

He Looks Good on Paper

By Ann Ormsby

Cay took another sip of the light green Daiquiri and looked around the room. All of the new professors at Highbury College had been invited to a cocktail party to meet Dean Carson and other faculty members.

Cay Coughlin rarely drank, but tonight she felt excited and a little nervous to meet her new colleagues, so she had ordered the exotic rum Daiquiri with the cherry and pineapple skewered on the end of the paper umbrella. She would start teaching French at Highbury in two weeks. Tonight she wanted to see who else would be there.

At 34, she wore her dark chestnut hair short and curly. She had small, almond-shaped, pale brown eyes, arched eyebrows and bow lips. The only make-up she ever wore was vivid red lipstick and ivory-colored powder. She wore a beautiful gray wool suit with a pale pink silk blouse. The jacket was fitted to her curvaceous form with a short peplum that accentuated her hourglass figure and fell against a slim a-line skirt. One strand of pearls completed her elegant look.

As she glanced toward the doorway she saw her friend, Florence Sims, coming in. Florence was tall and blonde. Men rarely missed an opportunity to take a second look at her. Cay liked to be with Florence so that she could attract the men and Cay could talk with them once they were there.

Cay waved to get Florence's attention, and as she did, her purse that was hanging from her arm hit the man who was standing next to her. He turned around to see who had hit him and

immediately their eyes locked. She was embarrassed. He was amused. He raised his Martini glass as in a toast and winked at her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. She felt awkward and hoped that Florence would come over to rescue her.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said as he turned toward her. “I was tired of old Carson’s blather and now I have a good excuse to get away. I’m Rolland Fine,” he said extending his hand.

“Cay Coughlin,” she said and reached out her hand to shake his, but as she did, her purse struck a rather matronly woman walking past.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Cay called after her.

“Let’s move out of the way before you start breaking glassware or someone calls a bouncer on you,” laughed Rolland as he took her arm and led her into a corner of the Great Hall, a very large, red-carpeted banquet room where the college held parties, receptions and lectures.

“Now Cay, now that the other guests are safe, what will you be teaching when the semester starts?” he asked looking at her directly with the biggest, bluest eyes she had ever seen.

“French I, and II, and French Literature,” she said. “And you?”

“Psych V and an assortment of philosophy courses. ‘From Socrates to Freud: What Have We Learned?’”

“Can you answer that question?” she asked.

“Of course not!” he laughed.

She noticed then that his teeth were perfectly straight and very white. He had a fantastic smile which reminded her of Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*. He was practically bald, but it lent him an air of distinction. He was dressed in the typical professorial uniform, khaki pants and a blue twill blazer with corduroy patches at the elbows. She felt somehow shy and embarrassed when he smiled at her.

“Are you done with your drink? Do you think we can make it to the bar without assaulting anyone? Let me take a look at that purse,” he touched her gray leather purse and felt the weight of it. “Well, it weighs enough to knock someone out. I am always fascinated by the stuff women put into their purses,” without waiting for a reply he took her by the elbow and escorted her across the Hall to the bar.

“What are you drinking? A Daiquiri?” he asked.

“Yes, please tell them to make it sweet and weak. Thank you,” she said looking up at him. He wasn’t much taller than she was but it was enough.

“Sweet and weak. OK,” he gave her a little half-smile and turned to the bartender. “The lady will have a Daiquiri. Sweet and weak with lots of fruit and I’ll have a gin Martini with an olive. Sour and strong.”

Part of her wanted to get away from his hypnotic blue gaze and slightly possessive manner, but the other part already felt that it was right for him to possess her. Why did he act so familiar with her? She didn’t know him at all yet she felt that they had always been together.

While they waited for the bartender to mix their drinks, she scanned the room for Florence. She saw her about halfway down the room laughing with a group of young female

professors. Cay thought about thanking Rolland for getting her a drink and then excusing herself to go and talk with Florence. She hoped that he wouldn't find her rude. She turned to look at him. In repose, as he was right now at the bar, he wasn't the most attractive man at the party. He was of medium height and build, 40ish, with a round face and a rakish quality. She could tell as she watched him that he had ordered many drinks for many women. Still, as he turned to her and handed her the glass she felt special that he had chosen her to be with. Of course, it was she who had attracted his attention by hitting him with her purse, but he could have just moved away. She felt taken in by his eyes and his smile.

“Do you know that group?” he asked nodding toward Florence's group.

“Only Florence Sims, the tall blonde. She's my roommate. We're sharing rooms at Peabody's Boarding House. She teaches English,” said Cay aware that her answer clipped but he made her feel tongue-tied and awkward. She decided to take her leave. “I think I better...”

“Oh God! Here comes Carson to the podium. I can't listen to his mediocrity,” said Rolland with a sneer. “Listen, I'm leaving. Will you have lunch with me on Saturday?”

“Oh. Ok...yes,” she said.

“Good, I'll pick you up at Peabody's at noon. See you then,” he smiled and was gone.

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“You're going out with who?” shrieked Florence.

“Rolland Fine,” said Cay looking worried by her friend's reaction.

“He’s rather notorious you know. Very charming. Brilliant. But quite the lady’s man,” Florence raised her eyebrows for effect and looked down at her friend who was lying on the green damask chaise lounge she had bought at a flea market. Cay always felt rich and sophisticated when she had her coffee lounging in her silk robe on her chaise lounge, but Florence’s description of Rolland was ruining her mood. She shuddered when she thought of her father hearing that she was dating a renowned womanizer.

Cay was an only child. Her father, Mertin, was a self-made man who quit school at 12 and started working at the local gas station. By 22, he owned the station and by 32 he owned 10 more. Mary, her mother, was the quintessential housewife. She made every cake, every biscuit, every pie, and every loaf of bread the family ate from scratch. She sewed all of her own clothes and Cay’s until Cay went to high school and needed a uniform. Mertin and Mary had to wait 11 years to have Cay and, after Mertin got over the shock of having a girl, they settled down into a routine family life.

