

Yellow Dining Room (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

My girlfriend is trying to say that she doesn't care if he's my best friend from work: before she leaves the room, when he's looking the other way, she holds up her index fingers, which means she wants him out of here by eleven.

Denny is saying, "Maybe I should have looked at the serving lady when the hostess, Mrs. Logan, spoke, or at Mr. Logan when their guest spoke. But when someone's speaking to you, you look at *that* person, right? Not at somebody else in the room. Or maybe I would have got it right about Gordon and Polly if I'd looked just a little bit over everybody's heads, at those yellow walls. Or at anything—if only I hadn't kept looking at the person speaking. After a while, when it got darker in there, they wouldn't have noticed even if I was looking out a window into the garden. But"— Denny says this to me as if he's not sure— "other people must not have to do stuff like that. They must be able to *look* at the person they're listening to and *think* at the same time."

It's hard to know about Denny. He takes a drive up the Hudson to someone's house, and just has to understand why the walls of one room are different from the others. Now, six months after dinner there, he's caught up in thinking about something that happened, and why he got it wrong. But at work he can be very confident and dry. At an auction of science volumes he did last week, he told the bidders that Goethe's book on color theory, though breathtaking to look at, wasn't scientifically sound. Then he paused a second to add that, of course, Goethe, like the encyclopedist Diderot, was a novelist on the side. And, just when I was sure he was going to start the bidding, he added that even way back in the early nineteenth century Goethe found cause to complain that there was just too

much printed matter to keep up with. But then the other day, when I showed him a signed copy of *The Meaning of Relativity*, Denny's eyes became serious and sad, and he said, "Einstein was the *kindest* man." Like the guy had been a personal friend of his, and he missed him.

Denny probably got a little unnerved when the first thing Mrs. Logan asked him at dinner was "Ever been married, Mr. Dennis?" Denny tells me about that and then says, "O.k., maybe it's just a casual question." But I know he takes it as if someone's asking if he'd ever been loved. Or been happy. Or had a home. "I mean," says Denny, "she didn't ask me, 'Are you married?' I mean, that I'm not—and, o.k., that I've never been—does it just *show*?"

I tell Denny not to worry about it, that he's had some bad breaks, that forty's not too late to think of starting. He says, "Then she asked me, 'Ever thought of setting up a firm of your own?' What if I'd said that I wasn't brave enough? After all, it does take a certain amount of courage to buy with one's own money. Courage to buy and courage to sell—I mean, maybe the real courage is in the keeping, before you sell. But no, I just rattled on about how I preferred the camaraderie of the workplace. The generous benefits. The profit-sharing plan.

"Not brave enough—I *did* say it," says Denny, "but to the first question. I meant I'd never been in a situation where it didn't require a lot of courage to get married. And then, after I said that, I looked at the two empty chairs across from me, and, as if it were part of my answer, I asked if they thought we ought to call Gordon and Polly; there was, after all—and I remember pausing there, as if I might be being forward—a phone in their guesthouse. Perhaps they'd got the hour wrong.

"If there was any response to that, it went by me," says Denny. "Because Mrs. Logan just says, 'A fine young man such as yourself. Edith here . . .'" and she looks over at her friend Edith at the far end of the table, "Edith took a course in marriage once, didn't you, Edith? Why don't you tell Mr. Dennis about it?"

“Then Edith—I don't remember her last name; it'll come to me—Edith says, like a schoolgirl who'd been waiting her turn to speak, 'I'd been standing at a bus stop in the city, and I picked up one of those brochures with the night-course offerings. And, leafing through it, I noted a class called How to Marry a Millionaire. It was to be held not too many blocks east of where I live, and just for one evening. Now, Mr. Dennis, it's a bit droll that I would have an interest in such a course, as I'd been married for most of my seventy-odd years to a millionaire, and been the daughter of one before that. But I just wanted to go—' and here Mrs. Logan interrupts her. 'To observe,' says Mrs. Logan, finishing the sentence for her, probably so Edith wouldn't lower everything by just saying 'out of curiosity.' 'It was a class for women only,' Edith says, 'but there were women of every age and appearance there, I might add. By the way, Mr. Dennis, the instructress said that every fourth term she also offered the course to *men*.'

