

Greeting

My story, which is not mine alone, but also that of a far finer spirit, takes place in 1984. As those of you alive at the time will surely remember, this was the most important year in the realm of the literary imagination since the death of God. The reason was, of course, Mr. George Orwell's notoriously unreadable, *1984*, which warned of society's descent into an authoritarian hell, reeking of cabbage and old rag mats.

For decades, critics had bestowed upon Mr. Orwell's arbitrarily chosen title a profound significance, and so when the actual year finally arrived it was greeted with a collective exhalation of very bad breath. Sleeves were rolled up and typewriters shaken free of tobacco ash. In every periodical and newspaper, the novel was discussed, dissected, and reassessed. On television, pundits scoured the cultural landscape for any sign of Big Brother -- a bootprint, a mustache hair, even a stray lump of scat. By spring, sales of *1984* had reached fifty thousand copies a day.

Of course, none of this meant anything. (So little truly signifies in the realm of the literary imagination.) For most people, 1984 was just another year: a ribbon of time marked by a seam or two -- a birth, a divorce, a slow, stinky death - - and as soon as it had passed it was all but entirely forgotten.

But I confess I am not most people.

For better or worse, 1984 changed me into something that quite closely resembles a human being.

-- B.K. Troop

January

On Sunday, January 1, 1984, Manhattan awoke to find itself buried under a cliché -- a blanket of white. For the next few hours, before a million tires got hold of it, the streets of the City would look, dare I say it, almost pretty. I had a mad whim to fling myself facedown in Times Square and execute a flabby snow angel, but I resisted the temptation and set myself to the matter at hand -- boxing up my life. The moving van was set to arrive at noon.

Packing was no small task. I had lived in that basement apartment for the past twenty-three years and had picked up, in that time, a vast embarrassment of rare and beautiful objects. If the choice had been mine, I would certainly have avoided this day forever, but, just a week before, my beloved friend and landlady, Sasha Buchwitz, had nudged me awake with the imaginary handle of an imaginary hatchet, explaining that Satan was standing naked on her fire escape, demanding that she cut off my head. (Hers had been a spirited twenty-year battle with paranoid schizophrenia and clinical depression; she was losing.) I scampered out the very next morning and, greasing a few palms, secured for myself a one-bedroom apartment in a tenement just a few blocks away.

The doorbell rang as I taped shut the final box. I stood by with pride and watched as my life was whisked away on the shoulders of giants. The transition went off without a hitch -- save for the queasy glare I was thrown by one of the removalists (a strapping, high-buttocked Dominican named Santos) in reply to my suggestion that he help christen my new digs by spending the night. His colleagues dragged him away by the elbows, and I set to work.

Sixteen hours later, just after cock's crow, I slid the last of my vast antiquarian library into its alphabetized place. What had once been an empty apartment was now a home. As I had yet to sleep a wink and am highly allergic to dust mites, I descended to the street, lost in a bleary, malevolent haze. My goal, a

Denver omelet and Bloody Mary at my beloved Parnassus Diner, followed by a twelve-hour snooze.

I little suspected what the Fates held in store.

We nearly collided as he ran up the marble steps three at a time. He was of medium height with longish black hair and equally dark eyes. His head was large, well-shaped. Our conversation was limited. "Oh, excuse me," we both said as we passed. It was only I, however, who glanced around for a peek -- he was slender and strong all over. The fact that he did nothing to confirm that I was flagrantly *neither* all over, I took to be an ill omen, but one which I had come to expect whenever my fancy was stoked.

Our more substantial introduction came the next after-noon when I cunningly emerged from my lair at the precise moment that he entered his.

"Hello!" I said, stopping him in his tracks.

"Oh. Hi. I guess we're neighbors," he said, flashing the shy smile of an intelligent person who has just stated the obvious. And it *was* obvious -- our doors were just three feet apart.

"I suppose so," I replied cleverly. "My name is B.K. Troop. What's yours?"

