

## Cohabitation

“I think that’s Gladys Hastings,” Linda whispered to Del as they emerged from the restaurant. The woman she nodded toward was looking into the window of the antique shop next door.

“Gladys!” Linda called as they approached.

The woman turned, quickly smiling.

“Linda!” she exclaimed as she reached for the sleeve of Linda’s jersey. “I don’t believe it! I do not believe it!”

As the two women worked out that it had been a good five years since they’d last seen each other, not since the days when Linda’s daughter, Felicia, and Gladys’ daughter, Jill, were high school chums, Del held back, checking his watch.

“Del,” Linda finally said, “you remember Gladys Hastings.”

“Of course,” Del said.

At least he remembered that surname from somewhere, if not the face which he was sure he would have, an attractive woman like that. Good cheek structure. A certain wrinkle-free mischief about the eyes. And for fifty-something, which she must be, unusually good skin: smooth, evenly tanned yet without a hint of actinic damage. As a dermatologist, Del couldn’t help remarking such things. Even on a Wednesday afternoon.

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He stepped back as the women went on talking: the children's whereabouts, Gladys' latest trip to Provence where she was refurbishing something she called a *gite*, definitely a date for lunch sometime soon.

"You're invited, too," Gladys added, reaching now for Del's sleeve.

"Del doesn't do lunch," Linda answered for him.

"But weren't you...?"

"That was so he could do his tennis."

It was only after Del and Linda had settled into their car that Linda spoke again.

"When something happens to me, you should marry Gladys Hastings."

Linda was capable of unusual comments, but this one defied response. He started the engine.

"I've always thought that about Gladys," she went on. "That she and you were, well, of a type. She's a great doer, you know. Like you."

"No, I don't. Or that you're terminally ill."

"Well, we're all terminal, far as that goes. But, no, all I'm saying is, Gladys is a wonderful woman. Didn't deserve that husband. Always liked you."

"Didn't think she even knew me."

"'Robust,' she said of you once. Wonderful to call someone 'robust,' don't you think? *Robust*. Your tennis maybe it was. Or your mountains."

Del drove slowly through town. It was important with these outings not to drive too fast and give the wrong impression, just as it was important with certain conversations not to express undue interest.

"Well, still have the old backhand," he admitted.

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“Just forget everything I said, OK?”

Usually all four of them—Phil Marberg, Dana Howe, Joel Bishop, and Del—stayed on after their doubles game for drinks at the tennis club bar, but this afternoon Dana and Joel had meetings, so it was down to just Phil and Del.

“So tell me,” Del said, having covered the Celtics’ prospects and Phil’s recent bar association trip, “Hastings. Know anything about a guy name of Hastings?”

“A guy name of Hastings,” Phil repeated carefully, red eyebrows nearly touching. “Well, you’ve got your father Hastings and you’ve got your son Hastings. Big Walter. Little Walter.”

“The one more our age, probably.”

“Little Walter, that would be. Or, as he’s known in the trade, Little Prick Walter. He back in town?” Phil telegraphed the barkeep with a few taps of his mug.

“He left?”

“Don’t remember that? Ten years ago, must be. Where to I don’t have the slightest. Smart son-of-a-bitch, though, I’ll give him that. Bought up a bunch of warehouses down by the harbor, way back, before you guys got here probably. Sat on ’em ’til they were worth ten-fifteen million maybe, then sold out. One weekend. Like that.”

“That makes him a prick?”

“Not telling his partners does. Or his wife, until he was out of town.”

“Gladys.”

“You know Gladys?”

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“Linda does.”

“Hot ticket.”

“How so?”

“Well, I mean, there were stories. Some elbow-patch type now. University. But she got her revenge. In the divorce.”

“Must’ve had a good lawyer.”

“Must have.” Phil’s eyebrows rose along with his refilled mug. “But why the interest?”

“Not really interest. Linda mentioned her this morning is all and I just...”

“Linda, huh? Why do they do it?” Phil began shaking his finger at Del, adding, “But let me tell you, my friend, if you’re looking around, which of course I know you’re not, my professional advice? Stay clear of anyone named Hastings.”

*Fall* Linda wrote in her slow script. She mouthed the word several times, then drew a line through it and wrote *Autumn* instead. *When death becomes less inconvenient with every leaf less and we can see our way home to the sky.*

She was sitting at her desk, making her daily journal entry. Out the bay window the dark calligraphy of trunks and branches kept drawing her attention. What she had come to realize, in the weeks since K had finally gone off for his freshman year, was that what she wanted now more than anything was to be able to put into words her sense of how things come together, or do not come together, at certain stages of life. For if action was Del’s salvation, words were hers. Why neither she nor Del had noticed that little discrepancy thirty three years ago, when he was torn between tennis and golf and she

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between French and Art History, she didn't know; any more than she knew whether it was too late or too futile to bring it up now.

