

Winter Honeymoon

..... *Stories*

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Rosalie & Kaely

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Winter Honeymoon

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During the final weeks of her husband's illness, Edith befriended the demented priest in the neighboring bed. Father Petrica was a cheerful, silver-haired man in his early sixties who spoke seven different languages with a thick Romanian accent. He'd fallen from a stepstool while changing a light bulb, fracturing ribs, vertebrae, both collarbones; later his brain swelled, unmooring his memories and inhibitions. Then kidney failure, skin infections, an amputated foot. The man stumbled from one setback to another, but courageously, like an imperial army in retreat. By the time Edith started reading aloud to him from Raymond Chandler novels, while Simon was away being MRI-ed and CT-scanned and surgically explored, the priest was innocently sharing tidbits collected over three decades behind the confessional.

One afternoon, Father Petrica proposed that they elope to Puerto Vallarta. "What do you say?" he asked. "We'll be just like Richard Burton and what's her name . . ."

"Elizabeth Taylor," said Edith.

"That's right. Only she'll never hold a candle to you."

He clasped her left hand in both of his, and belted out *That's Amore*, surprisingly on key, but broke down coughing halfway through the second verse. Edith poured him a cup of water from a plastic bottle.

"I'm flattered," she said. "Really. But aren't you forgetting that you're a priest?"

"*I'm a priest?*" asked the priest. He grinned impishly, as though he had been the victim of a practical joke. "You are pulling me by the tail."

"*You're a priest and I'm a married woman, as was Elizabeth Taylor when Richard Burton courted her.*" Edith spoke in the same firm-but-loving tone that she used to warn her second graders against stockpiling tree branches during recess. "I'm not even Catholic."

The priest digested this information. His large, genial features looked suddenly wistful. "So no Mexico?"

"I'm afraid not," said Edith.

She noticed the whiteboard sign beside Petrica's telephone: *GOOD MORNING. TODAY IS TUESDAY, JANUARY 18th.* It was actually Thursday, January 20th. Beyond Simon's empty bed, Edith could see jagged patches of ice on the Hudson River and New Jersey's snow-streaked cliffs. The priest swallowed the last of his water. He asked, "Do you regret anything?"

What a question! Who didn't have regrets at fifty-nine? But she wondered if her companion sensed something deeper, more personal, his insights growing clearer as his body withered. More likely, he was jabbing into the darkness like a fortuneteller. Or he wanted her confession: To hear her admit that she couldn't think of anything she *didn't* regret. Anything! Because she'd known from the outset that she'd married the wrong man—and now that she loved him anyway, he was mustering up the nerve to die on her.

"I have regrets," said Father Petrica. "I should have been Pope."

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Five weeks later, she received the card from Kenneth, as she'd somehow known she would, and two days after that, Edith was

driving up the New England coast toward Creve Coeur, Rhode Island. The morning was bright and cold. Through the naked trees flanking the highway, you could see swing sets and patios. She wondered which came first: the interstate or the houses. And had other families been uprooted to clear the route? More and more frequently, ever since her husband's diagnosis, Edith found herself searching for obliterated histories in familiar places. She'd telephoned the oldest alumna of the elementary school to learn what second grade had been like during World War I. She'd searched the archive at the New York Public Library for early images of their apartment building. Simon had been glad to see her busy. If her husband had owned one of those exposed homes, Edith reflected, he'd have put up a fence.

Kenneth had read Simon's obituary in the *Times*. The paper of record. The same paper that had once declined her wedding announcement. So this was a victory for Simon, she supposed, these two final columns above the fold. When you catalogued his achievements like that—all those honorary degrees, cardiology publications, celebrity patients—her late husband's life sounded so astonishingly impressive. Of course, someday Kenneth's death would make front pages across the country. Which was a truly morbid thing to be thinking. Yet here she was thinking it.

