

Bad Boys

by Jerry Ratch

Prologue

Her name was Carrie. And yes, it was love at first sight. Yes, she was a client, and you were supposed to keep your hands off the clients. Everyone in real estate knew that. She came into my office and took a seat in the reception area. I had a listing on Cedar Street that she wanted to take a look at. I glanced over at her from my desk. She was short with dark hair and dark eyes, shy as they come, looking down. Very nicely built, I could see that at a distance. When she stood up, as I approached her, something in her body reached out and pulled the heart right out of mine. It was something, some heat, in her thighs, that seemed to whisper, “children, children,” to mine. I felt the tug at my midsection. This had never, ever happened to me before. I remember thinking all of a sudden, *Oh, my God, she's the mother of my children!*

It kind of scared me, and yet attracted me from my middle section at the same time, because I never thought I wanted to have “children, children, children.” Of my own, that is. I'd had enough raising three children belonging to someone else. I'd already done my tour of duty, or so I thought. But maybe here was the love of my life. It was definitely love at first sight. I remember trying to catch a breath before speaking to her. But I felt sort of sick, and I heard my heart saying, “You shouldn't do this. You shouldn't do this.” But then it said, “To hell with that, go for it!”

Suddenly I got cramps. “Excuse me,” I said. “Sorry.” And I ran into the bathroom before we could talk. But not before I saw the look on her face. She was so pretty it hurt. I had a difficult time speaking to someone that beautiful. I don't know — I didn't feel worthy.

I couldn't let her know anything. I went to the bathroom and splashed cold water in my face. I looked in the mirror. My face

had grown so red that I realized right then I had to do something about my drinking. And about my entire life, in fact, up until that point.

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My first wife and I were sitting at the bar at Brennan's down on 4th Street one night, drinking too much without eating. Geary Marston had convinced us to come down there with him, for two reasons. One, to give us the lowdown on where to stay and what to do in New York City, on our way to Europe for the first time ever, for me. And second because he wanted us to accompany him on a special secretive "art mission" as he called it, though he would not reveal what it was over the phone. He had an extraordinary sense of paranoia sometimes that was bewildering, all things considered. I mean, this was Berkeley we were living in. You couldn't get much more liberal than that. But what did I know? I'd been in Berkeley way too long frankly, and was growing bored to death with it.

"When you get on the subway in New York," Geary told us, "don't make eye contact with anyone. Keep your head down. Take the bus if you can, it's safer. Never carry your wallet in your back pocket. Stay on the Upper East Side as much as possible. Here's the address of a great new sushi place on 1st Avenue and East 71st. You've got to go visit the Cedar Bar near NYU, but don't hang out for long. It's a very seedy joint. It's just that you have to visit the place at least once in your life, because that's where Jackson Pollock hung out with all his hard-drinking buddies. You're going to love it there. Both of you."

Geary tossed back a shot from the bar, and slammed down the empty shot glass, squinting his eyes and blinking. It rang on the old scarred bar top at Brennan's. He held up two fingers and the

bartender made a silent move toward the bottle with a black label.

"Your life will never be the same," he said. He gazed at us. Always there was a smile on his lips, insincere as ever. "Rent control helps people stay alive. You'll be a renter again some day. So fuck you."

"Never!" I responded.

"Don't you two start in again," said my wife. "I can't take any more of that shit. I'm sick and tired of politics. Let's talk about art."

"Ugh, art!" Geary sneered.

"Yeah," I said. "Who needs it?"

Geary and I both laughed. He held up another two fingers. The bartender pointed at the two full shots on the bar in front of our noses.

"Sorry," Geary said. He gave a stiff wave of the hand, saying, "He's got an attitude!" as he turned his back to the bar. "Isn't there somewhere else we can go have a drink, for Chrissake?"

"They've got cheap turkey dinners," I said. "I thought you liked them."

"Turkey dinners," Geary said, nodding as if in agreement. "Turkey clogs you up. I've given it up."

"So, what about Daniel and the nurse, now?" I asked.

"What about her?" He looked irked that I would bring it up.

"You're going to not ever talk things out with Daniel? After what, twenty plus years you've known each other, or something?"

He said nothing. You could see the tendons hardening underneath his jaw. I noticed he was starting to color the hair at the sides of his head. My brother Darrell was doing the same thing now.

"Since college in Missoula?" I asked, prodding him. His buddy Daniel was pretty sore about the subject, and told me so himself. These guys had been about as thick as it gets, without being lovers, or brothers themselves.

"That's right," Geary admitted. "So what?"

