

Monogamy

ALSO BY SUE MILLER

The Good Mother

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For Love

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While I Was Gone

The World Below

The Story of My Father

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The Senator's Wife

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Monogamy



A Novel



Sue Miller



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*For Doug,
mainstay*



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Monogamy



I

ANNIE HAD BEEN single for seven years when she met Graham. Whenever she thought about her first marriage, even long after it had ended, her primary emotion was a kind of shame. Shame that she could have been attracted to someone she felt so little for in the end. That she could have lived with him for so long.

She had excuses, if she'd wished to use them. Alan had been remarkably handsome in a kind of preppy way—tall, with a thatch of blond hair that flopped elegantly across his forehead. And she'd been young, so young and ignorant that she'd regarded him at first as a superior sort of person—he knew where he was going, he knew what he wanted. Annie was shakier on those issues. She had just graduated from college with not much sense of what came next.

Then there was the fact that *he* felt he was a superior person too. He had an easy contempt for the people around him—even for their friends. For a while, Annie had enjoyed sharing that careless contempt, unsure of herself socially as she was. How much fun! to come home from a party and sit around bad-mouthing all the people who'd been there. How sophisticated, how competent, it had made her feel. How adult—she was twenty-three.

Soon enough, though, as she might have foreseen, Alan's disdain turned to her. To her life, to her useless preoccupations—she was taking course after course in photography at the Museum School then. To her pitiful income (she did portraits of dogs for their owners, she photographed family reunions and graduations and birthday parties). To her self-delusions (she kept sending off photographs of local events to *The Phoenix*, to *The Boston Globe*, in hopes that she could get work as a stringer). It seemed to her a failure of character that she hadn't known this would be coming, that she should have imagined she'd be exempt from his general critique of the world.

It was when she was driving home with him from a party, a party he was speaking of in that familiar, slightly irritated tone, that it occurred to her that she simply didn't like him. Over the next few days she came, almost literally, to see him differently. Everything that had seemed admirable about him seemed just the opposite now. Small. Defensive. How could she ever have thought she loved him?

She didn't. She felt she never had.

Had she? Had she ever loved anyone? She felt herself to be without love—it seemed a kind of incapacity, a hollowness within her. This was the first time she had this thought so clearly, and also the first time she connected it—slowly, over some months of self-examination—to her photography. In her work, she felt, she was like him, like Alan. Cold, removed. Was it possible that this was why she'd chosen it?

In any case, she withdrew from Alan. He noticed this, finally. He wanted to talk about it, but she felt she had nothing she could say to him. How could you say, "I don't like you anymore"? "I don't think I ever loved you"?

She suggested they separate. He was surprised by this, which surprised her. She had assumed, as critical of her as he was, that he must have wanted out too. They had some weeks, then, of anguished back-and-forth. He pleaded. Annie felt awful. But even in the midst of his pleading, he couldn't resist offering more of his

general critique of her, and that made it easier for her, the ending.

She left. She took none of the things that they'd accumulated together—the expensive wedding gifts from his kind, moneyed parents and their moneyed friends. The silver vegetable servers with covers, the napkin rings, the fish knives, the linen tablecloth and napkins—she left all of it behind, thinking of it as the price she was paying for her freedom. At the time, she thought there ought to be a price, she felt so guilty, so ashamed of this failure.

But she kept the camera his parents had given her when she'd begun to be interested in photography, an expensive Rolleiflex that she'd only slowly learned how to use. That, and her books, many of them purchased for courses in college, filled with markings and notes she'd taken in a neat, careful handwriting she could barely recognize as her own.

So she was free, at twenty-nine. Which should have made her feel liberated, expansive. And she did, in some ways. Except that for a long while after the divorce, she was uncomfortable around men. For at least a year, maybe longer, she read almost every gesture, every remark, as controlling, as dangerous for her.

But all of that was behind her by the time she met Graham. By then she had shed that sense of danger, she could enjoy men again. And some of that enjoyment was the pleasure of casual sex, something that wouldn't have been possible for her when she emerged from college, when she married at twenty-three. But postdivorce, in a world that had itself changed, Annie learned to sleep around. Happily. Enthusiastically. Fairly indiscriminately too, so that later she couldn't call up the names of some of the men she'd had sex with.

Sometimes, though, at the end of one of these casual relationships, she experienced a kind of melancholy that lingered for days or longer, a sense that, free as she felt she was, pleasurable as she felt that freedom to be, there was part of her that might be hoping for something else. Some deeper connection.

Even, perhaps, monogamy again.

She met Graham at a party he was throwing, a party to celebrate the opening of his bookstore.

He had been lucky in the weather the night of this party. After several rainy, gray weeks that had darkened the brick sidewalks of Cambridge and depressed everyone, the sky had brightened through the day, and at five o'clock it was a lovely late-spring evening. People were suddenly out everywhere on the streets, walking, enjoying the benign touch of the air, air that still carried the scent of the various trees budding and blooming and dropping their pale confetti all over town—hawthorns, crabapples, lilacs.

Annie had ambled slowly over from her attic apartment on Raymond Street with Jeff, someone she slept with from time to time. They'd spent several naked, sweaty hours before this in her bed.

The bookstore party had been an afterthought. He'd been invited—did she feel like going?

Why not? she said.

Why not was the way she had come to navigate the world then. The way she'd come to understand it in the years since the end of her marriage. There was always the next thing, the next possibility. The man, yes. Sex, yes. But also perhaps just something interesting. Something to look at. Something to do.

They'd showered together, she and Jeff, before they started their stroll down to the bookstore. Annie's long, dark hair was still damp when they left her apartment, though it had dried by the time they arrived.

She stepped inside ahead of Jeff, stepped into the store's heat and hubbub, into the heady odor of women's perfume and cigarette smoke and here and there the whiff of pot. There must have been sixty or seventy people already there, milling around, talking loudly to be heard over some barely audible music playing in the background. The crowd was mostly her age—thirties, forties.