Hearing the mail truck squeak to a stop out front, she closed her journal, and fitted it back into its side drawer.

No personal letters, just bills and charity solicitations, which she left on the kitchen counter for Del; and a large, square envelope addressed in a graceful cursive to Dr. and Mrs. Delvin Albright. It was an invitation to the Witherspoons', to welcome to Carl's real estate firm a new associate. Linda tented it on the counter top.

One thing about Del, Linda had to concede, was that he was almost always on time. A very organized man she had married, which did have its pluses, especially at the dinner hour.

Del uncorked and poured the Merlot, and helped her bring the plates and salad in from the kitchen.

"Emailed Felicia today," Linda said, as they touched glasses.

"Saying?"

"Oh, the usual. Stay in touch with K. You may be all each other has some day."

She took a sip and added, "Anything you want me to tell her next time?"

"She coming at Christmas, you think?"

"Anything you want me to tell her. Next time I email."

He wound linguini on his spoon with his fork, put the tidy spool into his mouth, touched his napkin to his lips, and chewed until he could safely speak.

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“We think of her often. Miss her. When’s she coming to her senses and getting her ass back to her own country?”

“I always say that. Not those exact words, mind you. Oh, and I wrote some in my journal. About fall. Autumn, rather. Of life.”

They continued eating to the scratch of cutlery on china, the splash of wine refilling one glass, then the other. Now that it was getting dark out during the dinner hour, and with just the two of them at the big table, Linda found it harder to ignore their reflections in the window panes. That, she thought, must be something like what intruders, peering in from the patio, would see as they considered their next move.

“And what did you do today?” she asked.

“Skin.”

“Any interesting skin?”

“You make it interesting. You have to.”

“Yes. We do that, don’t we.”

“Hmm. So, you going to have lunch with that Gladys person?”

“Speaking of skin?”

“I’m showing interest. In your friends.”

“I said, forget everything I said.”

“Big mistake all right. She and I are leaving for the Dolomites tomorrow.”

“Oh, that reminds me. We got an invitation today. Did you see it? On the counter?”

“To the Dolomites?”

“Witherspoons. Want us to meet Carl’s new associate. Cocktail sort of thing.”

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“I’d rather go to the Dolomites. You liked the Dolomites that time, didn’t you?”

“So you don’t want to go.”

“I don’t want to have to look at your friends’ moles.”

“That Gladys person will probably be there.”

“Who’s that? I must have forgotten everything you said.”

After another moment toying with her food, Linda went on, “She and Carl went through a bad patch together. That’s the connection. If you’re interested.”

“Walter.”

“Huh. You remember about Walter.”

“Remember the name’s all.”

The Witherspoons’ house was a large one, with prime views of the shipping channel and the islands. As Del and Linda walked up the walkway they could hear laughter from inside, as well as strains of opera. A young woman stationed at the doorway pointed upstairs where they could put their coats.

“Had enough?” Del shouted into his wife’s ear, when they had returned to the first floor.

“What? Oh, isn’t that Joan Longstreth there? In the blue?”

“I’ll get your wine.”

Del began shouldering his way through the mob into the living room. As he recognized colleagues and acquaintances, he nodded greetings and rolled his eyes in mock distress. Many in the room had been patients at one time or another, and paused in

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their conversations to grin and mouth his name in reply. But he didn't stop until he reached the far end of the huge room where the bar had been set up.

The trip back with his two wine glasses was even more difficult. Up ahead he could see that Linda was huddled with several people: the Longstreth woman, a mustachioed man, a short man wearing a black turtleneck and jacket. As he inched toward them, glasses held aloft, he realized that standing just off to the side in a group of her own was Gladys Hastings. Empty-handed.

“*Madame?*” he said, holding one of the glasses toward her as he approached.

“Oh, *merci*,” she replied. “My date forgot me.”

“Your date?”

She pointed vaguely. “Nathan. Richter? Escort I should say.”

The topic of conversation in her group seemed to be opera, what poor background music it made. “Presumptuous” was one person's take.

“I hear you're a doer,” Del confided as he moved in closer.

“Beg pardon?”

“I said, ‘I hear you're a doer.’”

“Is that good? Good Scotch, I know.” And then, after a pause, she continued, “Go to loud parties sometimes. One thing I do, apparently.”

With a jerk of his head, Del beckoned her out into the foyer. It was just as loud and crowded there, so he led her part way up the stairs. They sat down on a step, overlooking the heads and the chatter below. Though the voices were not as loud here, the music made up for it, thanks to wall speakers mounted right at their level.