“Then Mrs. Logan prods her on: 'And what did you take away from the class, Edith?' Edith gathers herself up in her seat and says, 'Well, it all seemed to come down to this: the most important thing about marrying a millionaire is to *marry* him.' Then she stops for a moment, as if waiting for a cue from Mrs. Logan. 'And what else did the instructress say, Edith?' Edith starts out slowly. 'That, if you wanted to carry it to the logical extreme, you should pick a very *old* millionaire. Very old, and *not very well*. Your honeymoon night is none too soon for Emergency Services to arrive.'

“Mrs. Logan looks right at me. 'The logical extreme,' she says. And then she smiles, to put me at ease. 'Not something Gordon and Polly would understand.' She nods at the two empty chairs, as if to tell me that she was not ignoring my question about where they were. 'Both of them so young and so good-looking. And even before marriage they were—how would the instructress put it, Edith?' Edith shifts in her seat to prepare her delivery: 'Million-heir and million-heiress.' 'Right!' puts in Mrs. Logan. Both of them started laughing. 'And neither of us had need of a course, either, did we, Edith?' And then, for the first time, she looks over at Mr. Logan—not, I thought

without affection. *'Really,'* says Edith to Mrs. Logan, 'at the time it would have been so much trouble to marry down.' 'Not so much today, but still *some,*' says Mrs. Logan."

Denny takes a deep breath. "The serving lady had come in to remove the dinner plates. If she or the cook, who was holding the door for her, had found anything to be shocked or put off by in any of the conversation, I couldn't tell. What Mrs. Logan and Edith were saying," Denny says to me, "I wouldn't have said in front of them, would you have?"

"I'm sure they're used to it," I say.

"Well, in the dining room, anyway, I hardly looked at the servants," says Denny. "But I do remember looking at my watch. Eight-forty-five. Dinner had been planned for seven. Mr. and Mrs. Logan and their friend Edith and I had waited in the living room until seven-thirty before we'd come in to sit down. Perhaps Gordon and Polly hadn't heard the time right, I thought. Unlike me, they'd been to Mr. and Mrs. Logan's before—maybe dinner was customarily at eight. And maybe Mr. and Mrs. Logan usually didn't seat everybody until a half hour after that. But now the salad course was being served. And then I was wondering out loud if we should turn on some lights. Again, if there was any response to my question I didn't notice. 'Such a fine summer evening,' says Mrs. Logan, looking nowhere in particular. 'I think you two,' meaning Mr. Logan and me, 'have been very wise in deciding to leave looking at those dusty books till morning.' "

People often do as much damage bringing books in to us as has been done in five hundred years. The company knows what they're doing when they send us out to get them. Denny's always available to make the overnight trips to the clients, and I do the estates—up and back on Saturdays, a little country trip with my girlfriend. The first thing I noticed about most of these estates was that although a lot of the furniture was missing, and paintings had obviously been taken from the walls, the bookshelves were always full, never any

empty spaces. Some great missed opportunities for the survivors. And some of those books have been there for generations—unread, the pages uncut.

“I think if I did start on my own,” says Denny, “I’d specialize. Children’s books—you know, they don’t have to be so old. Anything from the first half of this century, if it’s in good condition.

“If I left, you think the boss would wish me the best? I wish almost everyone the best. But you’ve got to keep watching what people do. If there’s not much doing, then you have to try and go by what they say.

“The first thing Polly said to me was ‘How *interesting!*’ That was when Mr. Logan, whose book collection I’d come up to inspect, brought me in and introduced me to her and Gordon and left me with them for a bit. I’d just come back to the main house after unpacking my things. ‘How interesting,’ she said when she found out why I was there. Of course, you hear that a lot, especially from people of means, who are *very* interested in what someone might do out of necessity. Still, I think Polly’s interest was sincere. I remember her standing behind the velvet armchair across from me, where her husband was seated, and as she leaned forward, cheek beside his, even he mostly stopped looking at his newspaper and seemed interested.

“Polly told me Gordon’s father was an old friend of Mr. Logan’s. She said she and Gordon often visited during the summer months, and stayed in one of the guesthouses on the hill above the main house. She asked me which one I was staying in. First one on the path, I told her. ‘The pink one? It’s lovely,’ she said. ‘We stayed there once. Now we always use the farthest one, over the crest. Will you be here long? I’d love to learn about old books. Gordon and I have some that were his father’s.’