Mertin built a house on a lake in Niantic, Connecticut near Mary’s family. Cay went to the best schools and graduated as the valedictorian of her high school and college class. She got her Master’s Degree from Barnard in French and Education in 1938. Now, ten years later, she had landed a plum teaching job at a small, yet prestigious, college with brilliant colleagues and bright students in Madison, New Jersey, a picture perfect town.

She and Florence had met at college and had become fast friends and confidantes. Florence had been engaged twice and had slept with both fiancés, Robert and Michael, and because of this Cay looked up to her on the subject of men and relationships. Cay had never had

a serious relationship. She was too shy to play feminine games and she sometimes felt that her father was enough men in her life.

“So, exactly what have you heard about Rolland?” asked Cay in a hesitant way.

“Well, Charlotte says that he’s divorced with two young sons and that he was asked to leave Chapel Hill because he got involved with a student,” Florence said while brushing her thick, wavy, honey blonde hair. She turned from the mirror to see Cay’s reaction.

“Lots of people are divorced,” said Cay looking into her coffee cup.

“Cay, he’s not for you, honey,” said Florence.

“It’s only lunch and Charlotte loves to gossip,” said Cay. Charlotte Cody was a childhood friend of Florence’s who had been teaching at Highbury for two years. Cay always felt that Charlotte was a little jealous of her friendship with Florence.

Florence had now moved on to tweezing her eyebrows. “That’s true,” she said but her tone said, don’t be a fool.

Cay got up and walked over to her closet. She and Florence shared two rooms. One they slept in and the other they used as a sitting room. Their bedroom was painted pink, Cay’s favorite color, and they had bought matching bedspreads with pink roses and green leaves. Cay’s mother had made them white eyelet curtains and they had bought a pink and green hook rug.

She opened her closet and looked at her wardrobe. Cay loved well-made skirts, tailored jackets and silk blouses. She wondered where he would take her. She chose a cream silk blouse and a chocolate brown skirt and hung their hangers over the top of the closet so she could look at them.

She walked over to her dressing table and took her silver necklace and bracelet out of her jewelry box. She looked at the jewelry and thought of her and Florence's trip to Mexico the summer before. She looked from the thick sterling silver to the outfit hanging on the closet door and decided that pearls would be better.

"What are you doing today?" she asked Florence trying to redirect the conversation.

"I'm going shopping and then meeting Charlotte for dinner. Do you want to join us?"

"No, not tonight," Cay said. She was not interested in listening to Charlotte tell tales about Rolland.

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Everybody knew the yellow Victorian house with the green door that was the Peabody Boarding House on Vaux Hall Road. The Peabody's had been renting rooms to young professors for 30 years. Carol Peabody liked the fact that her boarders were well-educated and had responsible jobs with steady paychecks.

Rolland lived just four blocks away in the Baldwin Hotel which also rented rooms to single professionals. He arrived precisely at noon dressed in smartly creased khaki pants and a blue button-down Brooks Brothers shirt. He walked up the steps of the house and across the wrap-around porch to the door and rang the bell. Mrs. Peabody came to the door. Rolland said he was there to see Cay Coughlin and Mrs. Peabody told him to wait in the sitting room.

From the sitting room, which was to the left of the front door, he watched the top of the stairs waiting for Cay to appear.

In a few minutes, she came to the top of the staircase unaware that he was watching her. She smoothed her skirt and checked her lipstick in the mirror at the turn of the stairs. She fixed a wayward curl on her temple and took a deep breath. She smiled to give herself courage.

She turned from the mirror to see him standing at the bottom of the staircase with one foot on the first stair and a carefree arm poised on the handrail.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

Cay managed a smile as the color came into her cheeks. She didn’t want him to think she was vain staring at herself in the mirror that way.

“Oh. Hello. I didn’t...see you...there,” she said still standing at the turn of the stairs.

“You are a coordinated study in shades of tan and brown. It’s a good color for you,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Cay shyly. She was not used to all these compliments and men looking to see if her clothes coordinated.

“Come on. We have a reservation in town,” he said flashing his wonderful grin and holding out his hand to help her down the last few steps. They left the boarding house and drove downtown in his white sedan.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Theresa’s.”

“Oh, I’ve heard it’s very good,” she said thinking to herself that she had heard how pricey it was.

Rolland parked and they walked into the small, dark restaurant which screamed intimacy and romance. Most of the tables were tables for two and already the restaurant was more than half full. Large canvasses of modern art added vibrant shocks of color to an otherwise understated décor.

When they were seated under a painting of a Georgia O'Keefe-style iris he asked, "So, how are you finding Madison?"

"It's very nice. Much quieter than New York City," she answered.

"You were living in the big City? I've never lived in New York City. Is it all it's cracked up to be? Does everyone go to museums and Broadway shows and operas every week? Is everybody cultured?"

"Well, no," she laughed. "But I did see a fair number of shows. I love musicals and dancing. I love tap dancing and ballet. How about you?"

"I'll have to admit I'd prefer a good drama. Like Arthur Miller. I saw "All My Sons" last year," he said.

The waiter came and took their drink order. Merlot for him. Coke for her.

"No vino for lunch?" he inquired.

"It makes me too sleepy," she responded.

"The best help for an afternoon siesta," he parried.

She looked down at her hand and adjusted the diamond and sapphire ring her father had given her for graduation from college. She wasn't going to look at him again until he got the message that there would be no afternoon siestas with her.

While she was still avoiding eye contact, the waiter brought their drinks.

"Cheers," he said and lifted his glass.

