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Lady in the Lake



FABER & FABER

First published in the UK in 2019
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

First published in the United States in 2019
by HarperCollins Publishers
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

This paperback edition first published in 2020

Typeset by Faber & Faber Limited
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–33945–7



2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

I saw you once. I saw you and you noticed me because you caught me looking at you, seeing you. Back and forth, back and forth. Good-looking women do that. Lock eyes, then look one another up and down. I could tell at a glance you've never doubted you're good-looking and you still had the habit of checking a room to make sure you were the best-looking. You scanned the crowd of people on the sidewalk and your eyes caught mine, if only for a moment, then dropped away. You saw me, you tallied up the points. Who won? My hunch is that you gave yourself the crown because you saw a Negro woman, a poor one at that. In the animal kingdom, the male performs for the woman, woos her with his beautiful feathers or flowing mane, is always trying to out-strut the other men. Why do humans do it the other way? It doesn't make sense. Men need us more than we need them.

You were in the minority that day, you were in our neighborhood and almost everyone else there would have picked me. Younger, taller, shapelier me. Maybe even your husband, Milton. Part of the reason I first noticed you was because you were next to him. He now looked exactly like his father, a man I remembered with some affection. I can't say the same about Milton. I guessed, from the way people gathered around him on the temple steps, patted his back, clasped his hands in theirs,

that it must have been his father who had died. And I could tell from the way that people waited to comfort him that Milton was a big shot.

The temple was a block from the park. The park and the lake and the fountain. Isn't that interesting? I was probably taking a roundabout way to Druid Hill that afternoon, a book in my purse. Not that I liked the outdoors that much, but there were eight people—my father and mother, my sister and two brothers, my two boys and me—living in our apartment and there was never a moment's peace, to use my father's phrase. I would slip a book into my purse—Jean Plaidy or Victoria Holt—and say, "I'm going to the library," and Mama didn't have the heart to say no. She never faulted me for picking two good-for-nothing men and turning up back home like a bad penny. I was her first and I was her favorite. But not so favored that I could get away with a third mistake. Mama was on me to go back to school, become a nurse. A nurse. I couldn't imagine taking a job where you had to touch people you didn't want to touch.

When things got too much at home, when there were too many bodies and voices, I'd go to the park and walk the paths, drink up the silence, drop to a bench, and lose myself in ye olden days of England. Later, people said I was a terrible person, moving out on my own, leaving my babies behind with their grandparents, but I was thinking of them. I needed a man, and not just any old man. My boys' fathers had proved that much to me. I had to find the kind of man who would provide for us, all of us. To do that, I needed to be on my own for a little while, even if it meant living with my friend Latetia,

who basically ran a one-woman school on how to get men to pay for everything. My mama believed that when you put the cheese out for the mouse, you have to make it look at least a little appetizing. Cut the mold off or place it in the trap so the mold is on the side that doesn't show. I had to look good and I had to look as if I didn't have a care in the world, and I couldn't manage that in my family's crowded apartment on Auchentoroly Terrace.

Okay, so maybe I could imagine taking a job where you had to touch people you didn't want to touch.

But what woman doesn't do that? You did it yourself, I'm guessing, when you married Milton Schwartz. Because no one could fall in fairy-tale love with the Milton Schwartz I once knew.

It was—I can remember if I figure out how old my babies were—1964, late fall, the faintest chill in the air. You had a plain black pillbox hat, no veil. I bet people told you that you looked like Jackie Kennedy. I bet you liked it, even as you denied it with a Who, me? *laugh. The wind ruffled your hair, but only a little; you had that 'do shellacked. You wore a black coat with fur at the throat and cuffs. Believe me, I remember that coat. And, boy, Milton looked so much like his father and it was only then that I realized that old Mr. Schwartz had been kinda young and kinda handsome when I was a kid. When I was a little girl, buying candy in his store, I thought he was old. He wasn't even forty. Now I was twenty-six and Milton had to be almost forty and there you were next to him, and I could not get over what a fine woman he had gotten for himself. Maybe he was nicer now, I thought. People change,*

they do, they do. I did. It's just that no one will ever know.

What did you see? I can't remember what I was wearing, but I can guess. A coat, too thin even for that mild day. Probably came from a church box, so it was pilled and limp, saggy at the hem. Scuffed shoes, run-down heels. Your shoes were black and shiny. My legs were bare. You had the kind of stockings that almost shimmered.