From the moment she entered the room, Annie was excited. She

felt sexed, maybe a bit predatory, intensely aware of her body in all its parts, of her thighs moving against each other, slick and slippery in spite of the shower.

When Jeff brought her over to Graham to introduce her, Annie recognized him. She'd seen him often around the square, sitting with an espresso at one of the little tables at Pamplona, or ducking into a bookstore, or drinking at Casablanca or The Blue Parrot or Cronin's—a large man, bearded, visibly energetic, even from a distance, with a mop of curly hair. He was almost always with other people—talking, laughing, gesturing expansively. One of those habitués, then, of whom there were perhaps three or four familiar to her. She had felt envious sometimes when she saw him—envious of his liveliness, of what seemed his easy sociability, of the active pleasure he seemed to take in the people around him.

He took her hand in both of his as she reached out to shake. "What is it?" he asked, leaning down to hear her over the noise.

"Annie," she shouted, looking up into his light eyes.

"Ah, Annie," he said. He smiled, and the eyes almost disappeared. "I'm glad you came." After perhaps a few seconds too long, he let go of her and turned a little so he could gesture at a long table set in the middle of the room, a table covered with wine bottles, with three or four towers of clear plastic cups, with multiple ashtrays, some half full, with baskets of bread and two huge wheels of Brie, one of them already ravaged. He said something—she thought maybe, "Have at it"—before he turned to greet someone else and she and Jeff moved away, obediently, to get some wine.

After the first few conversations they tried to have as a couple—leaning forward, shouting at people one or the other of them barely knew—they drifted apart. Annie looked at the spines of the books on the shelves, at the people standing in groups near her. She found herself talking briefly to someone she'd known years before in a photography class, but even as they were speaking, she could watch his eyes moving around the crowd, trying to spot someone perhaps

more promising. She talked to several people she didn't know—quick, shouted exchanges. *How do you know Graham? Yes, what a perfect night for a party. Did we really need another bookstore in Harvard Square? Thank God the rain stopped, I thought I'd go mad.*

She went back over to the big table a few times to get more wine, one time lingering to eavesdrop on a long conversation between a man and a woman who clearly didn't know each other very well. She was asking him many, many questions about a trip he'd taken recently, and listening with what seemed like great interest to his account of how strange the people were, "sort of innocently *open*," he said. Annie was trying to figure out what country he was talking about, and then she realized it was not a country at all—it was Chicago, the city she'd grown up in. She laughed out loud, and a man standing near her stared at her for a moment. She looked back at him and smiled before she turned away.

And through all of this, she kept seeing Graham as he moved around the room, as he embraced people, men as well as women, as he threw his head back to laugh. His shirt was visibly damp with sweat by now, his skin slightly pinked from the heat. Or perhaps, she thought, just from excitement. When passersby stopped to look in the open doorway, trying to figure out what was happening in here, he would call out "Come in! come in!" He seemed so ingeniously happy and enthusiastic that she couldn't help smiling as she watched him. At one point he caught her glance and looked steadily, quizzically, at her for a moment before smiling back. As if he were really registering her, Annie thought. Maybe he'd noticed her too, here and there in the square, though that seemed unlikely, she was so much less noticeable a person—a *personage*—than he was, in his size, his ebullience.

Several times she spotted Jeff somewhere in the room too, once leaned over a woman, listening attentively. She recognized this posture. He'd assumed it with her too when he was picking her up at the party where they'd met. She watched him now for a few moments.

It seemed to be working in this instance too—the woman gazed up at him, apparently dazzled. He was good at it.

At some point she went outside to cool off, standing among a small group of people gathered there. She fell into a conversation with a tall, middle-aged man who vaguely resembled Al Pacino. She couldn't place his accent. New York? He was a friend of Graham's, he said. His partner, in fact.

"Partner?" she asked. Was he gay then, Graham? She felt a quick jolt of disappointment.

"Yeah, you know, the guy who owns the bookstore with him."

"Oh!" she said.

Peter, he said his name was. Peter Aiello. They talked for a while, easily, a bit flirtatiously, and then he saw someone inside the store he needed to speak with and moved away.

Annie stayed outside, by herself. The air was fresh and cool, the first stars visible in the deepening blue of the sky. She found herself wishing she could just leave—leave, and walk home alone. It wouldn't bother Jeff for more than a few seconds at the most.

Or maybe it would.

This was the trouble with these ruleless relationships, she thought. You couldn't really know anything for certain about what the other person might be feeling. Might be entitled to feel.

She went back in and made her way slowly through the press of people to the table, to get herself another glass of wine. Just as she turned to face the room again, wine in hand, she bumped into someone. It was Graham. He was holding a glass of wine too. White wine, she was happy to note, as she felt it slosh abundantly across the front of her shirt, cool and shocking.

"Oh, shit!" he cried. He grabbed napkins from the table and began dabbing at her awkwardly, mostly at her bosom, such as it was, which was where the wine had landed. "Oh, I'm so fucking sorry."

"It's all right, really," Annie said. She was as much embarrassed by his response as by having caused him to spill the wine.

“It isn’t,” he said. “How could it be? Look at you!” He dabbed away, talking all the while, lost in apology. “What a klutz I am! I’m just so sorry!”

“Really, it was my fault,” Annie kept saying, trying to stop him, trying to slow the hand that wielded the napkins.

“No, no. How could it be? It was me. Oh, God, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Please.” But now he was insisting on his idiocy, saying what a clod he was, an asshole. Until, just to make him shut up, Annie raised her glass—red wine, unfortunately—and tossed it at him, at his shirt. A blue shirt, as it happened, a beautiful soft shirt, now with a dark stain blooming on its front.

His hands froze, he paused for a visible intake of breath, and then he burst into laughter. A *guffaw*, Annie thought. Of course Graham would guffaw.

“Off the hook!” he cried. “Thank God!” He started to use the dampened napkins now to wipe at himself. “Free at last!” He looked at her. “Thank you. Thank you so much!”

He was grinning at Annie now, and she was smiling at him. They were standing close, people pressing in at their backs.

After a moment that began to seem too long, he said, “Here, we both need more wine, don’t we?”