She hesitated a moment but then, feeling as if she had made her point, she lifted her glass to his. When their eyes met he looked as innocent as a small boy. Had she overreacted to his comment?

"So, what's your background, Rolland? Where did you study?"

"I went to undergrad in Toronto at U of T. Master's in Heidelberg, Germany – where I must say, they know how to make beer – and then Cornell. I managed to turn 30 without earning a paycheck, much to my old man's chagrin. I suppose it's nothing to brag about, but I just love to read, to analyze, to learn," he hesitated and studied her face, "I bet you're like that, too. I see it in your eyes."

She laughed. "Ok. I admit it. I love to study! Aren't we an exciting pair?"

"Oh yeah. Wild, book wielding, page turners! Let's order," they both laughed as they opened their menus.

After lunch they walked through the quaint town to a small park which had a playground at one end and a pond at the other. They sat on a bench and enjoyed the waning summer. It was a bright August day with a cool breeze. Rolland had rolled up his sleeves. Two small boys and

their mother walked by on the way to the swings. Rolland watched the small blonde boys walk by hand in hand.

“I have two sons about their age. Ethan and Adam,” he said.

“Where do they live?”

“In Idaho with their mother,” he said with an edge.

“Do you see them?” she wanted with all her heart for him to say yes.

“She doesn’t like it.”

Cay didn’t want to push the conversation any further. She didn’t want him to say anything that she couldn’t live with. She was really enjoying his company and, at 34, she was ready for a serious relationship. Idaho was far away.

She would tell Florence that he had talked about his sons and that he missed them. She changed the subject.

“How do you find Dean Carson? I gathered from the cocktail party that he was not your favorite person.”

“Old Carson is full of himself and thinks that he is an expert on every subject. The sign of a truly intelligent person is that they are not afraid to admit that they are not an expert on every subject. Carson is a physicist for God’s sake. What does he know about psychology?” Rolland had worked himself up a bit. “Let’s get going,” he said as he rose from the bench.

“Did he try to tell you how to teach a course?” she ventured.

“He’s always meddling. His job is to lunch with alumni before they die and discuss estate planning. He’s still trying to be a department head. Anyway, I’m sure he’ll be fine with you. He doesn’t speak French. So, no, to answer your question, he is not my favorite person. We butt heads frequently.”

They had been walking through the park to his car. When they got there he opened the passenger door for her. She slid into the seat and smiled up at him. A slight breeze danced in her curly hair and the sun made her eyes twinkle. He smiled down at her.

“I have to go into New York tonight or I would keep this wonderful afternoon going into the evening,” he said. “As it is, I’m running late already so I’m afraid I’ll have to take you home now,” he said as he got into the driver’s seat.

“I’ve really enjoyed myself. Thank you for lunch,” she said feeling that she could stay with him forever.

When they drove up to the boarding house he said, “I hope I can call you.”

“That would be nice. Rolland thanks again,” their eyes lingered on each other’s and then she got out of the car. She walked up to the front steps and turned to wave good-bye. When she did he was watching her and flashed her a tremendous grin. He waved and pulled away.

Cay felt light-headed. It had been the most perfect afternoon. She knew she was smiling at nothing in particular but couldn’t stop herself. As she opened the front door she thought how happy she was that Florence was out.

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From that weekend on, Cay and Rolland spent time together every weekend and saw each other at least once during the week. He occasionally broke their dates at the last minute telling her that he was not feeling well.

Cay knew that the faculty and even some of the students knew that they were dating. No one talked to her about him. No one said anything negative, but there was a strained silence if his name came up. Cay chose to believe that people were just being tactful.

She did overhear two of his students talking about him one day when she was walking behind them down the path that led from the library to the University Center.

“He is brilliant,” said one of the girls.

“I didn’t understand a thing I read in the book, but after Professor Fine’s lecture, it was like so clear. I thought, yeah, that’s what it meant,” said the other.

“He’s not really handsome, but there’s something about him when he starts lecturing. He gets so passionate and he really knows what he’s talking about...”

“And he’s funny and little off color. I was rolling in the aisle when he was explaining what it was to be anal retentive,” both girls howled with laughter.

Cay listened raptly. She wanted to hear him lecture. Should she ask him to sit in or just show up? She decided to sneak into one of his classes and sit quietly in the back and observe. She knew he taught his philosophy class the next day at 3 p.m.

The course was held in Bethel Hall. One of the first buildings erected on the Highbury campus. The building was limestone with two wings and a courtyard with gardens and benches. It was a popular place for the students to hang out.

Cay got to the lecture hall ten minutes after the class had started and stood outside the closed door and could just hear the sound of his voice but couldn't hear what he was saying. Just then, the room erupted in laughter.

She opened the door and saw him leaning over the desk of an attractive young woman with long auburn hair. He finished what he was saying and then gave the girl one of his most cunning grins. He never noticed Cay slip into a seat in the back row.

“So, now that Miss Elson understands Descartes' theory...”

Cay was fascinated. Rolland was in total control of his class and his subject. He lectured with such clarity, such originality, and with such enthusiasm that the students – male and female – were totally under his spell.

He talked about ideas. He got the young students thinking. No one in the class was taking notes because they didn't want to lose the flow of his arguments or miss one of his jokes. About halfway through the lecture he noticed her. His eyes lit up and he smiled and pointed at her without losing the thread of his talk. A few students turned to see what or who he had pointed to but because he just kept on talking they turned back quickly.

The lecture was two hours without a break. Cay could see that this was where Rolland belonged. The classroom came alive for him just as a brilliant actor lights up the stage or a talented singer brings chills that ripple down the audience's back. Cay's senses were on fire. She felt both hot and cold.

At the end, she watched as the students – mostly the girls – surrounded him with their questions. The girl with the long auburn hair was the last to leave.

