

Early Afternoon, Indian Summer

“Just say you promise that we’ll stop there.”

“What for? . . . You don’t need anything.”

“That’s what you think.”

“I know what you need.”

“Sure you do.”

They were coming back from Vermont. He said, *Let’s have a mini vacation*. She said, *Let’s*. He found a little place in the mountains. They didn’t do much. Sleeping and eating. On the way back, she asked if they could stop in a center of a tiny little town where boutiques were also tiny but beautiful and all streets were running uphill.

The sun was still high. They left their car on a parking meter and walked up the hill to the shops. The little shop, really a tiny boutique with hats, and purses, a couple of dresses, some little gifts, soaps, and jars of jams and beauty potions was sitting between a shoe store and a coffee shop. She was wondering from shelf to shelf, touching little things, tilting her head, standing on the very tips of her toes in heavy boots to look at the items on the upper shelves, looking into the many mirrors, feeling good and lost in things around her. He was trailing behind her miserably.

“I should buy this hat.”

“C’mon, you don’t need another hat. . . . What? Seventy dollars? You must be kidding!”

“But it looks good, doesn’t it?”

“You don’t need it.”

The small, bird-like shop owner smiling sweetly took the straw hat out of her hand and replaced it on the manikin. She wasn’t really upset but pursed her lips. He took her hand and pulled gently.

“Let’s go.”

“I don’t want to go.”

She was looking at the colorful prints with French lettering.

“These are from the 60s,” said the lady-owner.

“I’m going to die, you know,” said the wife.

“Not right now.”

“One day I’m going to die. I’m going to die, and all of these will be gone, and I’ll be gone.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’ll be gone, and you’ll be gone.”

“C’mon. You’re saying all these things just because of some stupid hat. Let’s go. Let’s go across the street, and let’s see if they have anything good over there.”

They went and the shop owner looked after them. Her face seemed sad.

The shop across the street was bigger and fancier. Empty, except for a sales girl who gave her a look of disdain and boredom of a young person. The wife didn’t like the girl and thought that she should definitely buy something, something expensive.

She tried on a dress, and then another. With every new change she would come into the space in front of changing room and made a little show of walking up and down as if she was a model. The husband was sitting in a small pink armchair, uncomfortable but content enough to watch her perform for him. She had finally bought a long T-shirt dress with abstract flowers in black and white, and he paid for it.

“Do you think it’s too big on me?”

“It’s okay.”

“No, really. Do you think it’s a little . . . plain?”

“Plain? It looks fine, but it’s a little long.”

“It’s okay. I’ll shorten it myself.”

“Do you like it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to buy it?”

“I think I do.”

They had a little lunch in the coffee shop. He had his usual: a bowl of New England clam chowder with freshly baked bread. She had a large salad and tried her husband’s chowder. She was restless.

“Should we go?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You said we’ll stop here, and I can shop.”

“But you did.”

“No, I didn’t find anything I like.”

“Well, there’re no more shops. You have to stop buying. We should be selling things.”

“Why? I like buying things. What about that place over there?”

She pointed to the furthest point across the street.

“Over there?”

“Yes, what is it? It says, The Secret.”

“You wanna go in?”

“Do you think it’s another boutique?”

“How do I know?”

The shop was at the corner. She went four steps up. He was following her. Inside, the place smelled of lavender and honey. There were corsets, little garments, bright and silky; tiny little laced things, intimate lighting, curtained windows. “Intimate apparel” said the sign above one of the counters. Pink boxes were piled in the corner.

“What are these?” asked her husband. “I don’t think you need another bra.”

“How’d you know?”

“Is this what you want to buy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Welcome to our Secret,” said the shop owner. This one was big and forthcoming, an aging woman. She had a very short, gel-spiked haircut. “Can I help you with anything? Do you have anything in mind?”

The husband looked at her as if he had an idea. She shrugged. The owner looked inquiringly, her round body shifting forward half-hidden behind counters.

“What did you have in mind? Some little gift, some intimate little gift?”