"Daniel's heart-broken, I mean. He doesn't want to live without Haley."

"I don't own her. She does what she wants." There was a pause. "I wasn't the first, you know. There've been others. She told me so herself."

He gave a sheepish look. He looked at my wife too, same look. Everyone loved this cad, you couldn't help it. You couldn't entirely blame Haley alone. Daniel could be pretty boring, going on about the stuffy academic world of printing all the time. Nice guy though. It was a shame. I liked him. But what are you going to do? Most of life wasn't in our own hands. It's the animal that keeps tracking down our souls, that keeps us on the prowl. It's something out of our deep, deep past, way beyond our control, if you asked me.

The rumor was Geary had a rich woman in Europe who was considering coming back to America, and a wealthy girl in San Francisco looking for a house in Berkeley, and he was trying to balance the two of them before making a decision. Neither of them knew about the other. Truth is, when I was younger we would have given our eye teeth to be like him, though maybe things had changed somewhat. He was such a pretty boy the ladies couldn't resist him, and he did have a certain *savoir faire*. We never knew how he made his living exactly, other than dabbling in the occasional sale as an art rep, nothing much to speak of, but somehow he always got by. I happen to know for a fact that he'd been arrested for shoplifting an expensive duck liver pate one time, but was let go on a technicality. And then one day I caught him at Oliveira's Café in the Rockridge, right over the border from Berkeley, with his hand on the ass of Daniel's girlfriend Haley, the nurse, while they stood waiting for *caffe lattes*. He didn't know I was sitting at my usual table, writing poems from art books. When he turned and saw me, his hand fell away from her ass. He never said anything to Haley about me seeing them together. Well, there it was. The hand on her ass — that was the story, I guess you could say, of Geary Marston's life. It was like a painting of the Girl with the Pearl Earring, except

with a hand on the young girl's ass added in, if the painting had been extended downward a little further, to give it all some levity.

I felt myself in a compromised position. Isn't that always the case for an agent? I'd sold Daniel and Haley the house they were living in on Cornell Street in West Berkeley, near Fanny's Café, after Daniel left his first wife for her. But I'd also had a number of transactions that had been sent my way by Geary. So I found I had to keep my lips sealed either way, which was frustrating in the greatest sense, because I am a man who loves his fill of good gossip. I admit I am terrible in that way.

"So what about going with me on our little art jaunt?" Geary asked. "I need someone to drive the get-away car."

Elizabeth shook her head. "There is no way you're going to find me doing that kind of crap. I *won't!*" The way she emphasized the word "*won't*" somehow came out wrong. Or maybe it was right, for her. It was a little belligerent.

Geary stayed focused on me. He knew me pretty well. "C'mon. Are we going down to the waterfront or not? We're going to destroy that piece of crap sculpture, the Guardian. What a travesty foisted off on the art community. He just installed that piece of junk down there himself one night, you know. Without anyone's permission even, at the city." Geary practically snorted. "You of all people should be offended, Elizabeth."

"What do I care? I'm not destroying anything," she said. She lit another one of her infernal cigarettes, thinking the one in her other hand had gone out. Now she had two of the things going. I began waving a hand in front of me, and she blew a puff of smoke in my face, laughing her deep throaty smoker's laugh. These things were going to kill her someday, if the wine and booze didn't get her first, like her mother.

"Wimp!" she said, a little too loudly. I'd quit smoking myself the day I started selling homes. You can't expect clients to climb into a car smelling of cigarettes with their babies. Not around Berkeley anyway. Maybe in Paris, but here? Uh-uh. You wouldn't make a dime. Unless you were also peddling dope.

"C'mon. It'll be fun," Geary prodded." It's not really dynamite, just a few M-1000's strapped together. It'll be great fun. And it deserves to be destroyed, the piece of crap!" He grew even redder, thinking about it, apparently.

"No, no!" Elizabeth shouted. "You take me right home right now, Philip!" She twisted off her barstool, and got all wrapped up in her coat, trying to get an arm in. She fled out the door with her scraggly hair trailing after her. She'd gotten so red in the face I thought she was having a stroke.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's ... I don't know what's wrong with her."

I heard our old classic 1970 Mercedes Benz start up out in front of the bar, and suddenly she whooshed away with her foot to the floor, after honking loudly four or five times.

"All right then, I'm in, I guess," I said. "My ride just left."

"Good," said Geary, and he grinned that knowing, shit-eating grin that was his signature. He must have practiced that grin the day he turned fourteen and saw that he needed to start shaving.