"Chris Ireland," he said, extending a smallish, well-formed hand. Even in the dim light of the hallway I could see that he was a nail-biter; thankfully, the kind in whom vanity trumps self-loathing, which is to say that his nails were short enough to lift my eyebrows, but not turn my stomach. We shook. His hand was cold. No surprise, Manhattan was in the grips of an Arctic freeze.

"The pleasure's all mine," I murmured. And it was. His features were fine and pretty, his complexion faintly olive, and his smile so pearly white that I, as one deprived of dental care until the age of fourteen, could only marvel.

"Rumor has it that there's a superb Greek diner in the area," I crooned. "Do you know where?" I knew exactly where the Parnassus was, of course (a playful Polaroid of me was tacked above the cash register), but I wanted to prolong our intercourse.

“Sure,” the boy said. “Right on the corner. But I’m not sure it’s superb.” Then he smiled at his door in a way that said, “Enough, ye pest, be gone.”

I smiled back in a way that said, “You haven’t seen the last of *me*, dearie. Not by a long shot.”

I hurried off to the Parnassus, where, wolfing down a piping-hot Welsh rarebit, I told my dearest friend, Cassandra Apopardoumenos, all about my meeting with the fetching lad who lived next door.

A less worldly waitress would have said “good luck” or “fingers crossed,” but not the Corfu-born Cassandra, who, over the course of a rich and varied life, had become a veritable storehouse of signs, charms, divinations, and other quaint prospects of love.

“Do yourself a favor,” she instructed. “Get yourself a four-leaf clover. When you swallow it, think of the kid, and you’ll end up marrying ‘im.”

I choked, but passed it off as a laugh. Inwardly, I was seized by the oddest distortion. The thought of marrying anyone had always been anathema to me. There was no limit to my hatred of such a picture. And, yet, Cassandra’s words had *delighted* me in some strange way.

“*Marry* him?” I said. “Good God! I only want to seduce him!” She answered with a cryptic smile which I found most unsettling. “Besides,” I snickered, “where on earth would I find a four-leaf clover this time of year?”

Weeks passed before Christopher and I spoke again -- which is not to imply that in the meantime I did not get to know him much better. The wall that separated our apartments was made not of brick or stone, but of some contemporary amalgam of plaster dust and saliva, which meant that I overheard quite a bit of what went on in his cell. Plus, as a committed smoker of cigarettes, I left my front door ajar during waking hours, rendering me privy to a great deal of what Mr. Marcel Proust would have called *la vie d’escalier*.

The following is what I learned, or, to be more accurate, deduced. First, that my young neighbor was a reader. I rarely heard his television, except at seven o'clock on weekdays when he parked himself with a self-cooked meal before the grim journalistic stylings of Mr. Daniel Rather. The rest of the time, silence. And what else does a young solitary with flashing Mediterranean eyes, vivid with intelligence, do hour upon hour in a silent apartment but read?

Second, he was chaste. For not once in those weeks did he entertain a single visitor or spend an evening out. With one exception -- every weekday afternoon teenagers came a callin'. Which led me to my third conclusion: Christopher was a tutor. I did not learn what sort of tutor until one afternoon when I met on the steps an icicle-nosed Medusa with gigantic bosoms and hundred-dollar sunglasses (then, a hefty sum), who, as we passed, dropped a spiral notebook at my feet. Ever a gentleman, I picked it up and handed it back, but not before I had glimpsed, inside, an alphabetized list: *ablution, abomination, abrogate*. The mystery was solved: Christopher prepared young pups for the verbal section of their standardized college admittance tests.

"Thanks," the girl snarled.

"Don't mention it," I replied with a smile, but my heart already ached for the lad. The only thing more dreary than teaching is teaching something useless.