As soon as she left, Rolland hurried over to Cay.

“Well, Professor Coughlin, to what do I owe this great honor?” he asked sitting down lightly on the desk in front of her.

“Well, Professor Fine, I kept hearing what a great lecturer you were so I decided to come and see for myself.”

“So, how’d I do? Did I pass muster? Will you critique me over dinner?”

“I’d love to,” she said with a slight blush.

They went to a popular Italian restaurant called DeCandia’s. Once they had settled in she gushed, “You really do have a talent. I mean, philosophy was never so riveting. I always found it kind of dry, but you make it seem so important. Like every truth will be revealed,” she knew how she sounded but she couldn’t stop herself.

“Why we’re here has haunted man from the earliest time. I think that searching for that answer is inherently interesting. Don’t you?” he looked at her with his big soulful eyes.

“Today I did,” she said as she looked into his eyes smelling the faint musky fragrance of his after-shave, and she knew at that moment that she was falling, spiraling down to a place where reason had no home. She knew she was in love with him then.

“Let’s get a drink,” he said as he motioned for the waiter. “The lady will have a Daiquiri, weak and sweet, and I’ll have a gin Martini, strong with an olive.”

He turned to her and took her hand across the table. She noticed that his hands were big with thick fingers and nicely cut nails. She knew that she looked pretty in her pink sweater set and pearls. They sat enjoying each other until their drinks arrived.

“Here’s to us,” he said raising his glass to her.

“To us, Rolland,” she said their eyes meeting over the raised glasses.

The dinner was long. They shared stories of their childhoods. Rolland had grown up with seven brothers and sisters which fascinated Cay because she had been an only child. He told her funny stories about his brothers. There was Darius who used to eat bananas under his bed and Charlie who stole a car and drove it into the pond in the center of town.

After three hours, Rolland had had four Martinis and clearly was too drunk to drive. Cay suggested they call a taxi and leave Rolland’s car in the parking lot.

Once in the cab, Rolland put his arm around her and Cay snuggled against his chest. He smelled like Old Spice and cigarettes. She wished the cab ride would never end, but ten minutes later they pulled up in front of the boarding house.

Rolland walked Cay to the door and put his arm around her. He kissed her passionately. When he pulled away from her she was weak.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said and smiled his wonderful smile.

“Good night,” she said. It was 10 o’clock.

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When Cay woke up the next morning she felt happy. She thought about Rolland's smile. She thought about his capable hands. She thought about his lecture. She thought about how envious the girls in his class would be. She knew he was much too old for them, but still she liked the thought of their knowing that Rolland was hers.

It was Saturday. She was supposed to have lunch with Florence, but she half-hoped that Florence would cancel and Rolland would call and they would be together. Florence was still fast asleep. Cay remembered waking up and looking at the clock when Florence had come in after 2 a.m. Cay briefly wondered where she had been, but she had chores to do so she got up quickly and pulled on a pair of grey wool trousers and a soft, baby blue sweater. She started to collect her laundry humming a silly little tune as she did. She would get this all done and have a shower before lunch she thought to herself. That way, whether it was Florence or Rolland she would see she would be ready.

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Florence woke up with a slight hangover. She tried to get up. Ouch. Her head was aching and she felt dehydrated. She turned her head slightly to see if Cay were still asleep. Her bed was empty. Stray thoughts from the night before ran through her head. Rolland. She had seen Rolland at the party. He had left with two girls. It all started to come back to her.

She and Charlotte had gone out to dinner and then to a movie and then she had gone back to Charlotte's place for a nightcap. Charlotte lived in faculty housing which was situated across campus as far away from student housing as possible. The college had two apartment buildings

on the outskirts of the campus beyond the theater, beyond the main parking lot, beyond the security building for faculty. One building was for singles and the other for families.

When Florence and Charlotte entered the building, they heard music and laughter coming from the first floor lounge. They turned and smiled at each other and walked across the tiled foyer to the lounge where there were about 40 young, and not so young, professors and friends drinking, laughing and socializing in the wood-paneled lounge. They looked around and spotted a group of their friends and went in to join them. The large lounge was dark with worn oriental carpets, overstuffed couches, leather chairs and Tiffany-style stained glass lamps on marred end tables. Over the two fireplaces that were blazing at either end of the room were large portraits of stern looking professors from another era. Black and white photographs of the campus in winter hung on the far wall.

At 5'11" with her thick mane of honey blonde hair, catlike green eyes and rosy cheeks Florence was hard to ignore. She had taken to wearing wool trousers and white or cream silk shirts in the manner of Martha Gellhorn who she had seen in photographs in *The New York Times Magazine*. Gellhorn was an adventurous journalist who would eventually marry Ernest Hemingway and be the only one of his wives to give him a run for his money. While his other three wives lived in his shadow, Gellhorn cast a provocative shadow of her own.

Florence liked to fantasize that she was Gellhorn storming around Europe and Africa covering dictators and generals. She had spent a year in Spain while in college covering the Spanish Civil War. She had been engaged to Robert Trader at the time and had hurried home to their wedding day only to find he had fallen in love with her cousin. She realized later that she

should have gone immediately back to Europe but the days turned into months and it became harder to pursue her dreams.

Charlotte by contrast was short and frail with mousy brown hair and pointed little features that made her look like a little rodent. The only thing drabber than poor Charlotte's natural coloring was her wardrobe. She wore brown and grey clothes that hung a little too loosely on her rather childlike form which made it very easy for her to fade into the woodwork. Men seldom even noticed her presence when she entered a room following in Florence's wake. Her little brown eyes, however, missed nothing and because she had no love life of her own she was very interested in the love life of others.

"Hey you guys! This is great! This brings me back to college. Is this a frat party?" called Florence.