Geary drove. It was getting cold out, and the usual fog was coming in low over the bay on its way north and to the east. Berkeley was basically a gray town, for all its brilliance in its heyday. The sun never seemed to shine there anymore. The day of the Beats was way in the past, and it had been living off its reputation, whatever that was worth, for some time already. I didn't even know why I was there myself anymore. The people were so bizarre and backwards that the Berkeley police were called to a violent confrontation one day between neighbors, where they found them attempting to assault each other with hedge trimmers. You can look it up online. It happened at 6:48 p.m. to be exact, on August 10th. I read it in the Berkeley Voice. You can't make that sort of stuff up. I've tried. Reality is way funnier than fiction, or even dreams. Can you imagine what would happen to our lives if we ended up laughing all night in our dreams? Ah, the creases that would cause in our faces!

As we pulled up to the "Guardian" at the foot of University Avenue, a scowl came over Geary's face and he grew yet more agitated. He began breathing hard, looking first one way, then another. He jerked the steering wheel and spun the car around into a parking space. The area was completely deserted. I heard a lone sea gull squawking down by the water. You could smell the sea. It was damned cold out there.

He looked over at me in the car. "All you've got to do is keep the motor running. Leave the lights turned off even when we're leaving, until you absolutely can't see anything. Hear?"

I nodded. I felt cold, and far away. It didn't matter that much to me. I was thinking of something else entirely, though for the life of me I can't say what.

"Your brother Darrell and I have started a little joint venture, you know. Did he say anything about it?"

"Darrell? Why, no." I was absolutely certain what that had to be, knowing what my brother was into with the amount of magic mushrooms he was growing at his property out in Half Moon Bay.

"I think Vivian is really hot," Geary said. "Slide over here into the driver's seat. And keep the damn engine running. Don't shut it off, no matter what you hear, okay?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Yeah."

"Got it?"

"Roger."

"Fucking *Roger?*" he asked.

There was an unparalleled silence. Again the seagull squawked above the Berkeley pier. The gray fog slid right past the side windows of the car, engulfing us. I let my tongue drift over my upper lip, tasting the salt.

"Boy, you really need some European pussy," he remarked. I know for a fact, without looking his way, that he was staring at the growth of beard on my chin.

Another silence across the universe.

"That Vivian. She's really got a healthy set of jugs, doesn't she? And that skin. She's like a teenager still. She's a lot younger than Darrell, isn't she?"

"They've got a daughter, Geary."

"Still. It's like it didn't even faze her."

"My brother would kill you as soon as look at you. I'd watch out for him."

Again, that silence. Geary grinned that shit-eating grin of his. He always seemed to leave more to the imagination than he should. He liked it that way.

"Keep the engine warm. Gun it every now and then. This won't take long."

And he slipped out into the gray fog. In less than two minutes time I heard an enormous *Kaboom!* And he came running, laughing like an idiot. Laughing and running like any teenaged idiot from Montana, or anywhere else.

Life around him really was more fun.

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But the "Guardian" sat unfazed, facing the West, with a little chip taken out of its mouth, that's about all. And Geary grew still more incensed.

We read in the Berkeley Voice the next day that some vandals had apparently set off some kind of explosive device on the waterfront. Anyone with any knowledge of who the vandals might be, were urged to contact the Berkeley police at once, blah, blah, blah. What a joke.

Though if Daniel only knew, I am sure he would have done just that. With the hole that Haley had left gaping in his side. Because of Geary, I mean.

After we got back from Europe, that's when things really started changing for me. That trip changed my life, just as Geary had predicted it would. That's what was so maddening about him —

he was always so damned right about everything. He could be absolutely annoying, if he weren't so accurate. When we got back, I simply could not get myself to stop partying. I didn't want to go back to business as usual. And at this art party at a loft in West Oakland, I kept dancing and dancing, with anyone who would let me. Even when my wife complained about having a headache and wanted to go home and rest. I took her home, but came back to the party looking for anyone who would dance with me, including Haley, the nurse. I was drunk, sure, but she was drunk too, and I couldn't stop my hands from roaming all over her chest and up and down her hips, and she let me, and I was growing more and more drunk and more and more excited about touching someone new, someone other than the same woman I'd been with for a dozen years and whose passion had ebbed away years ago already, just exactly when or why, neither of us knew. But I felt it for a certainty, with a thud in my chest, in my stomach and my bowels, right there in these tunnels on a highway in Italy outside Rapallo when Elizabeth wouldn't stop screaming that we were going to die, oh, oh, we were going to die! She was so afraid of dying. Always, she thought she was going to die. Well, get a grip, as they say — *we're all going to die!*

“So, how's everything?” I asked Haley while we were dancing, just to be cordial.