Fourth, I guessed that my neighbor was an aspiring writer. One afternoon he lugged past my open door three reams of typing paper. The fact that there had yet to emanate from his apartment a single clack of his typewriter brought me to my last deduction. He was, among writers, the most unfortunate sort: the hopelessly blocked. A story-teller without a story. Of course, it was possible that he wrote by hand, but I doubted it. He did not seem like the pretentious sort.

On Tuesday, January 24, I reached the limits of my patience and applied my knuckles to his door. In Manhattan, such an occurrence is as rare and startling as a pheasant-sighting in Central Park. I heard a rustling of trousers and a slow, creaking advance to the peephole. I stepped closer and flashed my oyster-grays. A

moment later, the door opened, sliding back a steel pole that extended from the lock to a metal divot in the pine floor.

“Hi,” he said shyly.

“Good afternoon, Master Ireland. I would like to invite you to dinner. My place. Tonight.”

I set my jaw, daring him to rebuff me. I saw it all -- his deep desire to do exactly that, his suspicion that I would put up a fight, and his final surrender to neighborly civility.

“Oh. Okay. Sure,” he said, “but I don’t eat meat.”

I twinkled archly. “Pity.”

Before he could utter another word, I vaulted back into my apartment and set to preparing our meal; which is to say that I let my fingers sashay through the Yellow Pages until they stopped on a pizzeria which promised to deliver to one’s door, for a modest sum, a mouth-watering spinach lasagna.

Christopher appeared at 8:01, wearing what I soon discovered was his daily costume: faded blue jeans, white leather sneakers, and a button-down Oxford. I swept him into the room and savored the moment when he beheld for the first time my *Bloomsbury Aesthetic*: comfy antique furniture, gem-tone brocades, Persian carpets, exquisite oil paintings, and, jammed onto every shelf and into every nook and cranny, a multitude of great, dusty books.

“Wow,” he said.

“Wow, indeed,” I replied, then I popped the cork on a four-dollar Pinot Noir (high notes of black pepper; lament of trombone). I might have served better, but I live on a fixed income. After letting it breathe, asthmatically, for a full ten seconds, I poured him a generous tumbler. He sipped, I gulped, then we retired to a walnut tea trolley and sank our forks into what I allowed him to believe was a delicious home-cooked meal.

Christopher proved to be a charming guest, never at a loss for words. When excited, which was most of the time, he spoke very quickly, gulping for air. The subject that riled him at present was the impending arrival of his mother, a

psychiatrist from Milwaukee. Not only would her two-week visit disrupt his tutoring schedule, but his peace of mind, as well, for she was nothing short of a horror.

I repaid him with some candor of my own.

I told him all about myself.

He was naturally surprised that I had never taken a stab at creative writing myself. Flattered, I explained that while nothing would make me happier than a career in letters, I lacked the voice for poetry, the ear for drama, and the spigot for fiction. The spigot confused him. I explained that the great, horse-countenanced novelist, Ms. George Eliot, had once counseled, "Novels are easy. Simply turn on the spigot and let it run." Or something like that.

He chuckled. "Maybe that's my problem. I have a faucet, but I'm afraid to let it run."

"Of course you are," I said, "Every hour of every day we're bombarded with televised commands not to be a *water rat*. You've taken your civic duty to a ludicrous extreme."

He laughed.

He was lovely when he laughed.

For the next four hours, our conversation came as naturally as leaves to trees. We discovered that we shared a passion for the mighty dead of English verse. We compared geniuses. After dinner, we retired to the living room, which was nothing more than a love seat parked six feet away. My apartment, like his, was more a dog-run than a proper dwelling -- typical of Manhattan, where every day someone brags about his fabulous new place, which is actually nothing more than five hundred square feet of crooked flooring with the sofa close enough to the fireplace on the opposite wall to toast marshmallows without leaving the cushion. (This I do not find alarming; we swap comfort for culture. What I *do* find alarming is that so few of us know we've made the swap.)