Looking at you, I saw the trick to it: to get a man with money, I would need to look as if I didn't need money. I was going to have to find a job in a place where the tips came in folding money, not change thrown on the table. Problem was, those kinds of places didn't hire Negroes, not as waitresses. The one time I got a restaurant gig, I was a dishwasher, stuck in the back, cut off from the tips. The best restaurants didn't hire women to wait tables even if they were white.

I was going to have to be creative, find a job somewhere that I could meet the kind of men who bought a girl things, which would make me more desirable to the men who played for bigger stakes, allow me to trade up and up and up. I knew what that meant, what I would have to exchange for those things. I wasn't a girl anymore. I had two sons to prove it.

So when you saw me—and you did, I'm sure of it, our eyes caught, held one another's—you saw my ratty clothes, but you also saw my green eyes, my straight nose. The face that gave me my nickname, although later I would meet a man who said I reminded him of a duchess, not an empress, that I should be called Helen. He said it was because I was beautiful enough to start a war. And didn't I just? I don't know what else you would call it. Maybe not a big war, but a war all the same, in which

men turned on one another, allies became enemies. All because of me.

In a flash, you showed me where I wanted to go and how to get there. I had one more chance. One more man.

I did not imagine that day that our paths would ever cross again, small as Baltimore can be. You were just the woman who married the nasty teenager who used to torment me, and now the nasty boy was a nice-looking man who was burying his father. I need a husband like that, *I thought.* Not a white man, of course, but a man who could buy me a coat with fur at the neck and the cuffs, a man who would command everyone's respect. A woman is only as good as the man at her side. *My father would have slapped me if he heard such words come out of my mouth, make me find and memorize all the Bible verses about vanity and pride. But it wasn't vanity on my part. I needed a man to help care for my boys. A well-to-do man needs a beautiful woman. That's what I figured out that day. You were there to comfort Milton, to help him bury his father, but you were also an advertisement for his work and success. I can't believe you left him a year later, but death has a way of changing people.*

God knows, my death has changed me.

Alive, I was Cleo Sherwood. Dead, I became the Lady in the Lake, a nasty broken thing, dragged from the fountain after steeping there for months, through the cold winter, then that fitful, bratty spring, almost into summer proper. Face gone, much of my flesh gone.

And no one cared until you came along, gave me that stupid nickname, began rattling doorknobs and pestering people,

going places you weren't supposed to go. No one outside my family was supposed to care. I was a careless girl who went out on a date with the wrong person and was never seen again. You came in at the end of my story and turned it into your beginning. Why'd you have to go and do that, Madeline Schwartz? Why couldn't you stay in your beautiful house and your good-enough marriage, and let me be at the bottom of the fountain? I was safe there.

Everybody was safer when I was there.

October 1965

"What do you mean you've invited Wallace Wright to dinner?"

Maddie Schwartz longed to take the question back the second it was out of her mouth. Maddie Schwartz did not act like women in television variety shows and songs. She neither nagged nor schemed. She did not need to hear a Jack Jones song to remind her to fix her hair and makeup before her husband came through the door at day's end. Maddie Schwartz prided herself on being unflappable. Invite the boss home at the last minute? Surface with two never-before-mentioned cousins from Toledo, show up with an old high school friend? Maddie was always ready for the challenge. She ran her household much as her mother had run hers, with a sly wit and effortless—effortless-*seeming*—organization.

Unlike her mother, she accomplished these domestic miracles by spending freely. Milton's shirts went to the best laundry in North Baltimore, although it was miles from her usual routes. (She dropped off, he picked up.) A cleaning girl came twice a week. Maddie's "famous" yeast rolls were out of a can, her freezer full of staples. She used caterers for the Schwartzes' most ambitious parties, the New Year's Day open house for Milton's colleagues from the law firm

and the spontaneous spring party that was such a success that they felt obliged to keep having it. People really loved that party, spoke about it throughout the year with sincere anticipation.

Yes, Maddie Schwartz was good at entertaining and therefore happy to do it. She took particular pride in her ability to throw together a dinner party with almost no warning. Even when she wasn't enthusiastic about a certain guest, she never kvetched. So Milton was within his rights to be surprised by her peevish tone on this afternoon.