Edith stopped at the new welcome center just across the Connecticut border. A busload of Asian tourists had pulled in ahead of her, so she thumbed through the free brochures while she waited for the ladies' room. Inevitably, there was a flyer for Little Europa: "See the great cities of the world without leaving Rhode Island." The photo showed St. Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace constructed from thimbles, foreign coins and laminated candy bar wrappers. Edith had visited the real Venice twice, accompanying Simon to medical conferences, but she'd seen

Kenneth's replicas only on postcards at the Museum of Modern Art. She'd purchased the complete set.

Since her parents had passed on, she'd returned to Creve Coeur just once. Yet she had little trouble finding Kenneth's quirky masterpiece, following roadside cutouts of the Arc de Triomphe to what had once been known as Tanner's Hill, the seat of a thriving, nineteenth century trade in leather goods. During Edith's girlhood, the neighborhood—like the much of the city—had incrementally depopulated. What had been a whaling hub, and then the continent's ladies' boot manufacturing capital, became the moribund ghost city that her father had dubbed: "New Haven without a college." But now Kenneth's odd creations drew tens of thousands of visitors.

From the steep, tortuous driveway, climbing between vacant, red-brick warehouses, you could make out a few landmarks above the distant evergreen hedge: the famed soup-can tower of Pisa, the domes of the Kremlin, turrets that might belong to Aswan or Istanbul. Even on a chilly weekday afternoon, the parking lot was packed. Edith followed a slate path around a miniature Taj Mahal and past a bustling gift shop to a one-story, wood-frame office that smelled artificially of pine. Beside the plastered-in fireplace, on a wicker rocking chair, dozed the fattest Siamese cat that Edith had ever encountered. Framed posters for *It's A Wonderful Life* and *The Wizard of Oz* hung over the mantle. The pudgy girl behind the counter was speaking on the phone, what sounded like an argument with her boyfriend over the cost of new muffler. She pressed the receiver against her shoulder and looked up at Edith impatiently.

"I'm hoping to see Mr. Wondra," said Edith.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Not exactly," said Edith. "But—" But what? But I'm the woman who didn't marry him thirty-five years ago, so he'll want to see me?

She didn't even know whether Kenneth had a wife, a family. "We're old friends. We went to grade school together."

"Mr. Wondra's not here today," said the girl. "He works at home."

"I drove all the way from New York. Can you call him?"

The girl didn't acknowledge the request overtly. She told her boyfriend she'd phone him back and then asked for Edith's name. Edith gently shook the cat from the chair and settled down to wait, wondering how she'd ever become so pushy.

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Happiness requires flexibility, Edith knew. Not lowered expectations, but malleable ones. Intransigence is what hardens arteries and souls.

The last time she'd seen Kenneth, other than on a PBS documentary, Richard Nixon had been President. Her parents had still been alive. Sissy Collins, a girl in her freshman dormitory at Barnard, had just been killed in a skiing mishap—and, at the time, *that* had seemed like the end of the world. Oh, Sissy Collins! Who wrote a mildly salacious weekly column for the *Barnard Bulletin* and had dreamed of becoming the next Hedda Hopper. When did Edith ever think about her now? But during that long-lost weekend in early December, after Kenneth had hitchhiked down from Creve Coeur on the back of a truck hauling Christmas trees, Sissy's death had crept into every conversation as a frigid draught slinks around panes of glass. Edith hadn't known anyone her own age who'd died before. Not well. Her classmate's accident was her first warning that life, for all its pleasures, was inherently unreasonable.

She'd taken Kenneth to the cozy Greek pastry shop across from the Episcopal Cathedral, where the one-eyed proprietor served tiny glasses of mint liqueur alongside the coffee, and an

obese Romanian woman offered to interpret the grinds for two dollars. Kenneth ducked outside while Edith wavered between the amygdalopita and the baklava, and he returned with a red beauty rose from the corner florist. She doubted he'd actually paid for the flower—but that was a pointless conversation. She peeled the thorns off the stem and watched the restaurant reflected through the long salon mirror. How wondrous Kenneth looked with his enormous sculptor's hands and adorably asymmetrical ears! She felt like a mason about to carve into stone.

"Why not?" he asked—picking up a thread of their earlier conversation. "Look at it objectively, Edie. You can learn more hanging out in Europe for one day than in four years of college."