Soon, the conversation turned even more intimate and Christopher spoke for the first time about his *wife*. I was astonished. I had been certain he was a

homosexualist. Now it seemed I might be wrong. But I did not despair. Like a seasoned professional, I refilled his wine glass. Sexual preference is not and never has been an exact science.

Because he and his wife had split up only weeks before, the boy's wounds were still fresh, which meant he unburdened himself to me more out of compulsion than choice. In fact, the boy *did* have a spigot and I did nothing to stanch its mighty gush. As he spoke, his cheeks dampened and a single vein appeared between his eyes like an earthworm. Because every detail of Christopher's life is crucial to our story, I will share his tale of woe with you exactly as he shared it with me, but with less angst and far more economy.

Christopher had tied the knot a year before in a simple Yuletide ceremony on Cape Cod. Sadly, his bride was an aspiring actress, which meant that their union was doomed from the start. Unaware of this, Christopher cantered down the aisle with unbridled optimism. He realized now, looking back, that he and Mary should simply have lived together -- there was nothing religious or societal to prevent it -- but ours was a licentious age and their marriage was as much public statement as private sacrament. They were saying to their peers, "Go ahead, screw yourselves silly, but we are building something strong, fine, and lasting." Whether or not anyone else believed it, did not matter. *They* proudly did.

After a two-week honeymoon in Antigua, the young couple settled into the dog-run where Christopher now lived. When Mary was not in class, completing her last year at The Juilliard School (the nation's foremost manufacturer of automata), she browsed junk shops, searching for affordable knick-knacks to adorn their hovel. Her finest touch was a display of vintage perfume bottles. She also built a makeshift canopy bed and stitched a set of sheer, white curtains. She took up cooking, as well, which was unexpected, as she was also an aspiring anorectic.

It was only in spring, as graduation day loomed, that it dawned on Christopher that something had gone terribly wrong. Subsisting now almost entirely on a diet of rice cakes and mineral water, Mary spent hour upon hour in stony silence, reading entertainment magazines. She had become preoccupied

with the personal lives of movie stars. It was as though she believed that an intimate acquaintance with their climbs to the top would somehow ensure a swifter ascent for herself. Plus, their sex life had died. One morning, Christopher grimly noted over a bowl of oatmeal (self-prepared, for her generosity in the kitchen had ended as well) that he was masturbating more now than he ever had as a bachelor. Mary shrugged and asked, "What do you want *me* to do about it?" He answered eagerly, only to discover that the question had been merely rhetorical.

June came, Mary graduated, and they escaped to her family's empty beach house on the Cape, where all of Christopher's romantic disenchantment was sublimated into a passion for literature. He read novels ten hours a day, the Russians mostly, and at night planned his debut novel -- a lofty account of first love, imaginatively entitled, *First Love*. Mary spent her days fretting, jogging on the beach, looking in the mirror, and reading *Vanity Fair* (the magazine, not the novel). Once a week, she flew down to the City to meet with flesh-peddlers. By Labor Day she had secured one, a morbidly obese drizzlepuss named Esther Somethingstein who foresaw gigantic things in Mary's future.

Ten weeks later, Mary landed her first job. She had been waiting all day for Esther's call and when it came she pounced. As Mary took in the good news, a grin spread across her starving face, then she screamed with the sort of volume that in more civilized times was reserved for bad news from Guadalcanal. Christopher also screamed, but less madly, then flung out his arms for a celebratory hug. Her eyes flashed darkly and she walked away, plugging an ear. He stood, speechless, as she devoured the details. The role was Juliet at a regional theatre in Washington, D.C. Rehearsals began in three days. The pay was a whopping five hundred dollars a week.

When Mary hung up, it was as though her malaise had never happened. She was herself again, but with one important difference. Before, it had been their romantic future that had inspired her rapture; now, it was her own *professional* future. Within minutes, she had formed a plan. She would zip down and begin rehearsals, while he stayed in the City and tended to his students. In a few weeks,

he would join her and, supported by her salary, begin writing, at long last, *First Love*.