"I thought you'd be excited," Milton said. "He is a little, well, famous."

Maddie regrouped quickly. "Don't mind me, I'm just worried that he's used to dining in a grander style than I can manage on short notice. But maybe he would be charmed by meatloaf and scalloped potatoes? I guess life is all lobster thermidor and steak Diane when you're Wallace Wright."

"He says he knew you a little? Back in school."

"Oh we were *years* apart," Maddie said, knowing her generous husband would infer that Wallace Wright was the older one. He was, in fact, two years younger, a grade behind her at The Park School—and many rungs down the high school social ladder.

He had been Wally Weiss then. Today, one could barely turn on WOLD-TV without being subjected to Wallace Wright. He hosted the noon news show, where he interviewed celebrities passing through Baltimore, and also did "Wright Makes Right," a relatively new evening segment that took on consumer complaints. Lately, when the

beloved WOLD anchor Harvey Patterson enjoyed the rare evening off, Wallace filled in for him.

And, although it was supposed to be a closely held secret at WOLD, Wally also was the voiceless tramp who hosted *Donadio,* the taped cartoon show that aired on Saturdays. Baltimore's unimaginative answer to Bozo, Donadio never spoke and his face was hidden beneath layers of makeup. But Maddie had seen through the ruse when Seth watched the show as a child.

Seth was a junior in high school now. It had been years since she'd watched *Donadio,* or even WOLD. She preferred WBAL, the number one station.

"He's a nice guy, this Wallace Wright," Milton continued. "Not full of himself at all. I told you, we've been playing singles at that new tennis barn in Cross Keys."

Milton was a bit of a name-dropper and just silly enough to be impressed by playing tennis with a television personality, even one known as the Midday Fog because of his distinctive baritone. Sweet, starstruck Milton. Maddie could not begrudge his tendency toward hero worship, given how much she had benefited from it. Eighteen years into their marriage, he still had unguarded moments in which he gazed at her as if unsure how he had ever won such a prize.

She loved him, she really did, they had a harmonious life together and while she publicly made the right lamentations about their only child's heading to college in two years, she actually couldn't wait. She felt as if she had been living in one of those shoebox dioramas Seth had built—*she* had

built, let's be honest—in grade school, and now the lid was coming off, the walls breaking down. Milton had started taking flying lessons recently, asking how she felt about a second home in Florida. Did she like the Atlantic side or the gulf? Boca or Naples?

Are those the only choices? Maddie had found herself wondering. *The two sides of Florida? Certainly the world is bigger than that.* But she had only said that she thought she would like Naples.

"See you soon, darling." She hung up the phone, allowed herself the sigh she had kept at bay. It was late October, the High Holy Days finally over. She was tired of entertaining, exasperated by disruptions to her routines. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were supposed to be a time to reflect, take stock, but Maddie couldn't remember the last time she had been able to go pray before breaking the fast. The house had finally returned to normal and now Milton wanted to bring a guest home, Wally Weiss of all people.

Yet it was essential to impress *Wallace Wright* with dinner. The chicken breasts thawing in the fridge would keep another day. And meatloaf, even with scalloped potatoes, wasn't the note she wanted to hit. Maddie knew a clever way to make a beef casserole that everyone loved; maybe it wasn't Julia Child, but there were never leftovers. No one guessed that the key ingredient was two cans of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, plus several generous splashes of wine. The trick was to surround such a casserole with things that suggested elegance, planning—biscuits from Hutzler's

bakery, which Maddie kept in the freezer for just this reason; a cheeseless Caesar salad that Milton would dress at the table, then chop using the same technique as the waiters at Marconi's. She would send Seth to Goldman's for a cake. It was a chance to practice his driving, after all. She would tell him that he could have whatever fast food he wanted, too. He would choose *trayf,* no doubt, but Milton asked only that they keep a kosher home.

Maddie checked the bar, but they were always well stocked. There would be two rounds of cocktails before dinner—oh, she would do something clever with nuts, or maybe serve pâté on toast points—wine flowing through dinner, brandy and cognac after. She didn't remember Wally drinking much, but then she hadn't spoken to him since the summer she was seventeen. Nobody drank then. Everybody in Maddie's crowd drank now.