Edith trailed her fork aimlessly over the crust of the baklava. "They don't give you a diploma for hanging out in Europe."

"What's that supposed to mean?" snapped Kenneth.

Kenneth had put off college. He'd tossed his draft card over the railing of the Narragansett ferry. He was living rent-free above his father's dental office, in a semi-furnished room, selling hand-whittled wax and soap sculptures at the farmers' market for spending money. Now his plan was to slum across Europe, crashing with fellow "folk artists." He rolled a cigarette and blew a perfect loop of smoke.

"Look, I've met someone," said Edith—surprising herself. "Someone else."

"You've got to be kidding me."

Kenneth glared at her as though she'd harpooned him. Then he slammed his fist into the wooden tabletop, shaking the porcelain sugar bowl and the creamer.

"Please don't get angry," begged Edith.

"What do you want me to do? Dance in the fucking streets?"

She glanced at the neighboring tables, fearful that she was

provoking a scene. But the couples surrounding them—graduate students and their hangers-on, in various states of self-absorption and dishevelment—hardly took notice. “What I want,” said Edith, “is for you to go to college . . . or get a job . . . or join the war protestors, for heaven’s sake. Do you know how it feels when I tell people my boyfriend carves candles for a living?”

“Let me guess. Lover-boy is President of General Motors.”

The truth was she’d only gone out with Simon three times. He was a medical student at Cornell, a nephew of a physics professor she typed letters for, and on their first date he’d entertained her with a list of amusing things that doctors had allegedly written on hospital charts: “The patient has no previous history of suicides”; “Examination of genitalia revealed that he is circus sized”; “A full pelvic exam will be done later on the floor.” These were probably apocryphal—like the errors school children purportedly made on standardized exams—but they were funny nonetheless.

“Please don’t make a big deal of this,” she pleaded, retreating. “I don’t know if it’s anything. I don’t even know if I like him.”

“You *don’t* like him,” said Kenneth. “You just *think* you like him.”

“That’s not fair,” said Edith.

“I know you better than you do, Edie Moss.” Kenneth grinned bitterly. “You’ll probably marry Lover-boy just to spite me.”

They’d walked back to her dormitory in silence, across the gray shadows of the Columbia campus, and then they’d argued bitterly until nearly dawn—so bitterly, that on his way through the foyer, Kenneth piled all of her footwear into a paper shopping bag and stormed out of the building. He’d even included her bath slippers and her ice skates.

He sent them back to her, two weeks later, by express mail. The package arrived the same afternoon that she announced her engagement to Simon.

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Now what struck Edith first was how right Kenneth looked. How calm. As though sixty had always been his internal age, and his body had finally caught up. He was wearing a plaid shirt under his denim jacket and a knitted orange cap; his full auburn beard had gone silver at the fringes like the mane of an aging lion. But he was as tall and imposing as ever, not prematurely diminished as Simon had become. She'd nearly forgotten that Kenneth had to duck under low entryways.

He pulled the door shut behind him, jangling a tiny bell.

"Edie," he said. "Edie Moss."

"Edie Kindler," she said reflexively—regretting the words as she spoke them.

"Obviously," agreed Kenneth. "Edie Kindler."

He walked to the counter and deposited a stack of letters in front of the pudgy girl. "I'm going to give Mrs. Kindler a guided tour. Can you phone Becky and let her know I won't be back until late?" Then he turned toward Edith and explained, although explanation was unnecessary: "My niece is staying with me. Gloria's step-daughter. She's taking a year off before art school." He reached forward, as if he might stroke her hair, but it was only to retrieve a scarf from the hook above the rocker. "If I'd known you were coming..."

What? Edith wondered. *What would you have done if you'd known I was coming?* Probably nothing different. And how did little "Morning Glory" Wondra ever end up with a college-age girl of her own? The idea of other women having children left a vinegary taste in Edith's mouth.

"Let's go see the sights," suggested Kenneth. "Just don't blow my cover."

"You mean you won't get recognized?"

“I sure hope not. There’s a reason my picture’s not on the brochures.”

