

The Year 2013

This was a restaurant he'd been meaning to come to for years and now here he was with just the right one, the one who was the one, and in the improbably late year of 2013. Her name was Gabrielle Gillen, he had only recently learned.

The restaurant was named Villa Capri, as many places once were, always mispronounced as *Ca-pree*, as the pants once were. It occupied one end of a human-scale strip mall in what was either McClean or Langley, Virginia. He still was not certain. He passed it most Saturday afternoons on his way to a wine store at the other end, which held free weekend tastings. On the drive out here from Northwest Washington, he passed the CIA, which was Langley, of course. McClean was the address in email blasts from the wine store, but its name was Langley Cellars and another storefront was Langley Lacrosse. He did not know, then, if Langley, once as metonymic as Hades, was an official place. He never gave the matter much thought.

He felt happy on this street, in this suburb, whatever it was, and happiness for him was resistant to terminology. For that reason he could never work in the wine business or even be an exemplary wine customer. He had learned to distinguish and even to parse aromas and tastes and lengths of taste, but was false in describing them. He could use the standard descriptors—cassis, dark fruit, butter, beetroot—but only after translating into such terms what he actually perceived, which was often in picture form. The borderless finish of a fully aged Sauternes, the one time

he'd had it, played as a sort of montage of 1982, the year that spanned his last semester of high school and the first of college, a forever-seeming calendar year, in memory and while it was lived. Right Bank Bordeaux, vis-à-vis the more rigorous Left Bank, came to him as the slack sacs of fat on his grandmother's upper arms, and not displeasingly so. The "crushed limestone" you could find at the base of a complex Chablis brought to mind—insanely yet precisely—Kris Kristofferson. It got even more precise and more insane. It was always a beardless Kris Kristofferson. That was how it smelled to him, somehow, and he called it "crushed limestone."

The term *strip mall* seemed negative, so he never thought of it that way. It dated from 1958 and was originally called a "commerce center," Gabrielle had just told him. She was "associate architectural historian" of this county, Fairfax County. Set back from the street only by a depth of two rows of parking spaces, it did not vary elementally, to his mind, from a commercial block of a Main Street or a line of shops in an English village. The businesses were mostly local. Langley Cellars was a family operation, and so too, it appeared, was Villa Capri. At the wine store, the wife of the owner, Rick, helped out at the tastings and at classes held twice a month on Thursday evenings in the basement of the place. Here, their waitress had approached as a sight one did not see every day in such money-steeped reaches: a girl who might be in college and yet was performing labor. Fair and blonde, she had the mournful dark smudges of southern Italy under her eyes, a trace, perhaps, of the patriarch of Villa Capri, one Al DiGiorgio, who, according to the menu, opened the original restaurant in Old Town Alexandria in 1948 and

moved to this location in 1966, shortly before his death. It was odd that the menu saw fit to give the cause of that long-ago passing: hepatitis B.

With banquettes, carpeting, and low lighting, this was just what he was hoping for, a place no doubt labeled “old school” by the legions who precede one into every nook of the world and report their findings to Yelp or Trip Advisor. Old school or not, there had come at some time a transformation to the menu. The original Italian-American fare was still there at the heart of things. Eggplant parmesan was there, but now in parentheses, under *parmigiana di melanzane*. The Neapolitan version of lasagna, that which was most familiar to Americans, was now *lasagna all’americana*. A special this night was true *lasagna bolognese*, with bechemel instead of ricotta, and spinach pasta “*fatta in casa*.” That is what both of them ended up ordering.

She deferred the choice of wine to him, and there was a slight of her in what he chose, a Chianti *riserva*, 2007. The year was thought a good one in Chianti, though it was beyond his powers to find the qualities of a year in reserves, which he’d heard Rick dismiss as “raisiny.” The waitress poured for both of them to taste. Gabrielle lifted the glass by the very tips of her long patrician fingers and swirled, not with a rotation but with a back-and-forth bending of the wrist. She was developing a style of her own, taking advantage of the leverage of her hands. The motion put him in mind of tennis, and therefore of the 1970s—a tennis decade, as he recalled it. She brought the glass up until rim touched brow, magnifying her nose inside the bowl, a nose of a kind he did not think he liked before he met her: fleshy, too full to be pert, yet slightly turned up at the end; a nostrils-forward look, like that of an actress who never lacked for work in the 1970s: Jill Clayburgh.

