Nothing to Declare

All the senior partners were having a laugh about a movie they'd seen. *Forty-Five Years.* Something, something about the movie taking forty-five years to sit through. The woman McGuinness thought he recognized was into it with them at the far end of the table—leaning in, as if hearing everything for the second time. "Miss Nail!" they were calling her. "What do you say, Miss Nail? Tell us." They were all laughing. He didn't know what it was about.

The woman wasn't tall, but was slender in a brown linen dress, a tailored dress that set off her tan and showed her well-drawn body. She'd glanced past him twice—possibly more. A flickering look asking to be thought accidental, but could be understood as acknowledgment. She'd smiled, then looked away, a smile that said possibly she knew him, or had. So peculiar, he thought, not to remember. Eventually he would.

They were at the Monteleone, the shadowed old afternoon redoubt with the bar that was a carousel. It wasn't crowded. Outside the tall windows on Royal a parade was shoving past. *Boom-pa-pa, boom-pa-pa*. Then the trumpets not altogether on key. St. Paddy's was Tuesday. Now was only Friday.

At his end, the younger associates were talking about "contracts for deed." People were getting rich again, they said. "Help the banks out," one of them said. "The first fish to go ashore. *Gut und schlecht.* Man would rather will nothingness than not will . . ." Theirs was the old Poydras Street Hibernian firm Coyne, Coyle, Kelly, McGuinness, et al. Friday was the usual after-hours fall-by with the juniors. Give them a chance to find their place, etc. McGuinness was there to be congenial.

The woman had arrived *with* someone. A Mr. Drown. Someone's client who'd left. She was drinking too much. Everybody ordered the Sazerac the moment they arrived in New Orleans. The guilty taste of anise. She'd had three or more.

Her eyes passed him again. Another smile. She raised her chin as if to challenge him. The old priest was to her left—Father Fagan in his dog collar. He'd fathered a child, possibly two. Had diverse tastes. His brother was a traffic judge. "Why would sex with me be better than with your husband?" he heard the woman say. The men all laughed—too loud. The priest rolled his eyes, shook his head. "What did Thomas Merton say . . ." Old Coyne said. The priest put his hand to his brow. "What're they saying now?" someone said where he was sitting—one of the young women. "Nothing new," was the answer. "Coyne thinks he's a priest when what he is is a son of a bitch."

"Miss Nail! Miss Nail! What do you say about *that*?" They were shouting again.

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THEY HAD TRAVELED TO ICELAND TOGETHER THIRTY-FIVE YEARS ago (though to be here now was shocking). Both students in Ithaca. They'd known each other only slightly, which hadn't mattered. A Catholic-school boy from uptown. Her mother, a rich landscape painter living in the Apthorp; her father on a yacht in Hog Bay. Both parents were colorful drunks. Minor exotics.

They'd first decided on Greece for spring recess—again, knowing little of each other, but ready for an adventure. Mikonos. The limpid water. The little bleached houses you rented for pennies. Each day the natives caught a fish and cooked it for you. However, there was money enough only for Iceland. Their trip wasn't being advertised at home. She was then called "Barbara." A name she disliked. He was simply Sandy McGuinness. Alex. A lawyer's son. His mother was a school teacher. Nothing about them was exotic.

With their pooled money they took a package flight to Reykjavik and the bus to the far western fjords. Ten hours. There'd be hostels, they believed; friendly Icelanders, wholesome, cheap food, cold Scandinavian sun. But there'd been none of that. Not even a room to let. A fisherman who tended a cod-drying rack far out a dirt road, and who spoke little English, offered them a sod house with goats asleep on the roof. Free of charge. Sandy was in love with her before the flight departed.

In the sod house, they slept cold together, talked, smoked cigarettes, sat beside the fjord in what little sun was available. He made unsuccessful efforts to fish, while she warmed her legs and read Neruda on Machu Picchu, Ken Kesey, Sylvia Plath. She told him she had Navajo blood on her father's side. He was a blacklisted director. Her mother was in essence a courtesan and half-French. About herself, she said she wished to acquire repose—the inner resolve (elusive) she'd read about in Fitzgerald. She told him she'd loved women.

