

JOHN AND REBECCA

John and Rebecca met at a backyard barbecue in someone's Beaverton neighborhood. John was with his wife, Pauline. Rumor said that they were on the edge, near a break. Rebecca was there with her husband, Steven. They were thought of as the couple that'd been married for more than twenty years. People had paper plates; there were children running, the world around them blurred when John and Rebecca were introduced and said hello. The moment stretched, unfinished. Each returned to the business of the barbecue.

The party was another Nike party; everyone here either worked for Nike or was with someone who did. It was Steven who did and John and Pauline. Rebecca was an eighth grade English teacher.

Summer ended and school started up again. Right before Christmas the two couples met again at a mutual friend's house. This time a turkey smoked outside and people flowed in and out of doors. An upper deck strung with colored lights looked out over the back yard and a narrow creek.

Rebecca looked across the crowded living room—people spilled into the kitchen. She looked for John. He wasn't there. Pauline was there talking to another man. Rebecca moved to the sliding glass door opening onto the deck and stepped outside. Someone had turned on a porch light and it spread a harsh glare that flattened surfaces and blended the faces together.

Rebecca leaned over the railing, looking down at the yard. There he was. He glanced up; they smiled, both inordinately pleased, and let the look go. He was standing with four other

men, a coat on, zipped all the way up to his chin, hands in his pockets; steam puffed out of his mouth. John continued talking with the men and Rebecca returned to the party inside.

Later they stood near each other waiting in line for dessert, but didn't say anything, not until the evening ended and they said goodnight, and then there was tenderness between them.

Rebecca found John's gaze inspiring. John was stunned by the glance. The holidays washed over them. In some moments each found solace in that shared encounter.

Rebecca began the New Year going to the gym, but unlike in years past, she kept going. She soon regained her figure of a decade ago. Steven noticed and he began to jog. He and Rebecca were on different schedules and saw little of each other. Their children, a boy and a girl, were in college.

John and Pauline had given up on each other and agreed to separate. John found an apartment off Northwest Twenty-first and traveled out to Nike every day, continuing to provide the necessary college tuition payments for his two sons. John took long walks brooding around his new neighborhood, spending hours in Powell's gathering up books he'd always wanted to read.

Rebecca began to notice other men looking at her and she looked back at some. She had outrageous desires. In line once—at the grocery—she was seized by the desire to stroke the cheek of the young man in front of her, his beard looking soft, his face vulnerable. Lust, unexpectedly, washed over her. She and Steven still had sex; this was a yearning for something more. She thought of John, how he made her feel, how good it felt. She wanted to see him again.

John thought about Rebecca most evenings when he was having a glass of wine, looking out his window onto the busyness below him, out there. He recalled the swell of her hips, her

long brown hair. He felt ridiculous but still he went on thinking about her. He was restless at work, tired of athletic apparel, tired of health and fitness. He wanted a change. He wasn't sure how to proceed. The pull he felt toward Rebecca became urgent.

Rebecca continued to teach but lost her focus. She lost assignments, she forgot little things. Her disorientation surprised her. She had never been like this, but she liked it.

Months passed. In late spring—May—there was another Nike barbecue. Rebecca grew excited as the day approached, hoping she would see John there. She chose her clothing with care. She scanned the crowded living room, then the yard. He wasn't there. Her disappointment alarmed her. She wondered how this all could be happening to her.

John had stayed away, she found out, because he and Pauline were separated. She was afraid of this and what it might mean for her. He was afraid too. He wanted to protect all sides of his life, keep all exits open. He could tell that Rebecca was not the sort of woman he could sleep with and then forget. He was afraid of a woman like Rebecca. He wanted to try to get by on the good parts of what he already had. What good would a love like this be? It had a deep sweeping pull that he was trying to resist.

Months passed into fall. Leaves were everywhere—layers, colors, soft and wet. John was walking along Twenty-third one Sunday when he saw her. Rebecca glanced up and waved. Her mouth opened in a welcoming smile and he went to her.

“Hi John.”

“Rebecca.” He took her in, the longing alive again. She allowed his gaze to wash over her and all the world became his eyes, the dark, black edge there.

“You live nearby, don't you?” She remembered someone mentioning it. She wondered if he thought that was why she was here. It was why she was here.

“I live two streets over.”

Rebecca turned to look down a leafy street, with a red brick building and a row of old elegant houses. Shadows crossed in waving patterns mixing dark and light.

“I love it down here,” she said.

“How have you been?”

“Good. Busy. You?”

“Work. Dreams of doing something else.” He shrugged.

“I know. I feel that too. But what?” They both sensed their ease together, a kinship.

“Want to get some coffee?” Rebecca asked. She felt him close to her and she seemed to dissolve before him, open, nothing hidden away. She held her breath.

“Yes, that would be nice.” They walked down a few blocks and entered a local coffee and bakery shop. They stood side by side at the counter to order. Both felt what this was between them. They saw the recognition there in the other, old and knowing. They sat in the corner booth.

“Something has shifted in me,” Rebecca said, as if he were an old friend.

“I know. I keep thinking of some other kind of work. I feel like a teenager again, the confusion of it, what I want, what I need.”

She laughed, her head tilted back and their understanding complete. She said, “You get older and find you’ve given up so much in order to accommodate other people.”

“It happens gradually,” he agreed. “You stand in a room one day and wonder where you are and how the hell you got there.”

“You lose track of the individual, the you. I don’t know what I want. I want dreamy ridiculous stuff.”

“It’s not wrong, you know, to want the dreamy stuff.”

“It feels selfish. But I hate that word—selfish.”

“Knowing your own reality; what no one else can know,” John said. “Joseph Conrad wrote that. I’ve been reading a lot lately.”