She leaned in toward my ear and in the lowest of voices said, “Ennui.”

“What?” It was loud at the party.

Haley pulled her head back for just a moment, then leaned in and breathed in my ear, “Ennui.”

A new, faster rock-and-roll song came on, and that was when I started feeling her up as we danced, passing my hands all over her chest, her hips. And I began feeling something stir inside. Haley smiled with her eyes. But when she went back to Daniel after the dancing was through, she told him that I had been feeling her up on the dance floor, looking at me all the while. Her face was flushed red.

"I'm drunk," I said. "Daniel, I'm drunk. What do I know from anything? I'm drunk, that's all."

"Keep your hands off the nurse," Daniel said. He peered at me through his narrow steel-rimmed glasses, like an academic John Lennon, if that was possible.

"Danny! Come on. You know me."

"Yeah? Keep your mitts off the goods."

Haley was smiling from behind Daniel. *The little bitch, I thought. What the hell is she up to? I know she was egging me on. What's going on with her?*

Then I thought: *I know what happened with Geary. Who are you trying to fool? Okay, okay, maybe I'm just too drunk. Jeez, get a grip. You're out of control!*

But right then I blurted out, "What about Geary?"

Daniel and the nurse shot each other this look, as if they'd suddenly grabbed hold of either end of a live wire.

Daniel's mouth started moving, as though he'd just now started chewing on something he'd forgotten was in his mouth all along.

"We're not talking anymore," Daniel said, real low and slow. Haley was nodding as he said it, but looking down.

And I found myself asking: *Why does Daniel keep hanging onto his lost dreams?*

Then I thought: *Why do any of us keep hanging on to our lost dreams? Any of us?*

One bright day I ran into Geary Marston in front of the French Hotel Café, across the street from Chez Panisse. I was sitting outside at a small round metal table. A girl that looked like a Degas model was selling flowers on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Her short stocky body and large nose, as she walked barefoot, plodding in an untrained way about the cut flowers in their containers, and among the people as they passed by. A tall thin girl in a short skirt standing watching her as she sold her flowers. The broad, quick smile for everyone. Her calves thick, and her chest like a Degas model. (I had come back recently from Paris, but was it ever any different?) Her hazel eyes. The hair hanging down in strings beside her broad face, earrings dangling, mixed in, pale and red with her dark chestnut hair.

Just then the handsome young waiter from Chez Panisse was standing in the midst of a group of young men in front of the restaurant across the street, looking around them in the sunlight, each wearing an earring in one ear. He was dressed in a new black leather jacket, his curly reddened hair almost the same heavy bronzed color as his skin. And he wandered slowly across the street through the traffic without malice to buy a white long-stemmed rose from the flower girl, then back through the traffic and up the stairs into the restaurant. And the busboy who'd been sitting on the bench with the Degas model, caressed both of her arms, smiling and looking in her face.

That's when Geary spotted me, alone at my little green metal table.

"Bonjour," he said. "You've been eying her, haven't you? She's quite the little French wench, no? She puts out for just about anyone, you know."

"No."

"So, how's it going, since you've been back in America?"

"Uhhh!"

"Exactly!"

He sat down across from me. He'd caught me spying on the flower girl, of course.

"And so, how's life with the Mrs.?"

"We've been doing nothing but drinking and shouting at each other since we got back from Europe. It can't go on."

"Didn't I tell you life would never be the same? Well, didn't I?"

I nodded. Really my head dropped, more than nodded. It grew immensely heavy for some reason. I was having these massive headaches that kept coming out of nowhere, whenever I thought about the direction of my life.

We both noticed a well-dressed but shabby older man, a bum, stoop over and pick up a shiny new penny from the sidewalk, just a few feet away. He was without teeth, and wore a baseball cap. Gray whiskers stood out on his chin. He dropped the penny in his pocket and started to shuffle on.

"Watch this," said Geary.

He jumped up, smiling that weird shit-eating smile. He walked three feet away from the bum and dropped another shiny penny on the sidewalk, then walked away. The old bum moved over to where the new penny was, bent down stiffly and picked it up, putting that one into his pocket.

Geary signaled for me to watch again. He repeated what he'd just done, dropping another penny, but starting back toward our table in a large circle. He repeated this two more times until the bum was fairly near our little table, where Geary sat down.

"He must have been a pigeon in a previous life."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I was growing annoyed.

"In his other life. Watch."