The fisherman provided them cod, hard soda bread, herring, yeasty homemade beer, blankets, candles, kindling for the March chill. One night he invited them. There was his wife, and two children who spoke English but were shy. The wife scowled at Barbara. They visited only once. They were twenty. It was 1981.

Sandy McGuinness did not know, really, what to think about what he was doing. When they talked, Barbara punctuated her phrases with small, audible intakes of breath, as if these were conversations they neither would forget—though in his view they didn't seem very important. What he *did* think was that she was beautiful and intense and unfathomable, but possibly not as smart as he was. Often, as their week idled past, he would see her watching him as he performed his homely duties required to keep them warm and dry—moving wood, airing blankets, sweeping. She was assessing him, he knew, as prelude to some decision. He didn't know what needed to be decided about him. And then she told him, unexpectedly, she was intending to stay on after he left—to learn to read the sagas, which she believed would help confer the repose she so badly wanted.

To which Sandy McGuinness thought: Yes. Loving her did not mean more than how he felt at that moment. He would go happily back. Perhaps he would see her again, or not. He was thinking about veterinary school. She could read her sagas. He also felt he could easily marry her.

On their last day, they'd gone into the little town for Sandy to find the bus, after which she was returning to the sod house. She'd arranged to do domestic work for the cod dryer's wife—a victory, she said. She also said—to him, smiling into the glinting sun, looking luminous and foreign in her big blue sweater—"You know, sweetheart," she said, "we don't want anyone else once we've learned who we are. It's a very hard choice to make."

"I don't know anything about that," he said. His cheap, black-nylon bag sat beside him at the bus stop. She had the smile. Radiant. Caramel-colored eyes. The shining mahogany hair she dried in the sun. They had made love that morning—not very memorably. She had begun to talk with fewer than the necessary words. As if so much didn't need to be said, and so much was obvious. She was, he felt, pretentious and self-infatuated. Leaving was a fine idea. What he'd be missing was miss-able. In the stark light her face bore a coarseness he hadn't noticed, but supposed he would grow to dislike.

"Good choices don't make very good stories," she said. "Have you noticed that?" The sun passed across her eyes, making her squint.

"I haven't," he said. "I thought they did."

"We'll see each other again, won't we?" she said. "We'll talk about that. Decide if it's true."

She kissed him on the cheek, then began making her way purposefully back down the narrow street.

BARBARA HAD NOT COME BACK TO ITHACA. THOUGH HE'D HEARD things. That she had changed her name from Barbara to Alix and entered divinity school at Harvard. That she had been for a period an artist's model. That she had been ill—mysteriously. TB, possibly. That she had married a doctor and lived in New York City. They were all plausible futures for her. Nothing was mentioned about the sagas. He was starting law school in Chicago and meant after that to move home to practice. The foreignness he'd liked—conceivably, briefly loved—could take its place in the routine of memory. The place in his life she occupied—*Iceland,* he privately called it—had evolved to be a good story he told. A trip he'd once taken with a girl.

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SHE WAS STANDING NOW, EXCUSING HERSELF TO THE TABLE. SHE HAD given him another look—pursing her lips for his not having spoken, not making a to-do over her. But had she expected to find him simply because she was in New Orleans—after all this time? A small city's small accommodation. Still, so odd not to remember her sooner. Though no odder than that a woman he'd nonchalantly loved in college should turn up now and here. She was thinner, fitter. She didn't look fifty-four. He still saw himself as young. Youngest among the partners. There was no template for these things.

She was going, so it appeared, to the LADIES. The junior men had moved on to the "paradox of thrift." The "fallacy of composition." "Building a house from the top down." He had no part in any of that. His book was in admiralty. Enormous boats.

"Make way," the priest was now saying loudly. All the men were standing—to be gentlemen. "Miss Nail. Miss Nail is having a pee. Or are we wrong?" They were growing too used to her.

The sleeveless brown dress was simple but chic. Her legs and skinny ankles shone under the bar's chandeliers. Outside, the parade was still in partial swing. A ragged troop of clowns. The police bagpipers' unit.

"Well, you *could've* . . ." she said as she slipped past him, as if not expecting to be heard by anyone but him. She might've been about to laugh at him. Her dark eyes he now recognized.