He held the door open for her and followed her into the nipping chill. They walked side by side up the slate path, like a married couple. Between the parapets of Machu Picchu. Beyond Stonehenge and Tintern Abbey and Córdoba with its linoleum bridges and corrugated aluminum mosque. “The fountains are fully functional,” observed Kenneth, “but we shut them off for the winter.” He gently took hold of her elbow, to steer her through a vine-wrapped arbor, and did not let go. She stole a glimpse of his left hand. There were no rings.

“I can’t begin to express how impressive this all is,” said Edith.

“Thank you,” answered Kenneth. Not a hint of false modesty, just the candor of a man confident enough to accept a compliment. “It took a while, but I’m glad I did it.”

“I am too,” said Edith.

He glanced at her inquisitively. “Let’s avoid Italy and take the back stairs up to the mountains,” he proposed.

Kenneth unlocked a wrought iron gate and they climbed a steep concrete staircase that rose along the perimeter of the exhibits. A waterproof emerald canopy sheltered the path. You could hear the sightseers on the other side of the mesh, but you couldn’t see them. As the trail narrowed, the two of them were forced to walk single file. Through a minefield of folded sawhorses, coiled garden hoses, buckets of grout stacked pyramidally like acrobats. It reminded Edith of the time Simon had arranged a heart transplant for the chief keeper at the Bronx Zoo, and they’d received a private, off-hours tour. “There’s this guy in Japan, trained as an industrial welder, who’s doing the same thing inside suitcases,” said Kenneth. “It’s called Portable Cities. You open your valise and out jumps Angkor Wat or the Great Wall of China.”

“Like a pop-up book,” said Edith.

At the top landing, Kenneth unlocked a second gate. They stood opposite two snow-covered peaks. "That's the Matterhorn. This here's Mount Blanc. Straight out of a Shelley poem. The snow is shaved fiberglass from indoor swimming pools," said Kenneth. "I bet you never thought you'd see the Alps and the Andes in the same afternoon."

Edith hadn't read a Romantic poem since Barnard. To her, Mount Blanc meant pens. "This is like being on a honeymoon," she said. "A magical honeymoon."

At that moment, a mousy, henna-haired woman approached them and asked if Kenneth would mind photographing her in front of the Riffelsee. For her nephew in Switzerland. "When I was in Vegas," she said, "I had my picture taken outside the Luxor and sent it to my nephew in Cairo. My other nephew." The woman was about Edith's age and apparently travelling alone. Kenneth snapped a photo. And then a second *to be certain*. He returned the camera to the mousy woman and urged her to keep warm.

"That's my favorite part," said Kenneth. "She'll see my picture someday and she'll realize who I was. I tell you, Edie, it's a strange world."

Something in Kenneth's tone suggested intimacy, an acknowledgement that they were more than merely two old friends sharing a visit. Edith said nothing.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "I was just thinking of Sissy Collins."

Kenneth smiled sympathetically, but without recognition.

"The girl in my dorm who was killed in the skiing accident. *From Barnard*. Do you still remember that?"

"Maybe. Vaguely," said Kenneth. "This probably goes without saying, but I'm really sorry about Simon. Sincerely, I am."

"Of course, you are."

"I never thought I'd say that," added Kenneth. "But I am."

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The rabbi at the cemetery had asked her about Simon's life. They weren't at all religious, but they owned plots in a Jewish memorial park, the third generation of Kindlers to be eternally ensconced in suburban New Jersey, so twenty minutes of Rabbi Gershon's graveside blather were included with the casket and the hearse. The girl must have been fresh out of the seminary. She was so nervous, so stiff. Edith felt genuinely sorry for her. But even that couldn't prevent her from answering the girl's prescribed questions with a dash of astringent humor.

"What made Dr. Kindler a righteous soul?" the rabbi asked.

"I suppose *I* did," Edith answered, "on good days."

This obviously wasn't what the young rabbi had meant. "Let me ask that a different way. What was it about Dr. Kindler that made you love him?"