Geary got up and repeated the same cycle again until the bum came back toward our table and stood waiting, but at a distance. He was bowed over slightly, and walked with a limp. His shoes were untied, but he never tripped on the shoelaces because he moved so slowly. It might have gone on all afternoon if I hadn't stood up suddenly.

"I've got to go."

"I'm waiting on someone myself," Geary said. He would never ever let you have the last word, on anything. "They'll be along." He pulled out a packet of French cigarettes. Gauloise.

I crossed the street through the traffic and went up the stairs into Chez Panisse. At the bar I ordered a flute of champagne. The bar maid had the exact same impersonal stare as the girl in Manet's painting, "The Bar at the Folies-Bergere." Same red in her cheeks.

She took a good look at me. "What's with you?" she said.

I shook my head and kept smiling like a man who'd just cheated on his wife. Like a fool who was in love with something impossible.

"What?" she begged. "What is it?" She poured another flute without asking. But I just kept shaking my head, sipping from my flute. I was in love, and she knew it. Though not with her. Geary knew it, the bar maid at Chez Panisse knew it. I think even my wife knew it, deep in her heart, and she kept growing even more afraid of everything as I withdrew from her.

I had to tell someone, I was bursting with it. And a man cannot keep a secret, contrary to public opinion. That was when I called up Daniel and asked him to come have a drink with me. I was at the bar upstairs at Chez Panisse. It was urgent. Could he come right over, right now? I had a confession to make.

That got his interest.

"Is this about the nurse?" he asked.

"No. No way in hell. Well ... in a way."

He groaned way back in his throat. So deep in his throat that the groan extended to his beer belly. Wine belly, really. That would be more accurate. Wine and cheese from all the stuffy book parties he attended.

"Where are you, Chez Panisse?"

"Look, I'm paying."

"Do I need to bring my gun?"

"This is Chez Panisse," I said, "not the fucking O.K.

Corral."

"Let me just ask one thing? Is Geary Marston anywhere near there?"

"He's at the French Hotel, across the street."

There was a long pause. Daniel cleared his throat.

"Was he with the nurse?"

"No. Not to my knowledge."

"I'm bringing my gun."

"You don't even own a gun. Do you?"

"We're from Montana, me and Geary, what do you think this is?"

"Berkeley!" I said. I was trying to make light of it.

Jesus! I thought to myself. *How did I ever get mixed up with these people?*

But before Daniel could show up, my brother Darrell came upstairs to the bar at Chez Panisse. Darrell was half a foot taller than me, and always looked lean and hungry. He'd forgotten to shave and always wore clothes that were much too young for him.

"Philip," he said, taking off the sunglasses he always wore. "Fancy meeting you here. Have you seen Geary Marston, by any chance?"

"Yeah, across the street."

"At the French Hotel? He was supposed to meet me, but wasn't there. Huh! You never know what's going to happen with that prick, do you?"

He looked around the upstairs café, like he was waiting for something.

"Did you expect me to answer that?"

"What? No, of course not. What's wrong with you? Say, there's something different about you."

"I've been to Europe," I said.

"Other than that, I mean. What is it? Have you lost some weight?"

The bar maid was watching my brother, and smiled at him. Darrell could cut quite a figure. He used to be a lifeguard, for one thing. That was where he met his wife, Vivian. Saved her life at the

beach in Half Moon Bay. And he always wore this little matador ponytail.

"I think he's been getting some," the bar maid said. She looked right through me. *Jesus!* I thought, *I was that obvious? I can't go home like this. I can't. I won't!*

"So, what do you have going with Marston?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Darrell look surprised. "What did he say?"

I glanced at the bar maid, who was looking at us both, soberly, but amused.

"Nothing much."

"Whatever it was, keep it under your fucking hat." To the bar maid Darrell said, "You interested in dating a tall handsome dealer in mushrooms? Shitake, of course."

She shook her head ever so slightly, still amused though. "I, I don't think so."

"How about Portobello?" he asked.

"Oh, you're the mushroom guy from Half Moon Bay, right? That's different."

"I thought so." My brother turned to face me directly. "Listen, there's no way you've seen Vivian around here, is there?"

"Your wife?"

"Who in a fuck do you think I mean?" He practically sneered when he said this, and this was my own brother we're talking about.

"I ain't shitting," he said. "I want to know. Have you seen snappy little Vivian and her skinny little ass? The bitch. I think she's been sneaking around on me."

"What? No."

While my brother watched my face turning various shades of color, I tried to imagine what must be passing through his mind, though his brains had gotten fairly scrambled since he'd started dealing in the magic variety of mushrooms.

"No," I repeated. "No."

"Fucking-A!" he said. "What are you now, retarded? Go and get your ear wax cleaned out."