"You *could've,*" one of the younger men had heard and repeated in a whisper. The LADIES was out of the bar across the hotel's golden lobby.

"I just didn't expect . . ." he tried to say, turning to her. She paused as if it was he who'd spoken first. She was much more attractive being older. No coarseness in her features now, just rich, unfailing skin. The men at her end of the table were discussing her, which she would know. That she'd drunk too much was visible in

the changeableness of her expressions. As if she couldn't quite decide something. Her hands seemed uncertain, though her eyes were sparkling.

"Well. *Would* you, my dear?" she said dismissively.

"Of course . . ." he said. "I . . ."

"In the lobby. In whatever time it takes me to become presentable again?" She was moving toward the doorway to the lobby, beyond which the bellmen turned to notice her. Her shoes were slender, expensive, in pale blue. She had a sporting aspect and smelled of something tropical. She hadn't heard him say "Of course." Just looked around as she eased past. What would her name be now? Possibly Barbara again.

AT THE FAR END OF THE BAR, ON A RISER, A DRUM KIT SAT, UNUSED. A tall, older black man in a white shirt and dark trousers had begun to estimate the drums' positioning. Soon there would be music, and the Carousel Bar would be full. People present for different reasons would become an audience. It was past five. The parade was finishing in the street. Some of his partners were standing, readying to leave, waiting to see if Miss Nail would return. The associates had begun talking to another firm's young lawyers at the next table. Hershberg–Linz. Oil and gas litigators from when it was all booming. Now they did commercial realty. Built buildings. Barely the law at all. The noise level was going up. "That Miss Nail," he heard someone say and laugh.

IN THE LOBBY, HE WAITED BY THE VITRINE WHERE THERE WERE books and photographs of famous writers who'd stayed in the hotel. Tennessee. Faulkner. It was that sort of place—self-styled literary.

Tourists who'd watched the parade were flooding into the lobby from outside—hot, weary, in need of what the hotel offered. The bellmen ignored them, smiling. The revolving door was permitting gusts of hot, mealy air to mingle with the inside cool. "Were those real?" he heard someone inquire. An Iowa farmer's accent. "They were *so* beautiful. The pink feathers. So many." People were pulling suitcases past the bellmen. It was long past time to check in.

"I was just thinking how nice it is to arrive someplace," she said, suddenly beside him. The tourists had momentarily captivated him. The priest was hurrying past, his white straw hat on, consulting his cell phone. "I was thinking about arriving to Paris, of course. Not here," she said. "It's too hot here. It's only March." There would be no words about long ago. But what then could they say? Make a list of things, but here they'd still be.

"Who's Miss Nail?" he said.

"She's Mr. Drown's unfunny fantasy."

"What became of him?" Sandy said. The client, no longer in attendance. "Did he skip out?"

"Well," she said. She looked fresher, her eyes less sparkly. A tiny pearl of water remained on her chin. She touched it and smiled. She smelled of a cigarette. "The king of wishful thinking is no doubt in his Gulfstream flying back to Dallas. We had a disagreement. A small one."

They were side by side, talking like any two strangers waiting at a coat check, soon to be elsewhere. She carried no purse.

"This *is* a grand old barn, isn't it?" she said, looking around. She still smelled good. "Bell boys, escritoires, a cigar stand." She liked it.

"My father used to do his hijinks here," he said. "In the fifties."

There was the sudden quick intake of breath. "Hijinks," she said. "There's a useful word." Her eyes passed him. "What did he do?" She seemed to have found a way to be for now.

He should leave, he thought. He had—*they* had—other plans. His wife. Clancy's with old friends from Chicago. He understood that any time you were with Barbara a re-appraisal of life might be coming. It had been that way before but hadn't changed anything. Still. Wouldn't any woman wish to inspire that?

"Did you think," he said, "if you came to New Orleans you would just conjure me?"

Her eyes passed him again, came back and stopped. Her mouth made a tiny pucker. "Yes, well. Didn't I?"

"I suppose so," he said.

From outside on Royal Street, there was a large crowd noise. A whooping. A bass drum pounding very fast. The parade after the parade was approaching. That was all they would say about the past.