“Well, I don’t *need* it, but sure.”

He reached over to the table, now a mess of empty and half-empty bottles, crumbs, plates daubed with partially eaten food, here and there cigarettes stubbed out on them. He turned back to Annie with two opened bottles—red, white, one in each hand. He poured, first for her, then for himself. When he’d set the bottles back down, they raised their glasses vaguely toward each other and each had a sip.

Graham was looming above Annie—though what she felt was that he loomed *around* her, that she had somehow entered a space he owned. Heat radiated from him.

His face had become serious as he bent to her. He said, “What

are you doing with Jeff?” His voice, she noted, was deep, resonant.

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. It seems an odd pairing, somehow.” He was speaking very near Annie’s ear, and she could feel his winey breath warm on her cheek, the rumble of his voice in her spine.

She pulled her head back to see him. “We’re hardly paired,” she said, looking into his eyes.

His face changed. “Ah! Good news.” He smiled down at her, and they relaxed into the noise. Annie wanted him to touch her, she realized. She was waiting for it, her body was waiting.

Then, leaning forward again, he asked, “May I walk you home?”

“Now?” Annie pulled back again, laughing. She raised an open hand to indicate the people pressed in against them. The party was at full tilt, louder, bigger, more lubricated than it had been all evening.

He looked around, as if only now taking in all the people. “Oh!” he said. “Yeah. Later, I suppose, would be better.”

“But see, the thing is, I’m leaving with the one what brought me.” Though she was feeling some regret about that.

They looked at each other. It struck Annie that they were commiserating. Graham was nodding, over and over, as if taking in terrible news. “Well, I like to hear that,” he said at last. “It speaks well of you, I suppose. But also . . .”—he made a rueful face—“also I *don’t* like to hear it.”

When she left a while later, with Jeff, Annie turned at the door to look for Graham. She found him—he was so tall, so prepossessing, that he was easy to spot. She waved, and he seemed to take a step in her direction, but then someone in the group standing with him must have said something to him, and he turned back, away from her.

She lay awake that night. She kept thinking about Graham—his apparent joyfulness, his ease, the feeling of his rumbling voice in her ear. Even his size. How tall was he? she wondered. Six-three?

Six-four? More than a foot taller than she was, certainly. Ridiculous, really.

And he was so big. She'd never been attracted to a fat man before.

But no, she thought. He wasn't really fat. He was barrel-chested, large, yes. But somehow the way he carried himself—and of course, also his quick appreciation of her—had canceled out that notion for her. She remembered mostly wanting to touch him, wanting him to touch her. She'd been aware again, in the moments they stood so close to each other, of the wetness between her legs.

Alone in her bed under the skylight, Annie felt it all merge, the by now free-floating sexual alertness that had lingered from her afternoon with Jeff, and her happy encounter with Graham. She might have felt bad about using the sensations she'd had with Jeff to feed her response to another man, but she didn't. It didn't seem complicated at all to her—just the necessary way she'd stumbled onto Graham.

He *interested* her, she thought.

And then: C'mon, how could you even begin to know that? You exchanged about two words.

But he had seemed so open, so without caution or defenses. So sweet, really. So eager—for her, certainly, but also somehow for *life*, she would have said. In the dark, thinking of him, she was smiling.

The next evening she stopped in at the bookstore. It was miraculously clean. The shelves that had been pushed against the walls the night before were back in place, filling the room. There were comfortable chairs set here and there, floor lamps next to them. Graham was busy behind the long checkout counter in front of the plate-glass window, talking, answering questions, manning the cash register. Annie chose a book almost at random from the fiction section—something by John Gardner—and got in line.

When it was her turn, he looked up and his face changed. "Ah, it's Annie!" he said, grinning. Then a moment of doubt. He looked

worried, suddenly. “Isn’t that it? Annie?” he asked. She nodded, and he smiled again, more slowly. “What are you doing here?”

“This.” She held her book up, and he took it. While he was ringing her up, Annie said, “Also I thought maybe I could walk *you* home.”

His hands stopped. He looked at her. His face lifted in a way she would become familiar with, a way that meant he was purely happy, a way that would come to mean that she was happy too.

“Well, you’d have to wait,” he said. “I don’t get off till ten.”

“I can wait,” she said.

“Music to my ears,” he said.

And so it began, with Graham.

Annie misunderstood it at first, probably partly because the sex worked so well between them from the start. Happy sex. Seemingly uncomplicated. As soon as they began to sleep together, her worries about it vanished. In bed he moved above her, below her, inside her, as if in an element made for him. Swimming in sex—easily, slowly. More of same in Annie’s life, but better.

For a while it didn’t occur to her that it would ever be anything more than this. In her dizziness about how well things were going, she didn’t notice the changes in him. In herself. She thought of herself as still sliding through the world in the same way—loose, free, wild. *Why not?*

It was true that she felt overwhelmed sometimes—by Graham’s size, by his energy, his appetite for people, for music, for food. By his appetite for her. It made her uncomfortable, occasionally. She actually slept with Jeff once again after she’d started with Graham. And with one other man, someone friends introduced her to, a bass player, who made her laugh in bed by remembering for her an early Chekhov story about a double bass and a naked woman. She thought of these adventures, she even explained them to Graham,

as the result of a generalized excitement created by her affair with him. It was only looking back on them later that she understood she'd also been using them, using them as a way to resist Graham.

But Graham was persistent, a joyous lover, an enthusiast, and finally Annie gave over to him. How could she not? She'd been waylaid, really—by happiness, by his love for her, and then, more slowly, hers for him. By the end of the fifth month she'd known him, she'd moved into his place on Ware Street, a quick walk for him to the bookstore, for her a short drive to her studio in Somerville.

What she told people at first was that she'd moved because her very informal lease was coming up for renewal and the couple who owned the house that contained her attic apartment were going to raise her rent. But she knew, even before she and Graham spoke openly about it with each other, that a life together had begun. Within the year—actually on the anniversary of the store's opening (“The two happiest days of my life,” he always said)—they were married.