He tested by sight, tipping the glass above the menu to see if he could read through it. Except around a very narrow penumbra, he could not. He took reading glasses from his shirt pocket and held them halfway between the wine and his eyes. He had been trying to make a jauntiness out of reading glasses. For a while he'd experimented with an alacrity of motions, a certain whipping of them out and then whipping them open, like a mikado's fan. It didn't work, and not only because the arms were sluggish to respond. The motions implied, as he did not intend, an *attack* on the prose at hand. And now, as he ran the lenses back and forth above the sideways glass: What was he driving at?

"Nice," she said to the waitress. "Nice," she repeated to him. "Sort of . . . raisins, don't you think?"

At the class they'd attended earlier in the evening—their second together, the first by the happenstance of assigned seating and name cards, the second by design—she'd said that Italian wines were "terra incognita" to her; she still had her "hands filled with France." With Chianti *riserva*, he'd wanted to please her at an introductory level, simply by matching big Italian wine with big Italian food.

"Do you remember," he said now, "when I told you that you remind me of an actress, but I couldn't place who it was? It just came to me."

"Oh no."

"What?"

"No, please. Go on."

"No, no. I'm terribly sorry. Forgive me. That's happened to me. 'You remind me of an actor.' What a tension that sets up. Because you know it's not going to be the actor you want it to be. It's never going to be Sean Connery. Or Cary Grant.

I've gotten the damndest things. The closest I ever got to Sean Connery, Agent 007, was John Saxon."

"John Saxon? Gosh that rings a bell."

"A sort of a poor man's John Gavin, as I remember him. He was on the show *The Bold Ones*."

"*The Bold Ones*? John Saxon. And he was one of the Bold Ones?"

"Well, I should hope! What a thing that would be. To remind people of, you know, that one timorous guy on *The Bold Ones*. The one who seemed to be on the wrong show."

"Well, O.K., hold on, Mr. Smart Guy." This was not the first time she'd called him Mr. Smart Guy. He could not get enough of it. "I do remember John Saxon. In fact, I think I once saw him in person, at a Ralph's or a gas station or something. But the show wasn't *The Bold Ones*. I believe, young man, I believe it was called *The New Doctors*."

He began to object, but then, come to think of it, that did seem right.

"Now you have to tell me," she said.

"Tell you who you remind me of? Only very, very vaguely? Jill Clayburgh."

At this she pinched her mouth to keep from smiling, which he'd seen on so many first dates: a check, perhaps, on a smile too easily given.

"Jill Clayburgh. God. I hadn't heard that in years. Blast from the past. I suppose I should take it as a compliment. She certainly wasn't *unattractive*."

"She was far from unattractive. She was beautiful. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been in the movies. Although I can't now form a clear image of her. It has something to do with the nose. In these wine classes, you find yourself thinking

about noses. And with Jill Clayburgh, it somehow always came down to the nose. Didn't she make a sort of specialty of weeping? Of producing Kleenexes? Didn't we usually find her midway on life's journey, as a Dante would say? Around the age of thirty-five, suddenly alone, spurned, single? On a dark road? Didn't we once find Burt Reynolds on that same road, in a breakout performance that did not do well at the box office?"

"Burt Reynolds? You're not, by chance, thinking of Kris Kristofferson?"

This gave him a small start, for Kris Kristofferson had come to mind a few times in an evening of seeking mineral structure.

"Maybe. But with Kris Kristofferson, wouldn't it be the other way around? Wouldn't it be she who would leave and find redemption in Kris Kristofferson, who would be a sort of life force? Even though I don't know what a life force is?"