"Lay on, McGuinness, you dog," someone shouted across the lobby through the crowd. Coyle. "You've stolen all our fun." He was departing, also wearing a hat.

"Sorry," he said.

"Do you have time for a walk?" she whispered.

"You said it's too hot."

"It *is* rather unnatural, though, isn't it?" She put a fingertip to her chin where the water pearl had been but was gone. A bruise darkened the bony back of her left hand. It betrayed her.

"How'd you hurt that?"

She looked at her hand as if at a wristwatch. "It wasn't very hard."

"Did someone do it?" Possibly she'd fallen.

"Of course," she said and rounded her eyes in mock surprise. The revolving door whooshed with warm air and street noise. "Are we taking a walk?"

"If that's what you want."

"I'm a paying guest here," she said, pertaining to the hotel. She

looked around her again as if to admire everything. "I have a suite on a high floor. It's named for some writer I never heard of. I see the river."

He wondered—was he acting toward her now in a way he'd acted twenty-five years before? What would that way be? Awkward? Distant? Disapproving? Too infatuated? It hadn't been so satisfactory, then. Possibly there would be another way to act.

THEY EXITED OUT INTO ROYAL, WHERE THE SECOND-LINE HAD passed. Here was the breathless wall of early spring heat, the rich aroma of afternoon, the dregs of the day. A single white-faced clown came strutting along in big red shoes, stopping traffic, toting a tiny metal drum he tapped with a spoon. Nothing ever surprised. Sandy was instantly hot in his suit coat and took it off. They could walk to the river she could see from her room. Not a great distance even in the heat. The wind would be cool there. They were surprisingly together here, but not a couple.

They passed antique emporiums, a Walgreens, a famous restaurant, the Word Is Your Oyster book stall. Two large policemen on motorcycles, blue lights flashing, sat watching. Someone was smoking pot in a door entry. Bums drank wine on a curb. It was the French Quarter.

For a period they walked, and she did not speak, as if her mind had traveled away and become delighted. There was still the damp breeze and the late-day sun slanting between buildings. Her brown dress blew against her thighs.

They turned through an alley—a shortcut to the cathedral and the handsome square with the statue of the dubious president upon his rearing steed. She had a small, delicate limp, he noticed. Something she'd acquired. Though it might be the blue shoes.

"It doesn't seem real here," she proposed, like a new thought.

"Real?" he said, pretending to mock her, which he thought she would realize. Possibly Drown, the client, was waiting for her in the high-up room while this was going on. "I was born here," he said. "It's real enough."

"Why would you ever build a city here, though?" she said. "You always talked about it. Why is it good? Do you have to stay because you're from here?"

"More," he said.

"Yes, of course."

"Where do *you* live?" he said. It seemed preposterous to ask such a question. *And where do* you *live?* As if he might go there.

"In D.C.," she said as they continued on. "Just barely. I have a husband." A cigar shop was in the alley, also selling masks and pralines. "Oh, do. Buy a cigar," she suddenly said. "You always liked cigars, didn't you?" The store was closed, darkened.

"Wrong *you*," he said.

"Then buy me a wonderful mask, I adore masks." She laughed, forgetting about it. "Um-hmm." She was agreeing with something she was thinking. "I suppose there's a Mrs. Sandy."

His name spoken finally. He had not spoken hers. He was uncertain about it. "My wife," he said, not loud. "Priscilla."

She glanced at him. This brown dress had side pockets into which she put her hands as a gesture of acknowledgment. She had sweated little hemispheres beneath her arms, a shadow on the fabric. Not the right dress for now.

There was music in the park named for the spoiled president. Jackson. Street musicians were playing horns and pounding drums. People were dancing on the esplanade, sliding off to the side as the two of them passed. Others were having fortunes read under bright umbrellas in the late-day heat. The river was now very close,

its smell up and all around, a fragrance like fair taffy. They would go all the way to it and see across to Algiers. The great turn south. What ought they to be talking about in this small time life allowed?

"There's a very nice clothing store in town," she remarked unguardedly. "It's run by some very nice Lebanese. I visited it today. I bought this dress. Your wife probably shops there."