It seemed ideal.

Three days into rehearsal, however, she stopped asking at the end of their nightly telephone calls, "And how was *your* day?" In fact, she asked him nothing at all. Instead, she binged on about her artistic director, her director, and her Romeo. They were like a little family, she said. (A little family with no other women in it, he grimly noted.) And when she hung up, she didn't say, "I love you" anymore, but simply, "Sweet dreams!"

Astir with dark foreboding, Christopher jumped a train the first week in December. For those of you who were not alive at the time or else touched by meteorological amnesia, his arrival in Washington coincided with what experts were calling, The New Ice Age. On the Mississippi, towboats and barges were frozen in place; in the Midwest gravediggers were forced to use jackhammers; by year's end, over four hundred souls -- mostly those of the homeless -- had joined the frosty ether.

"Appropriate weather for our reunion," Christopher said now, as he reached for our near-empty bottle.

But at the time he had been full of stubborn hope. After all, he and Mary had pledged eternal fidelity to each other, not only before family and friends, but God himself. Their marriage was in trouble, no doubt about it, but it was the conquering of just this sort of adversity that separated true love from mere infatuation. (This well-meaning but fantastic notion was to be the theme of his novel.)

Mary, swaddled in cashmere, looking beatific and gaunt, waited for Christopher on the platform. When he reached her, lugging his duffel, she did not kiss him. She merely looked him up and down.

"Hmmm," she said, "you're smaller than I remembered." Then she hauled him away.

At the theatre, he was introduced to Mary's new family. First there was Stu, the artistic director, who slurped coffee from a metal cup and wore a Stetson. Christopher was surprised to learn that, despite his Western twang and cowpoke manner, he was reared in New Jersey. Then there was Ken, the director, a Dubliner in his forties, with bloodshot eyes, no chin, and hips wider than his shoulders. The only hold Christopher could imagine such a sorry creature exerting over Mary was that he treated her rudely, as though he were sexy and could get away with it. Last was Phillip, her Romeo. He was younger than she was -- his mind was silly and uncooked -- but it was clear that he was already hopelessly in love with her. When he shook hands with Christopher, his cheeks rouged and he glanced away.

"Maybe some people can live without passion," Mary told Christopher that night, after having just performed on him a perfunctory rite of fellatio, "but I don't think I can." Then, through anguished tears, she confessed all that she had come to realize about herself since the day she was hired. Marriage was crushing her spirit, she claimed. She feared that soon it would be too late. It would be as though her youth had never happened, as though as a teenager she had never made love on a moonlit golf course and on the front lawn at a graduation party and across her father's bumper-pool table. She would join the ranks of the living dead. Unable to suppress the bitterness in his voice, Christopher asked her why she had married him then. She said that she had felt she had no choice. Before him, there had only been cruel boys, each using her more selfishly than the last and each walking away with less regret. Christopher had seemed like a miracle to be seized. If only she had known how much would change. She had landed a great role in a great play, she felt freer, younger, prettier -- her extra pounds had simply melted away -- and, most wonderful of all, men who before would never have approached her except as a potential victim now adored her in a way that verged on the religious.

The end came that weekend over at Mercutio's place. A cast party. Eager to mingle, Mary abandoned him at the door. As the room was filled with uninteresting strangers, Christopher contented himself with stalking her. He

trailed her as she engaged her admirers, but they were too busy dancing and drinking to flirt, and, besides, with her husband present, what was the point? She grew peevish and dis-appeared through a doorway. Christopher waited a minute, then peeked in and saw her standing alone at a bedroom window, her eyes dull with self-pity. A blast of music shook the wall and Mary turned as though a glare from her might silence it.

“Jesus Christ!” she screamed when she saw him. “What are we, attached at the hip?”

She ran past him.