Then Geary Marston appeared at the bar, with the nurse, Haley, next to him. He had his hand on her back. And he was smiling that smile of his, of course.

He stubbed out his cigarette against the sole of his shoe and inserted it back into his pack of Gauloise. In those days you could still smoke in a bar or restaurant, though everyone in Berkeley put a huge frown on their face when you did, and turned up their noses and began a fake cough of some sort. My wife paid no attention to those people whatsoever. She had smoked her way all the way across the Atlantic Ocean when we'd gone on our vacation to Europe, and back as well. She didn't have time to think about health issues. She had three kids of her own and a lot of useless paintings to paint, that never left the house. They just kept piling up in the attic at home. I'd begun to fear that the weight of all the art up there would one day come crashing down through the ceiling and kill us. When I'd mentioned this to Geary one time, he just laughed. Art! He exclaimed. If you can't sell it, fuck it! Why don't you just haul them to the dump and set them on fire? Geary saw pretty much everything in a utilitarian way.

"Hi, Haley," I said.

She was always on the verge of sucking you in with her eyes. Her eyes were brown. I was very attracted to brown eyes. They were like my mother's. My wife's eyes were that cold kind of blue that seemed almost transparent.

I don't know quite what it was that was so appealing about Haley. She was very short, and her chest seemed to stick out even further as a result, I think. And she always looked somehow fresh, and not quite innocent.

I was about to say something about Daniel, who was on his way there, but I stopped myself.

"You're looking good," I said. Haley smiled. Her hair was cut short, like a boy.

"Of course," said Geary.

You really did want to hit him.

"So," said Darrell, "Who is this lovely creature? I don't think we've met. I'm Darrell Janov, this guy's older and wiser brother." He jerked his thumb toward me like I was a side of beef. He held out his large hand. Darrell towered over Haley.

"I'm Haley," she said.

"I didn't know you were dating anyone," Darrell said to Geary.

"We're not exclusive," Geary said. You really never knew what the hell was going to come out of his mouth, but you could be quite certain it was bound to embarrass someone. Haley's face turned crimson when he said that, and she looked down.

"Oh," said Darrell.

"I date plenty of girls," Geary continued. "I don't see the reason to be exclusive. That's so ... *American*." And with that he began eying everyone else in the entire café, men included. He looked everyone up and down as they walked past. *Jesus*, I thought. *Jesus! How do women put up with him?* But they certainly did.

"Don't you agree, Haley?" he said.

"Yes, I guess so."

"She's been living with a friend of Philip's."

"Really!" said Darrell, and he looked at her up and down, drawing his head back to see her better.

Halley's face turned more to the purple side. It used to be just red. I considered the possibility that she had stopped breathing.

"Daniel is..."

"He's a printer. Small press, esoteric stuff," Geary interrupted. "Nothing you would have heard of."

"Actually," I said, "I was just on the phone with Daniel."

Everyone turned to look at me. I was the center of attention. I took a sip from my flute of champagne and smiled broadly at the barmaid. I may have winked at her, I'm not sure.

"And?" said Geary.

"Nothing," I said. I pushed my empty flute across the bar, and she refilled it one more time.

"Saucy," she said. "I like that in a man."

"And," I said. But I stopped for effect.

"And?"

"And I whistle in the shower too."

The corners of the barmaid's eyes crinkled up when she smiled. Lovely. Very lovely.

"What about you and Vivian?" Geary asked all of a sudden. He looked flatly at Darrell. "Certainly you guys aren't exclusive, are you?"

Darrell looked flustered. He sputtered.

"Wh ... what? Well, of course. What did you think?"

"How would it make you feel if she came home with a load of cum in her panties?"

Darrell looked shocked, then suddenly sick. His face grew sour. He gripped his stomach and bent over for air.

"Fuck!" he spit out. "Fuck, Marston, you sonofabitch. Fuck!"

Darrell kept panting for breath. Geary just smiled that shit-eating grin of his. He knew he'd hit a pretty deep nerve. He was elated, and began looking all around the bar until he caught some woman's eye, and nodded, taking a sip off his glass of red wine. Girls could not resist him, that's all there was to it. He certainly had a pretty face. It would be too bad if someone came along and messed it up for him.

And that was when Vivian came upstairs at Chez Panisse. Geary shot Darrell a look that was astounding, for him. It was a moment of terror, as if he'd been confronted by a black bear in the mountains outside Missoula.

And my brother's face just froze. No one said anything for about two hundred years.

"Well, look who's here ... speaking of the devil," Geary said finally.