He did not remark. He was wondering if he had thought about her "a lot" in thirty-five years. In some unrealized way, it could be argued he had thought about her every single day. Though he'd thought about many other things as often. To be thinking about something didn't mean what people said it meant.

"What sort of law do you do?" She looked at him as if she sensed he might be suffering something. "*Do?* Do you say that? *Do* law?"

"Yes," he said. "Admiralty." He was sweating through his shirt. His tie was off and in his pocket. The breeze at the river would refresh everything. But not yet.

"Boats," she said to convey admiration.

"Supertankers," he said quickly. "Mostly insuring them, replacing them, selling them. Sometimes hauling them off the bottom."

"They all *want* a place to sink, don't they?"

"If I'm lucky," he said.

"Well, you *are,*" she said. "You *are* lucky. Look at you."

They were climbing the concrete steps that concluded at a promenade and the river. Three grinning black boys sashayed up beside them, from nowhere. Not threatening anyone, just playful. Tricking. "I know right where you got them shoes," one of the boys said—gone mischievous and smiling. It was their old trick. Which pleased her. She looked at them, delighted to be near them.

"On her feet," Sandy said to shoo them.

"Aww. Fo' sho," the boy who'd spoken said. "Where ya'll be from?" Letting them go past.

"Boudreau Parish," Sandy said. Their old Yat joke.

"I been *there*. I been *everywhere*," the boy said. They were talking and laughing as they sidled away to trick others.

THEY WERE AT THE GREAT RIVER NOW, WHERE THE AIR EXPANDED and went outward, floated up and away in a limitless moment before returning to the vast, curving, mythical, lusterless flood. The tumultuous bridges up and to the right. The tiny ferry—a speck midway to the other side. To Algiers. Not the real Algiers. A steadfast baking sweetness swirled landward. And a sound—not one you could hear—more a force like time or something enduring.

"Oh, *my*," she said, clasping her hands in front of her. Her bruise forgotten for now. From somewhere—from nowhere—he heard the riverboat calliope. *Grab your coat and get your hat, leave your worries on the doorstep*. He scarcely came here, but understood her. He thought of flying home from Iceland, across the snowy lobe of Greenland. He'd imagined then he'd be flying over many countries forever. But he hadn't. "It makes me want to cry," she said, wanting to seem—*to be*—rapt, transported, in awe. "It's so different than seeing it from my room. It has such volume." She smiled dreamily, let her gaze rise to the pale sky and south, where there were gulls, a pelican. Blackbirds. "Am I experiencing it correctly?" she asked. "I want to."

"It's all correct," he said, holding his hot coat over his arm.

"But there's a best right way." She again took the little abrupt breath in.

"I don't know," he said. "I've just always . . ."

"You've just always what?" Suddenly she was acute, as if he was mocking her again but in earnest. He wasn't.

"Always seen it," he said. "Seen it here. From when I was little."

She looked again at the brown, sliding surface as if she hungered for it. In the fractured, shadowless light, the diminished city behind them had ceased to be. She didn't look as pretty as in the hotel and seemed to sense that and not care what the cost would be. How many things did she not care a trifle about? When she was young it had been her great appeal—less than what she did care for. Now it made her seem rash. Again, he wondered—did *he* seem the same? "Oh," she said—just the next thing she thought. "It makes me want to kiss you. Sandy. May I kiss you now?" She turned, her eyes finding his face, as if he'd just arrived. Some other kind of not caring.

"Not here," holding his warm seersucker to his chest.

"So," she said, beginning immediately to walk, as if he had not disappointed her in the least. "What shall we do to take the place of kissing?" She would sober up now.

"We'll just walk along."

She nodded, "And so they continued to walk along."

THEY WALKED IN THE DIRECTION OF CANAL, AGAINST THE RIVER'S stirring flow—west or possibly south—along the promenade named for the famous mayor. Moon. In the watery late-day breeze a moon *was* visible—as if waiting, sharing no light with the sky. Taller, newer buildings were ahead—the less gaudy, business parts—where his office was. More tourists were present here. Bums, drinking and taking seats on the riprap, fished with poles in the tilting shallows. A great dark freighter seemed then to *appear*—from under

the bridges—drifting, yawing silently toward the great turn, attended by small boats. It mesmerized him even now. The incisiveness of navigation.