Annie was happy too. But occasionally through their years together, and in spite of everything that was pleasurable and loving between them, she would feel it again, the sense of his having overtaken her somehow, overwhelmed her.

2

HERE'S GRAHAM, AWAKE even earlier than usual this morning, sitting alone in the kitchen in the clean, grayish predawn light. He's wearing an old cotton bathrobe, faded blue—a *nothing* color in this light. It's frayed at the collar and cuffs. Under it, a T-shirt. His bare feet, crossed at the ankle under the table, are unusually slender and high-arched for someone so big. His hands, too, holding his mug, are shapely, the fingers long and tapered, reminders of his life as a thinner young man. Normally his expression is alert, ready to be amused at whatever might happen next. Now, in repose, he looks tired. The air is full of the smell of coffee.

He's at the expansive table where everyone sits during the dinner parties he and Annie like to throw. Facing him on the other side of the table is a row of tall windows that open out over the backyard, still in shadow at this hour—the leaves of the lilac bushes that line one side of the patio are an almost blackish green.

The newspaper, most likely containing the report of what the newly anointed Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama has said or done the day before, is laid out in front of him, but he's not reading it as he usually does. Instead, he's remembering his first wife, Frieda. Remembering the day she left him: the chilly morning,

homely Frieda in her old tweed coat, trying to hold back her tears as she carried Lucas out to the car. Just thinking of it makes him almost physically uncomfortable, even after all these years. He takes an audible, open mouthed breath and shifts his weight in the chair.

Their apartment then, his and Frieda's, was on the second floor of a sagging frame house on Windsor Street in Cambridge. He was standing on the brick sidewalk in front of it with nothing to do at this point but watch her, having already hauled down the last of the things she had wanted to take—a carton of her books, a carton of toys for Lucas. The trunk of the car, an old blue Ford Fiesta pocked with rust, was held almost shut with the bungee cords he had stretched over the many other boxes and suitcases she was taking. As she bent to settle Lucas into the back seat, Graham could see the tears glistening on her cheeks.

"Mumma's owie?" he heard the little boy ask. His small, pretty face, looking up at her, was frightened.

"A tiny one," Frieda said, trying to smile. "Just tiny." She pushed at her cheeks with her palms. "I'll be okay in . . . three minutes."

She'd turned then, and come to stand in front of Graham. "I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes behind her glasses were swollen, the wet lashes spiked darkly together.

"No," he answered.

No, because it was he who had wrecked things. No. Because it was he who was sorry.

Sorry in every sense of the word, he thinks now, in his comfortable kitchen. A sorry bastard. My fault.

Mea culpa.

An open marriage. They'd agreed on it at first. It had been that era—the world was shifting and changing rapidly around them, and Graham had stepped forward into this altered universe eagerly, along with what seemed like half of Cambridge, compelled by all

the things it seemed to promise—among them a different meaning for marriage, for sex.

The problem was that Graham had been happy in this new world, and Frieda hadn't. She tried, she dutifully had a few lovers in the first year or so. But then she got pregnant with Lucas and realized that she'd never really wanted any of it.

But Graham did want it, he still wanted all of it, it was part of his excited sense of everything that was newly possible for him. And because Frieda didn't ask him to stop—wouldn't have been able then to ask him to stop—he went on doing it, obviously, happily.

Frieda, private uncomplaining Frieda, kept her suffering about this to herself until she was too angry, too wounded, to continue. It was over, she told him. It hurt, it hurt all the time.

Afterward he sometimes thought that, as much as anything, she was angry at his physical transformation. When he looks at photos of himself from college or from the early days of their marriage, he barely recognizes the tall, gawky boy captured in them. In one image he remembers with pain, he had on a shirt that could have passed for a pajama top, it was so shapeless, so hopeless, so *plaid*. And always those thick, dark-framed glasses. The idea that they're now chic, that beautiful women willingly wear them, this amazes him.

The beard had been the first change. And when he grew his curly hair longer, as men were doing then, he looked like another person entirely. People responded to him differently, women especially. And in an answering response partly to that, and partly, he supposes, to all the other changes that were opening out to him in those heady days, he slowly more or less *became* another person—buoyant, outgoing, confident.

Frieda doesn't look like another person, even now. She's still the suitable mate for that old version of Graham—a tall, big-boned woman with a wide plain face and her own pair of thick, perpetually smudged glasses. He can't see her without the tug of all those

old feelings—guilt, sorrow, love.

They're friends now, he and Frieda. They've had to be, for Lucas, but they both would have tried anyway, because in some sense they still love each other. Though part of what they're loving is the sweet, serious people that they once were. That Frieda still is.

Not him. Not sweet. Certainly not serious. A joke, really.

He sips his coffee. Even this coffee makes him remorseful, this amazing cappuccino with its thick, creamy foam. He made it on the expensive espresso machine that Annie gave him last year for Christmas. Her generosity, along with the machine's sleek perfection sitting over there on the counter—these both seem a chastisement to Graham.

He's been much more careful in his marriage to Annie. More careful and more faithful.

Yet not entirely faithful.

Which is partly what's making him remember the end with Frieda. Because he's done it again.

A light thing, that's what he'd thought at first. A fling. He'd had one other short affair much earlier on in his marriage to Annie, in a period when things were suddenly difficult between them, for reasons he didn't feel he really understood. The earlier affair was with a woman he'd known for a while, a married woman, Linda Parkman. A friend, in their large circle of friends. He hadn't seen it as any kind of threat to his marriage, and neither had Linda. It was a tonic, actually—and it had turned him eagerly back to Annie when it was finished. She had asked him once about his suddenly increased ardor, and he'd made some kind of joke about it.

He remembers now coming into a party in someone else's house at around that time, looking across the room and seeing her, seeing Linda. By then, things were easily over between them. Well, relatively easily—just a mild bump or two. And she had ended it, for

which Graham was grateful—it was the kind of thing it would have been difficult for him to do.