"If you want it to be a frat party it is," replied Arnie Davis as he waved to Florence signaling for them to come over. Arnie was tall with broad shoulders and thick curly brown hair that was streaked with grey around the temples.

Seated around a coffee table on various chairs and a low loveseat were a group of thirty-something professors. In addition to Arnie, seated on the loveseat were Alice Place and Phillippe Moreau who had met teaching in Paris, Sandra Pearlman who was Charlotte's roommate, Lois Kramer a tall, vivacious German teacher, and Dennis Hunnicutt a portly professor of Humanities.

Arnie got up and went and got a chair for Florence. Charlotte pulled over a velvet hassock for herself.

“We just went to see *Key Largo* with Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart. It was fabulous,” said Florence as Arnie helped her with her coat.

“I liked Edward G. Robinson,” added Charlotte.

“I saw it last night. Wow! Lauren Bacall is gorgeous!” added Dennis.

Florence looked around the room and saw a bar set up on the far side. “We haven’t brought a bottle or anything. Is the bar open for everyone?” she asked.

“We had a retirement party last night and those are the remains,” said Arnie. “Help yourself.”

“Want something Charlotte? Can I get anyone a refill?” asked Florence.

“I’ll have a white wine,” said Charlotte. “Thanks.”

With no other orders, Florence started to make her way over to the bar. As she did she noticed a big group laughing and carrying on in a back corner of the room. They seemed to be listening to someone tell a story but she couldn’t see who was talking. As she was looking over the assortment of wine bottles she craned her neck to see who was entertaining the crowd. There were just too many heads to see through.

She poured two glasses of Chablis and headed back to the group. She handed Charlotte a glass and asked, “Who’s holding court over there?”

“Rolland Fine,” said Dennis with a roll of his eyes. “He comes by here sometimes to hear himself talk.”

“It surely looks like the rest of those people like to hear him talk, too,” said Florence.

“Well, he is funny,” said Phillippe.

“And charming,” said Alice. “He speaks five languages. His French is perfect.”

“Isn’t he dating your roommate?” Arnie asked Florence.

“Yes, I mean, I don’t know how serious it is,” said Florence.

“He’s divorced with two little boys he never sees,” said Charlotte.

“Now Char, we don’t know the whole story. Cay says the mother won’t let him see them.”

“Isn’t that what custody agreements are for? To outline when the father gets to see his children?” asked Sandra.

“Yes, I know of what I speak. I get my kids every other weekend and Jane can’t take them out of state without my permission. No, either he doesn’t want to see them or the judge doesn’t think he should,” said Arnie with an authoritative air.

“Well, anyway, who’s going to the art show that’s down at the armory? I’ve heard there are some wonderful water colors,” said Florence finding herself suddenly in the awkward position of having to defend Rolland.

As the group debated whether Norman Rockwell was a serious artist or an illustrator, Florence couldn’t help but want to go over and listen to Rolland. Was he as charismatic as all that? And where was Cay? She had told Florence that she was going to listen to him lecture and hoped it would turn into dinner.

After another round or two, Alice and Phillippe went upstairs and gradually the others started to say good-bye. Arnie was hoping that he and Florence would be the only ones left but he could see that Charlotte and Sandra were staying until Florence left so he finally went upstairs. Eventually, it was just Florence, Charlotte and Sandra. They stopped going up to the bar and just brought a bottle back with them.

“I think you have an admirer in old curly top. He’s cute with his broad shoulders. You should give him a chance,” said Charlotte shaking her head up and down with enthusiasm.

“You go out with him, Char. I don’t want a ready-made family. Don’t you want to go over there and hear what he’s saying?” asked Florence using her chin to point to Rolland’s group.

“Do we know anyone over there?” asked Sandra.

As the women debated whether or not to join the group, Rolland stood up flashing a huge grin at his audience and giving a chuckle to someone imploring him to stay a little longer. Two young women, one with long auburn hair, also stood to put on their coats. They appeared to be undergraduates.

“Who are those young darlings?” asked Sandra. “They don’t look familiar to me. Are they students?”

As Florence turned around to see who Sandra was talking about her eyes met Rolland’s across the room. He stopped smiling briefly as his face registered that he saw her and then he nodded and smiled at her quickly. He turned to help one of the young women put on her coat.

Florence turned back to Charlotte and Sandra. “Did you see that? He knew he was caught and he didn’t like it,” whispered Florence.

“The snake,” hissed Charlotte.

“Poor Cay,” said Sandra.

“Good evening, ladies,” said a voice from behind Florence’s chair.

Florence’s eyes went to Charlotte’s face but Charlotte was already looking up at the voice behind Florence’s chair. Florence watched her mousy little friend’s face light up with a provocative smile and twinkly eyes. Florence turned around in her chair and saw Rolland standing over her.

“Hello Florence,” he said. His voice was thick with alcohol but he did look attractive somehow. He was so confident of himself. She wanted to glare at him and ask him where Cay was but she heard herself introducing Charlotte and Sandra to him instead.

“We heard your friends enjoying your stories over there,” said Florence.

“Yes, well, you should have come over,” he said. “Cay and I left my car at a restaurant earlier and these two young ladies who live in my hotel are kind enough to offer me a ride home.”

“I see,” said Florence flatly.

“Well, next time come over and join the group. Nice to meet both of you,” he said nodding to Charlotte and Sandra.

“Well, he cares enough to make up a story,” said Sandra.

“Mmmm,” said Florence. “Let’s have one more for the road.”

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When Cay came back from the laundry room, Florence was sitting at her vanity combing her hair. She was wearing a light green robe that complimented her striking green eyes. Cay smiled when she saw her friend awake.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” she said as she put her laundry basket down on the bed.