Vivian was pretty tall herself, wore her hair long. It dropped straight down her back. Half the men in the restaurant turned to look at her. Who wouldn't? She was still something to look at. I couldn't help looking at Vivian myself, and I am Darrell's brother, for Chrissake.

For some reason Vivian couldn't take her eyes off Haley. Finally she looked at Geary. "Who's the new bitch in town?"

"Someone you don't need to know."

"You're always a little too overconfident, aren't you?"

Vivian smiled at Haley, rolling her big eyes. "He's a little quick on the draw, isn't he?"

I saw the horrified look on my brother's face. I knew that look from his past, and it meant trouble. He'd been through a lot with Vivian, ever since the birth of their daughter, because he'd gotten Vivian pregnant in his Volkswagen van practically five minutes after saving her life at the beach at Half Moon Bay. I don't think she ever got the chance to grow up herself, and their age difference made Darrell a little fidgety, which was why he always tried to dress so young, in his tank-tops and cut-offs. It made him look, somehow, ridiculous. And that earring in his ear! I mean, come on. He should have been out in front of the restaurant hanging out with the waiters and the busboys, instead of... Well, instead of what? Selling specious mushrooms to them?

I tried to picture what my own clients would say when they got into the car with me to go see some expensive little bungalow and took a gander at some earring in my ear. It was bad enough with my goatee. And yet, something needed to change in my life. And indeed, something was changing. Something huge.

"Philip," Darrell said. His jaw had grown rigid. "I need to talk with you. Outside." He yanked my arm.

"But, I haven't finished my champagne."

"Now!" he growled. "Right now!"

"No way, Darrell. I'm talking with the barmaid here. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You're married, for Chrissake! What are you doing, talking with a barmaid? What do you mean?"

The barmaid looked at me soberly, then at Darrell.

"So am I," she said, and a broad smile opened up on her lovely Manet face. My heart began to thaw after its cold ten year winter. I shoved my flute across the bar, pointing a finger to fill it up to the brim. And that was exactly what she did. To the brim, like my life, which had just begun bubbling over again.

Darrell dragged me by the arm into the men's room and locked the door. The fan began making a loud buzzing sound. They had beaten copper wash basins in Chez Panisse. It was very fancy there. But of course it still had an old-fashioned urinal, as if the French artist Duchamp had himself just signed it.

"Who the hell is this Haley woman?" Darrell asked.
"Exactly how thick is it between them?"

I thought I noticed him shivering. His eyes seemed glazed over, but he couldn't stop staring at me bug-eyed.

"Are you stoned, again?" I asked.

"Look, I want to know what exactly is happening here. Why the fuck is Vivian here?"

"Why don't you go ask her yourself?"

"Don't get smart with me. She's not speaking to me. Listen, I need to know this. Something's going on here. C'mon, I'm your fucking brother, for Chrissake. Your own brother."

"I know that."

"What do you know? Tell me now. I've got to know, or I'm going to start shooting this place up."

"What?" I said. "What?"

"I mean business, so don't go giving me any lip, hear?"

"Darrell, do you know who Daniel is? Haley's lover?"

His eyes bugged out of his head. "She has a lover?"

He hawked up a loogie and spit into the beaten copper basin. He didn't bother to look in the sink.

"Man," he said, "oh, man. Everybody's got a little side business going, don't they? Even you."

The loogie hung on the side of the copper basin as though it were weightless. Or frozen.

"Fuck," he said, more or less to himself.

"Well, he's on his way here. And he's bringing a gun. He's out looking for Geary."

"Who is this guy Daniel?"

"They're best friends since college in Missoula."

"Oh, man! Shit. And Geary's banging this little tramp? This ought to be good. C'mon," he said, opening the bathroom door. "I can't wait to see this."

I tried turning on the water to flush the loogie down, but Darrell had a real grip on my arm and yanked me out the door of the bathroom.

Then Daniel came up the stairs at Chez Panisse. First he focused on me.

"Who's this drug dealer?"

"This is my brother Darrell."

"The one you told me about?"

"I only have one brother, Daniel."

"You'd better tell him to leave, if you still want to have one."

"Who in the fuck are you to be telling me where I can be? I got business here."

"It's your choice." Daniel shrugged. He looked shaky around the edges, like he'd had too many espressos. His face was deep red. He concentrated on the barmaid next.

"Hi, Celeste."

"Daniel. Good to see you."

Then he turned toward Geary, who had an enormous smirk on his face.

"What are you up to? With the nurse?"

Haley tried to say something. Daniel put up his hand, right in her face, like STOP!