Whose party? Whose house? That was lost to history. There was always a party then, and the houses, the apartments, with their worn sofas, their secondhand chairs and lamps, their straw rugs, were pretty much all the same anyway.

So he saw her on somebody's couch in somebody's living room. Her face is what he recalls clearly, frowning in concentration as she listened to the woman who was speaking to the little group settled near her. Her chin was resting on her hand, one finger set sideways across her upper lip. When she looked up and saw Graham, her eyes rounded, her lips pursed, and the finger straightened out, rose vertically across her lips to touch the tip of her nose: *Shhhhh*.

He had felt a quick pulse of relief, of pleasure. He'd smiled at her then, and turned away.

He hadn't gotten off scot-free, though. He'd made the mistake of talking to Frieda about it. He'd let himself think it wouldn't matter to her, that they'd moved so far away from the grief of pulling apart that he could treat her like a confidante, a friend.

Not about this, he couldn't. She wept. She called him a fool. She said he might as well attach reins to his penis and gallop around after it. She asked what the point of all her pain back then was, if he was still at it in his marriage to Annie. Was it all a perfect waste?

There was something about Frieda that had always made him feel protective, even though he'd been so bad at protecting her. Her awkwardness. Her earnestness.

No, he'd said to her then. No, of course not.

"What did you learn, then?" she asked shrilly. "What is it that you learned from all my suffering?"

They were sitting across from each other at the kitchen table in her shotgun apartment on Whittier Street. He'd just returned Lucas after a weekend. He reached out to touch her hand across the scarred tabletop, but she pulled it back and turned sharply away, to

the side. He could watch her mouth pulling into a bitter shape as she tried to keep herself from crying.

“I did, Frieda,” he said. “I learned.”

“Not enough,” she said. And for weeks, she wouldn’t talk to him.

Now he sees that she was right. This time it isn’t working the way it did before, and he feels he may have put things with Annie at risk, something he never intended.

Things with Annie: your marriage, you asshole!

The problem is that Rosemary—Rosemary Gregory, the woman he’s slept with maybe four, maybe five times—has started to behave as if there’s some kind of commitment between them, as though she has a claim on him. Twice she’s called him at work at the bookstore in the morning, a time when he’s almost always sitting in the office, surrounded by other people. Her tone in these calls is too intimate, and this scares him. He needs to end it, but that’s something he’s never been good at—at disappointing people. At being, as he sees it, *unkind*.

Rosemary is sort of an old friend too—more a friend of friends, actually. But he and Annie have liked her well enough—her and Charlie, her husband. In fact, they’ve probably liked Charlie better. He’s smart, affable, well-read. He designs interactive museum exhibits.

But they’re divorced now, Charlie and Rosemary. Newly divorced. Graham should have remembered the rule: you don’t fool around with the newly divorced.

They were seated next to each other at a large dinner party. He was flirting with her. Graham likes to flirt with women. He likes being courtly, flattering people, making people feel good; but especially making women feel good. Everyone knows this about him. Rosemary should have known it too. People, including Annie,

make fun of him for this behavior.

He can't even remember what he was saying, but he was, as usual, joking around. *The merry grass widow. How men were going to be lined up to receive her favors.*

She had looked levelly at him. She was gorgeous, he'd always thought so, but in a dramatic, almost stylized way that didn't much interest him. Careful makeup, careful hair, lots of expensive-looking ethnic jewelry. "Well, why don't you just jump in at the head of that line?" she said.

Thinking she was simply being flirty too, he said, "Damn straight. I'll just push all those other guys aside."

"Thursdays are usually best for me," she said. "Late afternoon. I'll expect you."

She would?

Or was it an answering joke on her part?

He had no idea, he realized. And she turned away just after she'd said it, turned to talk to the man on her right, so he didn't have the chance to make it part of his game, to let her know he wasn't taking it seriously.

He let one Thursday pass, but then he thought that perhaps it might be awkward socially to see her again if she hadn't intended it as a joke, if she'd actually been inviting him. Maybe he should go, then. Go, and explain himself. Explain that he'd just been horsing around. *Not that he wouldn't love to, et cetera, et cetera.* He didn't let himself think until later that to ponder going there at all was further horsing around on his part, horsing around with the itch of what had begun to feel like a real possibility. And by then it was too late.

Outside, the shadows have lifted and the birds are launched into the frenzied call-and-response that starts their day. He gets up and comes around the table to the windows. Someone—Annie—has left a sweater on one of the old chairs that sit on the mossy brick patio. Its white is startling against the other, muted tones.

He had misunderstood Rosemary, he knows that now. With the quick turn she'd made on his playful tone, she had seemed to him worldly-wise, sexually sophisticated. After the first time they had sex, he tried to make a light remark about this, about how they had stumbled into bed with each other by accident, each of them joking, neither of them getting the other's joke.

"I don't see it that way," she said.

Suddenly he felt a little short of breath. "Oh," he said. Her face after sex was pinkish—almost chapped-looking. They were still in bed, in her grand bedroom. Even up here there was an expensive-looking kilim on the floor.

"I don't see it as an accident at all," she said.

"You don't."

"No, I think it was inevitable."

He didn't know what to say to this, or even how to take it; but slowly, over the next few times they were together, he began to understand her, to see that she was, if anything, absurdly romantic. Certainly not jaded, or even sophisticated. She was lonely. In need. This made him feel sorry for her, but it also frightened him.

Ah!—his attention is drawn now by the appearance on her back porch of his elderly neighbor, Karen. She pauses there for a moment, her head tilted back, maybe to smell the morning air. Then she laboriously descends the stairs and begins to survey her garden. She's dressed in one of what Graham thinks of as her "outfits"—in this case a wide-brimmed straw hat, a knee-length white nightgown, and tube socks. She has bright blue sneakers on her feet. There's something jagged-looking and silvery on these sneakers—maybe lightning bolts? They glint every now and then as she moves around.

He watches her stand for a few moments in front of various plants, her hands on her hips, as though she were chastising them. Occasionally she bends over to painfully, slowly, pull a weed. Her old cat trails her. Sam, orange with white patches. He twines around

her legs when she stands still, his tail lightly whipping her mottled shins.