“Hi. How are you?” Florence said shutting her eyes and rubbing her temples.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. My head hurts from last night,” said Florence.

“Really? Why? What were you doing that your head should hurt?”

Florence was torn between telling Cay the whole story or just that she saw Rolland or that she saw Rolland who was very drunk leave a party with two young women.

“Well, Charlotte and I went to see *Key Largo* and then we went back to her place for a nightcap and there was a party in the lounge and a bunch of us just sat around drinking bad wine,” said Florence with a yawn.

Cay was putting her folded laundry away. “How was the movie? I heard it was good. Maybe I’ll get Rolland to take me. Should I? Would I like it?” she asked.

“The movie...oh, yes. You’ll like it,” said Florence. A certain hesitation in her voice told Cay there was more that Florence wanted to say. Cay turned to Florence and studied her face. Unspoken thoughts flew between the two women.

“What’s the matter?” asked Cay feeling suddenly nervous.

“Nothing. I saw Rolland at the party and wondered why you weren’t there. That’s all. He was telling funny stories and a whole gang of people were listening to him. He came over to Charlotte, Sandra and me to say good-bye,” Florence turned away from Cay and looked at her own reflection in the mirror. She picked up her brush again and started brushing her hair.

Sensing the danger of the story had passed she said, “That was nice of him. He took me out to the most wonderful dinner and then I was feeling tired so I asked him to bring me home,” lied Cay refolding a perfectly folded shirt.

“Really, where did you go?” the heavy air that had settled in the room started to lift as they talked about Cay’s date and Rolland’s lecture. Cay didn’t need to know that two young women drove him home.

~

As fall turned to winter, Cay wanted to introduce Rolland to her parents. She hadn’t been home because she had been spending every weekend with him. She knew her mother wanted to see her. Would he want to come home with her for the weekend? It made her nervous to think of introducing Rolland to her father. They were two men who both demanded to be the center of

their women's attention. They were also opposites. Mertin was a doer and Rolland was a thinker. She decided to bring the idea up casually and see what Rolland said.

That night there was a holiday reception and Rolland was picking Cay up so they could go together. It was the first time they were going to a college function as a couple. Cay was a little nervous and had thought about asking Florence to go with them, but she was going with Charlotte and Cay didn't like to be with Rolland and Charlotte. Charlotte always acted strangely. She acted like she knew something about him that Cay didn't know. No, they would go as a couple and let the world know they were together.

Rolland was late picking her up. As he kissed her hello she could smell the liquor on his breath. He explained that an old friend had dropped by unexpectedly and they had gone out for a drink. Cay was annoyed but kept it to herself. She had been waiting for him to see her in her new red dress with the full skirt that she had bought for the approaching holidays but because he was late she had to put her coat on in a hurry and he didn't even notice it.

The reception was held at Dean Carson's house, a beautiful center hall colonial hidden behind a grove of weeping willows. The house had been decorated for the season and everyone was wearing their holiday finery. Cay thought maybe Rolland had had a drink to fortify himself against his dislike of Dean Carson. A drink or two seemed to mellow him a little and make him a little less sarcastic. Although, when he had too much to drink his temper could rise quite quickly.

"Let's not stay all night," said Rolland as they walked up the front path. "You know I can't stand Carson, that old windbag."

Cay had been planning on having a wonderful time all evening and was a little taken aback that they would have to cut the evening short.

“He is the Dean. Maybe you should make an effort to get along with him,” she said.

“I’m not staying all night,” he warned.

Oh dear, she thought, this was not going well. “Maybe we’ll have a good time,” she said. When they rang the bell she tried to put on a happy face. Rolland made no such effort. His large blue eyes bulged a little and his lips were drawn in a straight line. Once inside the house he looked for the bar and went to get them a cocktail.

Cay greeted colleagues she knew and waited for him to return. As she stood in the living room Dean Carson approached her and they exchanged pleasantries. As she spoke to the Dean she saw Rolland making his way over to her with two glasses of wine but when he saw who she was talking to he skirted the crowd and went into the dining room.

Cay spoke to the Dean a few more minutes and then went to find Rolland. She found him talking to Florence and Charlotte. She didn’t want to make a fuss in front of Charlotte.

“There you are,” she said to him possessively putting her hand on his arm as she watched Charlotte smirk. “Hello girls. Doesn’t the house look beautiful?”

“Lovely,” said Florence who looked stunning in an emerald green dress that made her eyes pop.

“I’ve always been allergic to Christmas trees,” said Charlotte with a dry cough. Even for the holidays Charlotte wore a shapeless beige sweater and a non-descript olive green skirt. Cay thought of suggesting to Florence that she take Charlotte shopping and help her buy a few presentable outfits, but then again, why did she care how Charlotte looked? Her lank hair would

still fall unbecomingly down the sides of her face. As Cay looked at her Charlotte said, “Rolland was just saying that he wanted to get out to Idaho during the holidays.”

Cay looked like Charlotte had slapped her. The color rose to her cheeks and tiny lines appeared between her eyebrows.

Rolland looked at Cay. “I haven’t made any definite plans. My, my, you had your coat on when I picked you up and I didn’t see how wonderful you look in your bright red dress,” he said to Cay. “I must say hello to old Cruthers. I think he’s in the study. Ladies,” he said with a little nod of his head and escorted Cay into the hall.

“I don’t like that little bitch,” he said as they walked toward the study.

“Rolland! Really!” chastised Cay but the smile came back to her face.

After saying hello to his colleague, Rolland and Cay left the party. With Dean Carson in one room and Charlotte in the other there was no comfortable place for them to stay. They said their good-byes and decided to go out for a drink. He took her to a small café in the next town where they wouldn’t run into the Highbury crowd. She felt that their coming out as a couple had gone very badly. She hated Charlotte for her insensitivity and wanted to know if Rolland really planned to go to Idaho. She had been hoping he would come home with her.