He would be different, of course. Everyone changes, but pimply teenage boys especially so. They say it's a man's world, but you'll never hear anyone claim it's a *boy's* world. That realization had been brought literally home to Maddie when Seth entered high school. She had told him to be patient, that he would sprout to his father's height, that his face would be smooth and handsome, and her prophecies had already come to pass.

She could never have said the same thing to Wally. Sad little Wally, how he had yearned for her. She had used that yearning, when it was to her advantage. But then, that's what girls do, that's the power available to them. Who was he kidding? He may have been taller, the pimples gone,

the hair tamed, but everyone in Northwest Baltimore knew he was a Jew. *Wallace Wright!*

Was Wally married? Maddie recalled a wife, possibly a divorce. The wife wasn't Jewish, she was pretty sure of that. She decided to balance the table with another couple, the Rosengrens, who would provide the wide-eyed wonder that Maddie would have a hard time faking. She could never see Wallace without seeing Wally. Would it be the same for him? Would he see the Maddie Morgenstern that lurked inside Maddie Schwartz? And would he consider the new version an improvement? She had been a beautiful girl, there was no use pretending otherwise, but terribly, almost tragically naive. In her twenties, she had lost herself to raising a baby, risked frumpiness.

At thirty-six, she had the best of both worlds. She saw a beautiful woman in her mirror, still youthful, but able to afford the things that kept you looking that way. She had one streak of silvery hair, which she had decided to consider incongruous, dashing. She plucked the rest.

When she opened the door to Wally that evening, his open admiration was delightful to see.

"Young lady, is your mother at home?"

That irritated her. It was such obvious flattery, something one would say to a simpering grandmother who wore too much rouge. Did Wally think she required that kind of buildup? She tried to hide her frostiness as she served the first round of drinks and snacks.

"So," Eleanor Rosengren said after gulping her first highball, "did you really know each other at Park?" The

Rosengrens, like Milton, had gone to public high school.

"A little," Maddie admitted with a laugh, a laugh meant to signal: *It was so long ago, let's not bore the others*.

"I was in love with her," Wally said.

"You were *not*." Laughing, flustered, and—again—not complimented. She felt mocked, as if he were setting up a joke for which she would be the punch line.

"Of course I was. Don't you remember—I took you to the prom when—what was his name—stood you up."

A curious glance from Milton.

"Oh, not stood up, Wally. Sorry, *Wallace*. We broke up two weeks before prom. That's very different from being stood up." She wouldn't have cared about going at all if it weren't for the new dress. It had cost $39.95—her father would have been scandalized if it had gone to waste after all the begging she had done.

She did not provide the name for which Wally had fumbled. Allan. Allan Durst Junior. When they had first started dating, the name had sounded Jewish enough to placate her mother. His father *was* Jewish, sort of. But Mrs. Morgenstern was not fooled once she saw him. "That's not someone to be serious about," her mother had said, and Maddie had not argued. She was becoming serious about someone else, someone even less likely to win her mother's approval.

"Should we go into the dining room?" Maddie asked, although people were still in the middle of their cocktails.

Wally—Wallace—was the youngest of the five at the table, but he had clearly grown used to people wanting his opinions. The obliging Rosengrens pelted him with

questions over dinner. Who would be running for governor? What did he think about Agnew's latest gaffe? Baltimore's crime rate? What was Gypsy Rose Lee really like? (She had recently been in Baltimore to promote her own syndicated talk show.)

For someone who did interviews for a living, Wallace was not much on asking questions. When the men offered their opinions on current events, he listened with patient condescension, then contradicted them. Maddie tried to steer the conversation toward a novel she had read, *The Keepers of the House,* which made some excellent points about the race problem in the South, but Eleanor said she couldn't get through it and the men had never heard of it.

Yet it was a successful dinner party, Maddie supposed. Milton was delighted that he had a famous friend; the Rosengrens were charmed by Wallace. He seemed to genuinely like them, too. Late in the evening, deep into his brandy, the lights dimmed so that the burning ends of their cigarettes looked like slow-moving fireflies in the living room, Wallace said, "You've done okay for yourself, Maddie."

Okay? *Okay?*

"Imagine," he continued, "if you had ended up with that fellow. Durst, that was it. He's a copywriter. An adman."

She said she hadn't seen Allan Durst since high school, which was true. Then she said she knew about his job from The Park School alumni bulletin, which was not.