Edith almost blurted out: *Because he was good in the sack*. Which was true, but not the reason she loved him. Nor was it his patience, his decency, his ability to keep calm under pressure. Not even his dry wit, how he playfully included a slice of pastrami among the medical students' pathology samples in order to keep them on their toes. These were the qualities that made her *like* Simon. But loving was something different. Maybe what it came down to was how vulnerable he'd looked lying there in bed beside her each night—the way, at the hospital, he could supervise two dozen residents, and perform fifty angioplasties a week, and deliver off-the-cuff lectures before audiences of three hundred specialists, but in bed, when he shut his eyes and sank into the pillows, he was as powerless and as exposed as a blind baby kitten. Maybe that was also why she loved her second graders. Because she could protect them—at least for the briefest interval. Was this what really held together their marriage? The knowledge that if not for her vigilance, a late-night prowler might have crushed Simon's skull

with a rolling pin. Quite possibly. But this was not the sort of soul-baring insight one offered a rabbi before a funeral.

“Can I ask you something?” asked Edith.

“Please,” said the rabbi. “Ask anything.”

“Don’t you think it’s peculiar that people live entirely secular lives and still get buried in religiously segregated cemeteries?”

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“I thought about asking her whether it was to help God sort the saved from the damned,” Edith mused, “but I was already giving her such a hard time.”

They were arm-in-arm again. Somewhere in Scandinavia.

“Death is an odd business,” Kenneth answered. “Death and love. The great cosmic mysteries.”

“Don’t forget art,” said Edith. “Surely that must be a cosmic mystery.”

“Art? Maybe for Vermeer. What I do is a lot more like shoveling snow.”

Edith laughed at that. Because she knew he wasn’t joking. Because living in Manhattan, she’d forgotten all about shoveling snow. Strolling with Kenneth made her feel carefree for the first time since Simon’s diagnosis, maybe even long before that. As though she were on vacation in *fin-de-siècle* Paris.

“Nobody believes me when I tell them that,” he said.

“I believe you.”

They’d reached the frontiers of the park—where a man-made stream flowed miraculously out of the rockface. It was the same channel that fed the Rhine and the Danube and the Volga. The water descended through tiered pools, in which moorhens and mergansers and a solitary Canada goose sunned themselves. From the far bank, a raggedy squirrel eyed Edith suspiciously. Kenneth

pointed out a swan nesting behind a concrete dam. If Kenneth had tried to kiss her, she would have let him. Instead, he said, “You haven’t asked me why I’ve built this. *Everyone* asks me that.”

The notion swept Edith’s mind that he’d created this monument entirely for her. As a shrine to lost love. “Okay. Why did you build it?” she asked coyly.

“I have no clue. None at all,” Kenneth answered. “I used to tell people that it was the poor man’s grand tour. A way for working class stiffs to experience all the sights they’d never see in person. But that was just Marxist bullshit. It sounded good. Between you, me and the wind, Edie Kindler, I’ve devoted my entire life to this project and I don’t have the foggiest idea of why. Sounds pretty far-fetched, doesn’t it?”

“But you’re happy?”

They started walking again. “Yes, I *am* happy. Are you? I mean, other than . . .”

“Other than *that*, Mrs. Lincoln,” said Edith, “how did you enjoy the play?”

The breeze picked up. She placed her hand in the pocket of his jacket, like she’d done when they went steady in high school; he didn’t object. Inside, her fingers found a workman’s pencil and a small polished stone.

“I’m on family leave this semester. There are days when I miss the children even more than I miss Simon. They’ll be doing their winter dioramas right about now.” Edith’s eyes grew moist: a flood of present sorrow and cold air and long-sought relief. “Can we see Paris?” she asked impulsively. But the question held more weight than she’d intended, as though she’d actually proposed a trip to another continent.

“Do you *really* want to see Paris?” Kenneth sounded disappointed.

“Is that all right?”

“Paris will be crawling with teenage couples and French Canadians on their second honeymoons. How about Mexico? You’ll like it much more.”

Something in Kenneth’s tone irked her. That he would still try to reshape her, even now. Soon the roof combs of the Mayan temples rose into view, but she had little desire to see them.