They ordered wine and both took a deep breath.

After an awkward silence she hesitantly asked, “Do you plan to go to Idaho for Christmas?”

“No.”

“Oh. Then why did you tell Charlotte that?”

“I knew that was what she wanted me to say.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The waiter came with their drinks. Cay took a sip of the fruity wine. Rolland gulped down half the glass.

“Actually, I was wondering...” she hesitated.

“What were you wondering?” he asked as he slugged back the rest of his glass and held his hand up to beckon the waiter.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come home with me for Christmas. I haven’t been home since the summer and my mother wants me to come. I always go home for the holidays. They have a large house so there would be room for you to stay with us. And...” she stopped there.

“And?”

“Well, I thought...I mean. I’d like you to meet them. Would you like to? Meet them, I mean?” her heart was racing and she felt very exposed as she waited for his answer. The waiter arrived and he ordered another glass of wine. She felt like the rest of her life rested on his answer to her question.

“Yes, I’ll meet them,” he said looking at her with his big tired-looking blue eyes.

Although he hardly sounded excited by the prospect, Cay felt a terrible weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She felt like she had jumped a hurdle and just made it over without catching her foot on the wood. “Well, that’s wonderful. Yes, you’ll love it there. They live on a lake and we can walk down through the fir trees and hike along the water. Unless it snows too heavy, that is. But that’s beautiful too. And no one is a better cook than my mother. Tell me your favorite dishes and she’ll make them for you. Oh, this will be so much fun.”

“And what about old Mertin? Will he be happy to meet me?”

“Well, I won’t lie. He can be a little grouchy, but he’s ok really. You two can talk politics,” but then she frowned. “Well, maybe not. He’s a staunch conservative and you’re a liberal. He’s smart, but not book smart. Well, I don’t know what we’ll talk about. Maybe we’ll just eat!”

“Ok then. I’ll prepare to gain five pounds,” he looked at her and smiled his wonderful smile as the waiter placed another glass of wine in front of him.

Cay was so happy that a night which had started off so badly could end as one of the happiest nights of her life.

~

The pre-holiday season passed quickly and Cay was excited about bringing Rolland home. He had cancelled three dates, but she told herself it was also the cold and flu season. Her parents, or really her mother, sounded very happy that this unexpected guest was coming to stay. Cay had mentioned that Rolland liked liver and bacon and that had sent her mother into a

tailspin. She had never cooked liver and bacon but she would now. Her father said he didn't like the smell of liver frying.

They had decided that Cay would go home on the bus when the semester ended and Rolland would come on Christmas Eve. Cay would be able to help her mother get ready for the big Christmas feast. They were expecting about 20 relatives and neighbors.

Privately, Cay was nervous about Rolland meeting her father, but she kept it to herself. Cay knew that Rolland was too strong-willed and proud to bend over backwards to win Mertin over, but she decided that this was her future and her father could be happy for her or not. She was going to try to ignore his opinion. She knew Rolland would be charming to her mother and that Mary would like him. Especially when she saw how happy Cay was with him.

Soon the semester ended. Cay wished Florence and Mrs. Peabody a Merry Christmas and spent her last evening with Rolland. He would be driving up in three days. As she said good-bye to him she wished they had decided to go together, now, but he said that he had some things to take care of.

When she got home, every minute seemed like an hour, every hour like two. She busied herself by helping her mother bake and clean while looking at her watch every five minutes. Her anticipation annoyed Mertin who didn't like uncontrolled developments in his life. He wasn't thrilled about having to be cordial to this boyfriend. For God's sake, the man wasn't a boy he thought to himself he was over 40. He knew Cay should be married but he just didn't feel like going through the process of getting her to the altar. All the pleasantries. All the parties. He didn't want to fit all these things into his rigid schedule. The whole thing put him in an ornery mood.

Mertin Coughlin was a stern and controlling man. He never talked about his childhood but after spending five minutes with him you knew it had not been easy. When he dropped out of the seventh grade to take a job in a gas station he moved into a room over the station and no one knew if he ever saw his family again. He was devoid of any joy. His register for human emotion just did not swing that high. He was all business. He lacked patience, charm and wit. In their place were persistence, vision and common sense. These qualities made him a very good businessman, but a tough father.

And now, all this commotion over some other man who had never done an honest day's work with his hands. There she was looking at the clock again. Like a schoolgirl. She did look happy, though. It was easier when she was happy. He decided he would try to make an effort. Someone had to take care of her when he was gone.

What did he know about this man? He was a psychology and philosophy professor. What the hell kind of rubbish was that? Mertin was a practical man. He didn't need to know anything about the mysteries of life. Life was about feeding your family and taking care of your land and your house. Anything else was just frivolous. Even all these holidays were just for the women. He couldn't wait until it was all over.

Finally it was Christmas Eve. Cay and Mary were bursting with excitement. Was the room ready for him? Had they put out enough towels in the guest bathroom? Did they have gin? He liked gin Martinis. They were going to cook liver and bacon. What had happened to a man's home being his castle? Mary always spent all her time catering to him. He wasn't eating liver and bacon tonight. He had told Mary to cook him a steak. He decided to go down to the lake and take a walk.

He wasn't gone an hour when the house had been turned upside down. The boyfriend wasn't coming. He was sick. Cay had fled to her room. He found Mary standing in the hall outside Cay's door wringing her hands.

"What happened?" he asked.

"He called and said that he couldn't make the trip. That he has the flu," whispered Mary.

"Well, the man's sick. Don't cook the liver and bacon. I hate that smell. Cook the steak," he said as he walked away to go to his study.

Mary stood outside her daughter's door listening to her sob. No, she wouldn't cook the liver. It would remind Cay of him.