He followed, but by the time he had hacked his way to the front door, all he saw was a flash of cashmere flying down the stairwell. He knew what she wanted. She wanted him to chase her, spin her around, crush her in his arms, and declare that he loved her madly and would never let go. This was exactly the sort of romance she craved. Christopher rejoined the party, where he clapped along with everyone else when Hoboken-born Stu executed a boozy Texas two-step.

By the time Mary returned, the festivities were all but over. She found her husband in the breakfast nook playing poker. He knew it was repulsive to her, this custom among theatre-folk to break out the cards every time they found themselves together with more than a few minutes to spare.

He watched as Mary gradually noticed what he already had: All three of her suitors were present. Stu faced the door,

a filterless cigarette dangling between his cowboy lips; Ken downed a bottle of Celtic ale in greedy gulps; Phillip, her Romeo, studied his cards, shooting worried glances at the ceiling like a schoolboy dividing large numbers in his head. Finally, he tossed in five dollars, calling Christo-pher’s bet, and showed a pair of jacks.

Mary winced as Christopher slapped down three aces and dragged in the pot.

"Excuse me," she announced. "I feel a migraine coming on. I'm leaving."

Everyone stared up at her blankly; they thought she had left hours ago.

"All right," Christopher replied wearily, gathering his winnings.

"No, stay," she snapped.

"Forget it. You'll get mugged."

"I don't care."

He thought about it, then shrugged. "Okay. Feel better."

Her jaw stiffened and her eyes filled with spite. "What good would you be, anyway?" she asked. "You're a shrimp."

She held her ground.

An embarrassed silence slapped like a wet net over the table. Christopher glanced over and saw Ken staring at him.

"Not safe for a lass to walk home alone," he muttered in his sloppy brogue.

"Better hit the trail," Stu recommended.

"You really should," Phillip said, nibbling his lip.

"Why don't *you* walk her home?" Christopher suddenly asked.

Phillip was unable to hide his happiness. Blood crept up his thick neck.

"Yeah, Romeo," Mary said, turning to him with a twitchy, little smile.

"You're big and strong. You'll protect me."

Phillip rose slowly, grimacing, as though nursing an old back injury.

Hours later, Christopher was awakened by a burst of light from the bedside lamp. He gasped, terrified, then he saw Mary and settled back, rubbing his eyes.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"With Phillip."

"All this time?"

"All this time."

"What happened to your migraine?"

"I never had one."

He continued to rub his eyes.

Impatient, Mary broke the news more brutally than she had perhaps intended. "I've been in his room for the past four hours. Making love."

Christopher took his hands away from his eyes and stared with blank amazement. She was braced, expecting tears or profanity, perhaps even violence.

Instead, Christopher laughed -- a patronizing little chuckle that ended with a snort. Indignant, she walked into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Ten minutes later, she emerged and slipped naked between the covers.

"Did you enjoy it?" Christopher asked, wide awake now, staring at the ceiling.

"What?"

"The sex."

"Very much."

"Will you do it again?"

"Yes."

"Do you love him?"

"Very much."

Christopher laughed again.

She growled and rolled away.

A few minutes later, Christopher rose. He walked to the dresser and began to stuff his underwear into his duffel. She rose on one arm, slack-jawed.

"You're *leaving*?"

"Yeah."

"*Why*?"

Again, he laughed.

The elevator came quickly. They plunged together in ticking silence. When they stepped into the lobby, Christopher started to say good-bye, but she walked outside, wearing only slippers and a flimsy robe. He followed with his bag, and together they carefully descended the icy steps.

The taxi driver opened the trunk.

"Be well," Mary murmured.

"You, too," he replied.

He kissed her sharp cheek and got in.

The taxi roared away. Christopher turned in his seat and saw, through a billowing cloud, Mary standing alone in the middle of the salted boulevard. She was waving good-bye. He wasn't sure, but he thought she might be crying.

Having finished his story with, I felt, a chilling excess of objectivity (as if he had not even been a participant), Christopher sat back. I could tell from the meek look he threw me, that he expected words of pity and comfort, but I am, if nothing else, unpredictable. I crossed my legs, flicked my ash, and asked casually, "And what did you *learn* from all of this?"