"Don't you think," she said, "that Kris Kristofferson was a little too passive to be what you call a 'life force'?"

She was right, this perceptive person.

"You're right. Kris Kristofferson was the opposite of a life force. Life came *at* Kris Kristofferson. Women came *at* him. Like a wind. His face was fairly chapped by the winds of life. A life force would be Anthony Quinn as Zorba the Greek, doing that arms-outstretched dance. Kris Kristofferson was a latter-day . . . what? It didn't matter. The 'latter-day' was the important part. He was a prophet, a preacher, a poet, a pusher. One part sinner, one part whatever."

"I think," she said, at last releasing the smile, "that we are both right and wrong. The both of us. I think we're conflating a lot of things."

What did the young waitress make of them? He wondered this when she came

bearing the lasagna. The specials sheet promised nine layers, and they all seemed present. The spinach pasta looked indeed *fatta in casa*. It was not a uniform green, but streaked with green. At his upper periphery he saw her halt a step behind Gabrielle, so as not to interrupt a sentence. How many couples their age, each wearing a ring, need she have worried about interrupting, when coming toward them with such a thing to behold?

“Do you remember,” he said, “a song by U2 called ‘I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For’?”

“I remember it very well. They just played it five minutes ago.”

“Did they really? *Really?* My goodness. I hope I’m not losing my hearing. Was that the title? ‘I believe in the kingdom come, / When all the colors bleed into one.’ It spoke to me, that song. I would turn it up when it came on in the car. But I remember thinking: *Gosh, I hope not. What a ghastly idea of Heaven.* A conflation of a lot of things, to use your good words. Everything stirred around in one vat until it is one gray soup. Which is, I guess, what the internet is.”

She now took up the bottle and poured for both of them, an unnecessary topping off, spoiling the aeration they’d worked so hard for, with all the swirling. “What,” she said, “would be your idea of Heaven?” The Chianti, of course, was in addition to the wine in the class; it was only now that he noticed the slightest slipping of cogs, just enough to have allowed through such a question, asked, it seemed, not at all idly. Their talk tonight had been strictly idle.

“All I can say, I suppose, is that it would be the thing you could not have imagined. Which is what you were expecting. If that makes sense. It would be the expected unexpected thing.”

This sounded aphoristic to him. It sounded pretty good, in fact. But it might have sounded rehearsed to her. It was indeed rehearsed. He'd been waiting for a good moment to say the words, but in answer to an entirely different question. She had lifted the bottle, extra-hefty to suggest the heft of the wine, to give correspondence to the heft of the question. "What [*lift*] would be [*pouring*] your idea of Heaven?" Seconds too late, he saw that this would have been a good moment. But there would be other moments. He had waited this long.

Then again, he had not waited long enough.

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He was the first to go to the restroom, which he'd been looking forward to: a departure and a return to find her still there, for no other reason than for his return. The approach was from directly behind her. Her haircut, an A-line bob that she'd said was new, exposed a wide flat nape. Her back was erect but her head was dipped forward, her natural or perhaps a practiced bearing. She must have been talked out of this hair for years by stylists, for it accentuated her height, which was nearly his own. This must have been what she'd intended. She must've known that she herself, with the slight tilt, had served the effect of hair longer on the sides than in the back: the illusion of a falling motion, a cascade arrested. Now she was dipped even further, as if for his benefit.

It was not for his benefit. She was over her phone and her face was aglow from it. For a priceless moment it seemed she had made special a posture that in the year 2013 was becoming an absolute on his twice-daily descents into the Metro. Along the platform, the immobilized figures were to him as lacking in individual interest as pelicans on posts along a pier. He heard the rustle of a newspaper and did not

have to look to know that the reader was of years, on the way out. Were the rest of the eyes reading in the same way? The stupefied inward rather than outward gaze, the stock stillness except for the one finger caressing the screen: it suggested an entirely other, specifically female, activity.