Graham and Annie are worried about Karen. What were once charming eccentricities have *ripened*, he would say, into more troubling behavior. She seems addled sometimes. Only a few days earlier he found her in the house when he came home from work, standing irresolutely, frowning, in the middle of his living room.

“What are *you* doing here?” she’d said sharply to him.

“I might ask you the same question,” he said. “But I won’t.” She laughed then—gaily, it seemed to him—and headed toward the back door.

He thinks now of how strange it is that she should be so much in their lives. More than their own parents ever were—certainly more than his, anyway. And this purely the result of the accident of buying the house next door to hers all those years ago.

Standing at the window, he remembers walking with Annie behind the real estate agent through the dim rooms of the house. Annie, small and slender ahead of him, her dark hair still long then, a thick ribbon down her back, her carriage elegant. The graceful accommodating dancer’s turn to whatever the agent was pointing out.

They’d been house-hunting for a while, feeling more and more discouraged as they slowly discovered how limited their choices were going to be. This, the house they were looking at—the house they ended up buying—was a converted coach house. You walked up a long driveway at the side of the much larger, *real* house, as he thought of it, to get there.

It had been divided then into what were essentially dark cells, tiny rooms that had depressed him on that walk-through. But what Annie said afterward as they talked about it was that those walls would be as easy to take down as they’d been to put up. That when the towering old pine that leaned over the roof was removed, the light would pour in. That the house was essentially surrounded

by open land—all those other people’s backyards. In that era before gardening was chic, most of these yards were overgrown with thick, tall grasses gone to seed—a kind of prairie encircling the house. A prairie, except for Karen’s yard, shockingly lush with the perennials, the roses, the shrubs, that the others would slowly acquire as gentrification took hold.

On the day they moved in, Karen, then middle-aged, a handsome, tall, prematurely white-haired woman with a Brahmin accent, had welcomed them with a jug of the cheap wine they all drank at that time—Almaden or Mateus, something like that—and a strange-tasting pasta casserole she said she’d made herself. When Graham returned the empty dish to her, he asked her what it was, exactly. She told him she’d invented the recipe. “I think what really makes it work, though,” she said in her toney voice, “are the canned plums I always add to it.”

Annie sometimes used this line when she was complimented on a meal. Thinking of this, of her excellent imitation of Karen’s voice and patrician accent, he smiles.

As if on cue, above him, footfalls, and then, a minute later, the rush of water through the pipes: she’s awake. He goes to the coffee machine and with the push of a few buttons, the turn of a valve, makes a cappuccino for her and a second cup for himself.

All this is part of their routine. He gets up first, usually around five. He goes downstairs, he makes his coffee and sits alone with it while he reads the paper—the headlines and maybe an article or two. In the summer, he can watch the sun rising slowly over the houses that back up to his and Annie’s, rising until the tops of the trees in his neighbors’ yards look as if they’ve burst into flame. Usually he enjoys every ritualized part of all this.

Not today.

He brings both cups of coffee up the steep back stairs to their bedroom. When he leans against the bedroom door, it swings open to the dazzling morning light up here. In this light, propped

against the pillows on their bed, Annie, in her blue-green kimono.

Maybe because of the light, maybe because of his guilt, maybe because he's been thinking of Frieda—Frieda, homely and in pain—he sees Annie afresh. Annie, this graceful, delicate woman he's married to, her wide mouth moving now with pleasure into the smile that transforms her, that thrills him now as much as when he first saw her, thirty years before, at the opening party for the bookstore he still owns.

“My sweet husband,” she says, reaching up with both hands to take the cup he holds out to her.

The bookstore. It had been another part of Graham's transformation. For years after he quit graduate school—all but dissertation on a doctoral degree in English literature—he taught as an adjunct here and there in the Boston area, finally mostly adult education classes, all the while trying to write his novel. He was slow to give that up, but at some point he saw that he wasn't going to be able to write a book he'd want to read, or, more important, that he'd want anyone else to read. It had felt liberating to acknowledge this to himself and others, to shed his painful sense of the obligation to be somehow *remarkable*; but it left him with the unanswered question of what to do with his life, and simultaneously the realization that working on the novel endlessly had been a way to avoid facing that question.

As he took stock of himself, he remembered the time when he had worked a part-time job for a year or so in a small bookstore in Harvard Square—gone now—and it seemed to him that he was most happy then, living among books, talking about books. He began to nurture the notion of a bookstore of his own.

So when an uncle of his—the lone success in his mother's family—died and left him what he described to friends as “a little chunk of change,” he and an older friend, Peter Aiello, who always seemed to

have many of those chunks more or less just lying around, bought a storefront on Mount Auburn Street, the plan being that Graham would run the store, with Peter as a silent partner.

On the opening night—*of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world*—Annie walked in with a guy, a guy he'd sent an invitation to for reasons he couldn't later recall. And in spite of everything that seemed ladylike and elegant about her—her slender dancer's body, her grave, sober face—she also carried a kind of charge that he felt instantly. He understood it as sexual, yes, and it turned out that was apt—she told him later that she'd been fucking Jeff all that afternoon. But in the moment he imagined it as directed at him, connected to all the changes he'd made and wanted to make in his life, to who he wanted to be; and his impulse was to try to be sure she didn't somehow slip away.

Now Graham sits down in his chair by the bedroom window and lifts his feet, sets them on the end of the bed.

"What news?" she asks, after she's had a sip or two of her coffee.

"I don't know." He lifts his empty hand. "I didn't read the paper."

"What?" Her eyebrows rise in theatrical surprise. "You're supposed to be my conduit to the wider world."

"I know, I know. Falling down on the job. But . . ." He shrugs. The sun is warm on his feet. Only now does he realize how cold they were downstairs.

They are quiet awhile. He's aware again of the racket of the birds. They both drink their coffee. He has a mug with his store's name on it. Annie has a wide white bowl that was an enormous cup before the handle broke off. She has to raise it to her lips with both hands now.