“A man once asked me to run off to Mexico with him,” she said.

“I’m not the slightest bit surprised,” said Kenneth. “You’re a beautiful woman. I imagine you’ve had your share of offers over the years.”

Edith sensed he’d retreated—maybe taking a cue. In his compliment hung a forced indifference that diminished their own lost romance.

“A few,” she said. “Not as many as you think.”

The truth was there had only been one.

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The first postcard had been waiting for her after her honeymoon. They’d spent the week in Cape May, New Jersey, because Simon couldn’t afford to get away for longer. To her husband, it was so cut-and-dried: Why spent six days in Hawaii when someday they could spend six weeks there? And he’d kept his promise. For their thirtieth anniversary, he’d arranged a two month visiting professorship in Honolulu. But returning home to Kenneth’s memento from Lisbon left Edith enraged—at both the man she’d married and at the man she hadn’t. The card showed an interior view of the cloisters at the Jerónimos Monastery, the sort of free postcard that advertised a youth hostel across the front. Next came a triangular card from the Basque Country. Later more cards from Brittany, Liege, Hamburg. For a while, she’d feared Kenneth was traveling solely for the purpose of sending her mail. But the notes were brief,

innocuous. Even the aerograms from Warsaw and Gdansk were so extravagantly bland that they must have confounded the Polish censors. Simon took no interest in these notes; he was neither jealous nor intrusive. At first, Edith thought them threatening. But after the first six months or so, she found herself taking an odd comfort in their consistency. What did she have to be afraid of? She was married, wasn't she? That ought to be armor enough.

But then Kenneth returned to Rhode Island. He sent her a kind note when her father died, a longer letter when her mother passed on. With the letter, he included a clipping from the *Creve Coeur Courant* about his exhibit, "Little London and Petit Paris." This was during one of the frostiest patches in Edith's marriage, when Simon traveled constantly, and her body started telling her what the endocrinologists would later confirm—that she would never have her own children. So when Kenneth phoned one Sunday afternoon while Simon was in Little Rock, addressing the annual convention of the Arkansas Hypertension Association, it was Edith who suggested the rendezvous. Coffee, she'd said. A chance to catch up. Whether she'd intended more, she wasn't certain. But she never mentioned her plans to Simon.

They'd chosen the following Saturday. That was after her parent-teacher conferences were done, before Kenneth's impending two-month trip to South America. A crisp, sunny afternoon in late October. Simon would be 30,000 feet over the Rust Belt on his way to a weekend conference at the Mayo Clinic, while Edith cruised up the New England coast in her husband's sporty new Saab, feeling as though she were driving a stolen vehicle. She'd seen Simon to the door that morning, reminded him to request his frequent flyer miles. A cop in Branford, Connecticut, pulled her over for passing illegally on the right—but let her escape *just his once* with a warning. She turned onto High Street, across from the Clam & Oyster, at twenty minutes to twelve.

She'd met Kenneth at the Clam & Oyster a thousand times before. It was a cozy, dimly-lit pub that sold coffee and cold sandwiches on weekend afternoons. But no shellfish. The proprietor's father had served six years in the navy. On shore leave in Liverpool, he'd come across a bar with the same name, and brought it back with him. "And that joint didn't serve seafood either," the old salt liked to say. "Guy who owned the place was named Clam—Bert Clam—and he made up Oyster for a partner." Edith peered through the plate glass. They'd put in new booths along the far wall, and broad wooden ceiling fans, but the menu hadn't changed. Nor had the woman behind the counter. She'd been a few years ahead of Edith at Chafee High School. Now she must have been close to forty. While Edith had gone off to college in New York City and married Simon, this girl—Carol or Cheryl—had stayed right where she was.

The restaurant was nearly empty. The proprietor, his formerly salt-and-pepper hair dyed jet-black, wandered from vacant booth to vacant both, lighting candles. A Rheingold clock hung above the bar, perpetually frozen at ten past two.