“I want to go,” said the wife. “I want to go, we should go now.”

“Why? It’s interesting. Look, they have some nice things here.”

“I don’t want to be here.”

“Why are you so shy all of a sudden?”

“Let’s go.”

The owner was looking at them with a smile in her eyes.

“I know . . . you want to make your wife happy?”

“Yes, yes. What would you suggest?”

“I’ll be outside,” said the wife angrily.

“Don’t go. Wait!”

She stepped out, but stayed on the steps turning this way, and that way. There were no people. It was a sleepy little town soaked in the syrupy afternoon sun. Autumn. Yellow, red, golden-crowned time. Apple season. The town smelled of gasoline, apples, and coffee. It smelled of overheated, dusty asphalt mixed with cut grass and dullness.

He stepped out following her and took her by the hand.

“You said you wanted to . . .”

He said this in a low voice, leaning over her.

“I don’t want to be here.”

“Listen, we are grownups . . .”

“What do you want from me?”

He led her back into the shop still holding her hand. The place was empty except for the shop owner who was smiling invitingly.

“. . . We have some lovely items.”

The wife looked at her husband and said pleadingly, “You do it.”

“You don’t want anything fancy, do you?” asked the owner.

“Well, what do you have?”

“We are not a sex shop, you know. We carry only nice things. How about this little item?”

She went to the back of the store, behind a screened door, and came out with a box. It was lavender, with velvet trim.

“Do you mind the color? Actually, we carry different colors. I think pink is very appropriate. Or it could be lavender, like the box.”

The wife stood next to the entrance. She didn’t move since she came back inside; she turned away from her husband who was now engaged in the transaction.

“Honey, would you like a pink . . . or do you want some other color?”

“I don’t know. Whatever.”

“One should know how to please himself and his loved ones,” said the shop owner. Maybe, she was just a sales woman. “People don’t know how to be happy anymore. Really, they watch news, and they get unhappy. I’m telling you, when one begins to focus his attention on the surroundings, that person might become pretty dangerous to his own peace of mind. Or those around him.”

“We are going to buy this thing, I made up my mind,” said the husband. “Yes, we will.”

“You know, my boutique is well known.” She was the shop owner after all.

Back in the car she didn’t talk to him for a long time. He stopped asking questions and was driving soothed by his favorite country music station.

“Why did you buy it?” she finally asked.

“Why? You know why.”

“No, I don’t. I know what you bought it for, but you didn’t tell me why.”

“But we talked about it . . .”

“No, we didn’t.”

“But you said . . .”

“No! I didn’t.”

“But, honey, right there, in the hotel, you said . . .”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why are so angry?”

“I don’t know.”

“Listen, it’s just a toy. If you don’t like it I’ll throw it away.”

“You paid a lot of money . . .”

“Who cares about money?”

“You do.”

“No, I don’t!”

“Exactly! You don’t care about nothing, and I have to work like a dog!”

“You’re not a dog. You’re my little kitty.”

“I’m not a cat.”

“Okay, you’re my little lamb . . .”

His voice trailed off, he was tired of this argument. His back hurt and he tried to concentrate on driving. It started to rain and the road was slippery. His wipers were worn out, and he couldn’t see well through the foggy glass.

“What do you want from me? Okay, I’ll stop now.”

He was tired. She was unreasonable. He pulled over to the rest area, parked the car and looked at her. She stared ahead sullenly. The shopping bags on the backseat were out of his reach, and he had to unbuckle.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m getting rid of this thing that made you so uncomfortable.”

Her face was in her hands now. She just wanted to disappear. Then a thought crossed her mind and she peeped out, removing her palms from her wet face.

“Can I look at it?”

“Sure.”

They drove for an hour. She was tired from crying and fell asleep. He was thinking about her, and that she was sleeping. He was relieved that she stopped talking and hoped he could get home in time for the game. He loved tennis. Her face went slack, and she looked older, but there was peace in that face.

It was early autumn; crisp, clear, fine afternoon.

He was listening to his favorite station.