“Better,” Gladys said with a sigh. “Felicia, Linda told me, is traveling?”



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Del set his glass down on the step next to the wall. “We think she’s in England right now. She does, anyway. Felicia, I mean. Pretty vague.”

“They all go through that. Didn’t you?”

“Me? Sure. But then out the other side.”

“And your son...”

“Kendall. K. My basketball guy. Starting Maryland. Hated to see him go. But, tell me, what else besides loud parties.”

“Ah, yes. Doer that I am. Well, I have this little place in southern France, Linda may have told you. Which I dearly love. You’ll have to come visit me sometime. Both of you. Has a pool. Grapes.”

“This here’s about as far from home as Linda gets anymore.”

“Oh, but there’s so much out there, Del. So much.” Her face broke into a broad, knowing smile. Del smiled back. She did, after all, have a few wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. He imagined her at poolside. That huge Mediterranean sun.

“Mind if we sit here?” It was Jake Maloney, the chicken processor, and a woman in a low-cut dress. They seated themselves two steps down and tried to talk over a climaxing chorus.

Del pointed upstairs with his thumb, and they climbed the rest of the way to the landing. The bed in the first room was completely covered with coats, but two doors down they came to a low-lit room with a four-poster bed and one straight chair. Del led the way and with a pat on the quilt invited Gladys to join him. Springs squeaked as they sat.

“That was Linda,” Gladys said.

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“Could be,” Del said. “But, you know, she did say something odd that day. Outside the restaurant?”

Gladys turned to face him, eyebrows slightly raised.

“That if anything happened to her....”

“So you thought you’d check me out.”

“No, no. I....”

“Or that I’d take it as some kind of compliment.”

“Not that either.”

There was a pause before Gladys continued. “Sorry, Del. My husband did a job on me, you know.”

“I’m sure that was....”

They sat there quietly for another minute, until Gladys spoke, more brightly this time.

“May I ask you something?”

“Certainly.”

“Kind of personal.”

“Please. Please.”

“Well, I have this...” and she pulled her blouse down from her shoulder. “...This funny.... Light’s not very good in here.”

Del looked down at the tan shoulder now exposed, the small, dark lesion at which she was pointing, just below the clavicle and above the beginning swell of the breast.

“I’m not that good about sun screen and....”

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He squinted, moving in closer. “Benign keratosis, I’d say. Be glad to check it out in the office, though, if you’d like.”

“I think maybe I would, Del. Just to be, you know, safe.”

“No, I don’t write anymore,” the man in the black turtleneck had replied to Linda’s question. “Words are the final pollution.”

“But I would have thought, Nathan, as an English professor....”

“You realize all the nonsense that’s out there. Publish *and* perish, far as I’m concerned.”

“Well, publishing could be a distraction I guess,” Linda said. “I do a little writing myself actually. Journal sort of thing. I don’t suppose you ever have time to look at people’s....”

“I can barely get through what they pay me to read. Drink?”

“That would be nice. I thought my husband.... Anything red.”

As Linda waited, hoping not to get involved with anyone else before the professor returned, she peered out into the foyer. With all the people nodding and shifting and waving about it was hard to identify individuals, but nowhere did she see the beacon of her husband’s balding head.

“Thank you so much, Nathan,” Linda said, when the professor returned with their glasses. “I was sorry to hear what you said about writing. I always thought....”

“You know, I think I’m leaving.”

“No! All that experience. What would you do?”

“The party, I mean. Not a party person.”

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“What about Gladys?”

“She’ll find a ride.” He quickly drained his glass. “We don’t cohabit, you know.”

Linda stood there with her drink, watching the professor make his way toward the front door. The second man to leave her that evening. She put the glass down on a nearby table and followed him as far as the foyer. Some people were still standing there in their overcoats, unable to work themselves further into the house since they’d arrived. Del wasn’t among them or with the groups standing in the study across the way.

“I’ve lost my husband,” she explained to Martha Maloney as she passed her on the stairs. “Or he’s lost me.”

The Maloneys looked at each other. “Up there?” Martha said, pointing. “Coats?”

That’s all there was in the bedroom where they had left theirs, or in the sewing room across the hall. Past a darkened room she came to another bedroom, softly lit from the hall, and there he was, sitting next to Gladys on the side of a four-poster bed. Gladys’ blouse was pulled off one shoulder. Del was leaning in close.

*Dear Felicia and K, she imagined as she waited, envisioning the words scrolling across the screen, or perhaps across a page of her ecru stationery, I’ve decided the time has come to write to you about your father and me. About cohabitation.*