“It turns out we were both right and wrong, once again,” she said, and only then looked up. “The both of us. That show was called . . . are you ready? *The Bold Ones: The New Doctors.*”

“*The Bold Ones the New Doctors?* It doesn’t make sense.”

“*The Bold Ones, colon, The New Doctors.* I remembered that *The Bold Ones* was an anthology show. Not anthology. What’s the word? A rotating show. Different shows rotating. Look.”

He did not take the phone. “That’s O.K.,” he said. “I believe you. I trust you.” The withdrawal of the phone was delayed, uncertain. “I guess what I’m saying, Gabrielle.” He did not know what he was saying, yet he fixed her eyes to make whatever might come out signify greatly. “Is that I don’t feel the need to fact-check you.”

The words did signify. There came what appeared to be a dreadful moment he knew from his long career as a bachelor. Her eyes became discursive, as though looking for rescue from any of her fellow diners.

“What is it?”

“Oh. Well. You know. What a sweet thing to say. Pardon me.”

She rose, a levered lift, a long hand pressing flat, and now would come what he’d most looked forward to: her departure and her return. There came, too, an accident of motion that would play in memory as choreography, or perhaps as

blocking. As she walked straight away, the waitress was crossing from right to left at a receding Japanese angle. Their directions brought them to an intersection, where Gabrielle spoke a few more words than were needed for a greeting. All of this was as if for Ozu's unmoving camera, complete with the tilt upward from a seated position.

The return made him feel as he'd hoped. As he recalled his youth, he had never felt fully present before the first time he watched a girl walk a distance with himself as the destination. He then felt confirmed. The feeling was not of uplift but of a weighing down, especially a heaviness to the arms; a new solidity. She sat down at the very moment the waitress was setting down two glasses of *limoncello*.

"Ah. Perfect," he said of the *limoncello*. "You read my mind."

"Thomas, I have a confession to make." The waitress was gone, but she did not continue. She was pausing, it seemed, in an actorly way, taking ownership of a silence. A sound as if to tell us that this was diegetic silence and not a malfunction—like dripping water in Tarkovsky or a clock ticking in Bergman—came as the busing of a table he could not see, some violence of flatware. "In the last two weeks, I've spent some time doing something."

"Such as?"

"What you said before I left. Fact-checking you." The words sounded clinically obscene, and not only because she whispered them. "Well, maybe not fact-checking."

"More like a running a background check. Like a policeman. When I was pulling away on the first night, you were still in the SUV. Your face was lit by the phone. Did it start then? What did you come up with?"

“Not much on you. Something deep on the National Gallery site. I’ve never seen such a light footprint. You’re like a ghost!”

“But a lot on Liliana? American U made her go on Facebook, for the sake of her students or whatever.”

“You called her by name, Liliana. You said she’s from Italy.”

“She’s quite striking. But I don’t have to tell you that.”

“Well. Yes. Thank you.” Was one supposed to say thank you? He did not know. He’d never done this before.

“Thomas, in the wine world . . . How do I put it? When pairing wine, as I understand it, there are two entirely separate ways to go. The complementary and the contrastive. That night, the Alsace night, the owner said that gewürztraminer was his go-to for Indian food. I thought that was a great example of complementary. One more exotic ingredient.”

“You had a nice line. You said it was like a spice jar in the Bible. Such a pretty thing to say.”

“And also contrast, no? Tannins to balance, or work against, rare steak or whatever. I suppose you know what I’m asking you.”

“I have no idea what you’re asking me. Is this about wine or wine as analogy? I have a feeling it’s the latter. Tannins? What are we talking about?”