Rebecca smiled up at John. His eyes took her in, and, just like that—he possessed her. She wanted his eyes all over her. They both looked away, confused, happy. She noticed his hands, smooth, brown, well-kept hands. He still wore his gold wedding band. She wanted his hands on her; the essence of what was between them was touch. The moment passed. They sat together with their shared reticence.

Outside the wind was blowing. Rebecca pulled a violet beanie from her purse and put it on. John smiled at her girlishness. This woman was someone he hadn’t expected. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t remember how to go about love. He wanted to touch her, all the hidden places of her. He wanted to smell her hair. He wanted his hands on her breasts. Their spark was sharp, immediate. The world would see it soon. She had been lit up.

Rebecca didn’t know how to do this. She felt as if she didn’t know anything anymore. She was afraid of entering the space between them. They knew what was possible now, what they could do, how the possession could be complete. And yet, the moment passed. They shared the burden of this in silence together. “I should go,” Rebecca finally said.

“Good to see you.” God, he felt pathetic. They shook hands beneath the awning of the coffee shop and walked off in opposite directions. John turned once and watched her, head down against the wind.

The days passed until it was the end of October. Rebecca drove across Portland, across the wide arc of the Marquam Bridge, white steel above the wide Willamette, the pink glow of

downtown reflected there. Clouds fisted up in clumps of grey, rain threatened. She took the I-5 to the leafy haven of Lake Oswego; it's suburban calm sad and threatening. She wondered—as she had every day since that day with John—what was happening to her. The world was different now, the trees, the color of the leaves, the wind, the taste of coffee, it had all changed. The swiftness of her fall was like a blow. She was down, like a boxer in the ring, she couldn't get up.

She thought of John in all her still moments. The car radio was on and there was a haunting song, a woman's voice, then the bass guitar; it invaded Rebecca, broke her open. She pulled into her driveway and let the song play out. She looked out at the leaves, great layers of them—the crushing wounded blood-red, the faded yellows, the tarnished glaze of orange—and she wanted to lay among them, to feel them on her, to be covered up by their colors. She had lost her way and she didn't know anything anymore.

John tried to stay busy, knowing that the busyness could hold back what was coming at him like a wave—but it didn't work. He had seen the way Rebecca looked at him and he wanted to do something, say something, but what? He knew what the consequence of all this could be. If it began he wouldn't want it to end. He'd read stories about love; he didn't know it was this. He felt swallowed up by it—inside the whale. He wondered about the impossible circumstance of them together. He began to plan a trip somewhere, somewhere far away, where the memory of Rebecca could fade, allowing doubt to move in. At Powell's late that same afternoon, he read the books in the travel section.

The next morning, John was walking along Twenty-third, letting the throb of people hammer some kind of determination into him. He walked up to Burnside, then down again on the opposite side of the street. Leaves fell; leaves were everywhere. Laughter moved in groups,

voices carried fragments of other people's lives. All of it brought him back to Rebecca: the leaves, the falling, the pull. He remembered their brief encounters, he remembered her beauty. If asked, he wouldn't be able to explain any of this.

Rebecca had remembered too and she wanted to see John again. She didn't know how to go about this so she drove to Twenty-third and parked, hoping she'd run into him again. She had shopping to do. She went in and out of stores, and then brought her bags to the coffee shop she'd been to with John. She knew she shouldn't have come here. She knew if he walked into the room now she wouldn't be able to hide the longing in her eyes. It would be there for the whole world to see. He would know everything then. She wanted to weep, to scream, to howl. She wondered again how this could be happening to her. She had to catch her breath. Did he know what he'd done to her? She was already his.

She stood to leave and saw him. He gave her a surprised nod and they smiled, a there you are then. He thought: I don't know what to do anymore than you do. He hadn't known this about love. He moved toward her, his energy crackled, crisp white shirt buttoned up, black hair, black eyes, all coming at her now. She didn't have a chance. She sat down. She touched her hair. He gazed at her, all golden, her hair, the sweater, the roundness of her breasts. John sat down beside Rebecca.

The frisson again, the glint in his eye for her and the softening for him she couldn't stop. They didn't know where to put their hands. The space between them was lit up. The world blurred. She blushed at the dark edge of his eyes. He saw the glow spill out from her and he wanted to undress her.

He had a book. He set it down on the table. On the green cover was the word Ireland.

“Are you going away?”

“I’ve been wondering if I should.”

“There?” She pointed at the book.

He looked at the book and shrugged. “Somewhere.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know.” He laid his arm on the table. She saw his hand, so smooth, so brown, right there. She saw that the gold band was gone.

“I’ve been thinking too,” she said.

He waited.

“I’m not sure what it is, some kind of shadow world, a life suspected.”

“I know.” He felt the pull and he wanted to give in. But after all the love wore down, after all the sex, then what? She studied his hands and his face. She didn’t want to go back to the place she’d been before she loved him. But what good would a love like this be?

“I’m taking two months off,” he said.

“When?”

“In two weeks.”

“You need a change.”

“You’ve made me think again. I want something. I’m not sure what, something more.”

“It’s all so unexpected.”

“What?”

“This. Everything. Us.”

She looked at his face, his neck, his eyes. He stood and leaned over her and smelled her hair. He held his hands out to her and Rebecca stood. He was so close she could touch him. She wanted to touch him so she did; she slipped her arm around his waist. This close he smelled

of soap and rain.

John and Rebecca walked outside; leaves scuttled up around their ankles as they walked toward his apartment. He took her hand and she stroked his thumb. At the entrance, he reaching for his key, she gazed down at the leaves collected there, and at one in particular, its red glory dimming. And beside it another of tarnished yellow, dissolving into the slow fade of decay.