A tiny plane muttered overhead, not so high above the river's crown, trailing a banner, wishing all ashore *Happy St. Paddy's*. Some bar in the Quarter. Though it was days away, still.

"It must be nice to be Irish," she said, sounding disinclined—having not spoken in minutes as they walked. "Not to have to care about anything." A phone began ringing—more a humming, down in her dress pocket. She did not let on and presently it stopped. He felt relieved and wasn't sure why. Her limp had mostly disappeared.

"How do you make ends meet?" he said, a half step behind her in the warm, variable air, his voice hardly heard, conveying authority in that way.

"What are you asking me?" she said, casting smiling disapproval over her left shoulder, as if it pleased her to disapprove.

He'd asked but did not so much want to know. He'd been imagining if she'd kissed him, how it would've tasted. The anise. The tobacco. The lack of fervor. When she'd been young she'd been easily distracted. Slow to finish a meal. To dress herself. Slow to complete a sentence or to find her way to orgasm. He hadn't liked it. She only kept photographs of herself. One atop a dead giraffe she'd shot with her father in Africa. Another of her naked on a chenille bedspread—taken by a famous photographer whose name was lost.

"It was just idle," he said—regarding having asked what she did. Could she even have heard him with the hot-then-cool, metallic breeze blowing past and the thrust of the freighter completing the famous turn south? He might've asked about reading the sagas.

She'd altered her gait to be more carefree. The limp was gone

altogether. "Do you ask all the girls if they're whores? And do they all deny it. Or just me?"

"They all do," he said, accepting the joke she was permitting them. This sweetness had always been available. Not to take each other so seriously when they were being frank.

"Let's say—as my non-answer," she said, almost gaily, "let's say . . . ummm . . . What I do is, I'm not very adept at making friends of old lovers. They stay lovers, or I don't like them." She was still walking ahead. "And I was just thinking about arriving someplace. How much better it is than leaving. I was thinking of someplace else, not this lovely place beside the father of waters. I already said that, I think. But it *is* romantic that you would ask me how I got on."

They passed along now, still not quite a pair, not quite apart—he in his seersucker trousers and blue shirt, jacket in hand; she in her smart dress, tanned legs, tanned arms, and blue shoes, which needed to be Italian. She was sweating at her hairline from drinking. He considered touching her shoulder, coming beside her. He imagined her shoulder would be cool in the heat.

The business buildings had now come very close, no longer unimportant—crowding in. He could see the very tall one wherein was his office. A streetcar went by. The freighter had slid far past, given its deep tuba noise in triumph and disappeared toward the Gulf. The moving air had taken on a petroleum sting. It had to be six, the beginning of the evening in New Orleans, when shadows cooled into darkness. A small flotilla of green-headed ducks bobbed at the river's margin in the relaxed wake of the freighter. People—tourists—on park benches watched the two of them walking. A handsome couple always attracted withholding stares. *Look. Aren't they just wrong? We've been there. We've been everywhere.*

"How's your father?" he said, coming close now, smelling her. There'd been talk, once, that the two of them would meet. The father and the new boyfriend-of-the-moment. Would the father even be alive? His own was long gone. Though not his mother, alone in the big house on Philip Street, not far from where they were.

"Oh, Jules is fine," she said, as if the thought amused her. Or his asking. She let the back of her right hand—not the bruised one—whisper against his trousers' leg. They could not walk so much farther. Hotels and malls and the convention center lay ahead. "They're *both* above ground—at least today," she said. "Fancy young boys take my mother ballroom dancing and steal her money. Jules lives in the Locarno with his Peruvian wife, where he's writing a novel. Didn't you want to do that once? I remember you writing."

"Someone else again," he said.

"Did we not go to Hog Bay to visit him?"

"I don't remember," he said.

"Sure you do. *I* remember. He's built a school in Kenya. The Peruvian won't go near it." A pair of airedales took leave of their young owner and came toward them amiably to conduct an inspection. It was how things happened on the promenade. "Nice dogs," she said. "Sweet dogs." He had still not used her name. It made him feel as if some things were understood. Though she had used his. "Isn't it really hotter than it should be?" she said and fanned her hand.