"I never heard there was a big high school love," Milton said.

"That's because there wasn't," Maddie said, more sharply than she meant to.

By eleven P.M. they had sent everyone home weaving, insisting they do it again. Milton toppled into bed, felled by drink and excitement. Maddie normally would have left the heavy cleaning to her Friday girl. There was no crime in letting dishes sit overnight as long as you rinsed them. Though Tattie Morgenstern had never left so much as a fork in her sink.

But Maddie decided to stay up and put things to rights.

The kitchen had been redone last year. Maddie had been so proud of the project when it was completed, so happy with her new appliances, yet the pleasure had burned off quickly. Now the remodel seemed silly, even pointless. What did it matter, having the latest appliances, all these sleek built-ins? No time was actually saved, although the reconfigured cabinets did make it easier to maintain two sets of dishes.

Wally had expressed surprise when he realized, during the salad course, that the Schwartzes kept a kosher household, but that was a nod to Milton's upbringing. Two sets of dishes, never mixing meat and dairy, avoiding pork and shellfish—it wasn't that hard and it made Milton happy. She deserved his devotion, she told herself as she soaped and rinsed the crystal, dried the good china by hand.

Turning to leave the kitchen, she caught a wineglass drying on the drain board with the tip of her elbow. It plummeted to the floor, where it shattered.

We're supposed to break a glass.

What are you talking about?

Never mind. I always forget what a heathen you are.

The broken glass meant five more minutes with dustpan and broom, ferreting out every sliver. By the time she finished it was almost two and yet Maddie still had trouble falling asleep. Her mind raced, going over lists of things undone and overlooked. There was nothing here in the present. The things she had failed to do were twenty years behind her, when she had first known Wally—and her first love, the one her mother never suspected. She had sworn she would be—what, exactly? Someone creative and original, someone who cared not at all about public opinion. She—*they*—were going to live in New York City, in Greenwich Village. He had promised. He was going to take her away from stodgy Baltimore, they were going to live a passionate life devoted to art and adventure.

She had kept him out of her mind for all these years. Now he was back, Elijah showing up for his Passover wine.

Maddie fell asleep paging through an imaginary calendar, trying to calculate the best time to leave her marriage. Her birthday was next month. December? No, not over the holidays, unimportant as Hanukah was. February seemed too late, January a cliché, a mockery of New Year's resolutions. November 30, she decided. She would leave November 30, twenty days after her thirty-seventh birthday.

We're supposed to break a glass.

What are you talking about?

Never mind.

The Classmate

I grip the steering wheel of my new Cadillac, talking my way through the drive from Maddie's house to mine, short as it is, a dog's leg down Greenspring, past The Park School—our alma mater, although Park was in a different location in our day—then a right turn on Falls Road, and finally up the hill into Mount Washington. I talk to myself like a coach, not that I ever played for any team. Couldn't even make water boy. *Focus, Wally, focus*.

In my head, I'm always Wally. Everyone looks up to Wallace Wright, including me. I wouldn't dare try to talk to him the way I talk to Wally.

I'm terrified that I'm going to cross the center line, hit another car, maybe worse. *WOLD anchorman Wallace Wright was arrested for vehicular manslaughter near his Northwest Baltimore home.*

"The newsman can't end up as the headline, Wally," I tell myself. "Focus."

A cop stop would be almost as bad. *WOLD anchorman arrested for drunk driving.* News only because it involves a newsman. Who doesn't drive a little tipsy from time to time? But a cop also might wave me off, even ask for an autograph.

Where did Maddie learn to drink like that? I guess it's

like the old joke about Carnegie Hall, *practice, practice, practice*. I've never had a chance to develop the cocktail habit because I'm seldom home before eight, have to be at work the next day by nine, on air by noon. That routine doesn't lend itself to liquor. Or marriage.

Mount Washington is so dark at midnight, so hushed. How have I never noticed that before? The only sound is the crunch of the fall leaves beneath my tires. By the time I creep up South Road, it seems the better part of valor to park by the curb, not attempting the driveway, much less the garage.

Why did I stay so late? It certainly wasn't the scintillating conversation. *Because it's not every day you get to show your first love what a mistake she made.*

If you had asked me even this morning—and people ask me many things, you'd be amazed what an oracle I am—I would have told you with all sincerity that I never thought about Maddie Morgenstern.