He shifted uneasily. "What did I *learn*?"

I nodded.

With reluctance, he began what proved to be, in the end, a twenty-minute dissertation on the perils of loving an actress. He claimed that actresses, in the marrow of their bones, despise themselves and, even more deeply, reality, because it is reality which entraps and wounds them. Their escape is fantasy. Although this is true of *all* artists, other artists render their fantasies abstractly with brush, chisel, or pen, but the actress has only her stunted, malleable *self*, and so she is forced to *embody* her fantasies, which makes her life nothing more than a gigantic inauthenticity, a self-composed romance in which she has cast herself in the leading role. Mary had fled not because she was in love with Phillip, but because she was desperate to flee the collision with reality that marriage demanded. "Marriage is like being handcuffed to a mirror," Christopher observed pithily. It had forced her to gaze deeply into her own wretched soul. When the crucial choice had to be made, she had chosen fantasy. Christopher exhaled heavily and sat back again, rather proud of himself.

I frowned and shook my head.

"What?" he asked, confused.

I sipped my grape, torturing him with silence, then spoke with quiet authority. "All of what you have said is not only true, but quite obvious. It is only your *conclusion* that I object to. It was not she who fled the marriage, but *you*."

He laughed. He thought I was joking.

I reached for another cigarette. “Mary had told you she was unhappy. You said yourself that at the party she longed for you to join her in her fantasy -- chase her down and behave like a proper leading man. Yet you refused. You felt it beneath you. It would have lent, what? *Validation* to her fantasism. Am I right?”

He nodded.

“That’s all well and good, but your wedding vow read, ‘In sickness and in health,’ didn’t it? And the girl was clearly sick. It might have been temporary, who knows? Not you. You refused to follow her.”

“But--“

I cut him off with a raised hand. “Yes, *of course*, on the surface it was she who ended the marriage, when she made sweet, sweet love to Romeo. You would certainly never have done anything like that. You’re far too good. Far too *cunning*. Instead, you suggested Phillip walk her home.” I took a pause and fed my glass the last splash. The air was charged. “You knew perfectly well what that would lead to. And when she fell into your trap, enacted the role just exactly as you had scripted it, what was your response? You packed your bags and hightailed it outta Dodge. It was *you* who ended the marriage, my boy. *You are the adulterer.*”

I smiled and fell silent. With the orange tip of my cigarette, I began to rearrange the ashes in their hammered copper tray.

Christopher said nothing.

Then, with more than a hint of shame, he muttered, “You’re right.”

“Yes, I am,” I whispered softly. I released sexy tendrils of smoke from both nostrils, then leaned in close. “But *why*, Christopher? *Why* did you want out? What did you crave that Mary wasn’t giving you?” I squinted and subtly pursed my lips, doing my best to look like the sort of older man whom one might flee marriage for the chance to enjoy.

“God, I don’t know,” he sighed dejectedly.

A minute later, he was gone.

I awoke the next afternoon with a jolt. My first thought in the sober light of day was that I had gone too far. I had fed the boy difficult truths. Was he the

better for it now or did he despise me? I received my answer when I opened my door and reached for my *Times*. Trudging up the steps was a miserable teenager, her round face a kaleidoscope of cystic acne.

Christopher's door swung open.

"Hey, Lori," he said. Then he turned to me, smiling with good-natured sarcasm. "Hello, Sunshine."

Sarcasm it was, because my eyes bore a Morphean crust, my lips were flecked with spittle, and my sparse hair stood on end like a troll doll's. But his greeting filled me with relief, because in that instant I knew I had not offended him. Clearly, he possessed what I consider to be the rarest and most appealing of all human traits: *the ability to learn from me*.

"I am not a morning person," I croaked. Then I smiled coquettishly and retreated, leaving my door ajar.