Lately he’d noticed in Rick’s emails the use of “fine-grained tannins” to promote whatever recalcitrant red was featured that week. He could not fully imagine what was implied with “fine-grained,” and yet he saw that something was happening that might be called fine-grained, if it could mean increments of motion marking time, like grains of sand slipping down. From the first, they’d been

moving imperceptibly; there had been no leaps to where they were now. They were now holding hands. The fingers of his left hand were laced awkwardly with those of her right, leaving their respective good hands free for the *limoncello*. Her left-handedness was the reason for their first incidental touching as she sat to his right in the first class. Both had taken notes on the handout sheets, and the back of his hand kept bumping the heel of hers, curled inward in the left-handed way. There had been no electricity to the touches, and there still was not. This still felt innocent. There seemed to be allowances of touch for people exactly the same age.

“She, Liliana. She’s quite petite, isn’t she?”

“In the sense of short? She’s five feet two. The exact height of Napoleon.”

“Let’s forget it. I’m a little tipsy.”

“No. It’s O.K. I think maybe I see. Gabrielle, which would you rather be? Or which would you rather not be? The contrast or the complement? The answer is that you’re neither. You’re making an analogy in which you yourself disappear. You’re not a product to me. To be consumed.”

“What am I to you, Thomas?”

He was not yet ready, so he changed the subject. “Is that your wedding ring?” So central to the scene were their joined hands that a shift from right hand to left came out as a non-sequitur. She looked surprised.

“My wedding ring?” She gave a laugh that did not invite him to join in it. “It’s my divorce ring.” Perhaps this was a joke she shared with another woman, who also wore a “divorce ring,” whatever that might mean.

“You wear it to ward off the rifferaff?”

“No. That’s not really it. If it were, it wouldn’t work. It would draw the true riffraff. The ones who don’t care what kind of ring it is.”

“Riffraff like me?”

“Well, you tell me, Thomas. You might have noticed, the first night, that we were the only two dressed for the evening. Yours was the only necktie in the room. Do you wear a tie to work? Does film programmer at the National Gallery require a tie? Do you remember when we hugged goodbye?” He remembered an inurement to hugging. They were living in a hugging century. “You did such a peculiar thing.” She freed her hand to demonstrate. “You didn’t so much hug as place a hand lightly on each shoulder. And then, as you pulled away, for a second or two you kept your arms held out. Like this. Like you were taking a rough measurement.”

“I wanted to carry something away. A muscle memory, I guess. Something of you. Not you in contrast to something. In answer to your question, no, film programmer doesn’t require a tie. I wore it for you, for what you are to me.”

“I’ll ask again. What am I to you, Thomas?”

He could never keep a clear picture of his own face, let alone his face in motion. What was he doing now with his eyes that brought a crazy look to hers as they followed them.

“There was the greatest moment a few minutes ago,” he said. “I’m directly facing the restrooms, the door marked WOMEN. The door swung open, the word disappeared, and there you were. First a *what*, WOMEN. And then it was you, the *this*. You spend time when you’re young trying to imagine an ideal. Her hair will be this way. Eyes that way. Whatever. And the picture never holds together. Or else

you end up with something grotesque, too composite. A Mr. Potato Head. I said it about something else. But it's you, Gabrielle."

"What's me?"

"The unexpected expected thing. You know how I know it's you? Because even if you were not exactly you it would still be you. Does that make sense?"

Her nostrils were narrow, he noticed now. Her eyes had welled and she drew in a congestion, which came with a fluttering sound. "You mean like the expected unexpected thing?"

"That's what I said."

"It's what you said earlier. You said Heaven would be the expected unexpected thing. This time you said unexpected expected."

"I knew this would happen. I'd been waiting so long to say it. I was feeling so cool too."

"It's O.K.," she said. "I still think you're pretty cool. Sometimes."

"Sometime you think it or sometimes I am?"

"When you've been, I've thought it. Like that night, the Alsace night, at the end, when the elderly man stumbled on those stairs and you practically carried him up."

"Like Aeneas, carrying his father away. I did it for you."

"Aeneas. Good. Good reference. I know it only from *Hamlet*. I was thinking of St. Christopher."

"St. Christopher?"

"Strength in the service of weakness. That's pretty cool."

"The name Gillen is Irish?"

"Yes."

“Pasadena. Lace-curtain Irish, as they used to say?”