She lowers it to the worn quilt that covers her lap and looks at him, frowning. She says, "Are you worried about something?"

"No, everything's fine in my little world."

“Hmm,” she says, looking steadily at him. “Because you seem a bit . . . preoccupied.”

He can hardly stand it, this solicitude toward him, a solicitude that only compounds his guilt. She knows something is bothering him, which makes him ever more evasive. Which worries her the more.

Don’t, he wants to say. Don’t be concerned. Don’t care about me.

“Just, store stuff,” he says. “Nothing important.”

“Well, what? What store stuff? If I can help . . .”

“No. No, everything’s fine.”

She makes a face—eyebrows lifted skeptically, mouth drawn down. “I guess I have to believe you,” she says. “Thousands wouldn’t.”

He smiles at her. Then, to change the subject, he says, “Karen’s out and about.”

“Is she. Gardening?”

“So to speak. In not exactly gardening togs.”

“Oh dear.”

He nods, first up and down, then—what to do?—side to side. “All that’s missing, really, is the boa.”

She laughs quickly and says, “Shit. Well, I’ll talk to her on my way out, for all the good it’ll do.”

They sit in what he hopes is a comfortable silence. In the early days of their marriage, Graham sometimes climbed back into bed with her after they’d drunk their coffee and they made love, but they’ve mostly given that up in recent years. And on those rare occasions when they start in, as often as not, absent the magic blue pill, Graham winds up “underperforming,” as he calls it. Still, it brings them close again each time, the warm touching, flesh on flesh.

He’s thinking of this when she says, “What are you up to today?”

He smiles at her. “More of same, of course. Ever more of same. But I think I’ll stay home this morning. Work at my desk here.” Then he remembers. “Oh, and I’m having lunch with John.” His

oldest friend, from college.

“John *Norris*?” Her voice has a surprised pleasure in it, her smile changes her sober face.

“Yeah. Didn’t I mention it?” She shakes her head. “He’s in town for some conference, I think at MIT, so he’s making time for me today.”

“But how nice. Maybe *he* can cheer you up.” He doesn’t answer her. After a moment, she says, “How long will he be around?”

“I’m not sure. He might have told me, but I don’t remember.”

“Why don’t you ask him for dinner tomorrow, then? If he can. One extra person would be nice. Balance out the boy-girl thing. And I’d love to see him.”

This is the dinner party they’re having the next night—Friday—to celebrate Jamie Slattery’s reading at the bookstore from her new book, an apocalyptic novel set in a fictional New Orleans after a flood more devastating than Katrina.

Jamie is an old friend, but old friend or not, they often have parties for the writers who read at the store. He and Annie are known for these parties—for the meals Annie cooks, for the free-flowing wine, for the talk. In the old days, for the dancing too. It was only a few years ago that Graham finally threw out the stack of 45 he’d held on to for years, most of them so scratched or spilled on that they were unplayable anyway. He still misses them. At odd times he’ll think of one of them—Shirley and Lee doing “Let the Good Times Roll” or James Carr singing “Pouring Water on a Drowning Man”—and he’ll feel a pang of regret—yes, for the loss of the music, but more for those gone-by times. They mostly don’t dance anymore either.

He and Annie talk now about the various people who are coming tomorrow, they exchange what each knows about what’s been happening recently in one or the other of their friends’ lives, and for these moments, everything seems the same to Graham, he can almost forget his anxiety, his sense that he deserves to lose all of this.

Then she says, “You’re staying home more than usual these mornings.”

“Well, I can get more done here, really. And then I’ve been doing that late-afternoon, early-evening shift at the store.”

“I know,” she says. After a moment, “You like that better?”

“I do. I do in some ways. It’s a big rush right after everybody gets out of work, but then it quiets down and you can actually talk to people.” This is all true, but also there’s the problem of Rosemary calling him at the store in the morning.

“Ah, the house specialty,” Annie says. “Talk. And more talk.”

“I suppose,” he says.

“I miss you here when I get home, though. The house feels lonely.”

“Mmm.”

“You’re not avoiding me, are you?”

He reaches over to touch the tented shape of her feet under the quilt. “Hardly.” Though that may be part of it too, he supposes. He looks over at her. She’s lifted the cup to drink, and he can see only her dark brown eyes, steady on him above its rim.

“What are *you* up to?” he asks.

She groans and rests the cup again on her outstretched legs. “Packing up,” she says. “Getting ready to take the stuff over to Danielle’s. My bubble-wrap day.”

Annie is a photographer, and she has a show coming up at a gallery in the South End. It’s a big deal for her. She hasn’t had a solo show in almost five years.

And he forgot. Fucker that he is. He forgot all about it. He feels a sudden deeper remorse: he was so lost in his own shit that he forgot her life, going on around his. Her life, having to do with what she makes and then puts out into the world, with all that’s fraught about that for her—even more so now because of the long pause that’s preceded this show.

“Ah,” he says. “Well, if you need help, you know where I am.”

“Most of the time I do,” she says, and smiles.

He knows that she’s teasing, but it startles him anyway. He hopes that doesn’t show in his face.

He can hear Annie’s voice rising and falling softly while she’s taking her shower: she often talks to herself. As he passes the old bathroom door on the way to his office, she distinctly says, “Yikes!” and then something else he can’t hear.

It seems to him that these private conversations must be a bit like dreaming for her, but a kind of dreaming more closely based on the concerns of her daily life than would occur at night. Once he heard her say, “I should just *shoot* the guy,” and thought for a moment that she was talking about him, about something he’d done that had made her angry. But then it occurred to him that she was probably thinking about someone she wanted to take a picture of, and he laughed.

His office is at the front of the house. It’s a small room with a single window that looks out over the long driveway belonging to their neighbors in the real house—the driveway that is also essentially the walkway from the street to their own front door. He starts to neaten up his desk, which is, as always, heaped with books and papers and spreadsheets, printouts of reviews, schedules of upcoming readings at his store and others’. He has two of Jamie’s earlier books stacked next to his computer. He’s reread them quickly in preparation for writing her introduction—he always introduces the writers who come to the store, unless there’s a special reason for someone else to do it. Several drafts of that introduction are lying on top of everything else. When he’s made what seem to him like orderly piles of most of the stuff, he looks over the last version he’s done of the intro and starts to tinker with it—partly because it needs work, but partly also to look busy when Annie comes to say goodbye.