"What do you mean?" asked Geary. He somehow managed to put on a truly inquiring look, as though this were an academic question only. What an actor! A cheap afternoon soap actor. Just as handsome though, that was the problem. That kind of unshaven, squared-jaw look, with his shirt unbuttoned, opened one or two too many. It was calculated to make women take notice, and men want to smash him one.

Daniel reached up and patted his shirt under his right arm.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you packing heat?"
"What do you think?"
"I don't think you've got the balls around this limp-wristed town."

The barmaid said, "Gentlemen, c'mon, c'mon."
Daniel turned toward her and tried to smile.
"So, are we on for tonight?" He swallowed hard. There was a pause that went on for about two hundred years.
"Of course, Daniel," she said. "Eleven's when I get off."
"Oh, you'll get off, all right," Daniel said. "Give me a glass of that house zinfandel. The rough stuff. Santa Cruz Cellars."
"Ah! The wine of hangovers," Geary remarked.
Daniel walked one quarter of the way around Geary's face and shouted right into his left ear, "Fuck off! Fuck way off! *And keep your mitts off the fucking nurse!*"

"It's her life," Geary said, without turning to face Daniel.
"Why don't you ask her what she wants?"

Quietly, purposefully, Daniel spoke in Geary's ear. "You really are playing with your life, my finicky fucking friend." And Daniel walked to the stairway, without ever once looking at Haley, like a wooden crocodile on wheels, and descended the stairs.

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It was Phil Collins on MTV, "In the Air Tonight," that cemented it for me. It was the beginning of the end of my marriage. Well, not exactly the true beginning of the end. You would have to go pretty far back, honestly, to find the true root of it all.

But that last night in Europe, getting ready to fly out of Amsterdam back to the States, I heard this Phil Collins song, "In the Air Tonight," which expressed some of the turmoil and confusion and whole-life hysteria I was feeling inside. Waves of frustration and cosmic confusion about what I was doing with my life. My month-long vacation in Europe had come to an end, but it was that vacation that allowed me to take one huge-mother giant step back from work

in real estate, which had been steadily eating me up for the past seven years. Seven years without taking a break. Seven long years. That is insanity. No one should have to endure something like that. The brain stops functioning in any human sort of way after a time, and you lose track of who you are, who you were, or who you wanted to be.

We had driven pretty much non-stop from the boot of Italy at a break-neck speed, up through Southern Germany, where I stopped at a roadside Motel one night just outside Munich. The girl at the desk immediately began speaking to me in German, assuming I was one of her race, because my ancestors were Bohemian, more or less right over the border. I realized suddenly they all looked like me! I couldn't believe what I was seeing. You never saw that in America. These people looked like nothing had changed in their basic facial structure in ten thousand years. And it was that sense of the depth of my roots that so struck me, and stuck to me. I just couldn't shake it.

The girl at the desk took a good look at me. She seemed puzzled, and then amused, because she had also gotten a good look at Elizabeth when she passed by on her way down the hall, dragging her suitcase. It could only be described as plodding. I looked after Elizabeth, who had passed by the desk clerk without saying a thing, not even a polite nod.

"That will be just the one room? Or this will be two?" asked the girl at the counter. She smiled at me.

I blanched. I opened my mouth and nothing came out. I almost said: *Make that two.*

What was I thinking, what was I thinking? That maybe the girl at the desk, easily a dozen years younger than me, would come down the hall in the middle of the night and sneak into my room?

Well — maybe!

I was off and running in my wildest dreams now. My imagination got the better of me, and it was only a matter of time. I was a marked man. And had it been so easy to upset my little wagon, with the simplest of questions, and on the outskirts of

Munich yet? The scene of the infamous beer putsches leading up to the rise of Hitler and the Second World War? The most fertile grounds for that kind of ego? But hadn't it started really quite some time ago already?

Yes, yes, and yes. It was so easy, you could say, and yet it had also been a long time coming. And there it was.

When we got up to Amsterdam, there was this wonderful song on MTV, "In the Air Tonight," and it began gnawing at my soul and at my heart.

Where had I been for the past dozen or so years? Why had I abandoned my center? How had I veered so widely from my original path? What would it take to put me back on track?

I remember lying on my back on the made bed with my shoes off. My wife was stuck in the bathroom for an hour, as usual. And I began to feel free, somehow. A sense of freedom began rolling over me with the music, "In the Air Tonight." I hadn't felt this kind of sensation in at least a dozen years. And out of nowhere I experienced an erection that just would not go away, until my wife came staggering out of the bathroom, drunk as usual. That made it go away.

