again.

It was a T junction that finally brought her to a stop. Idling, wondering which way to turn, she kept checking the rearview mirror, as if not only cars but untold consequences might be about to hit.

Yet nothing serious had happened. Phil need never know the little that had. Bruce was no gossip. No one had seen her. She'd resign from the committee. The whole episode would disappear. The whole episode so trivial, now that she was gaining a little perspective, that it might never have actually happened at all.

She turned left for home, taking the long way around.

But it was increasingly hard, over the next few days, not to say something to Phil. She owed it to him after all, and to herself – revealing honestly that she had met someone interesting, someone interested, at least so she thought, and that.... And that what? That he had, or so she thought, made advances? Or that she had been, or would have been, complicit, not out of passion so much as expectation? Neither account was appealing. Or relevant. Or maybe even true. And what would Phil's response be? He would have to be jealous, to think that his wife was drawn to another man, no matter the reasons or results. Of course, he wasn't jealous that she was drawn to Ellie for conversation, even for hugs at her rare bad times. At least he'd never indicated that. Because there was no sex involved? Is that all jealousy is? But there wouldn't be with Bruce, either. Phil would have to know that. Yet, knowing it or not – maybe, oddly enough, more knowing it than not - he would be jealous. It was only natural. As natural as her dismay if he weren't.

One week after the farm house incident Jean and Phil were sitting in the living room having a glass of wine. Phil was checking his messages and though she rarely interrupted him when he was dealing with his phone, she suddenly had to speak.

“Oh, by the way,” she said, “I’ve dropped the committee.”

A moment passed, as if he hadn’t heard, then he murmured, “Figured you would.”

“And why is that?”

“Deadly, those committees. Takes a certain type.”

“Which I’m not.”

He didn’t take the bait, so she went on, “What type am I, Phil, would you say? Honestly.”

“I just know what you’re not, I’m afraid.”

“Oh dear. You married a woman for what she’s not.”

He put down the phone, raised his glass as in a toast. “Married her for love, Jean. You know that as well as I do.”

Yes, she did know that. They had loved, still loved, would love, in their familiar way. Now that he’d mentioned the word, they might even make love that evening. She hoped they would, if only for old times’ sake.

She let him get back to his calls. She’d said enough. For now.

It was several weeks later when, pulling into a parking place by the bakery in the town center, Jean noticed Bruce’s bike in front of the hardware store. She did her shopping, and when she got back in the car saw that the bike was still there. She waited. When Bruce finally emerged, carrying a large cardboard box, she stepped out and hailed him. He set the box down carefully by his bike and came over.

“How are you?” he said. “Committee misses you.”

“Really?”

“Well, I do.”

“Holidays, you know. Girls’ll be coming home and....”

“You were offended, weren’t you.”

“No, no. I was.... Well, not really.”

He nodded slowly, smiling.

“Don’t think I haven’t been thinking about it though,” she added. “What I was. Wasn’t.”

“Yeah. What we do, isn’t it. Anyway, you know where I live.”

At that he turned and walked toward his bike. Jean got back into her car and buckled up.

She watched him fix his pant leg, but drove off before he would have to deal with the box.