“I guess you could say. Thomas, are you a single churchgoer? In addition to being a single wine-class-goer?”

“What makes you think I’m a churchgoer? And b) Why a single churchgoer?”

“Well, a) I got a pretty strong sense from the start. All of that formal politeness. ‘I’m sorry.’ ‘I’m terribly sorry.’ ‘I’m so terribly, dreadfully, frightfully sorry. I suppose you’re trying to be Cary Grant, but it comes out as a cry from the depths. *De profundis*. . . To anyone tuned into the vibe.”

“Very astute. But the Church comes in different ethnic flavors. Mine is a happier flavor than yours. How did you know about Liliانا?”

“The little Italian girl who didn’t take your Italian name. Not even a hyphen. That was a pretty good clue, wasn’t it?”

“The little Italian girl isn’t a little girl. She might’ve posted old pictures of herself. She’s thirty-nine. She turns thirty-nine this year. Next month.”

“And has she talked about this year, the year 2013, as being a special year?”

Need one answer? He had never done this before.

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Outside, nearing the Langley Cellars side, they seemed drawn independently to the same place: off the walkway and into a width of spaces between their cars. This was where much of it had played out in nature’s ordained season, when things were also a matter of two cars. It had to do with planes of space divided by lines, in which they were free to move because of someone else’s absence. Youth had felt to him as the filling of someone’s absence.

“You said this shopping center is 1958,” he said. “That Sherwin-Williams sign. Is it possible that it’s original to 1958?”

“Gosh. Possibly. Look at how yellowed the plastic is.”

“Let me show you a trick I do.” He held up both hands, with the thumbs touching, framing a scene like someone playing a movie director in a movie. “Sometimes, with a building of any years, I do this to find a view that hasn’t changed since the year it was completed. To imagine that I’m in that year, with nothing to tell me otherwise. You can do it with this or with Chartres Cathedral or anything. I block out everything that was not there. Now I’m seeing only the sign, and that great sine-curve roofline. And the black of the sky.”

“Does it feel like 1958 to you?”

“I don’t know what 1958 feels like. It feels like 1981 or so. We’re in high school and we’ve just discovered that we have a lot in common. Or maybe later, at UCLA. I once had an idea of going out there, to the Film School.”

He kept his hands up until a light came to the edge of the eye closest to her. She had the phone out and was scrolling. “Ah,” she said. “You should probably see the one you had so much in common with. Isn’t this funny?” Without the glasses he could only see that it was a studio picture.

“I don’t want to look. I want to see you now.”

What he saw he did not understand. She gave what seemed a silent gasp. He then saw what he had done. He had taken her phone and not returned it; he had seized the phone. It was a new weight in a side pocket of his jacket. If one wanted to be Rhett Butler, he then saw, this was a way to do it. He had become, as far as he knew, the inventor of an outrage for this time: seizing an iPhone and everything

within it, which in the year 2013 was becoming everything.

He had mistaken a familiarity in his hand for his identical phone. He could take ownership of the mistake, but he did not wish to own it. It felt the action of a bully.

“I’m so sorry.” He laughed and held it out to her. “I somehow thought it was mine. I left mine in the car. That’s where I often keep it. For an emergency, in case I need to call AAA. Or maybe AARP.”

She did not laugh and she did not take back the phone. She moved closer and went out of an already blurred focus, then close enough to make her breath known, which was as he’d hoped it would be: light and dry, like the first breath of air outside of LAX when arriving from Washington’s summer.

“How does *this* feel, Thomas?” Below them she was touching his left hand. She pulled Liliana’s ring up to the knuckle, then pulled again until it was off. She unzipped her purse and dropped the ring into what looked to be a tangled mess.

“Both right and wrong,” he said, trying to hold his cool. “It feels like sin.”

“What sin would that be? Is it the one we have in common? We have a lot in common. As you say.”

“Which sin? I have so many.”

She brought her mouth and her breath up to his ear. “We despaired.”