~

The day after Christmas, Cay felt a little better. She would be back at school soon and she would see him then. Her mother had said that they would drive down in the spring and meet him at Highbury. Her father hadn't looked too thrilled about that pronouncement, but he hadn't refused to go.

It was a beautiful, clear day. Quite mild for December and Mertin had said they would take the boat out and get some exercise. It wasn't posed like a question. "Do you want to take the boat out?" It was a command, "we'll take the boat out at 11." All her life it had been that way. There was never any discussion with her father. She had been told what schools to go to, what neighborhood children would be her friends, what sports to play, which college to go to and what to study when she was there. Women could be two things. Teachers and nurses. But there

her father's plan for her had ended. After being told what to do for 22 years, Cay found it difficult to make her own decisions. She finally settled on being a French teacher because she liked French.

She looked out her bedroom window at the lake. They owned about five acres of wooded, waterfront property so the only other house that could be seen was straight across the lake. She opened the window to feel the air. She would need a sweater and a jacket and a warm hat and gloves to keep warm.

They walked down to the lake in silence. It was just she and her father. Her mother didn't like the rowboat. "Too tippy," she always said. Like two people who had done the same thing a hundred times, they took the cover off the boat, bailed the little water that had gotten under the tarp, climbed down into the boat and pushed off the dock. They put the oars in the oarlocks and rowed out to the middle of the lake. Anticipating each other's strokes. A small flock of geese was floating in the cold water. Cay took a deep breath and looked at the natural beauty of the lake she loved so well.

"So, what do you really know about this man?" asked her father when they had pulled their oars into the boat to take a rest.

"Well, he's a professor at Highbury. He studied at the University of Toronto, the University of Heidelberg and Cornell. He's brilliant and funny and charming..."

"Why isn't he married at 40?" her father's deep, dark blue eyes, almost purple, were hard and penetrating.

"He was. He's divorced."

“With children?”

“Yes. Two boys.”

“Does he support them?”

“I don’t know the details of the arrangement,” she said starting to feel trapped on the small boat.

“Well, you better find out. Men usually treat their second wives no better than their first,” said Mertin taking his pipe out of his jacket pocket.

“It’s a hard subject to approach. I know he misses the boys.”

“He doesn’t see them?”

“They’re in Idaho,” said Cay as she watched the smoke from her father’s pipe drift away into the air. It smelled like cherries and wood and made Cay feel like a little girl again.

“Sounds to me like this guy looks good on paper, but what’s under the fancy print? That’s what you need to find out. You’re 34 years old. At your age you’ve got to get it right the first time.”

Cay felt the little bit of happiness the lake had brought her drift down to the bottom of the silty water. Of course her father would go to the heart of the matter without regard for her feelings. She knew he was right but she didn’t care. She just wanted to get back to Madison to see Rolland again.

~

After she returned from the holidays things moved swiftly. She and Rolland were inseparable. They spent all of their free time together. They ate together, went to movies and plays together, when the weather got warmer, they played miniature golf together, and went to readings and lectures. They even ventured into New York for a musical and an Italian dinner. There were those occasional days or evenings when he broke a date, but Cay ignored them. She never asked too many questions because she feared the answers.

He proposed on her birthday in May and the wedding was set for August. They would be married at her home in the backyard with her beloved lake as the backdrop under the shade of the tall trees. He reluctantly agreed. Everything was in place. Her parents had finally come to meet him and they had spent a tense meal at a local restaurant with Cay and Mary doing most of the talking. Her father and her fiancé sized each other up immediately. They both knew exactly how Cay's life would turn out. Both seemed helpless to stop the plot from moving forward with Cay being the catalyst of her own unhappiness. At the end of the meal, the women went to the ladies room leaving the two men alone.

Their eyes met over the dirty dishes, crumpled napkins and general disarray of the table after the meal. Rolland's large blue eyes met Mertin's steely gaze. Like boxers before the fight they sized each other up. Mertin threw the first punch, "I know your kind."

"And, I, yours," countered Rolland.

"You are self-absorbed and arrogant. You think the world owes you something and you feel free to make other people miserable because you are miserable," Mertin jabbed.

“You are puritanical, insensitive, impatient and heartless,” returned Rolland.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I love her. I care about her. Of course, you’ll say the same, but it’s clear you won’t be good to her. You’ve already abandoned one family...”

“I’m going to try with Cay. That’s all I’ve got to say.” Mertin knew the deal was done. Rolland had convinced himself that he would try. Mertin knew the outcome. He knew that no measure of trying was going to give Cay a good life with this man, but also knew he couldn’t stop her from marrying him. Rolland knew the same. When Cay and Mary came back from the ladies room they could feel the tension but they could also feel the resolution. An understanding had been reached.

~

Mertin broke down once and called Cay to tell her not to marry this man. Didn’t she see the signs? The multiple Martinis in the afternoon. The boys he never saw. The broken dates. The rumors of other women. He had checked around. She knew why he called and refused to listen to his words. The arrangements were all being made. The dress, the flowers, the invitations, the food, the champagne, the minister. He wanted to not let it happen. Like a car crash in slow painstaking motion he watched his only daughter marry an alcoholic. He had found out that he wasn’t even allowed in Idaho. That he couldn’t see those boys even if he wanted to. He would be arrested immediately for not paying child support.

After the call, Cay put her father’s voice out of her head and as if she wore blinders she pursued her goal of marriage. She asked Florence to be her maid-of-honor. Florence wanted to

scream no, no, don't do it. But, instead, she smiled and said she would be delighted. How do you stop someone when they refuse to see what everyone else sees? Cay was so focused on the dream. She had hung the antique lace wedding dress on the outside of her closet door. She would wear this dress for a few short hours but it would seal her fate for the rest of her life.

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