But the moment I saw her on her own threshold, I realized she had always been with me, my audience of one. She was there Monday through Friday, when I faced the cameras between noon and twelve thirty on the midday news show. On Wednesday nights, when I did "Wright Makes Right." Whenever I was lucky enough to substitute for Harvey Patterson, whose job I will take one day. Maddie somehow managed the trick of being a seventeen-year-old girl *and* a suburban matron, sitting at home with a cup of coffee, the morning housework finished, watching channel 6 and thinking: *I could have been Mrs. Wallace Wright if I played my cards right*.

She's even there when I put on makeup and play Donadio, the sad, silent clown that was my fluke entree at WOLD-TV.

I had been working in radio, prized for my voice, but not considered camera ready. The Donadio gig meant an extra twenty-five dollars a week. The only stipulation was that I must never tell anyone, and I was more than happy to keep that promise.

One Saturday, as I was removing my makeup, a cop killing came over the scanner. I was the only reporter available. Somehow, during the fourteen months I had been masquerading as Donadio, I had gotten taller, my hair smoother, my complexion paradoxically clearer. Maybe I did a better job cleaning my face once I started wearing clown makeup. At any rate, my face and body finally fit my booming baritone. I went to the scene, I gathered the facts, a star was born. Not Maddie, not that putz she dated in high school, not her perfectly nice lawyer husband. Me, Wally Weiss. I'm the star.

We met in, of all the unlikely places, our school's ham radio club. We quickly established that we shared an intense admiration for Edward R. Murrow, whose London reports during the war had made a big impression on us. I had never met any girl who wanted to talk about Murrow and journalism before, much less a pretty one. It was like that first great work of art that transfixes you, that novel that stays with you the rest of your life, even if you go on to read much better ones. It was all I could do not to stare at her, mouth hanging open.

Maddie's appearance at the ham radio club turned out to be a one-off; she had thought it was a *radio* club, for people interested in writing and performing, not a room full of losers who liked to tinker. She switched to the school newspaper, quickly landed a column and started running with a very fast, goyish crowd, including Allan Durst. Obviously, Maddie Morgenstern could never be serious about him, but her parents were shrewd enough not to fight a high school romance. I heard they had even invited the Durst parents to their home for Shabbos. The mother was a famous artist, painting huge abstracts that hung in museums, the father a competent painter of portraits, specializing in Baltimore dowagers.

Allan dropped Maddie right before prom. I found her weeping in an empty classroom. It was an honor to have her confide in me. I suggested she take me as her date.

"What could be a greater insult?" I said, patting her back with a flat up-and-down motion, almost as if burping a child. My hand brushed what felt like the clasp of a bra, my most erotic experience to date.

She agreed to my plan with an almost painful alacrity.

I bought her a wrist corsage with the most expensive orchid to be had in Baltimore. She did her part, ignoring Allan, who had come stag, and laughing at my jokes as if I were Jack Benny. Allan approached her at one point and asked for a dance "for old times' sake." Maddie cocked her head to the side as if she were trying to remember exactly what old times they had shared, then said, "No, no, I'm very happy to spend the evening with my *date*."

I whirled her away, feeling every inch the young Fred Astaire. If you think about it, Astaire wasn't conventionally handsome. He was never the tallest guy in the room, he wasn't an athlete. But he was *Astaire*.

As I drove her home after the dance, she slid across the seat of my father's Buick and rested her head on my shoulder. She confided in me that she wanted to write, really write, poetry and fiction, which was almost more exciting than her very real kiss at the front door. Back in the car, I discovered that the flower had fallen from its ribbon. Maybe its fragrance was nothing more than the usual orchid smell, but to me it carried Maddie's distinctive scent, as singular as her voice, subdued and husky for a teenage girl. Maddie never squealed, she was no bobby-soxer. She was dignified, regal, the girl who always played Queen Esther in the Purim play.

I called her three days later to ask for a movie date, a proper date, having calculated that three days was the right amount of time. Not too eager, not too detached. Very Astaire.

Her tone was puzzled, polite. "You're a sweet kid, Wally, to worry about me," she said. "But I'm fine."

Within a year, she was engaged to Milton Schwartz, big and hairy and older, twenty-two to her eighteen, his first year of law school already behind him. I went to their wedding. It was like watching Alice Faye run away with King Kong.