"It's the tropics here," he said. "This is the way it is."

"It's never the way we want it, is it?" Words were missing again. He remembered how remote she could be just in an instant. The blunt turning away. It was something a cautious father would advocate. He had two daughters, himself. Seventeen and thirteen. Both had remoteness as an ally.

From away, from the narrow teeming streets of the old quarter, there was the sound of bagpipes again. The parade had made its way back down Chartres. They would miss it. Drums were pounding. Blue police lights flashing. "Ha. No bagpipes, please," she said. "It's far too late for that." It was another joke she knew.

"Are you still Barbara?" he said. Miss Nail. Alix. Who was she? He felt excluded for asking.

The airedales had followed them, their owner calling from behind. "Lulu and Gracie. Don't run away."

"*Oh,* yes," she said. "Barbara." She turned toward him in the midst of the now-more-crowded promenade. The river was a background photo. "Why?" She was radiant, as if she would quickly laugh. Her wonderful eyes.

"Just seems inevitable I should know." He remembered, or misremembered, that she'd been born in Kansas City. At least she'd said that years ago. It made as much sense as anything. Was *this* responding to her in a new way? "I remember you said, how good it was to be us."

"And you said I only meant how good it was to be *me*."

"Correct." And just as quickly they were having a small "word." In public. In view of others.

"Sometimes," she said, "I think about you. Not very often. In New York last summer, I saw a *you* crossing a wide street. An avenue. I couldn't get to you. Of course it wasn't."

He went to New York. He had someone there he saw. Not often. "Probably not," he said.

"I thought . . ." she said, but paused. Two people—kids—a girl and a boy passed by, both beautiful, both speaking French. *Mais, quand même, quand même.* She looked at them as if she understood their conversation, then realized she'd lost what she was about to say. It could've been the thing he wanted to know. What

she thought. "Maybe," she said, "it was *that* that brought me here now. Almost seeing you but not really." She brightly smiled. It may have been close to what she was about to declare. She seemed prepared to laugh again.

"I'm sure it was," he said.

"Would you go away with me?" she said. "I've never made anybody very happy. But I always thought I could make *you* happy—if I decided to. It'd be a challenge." Her smile was brilliant, no hint of sadness. "You look younger than I look."

"That's not true," he said.

"And I'd still like to kiss you." The dampened wind unsettled her hair. She gave her head a tiny shake that freshened her smile.

He stopped walking in order to take full enough notice of her. And to kiss her. Far beyond, in the city's cluster, the Monteleone sign sat atop its white rectangle. From any window someone would see the two of them. Anonymous but interpretable. Farther down the promenade, he spied the priest, in a new bright yellow shirt and jeans, seated on a bench beside a younger man.

He stepped close, put his hand where he'd wanted to put it—on her bare shoulder, where she was indeed unaccountably cold. "Yes," he said and kissed her, leaning in to her as she rose in her blue shoes to meet being kissed. She smelled sweet—the anise, vaguely of a cigarette.

LATER, AS THEY WALKED BACK DOWN INTO THE OLD STREETS, she became talkative, as if something—more than their kiss—had freed a spirit in her, and they were together as they once had almost been. In Iceland. He'd begun thinking rather freely of his old law-school professor who'd died young. He'd been the adored and constant focus of everyone's attention, admiration, interest. Though in

almost no time, people stopped talking about him. Professor Lesher. He'd had the terrible nervous tic. Was brilliant. Briefly, then, he'd thought of his father, who'd left the family and, if truth were told, never came back; lived his life in other cities, with other people. A great error. Though then the wound closes.

"What's happened to you, Sandy?" Barbara said. "What would you say the outcome's been?" She'd forgotten about asking him to go away with her. They were on Iberville Street, nearing the corner where they'd begun. The storied old pile where she was a guest.

"I'm not that kind of lawyer," he said, knowing this wasn't her question nor the answer to any question. "We try to avoid outcomes if we can."