The counter girl offered Edith a table, but she said no. Somehow, the thought of sitting alone made her feel claustrophobic—as though she might order a soft drink and then be trapped at her perch for hours. She preferred the sidewalk, where she could window-shop and peruse the flyers stapled to the telephone poles. *Discount acupuncture. Discount piano lessons. A rally to free Rhode Island's political prisoners.* Also many rusted staples attached to nothing, a reminder of life's missed opportunities. Gulls circled overhead. A taxicab honked for a late fare. The stench of the ocean rose from the Portuguese fish market. Soon, Edith's fingers grew cold and she decided to wait for Kenneth inside the car.

He arrived at exactly twelve o'clock and peered for her through the Clam & Oyster's front window, then enjoyed a cigarette on the

sidewalk. Edith waved from the far side of the narrow street—a spontaneous impulse—but quickly realized that he couldn't see her through the Saab's tinted glass. And this relieved her, in some inexplicable way, knowing that she hadn't yet committed herself. What she didn't do next was to get out of the vehicle and announce her presence. Instead, she waited and watched. After a second smoke, Kenneth went into the restaurant. He chatted briefly with the counter girl, probably asking after Edith, and took a table by the juke box.

Kenneth waited another three hours. Chain smoking, reading. Edith could just make out the word BOLIVIA printed across the front of his book. When the happy hour crowd straggled in, he ordered a cup of coffee and a sandwich. And then he departed. She caught the look on his face as he crossed back up the block toward the bus stop. He did not appear heartbroken, merely displeased. Like a man served the wrong meal in a restaurant.

Edith sobbed all the way home. On the outskirts of the city, she turned on the radio news—suddenly, irrationally convinced that Simon's plane had crashed into an Iowa cornfield, and that she had been left all alone.

After that, there were no more postcards from Kenneth. No more phone calls. Nothing. And then one day, one year, she was deeply in love with her husband, and the thought that Kenneth might call sent a nervous chill across her flesh.

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"He died," Edith said sharply. "The friend who invited me to Puerto Vallarta died. A few days before Simon."

"Puerto Vallarta is a stunning city," Kenneth answered. "Let me show you."

He placed his arm gently on her back and led her forward. She felt a surge of unreasonable anger toward him. She considered

asking why he hadn't come searching for her that day—why he hadn't phoned her in New York City? She might have skidded off the highway and been dead in a ditch! But why go into that now?

"My friend fell off a goddam ladder," said Edith. "Sixty-two years old."

"You've had a hard run of it," Kenneth said. "You know, Edie, I've thought about you many times over the years. Don't think I haven't."

"I don't know what to think," she said.

Her tone was unkind, and he said no more.

They walked a good distance farther in complete silence. Eventually, they arrived at a small coastal village shielded by coconut palms. The trees were fashioned from men's pocket combs, the fruit from hacky-sacks and stuffed baby booties. Puerto Vallarta. Kenneth's hallmark of obsessive care was apparent in the individual, hand-wrought planks along the boardwalk, and the tiny cocktail olives in the sunset-bar drinks, and the fine exterior stairs circling the spires of Our Lady of Guadeloupe. A miniature *Love Boat* sat at anchor in the harbor. Kenneth used a broken stick to indicate the colonial-style villa on Gringo Gulch, Casa Kimberley, where Richard Burton had seduced Elizabeth Taylor while she was still married to Eddie Fisher. Edith felt like a tourist and was seized with a desire to return home.

She glanced at her watch. "I'd best get going soon," she said. "Otherwise, I'll get caught in traffic."

He nodded. "Already?"

"Thank you for the tour," Edith said.

That sounded so formal. But she didn't know what else to say. The regrets and hopes she had planned to share with Kenneth, this parallel world avoided for half a lifetime and then suddenly craved, had just as suddenly crumbled—like an ancient relic preserved for

centuries that falls to dust upon the first human touch. She was already thinking about her second graders, about how Simon would not sleep next to her that night, about how she might take over his garden in the coming spring, stoically tending his daylilies and his peonies. She was already thinking about the long ride home.

Kenneth walked her to the parking lot through the main gate and they hugged briefly. Like dear old friends. If he'd squeezed her longer, she might have held on, in spite of everything. But he didn't. Neither of them did.