And here she is, standing in the doorway in jeans and sandals and a white linen shirt, her wet hair pinned up at the back of her head. “I’m off,” she says.

“You look ravishing.”

“Mmm. Thanks. Maybe you could ravish me sometime.” She comes into the room and bends over him, tugging lightly at his beard. His secret weapon, she calls it. She’s told him often how much she loves its soft touch on her thighs, her cunt.

He’s enveloped in her smell—soap, perfume, something clean and bleachy from her clothes. “I’ll ponder it,” he says.

“Ahh! nothing like ponderous sex, is there?” she says, and laughs. She kisses him lightly and turns to leave the room. He hears her pause partway down the stairs. She calls back, “Late dinner tonight, then?”

“Yes,” he says.

The front door slams, and he’s alone again. He’s relieved to be alone, he realizes. Pathetic.

As he edits the introduction, he’s also intermittently thinking of Annie, of their earliest lovemaking. Of her body, of what they did with each other, of where they did it—her apartment, sunstruck and hot in the attic of a huge house on Avon Hill, the scudding clouds visible above her in the skylight as she rode him slowly. In his car at night in the dark parking lot behind some long-gone jazz club in Central Square, stopping, holding still when someone passed close by. Images like this have come to him often in the last few weeks, mostly, he thinks, as a way to make a distance between himself and Rosemary—reminding himself of those days when everything about Annie, too, was new, when everything they did with each other seemed a way they were claiming each other. For him, that he was *owning* this part of her, and this, and now this.

Sitting here at his desk, he suddenly remembers that in the midst of all that, when he was most besotted, she told him that she’d slept again with an old lover—Jeff, it was. Jeff, the guy who’d brought

her to the bookstore party. Jeff, and then, unbelievably, another guy too, someone she'd been fixed up with by friends, friends who didn't yet know about Graham's presence in her life. How astonished he'd been that she wasn't, like him, feeling the overwhelming sense of a beginning—a beginning that would have made even the idea of sex with someone else impossible.

He remembers now that she said the impulse was born, in fact, exactly from being with him—the sense she had because of that of being wildly fuckable. Of wanting everything. “Really, almost *everyone*,” she said. She laughed then, before she saw his face.

He's stopped by this memory.

And then he understands what he's up to. *Oh, blameless, blameless Graham—because she did it too.* That's what this is, he thinks.

But she did it before we were a couple.

For a while, this checks him. He types in the changes he's made to the introduction to Jamie, and reads it through, speaking it aloud once more. He looks over the monthly figures from the store.

Then it begins to nag at him again: isn't it possible, might she not have *amused herself* with someone else, maybe even after they were a couple? After they were married?

Amused herself, he thinks. *A little amuse-bouche.* He thinks of going down on her, his own amuse-bouche. How he loves it. A time back then when he felt he wanted to enter her, swim into her, headfirst, mouthfirst.

These images, these thoughts, arrive and disappear as he finishes at the desk. He gets up finally and goes into the bathroom, into the lingering scent of her shampoo, of her soap—but something else too, something elemental to her.

The sun from the skylight above the shower warms him even before he turns the water on, and he stands gratefully under it and the spray. When he's finished and steps out, the air is cool on his wet body. He dries off, inspecting himself as he works the towel—the diminishing number of white hairs at the top of his chest, the sling

of his belly, the fattish penis below it, his burden, apparently. He sighs and goes to the bedroom to get dressed.

Standing in front of the closet, he slides the hangers along. The light brown linen suit, he thinks. An off-white shirt. The soft leather shoes just a shade darker than the suit.

All this—these expensive clothes and his love for them—was a later element in his transformation. It happened at about the time he bought the bookstore, just before he met Annie. He had wanted to mark the end of his catch-as-catch-can life—the blue jeans, the secondhand tweed jackets, the thick Frye boots. He wanted, he supposed, to look more like a man of substance. A burgher. The spring the bookstore opened, he'd bought two suits, one seersucker, one a pale gray linen. Then, in the fall, two more suits, light wool ones.

He'd actually talked to his shrink about these choices, these decisions.

The shrink was part of his old life. An *éminence grise*, Graham was given to understand later, who didn't seem to feel the need to play by what Graham had always understood to be the rules for shrinks. He talked freely about himself to Graham, he shared anecdotes from his own life. He did have a couch in his office, but he and Graham sat opposite each other at a wide desk—like colleagues, Graham thought, working on some shared project. Sometimes his flatulent old dog scratched at the door, and Dr. Fielding got up and let him in. Their conversations on those days were punctuated by Boogan's occasional prolonged farts.

He had started seeing Dr. Fielding after he and Frieda split up. First about his guilt over that—over Frieda and Lucas—and later about everything else: his family background, his sexual life, the store and how it was changing everything for him. And then, after she'd entered his world, Annie.

But from the beginning they had also talked every now and then about clothing, talked about it as an expression of Graham's wish to be changed, somehow. To be a better person. Or at least a different

person.

He'd stopped seeing the shrink by the time his interest intensified, by the time he began to really know about the quality of the clothes, to care about it—the fabric, the leather, the cut, the stitching. By the time he became, as Annie calls him occasionally, “something of a fop.”

Those early clothes are all gone now. Even the clothes he's putting on today are old enough to be a bit worn, but he finds them the more beautiful because of this.

He looks at himself in the full-length mirror before he leaves for lunch. He's thinking of how much it would amuse his friend John if he were here, watching Graham costume himself.

Rather like Karen, he thinks.

Only different.

He laughs, quickly. “Enough,” he says aloud, and heads down the narrow, tilting staircase and out the door into the perfect early-summer day—the sky the blue of a child's bright crayon. The humid air a kiss.