"My view is . . ." she said quickly, holding his arm. She'd stumbled on a broken paving, scuffed her knee, ruined her pretty shoe. He had his coat on again. Not his tie. "*You,* in particular, try very hard to be complicated. While *I* try very hard to be simple." She pressed close in against his arm, as if for protection. It was not easy now to walk in her shoes. Though you wouldn't walk barefoot in the French Quarter. When she'd regained her room (if there *was* a room), she'd put these shoes in the trash. "You have a bull's-eye tattooed on your heart," she said. "It's not complicated."

"I disagree," he said. It wasn't true.

"Would you like to make love to me," she said altogether casually. There was the calliope starting once more, behind them at the river. Some Beatles' song he couldn't remember the name of.

"Of course," he said.

"All those things I taught you. They get practiced on someone else, I suppose." She was just going on. She again made her quick little gasp of breath.

They had come to the revolving door, where they'd stepped out into the heat an hour ago or less. The big, blue-uniformed doorman,

with gold braid and epaulettes, stepped forward, smiling, pushing the doors along. "All right, all right." A rush of cold air escaped. Inside, the lobby was crowded still, and bright with people milling and loudly singing. All the things she'd taught him was a far too dense subject to commence now, though she had never made him happy or tried to. For him, the same. He had merely, briefly, almost loved her quite a long time ago.

He stood out of her way, touched her shoulder again as she left his arm. He had said her name once but did not say it again. "Some other time," she said, somewhat unsteadily, the glass doors turning. She had meant possibly something else. Though anything she said now would do.

"Yes," he said, as she went in through the circling doors, and he turned for his walk—not so far—up Canal.

ON THE DRIVE UPTOWN, WHERE HE WAS MEETING HIS WIFE AND others—he would be late—he entertained another thought regarding his father. He'd last visited him in the handsome house his father had purchased on Lakeview, on the near north side of Chicago—there, with his new wife Irma. His father had fancied one of the old stepped brownstones. A bay window and an oriel with stained glass. It was October. The lindens and beeches were in their array across the park. His father was by then representing an Irish firm that made kitchen ceramics. He'd had enough of lawyering. He would live two more years and die climbing steps into an airplane. Completely happy.

"I couldn't live in that city one more minute," his father had said, meaning New Orleans. "It wasn't your mother's fault. There was no Irma then. We just had nothing more to say to each other, hadn't in years. Yes, I know. So what? But. I just became . . . what's

the word . . . *de-fascinated*. It won't make sense to you. I hope it never does."

He had flown up to see his father on family business. The estate. The changed will. How his mother, the spurned wife, was being looked after. His father had maintained a diligence, but now wished unexpectedly for a hearing. He was tall and bright-eyed and smooth-faced. Spirited and utterly deceptive. He had been a judge, a king of Comus. Was a grandee. "There's entirely too much self-congratulation in the world now, just for doing what you're supposed to do," his father had said and stepped to the curving bay window, the leaded panes separating red from green from yellow from blue. He stood looking down into the leafy street as if something in it interested him. "I no longer experience self-congratulation," he said. "Nothing's worth being proud of. You *must* guard against it. It's not the worst human flaw, but it *is* the most self-deluding and painful."

"Yes," Sandy said. "I will. I understand." He thought he did.

Which was the last subject they'd talked about. His father was a man of large pronouncements and hard lessons boisterously learned. This was all the hearing he wished for. Later, he'd realized his father was only thinking about seeing after his abandoned wife, for which he wanted no particular recognition. It was all quite irrelevant. Though for an instant, when he'd thought he understood, it had seemed his father had been talking about some question or act of great consequence. It hadn't been true.

He'd recall this conversation at the most unexpected moments, as now, when he might've expected to entertain other, onward thoughts—the dinner he was soon to have. His wife, with whom he would have it. The anticipated, colorful, meticulously rehearsed affairs of her day. This last hour—this barely-achieved time with Barbara—would *not* be rehearsed. There had been little or no con-

sequence or outcomes to think about. Nothing had been harmed, no one disappointed. He would simply not see her again. Which by itself conferred a small—what was it? Possibly like a trust, but not quite. As his father had said, we have little to pride ourselves in. Which argued for nothing in particular, yet would allow a seamless carrying forward into the evening now, and the countless evenings that remained.