I had not thought of Milton Schwartz again for almost twenty years when I ran into him in the locker room at the new tennis barn, the only convenient place for me to

exercise before work, given its proximity to Television Hill. We were well matched at singles and Milton clearly enjoyed having a famous friend. It was only a matter of time before he asked me if I would like to have dinner at his house. "No big deal," he said. "Just the wife, maybe our neighbors, anyone you want to bring."

Bettina and I have been apart almost two years and although I date, there's no one serious. I decided to go stag, like Allan at the senior prom. Milton knew that I had attended the same high school as Mrs. Schwartz but said his wife had never spoken of me. Rather than feeling demoralized that Maddie didn't brag about our acquaintanceship, I saw it as a compliment. If she hadn't mentioned to her husband that she knew Baltimore's Midday Fog, it must be *because* she had the occasional fantasy, a what-might-have-been moment. At her kitchen table, with her coffee, a cigarette burning between her fingers, she relived that prom night and my phone call three days later, kicked herself for not saying yes. Her dark hair would be prematurely gray, her hourglass figure dumpy and plump. Neither of those things were true, as it turned out, but that's how I imagined her.

I was surprised to discover they kept a kosher house. I never set out to distance myself from Judaism, but a television personality such as myself has to connect with his audience, and my audience is mostly Christian. That's the cost of being an oracle. Then again, there is Orthodox and there's *Orthodox*, and the refusal to mix meat and dairy was the Schwartz household's only concession to Judaism I could see. I was a little shocked by the things they said

about the changing neighborhoods to the south, the more religious Jews who lived along Park Heights Avenue, to whom they clearly felt superior. If you ask me, there's no one more anti-Semitic than a middle-class Jew.

But we did not spend that much time talking about Judaism. We discussed politics, with the Schwartzes and their guests deferring to me, as people tend to do. We laughed about Spiro Agnew's most recent blunder, the speech at Gettysburg where he was clearly confused about which side had prevailed on that battlefield. By the after-dinner drinks, everyone felt warm and familiar. I thought it was safe to bring up the prom—and Maddie's subsequent refusal to go on another date with me.

And she denied it. She insisted I had never asked her out at all.

Yes, she agreed, we had gone to the prom, but she was adamant that I never called her again, when I know I did.

"Because of course I would have gone out with you!" she said, by way of argument for her memory over mine. But she couldn't help undercutting it: "If only to be polite."

Still, her heat on this topic was disproportionate. There was no reason to get so angry about it.

Safe on my own doorstep, I drop my keys two, three times before I stumble into my house, still baffled by Maddie's hostility. Is it because she could tell I saw through her? I may have been the one with a goyish name, but I was still a Jewish boy in my heart, whereas the Schwartzes, with their two sets of dishes, were ersatz. Everything in their house was for show.

My house is so quiet—and so dusty—since Bettina moved out. I thought she would fight to keep it. The house had been her chief preoccupation for our six years together. But, by the end, Bettina wanted no part of it or me. We didn't have kids. I still don't know how I feel about that. A child would have been delighted to have Donadio for his dad.

Although exhausted and stumbling drunk, I go to the "study" that Bettina made for me, in our marriage's first, hopeful year. It is all leather and mahogany, with English horse-racing prints that embarrass me, although I suppose the proximity of Pimlico justifies such airs. Bettina arranged the books for visual appeal, which drives me mad, but I finally find the one I want: my old battered copy of *Arch of Triumph,* relegated to an upper shelf with the other paperbacks. When I first read it, it made me want to write, make other people feel as novels made me feel. Instead, I tell them the headlines and the weather, raise an occasional eyebrow at a celebrity.

And there it is, between pages 242 and 243, Maddie's orchid, brown and brittle.

Of course, the flower's existence proves nothing; we are agreed that we attended the prom. Yet to me it is the smoking gun, irrefutable evidence—but of what? That everything happened as I said. Why did she deny it? My story is a testament to her power, the glory of her youth.

Anyway, it's a good thing that nothing came of our date. At thirty-five, I am still young, my life nothing but possibility. I might be interviewing second-raters now, but one

day I will talk to presidents and kings, maybe work for one of the networks. Whereas Maddie Schwartz, pushing forty, has nothing to look forward to.