“*People want to know*, isn’t that right?” says Denny to me, as if I’d understand exactly what he meant. “Don’t tell the boss,” he says, “but if I meet people I feel familiar with, I tell them to forget about the things I have to look for in books. I take them aside and recommend a good reprint. I was just about to say that to Gordon

and Polly when Mr. Logan came back and said he wanted to show me around the grounds. 'We're having dinner at seven,' he told them. Polly leaned down closer to Gordon, who lowered his paper. They said to us, almost in unison, 'See you at dinner!' "

So in about ten minutes my girlfriend is going to come out and do a little walk around the room with her index fingers flashing up and down to remind me that she and time really exist. I think you have to be flexible with friends sometimes, but she says, How often do we go over to *his* place? Still, I think Denny is, in his own way, considerate. Right now, he's laying out magazines all over the coffee table to protect it when he puts his feet up. In the long view of things, why shouldn't he get comfortable? All of a sudden he looks around the living room and glances past all the doors.

"Yeah," say Denny. "All white. White, or off-white, yeah. And that's the way it was at the Logans'. She gave me a tour of the house, and I saw only all-white or off-white rooms, except for one. You know, I don't think I could even tell you exactly where the place was. Somewhere near the Putnam-Westchester county line. I took my time driving there; I got on the Palisades Parkway so I could drive up the west side of the Hudson and through Harriman State Park, where I crossed back to this side. Somewhere near there.

"O.k.," he goes on. "I *did* finally see them at dinner. After a while, I couldn't even *imagine* that anybody was going to sit in those two empty chairs. I looked past them, and that's when I first began to notice what Mr. and Mrs. Logan had done—something I thought was strange. The area where they ate breakfast and lunch, which was just off the kitchen and faced south and east, they'd painted, like the rest of the house, some shade of white. But the dining room, which faced south and west and caught the long, slow sunsets that are warm and yellow anyway, they'd painted yellow. But then I thought, Well, *now* the sunlight's there, because it's summer. For most of the year, though, they'd be eating dinner by artificial light. So the yellow walls would add warmth then. But by the time I'd

thought of that, it was so late you couldn't tell what color the walls were anyway.

"That's when I heard Polly's voice through the screen door. 'Should we light some candles?' she said. 'Here, I'll do it,' said Gordon, as they came in, and I saw him let go of her hand to reach into his pocket for matches. The second they sat down beside each other, they made a nearly simultaneous move to hold hands again. I noticed a slight sheen on his brow, and his hair wasn't as tidy as before. Hers was all tousled, and her face was flushed—less like porcelain than I'd remembered it from that afternoon.

"The serving lady brought in some plates of food for them, as if their being late were a regular occurrence. In the next hour or so, Gordon and Polly often held hands, but never looked into each other's eyes or spoke to each other, as if to do so would be to flaunt something. After dinner, again hand in hand, they walked me out through the garden and the tangle of trees, then along the path that led to the guesthouses. At mine, they'd said, 'See you at breakfast!'—again almost in unison. Then they turned to walk up over the hill. But," says Denny, "I didn't see them at breakfast.

"Nice life—I remember thinking that as I tried to get to sleep that night. And I didn't mean the money. I had sat there all evening worrying about Gordon and Polly missing dinner, because I forgot—maybe I don't even know—that two people can find such pleasure in each other that they forget about time. I didn't sleep well that night and was kidding myself if I thought it was just the strange bed. Because I don't think I've really slept very well since—and it's been six months. Do you believe something like that could have such a long-lasting effect?" Denny looks at me, but I don't think he wants an answer.

"So I had breakfast with Mr. and Mrs. Logan and Edith the next day, chose among the books, got the contracts signed, and left just before noon. Gordon and Polly didn't appear, but by then I was making allowances for them. I drove back on this side of the Hudson. I remember stopping to pick up a few groceries—at the unhistoric Stop & Shop in historic Dobbs Ferry—and still I got back

to the city by two. Anyway, I didn't see any of those people again until today.

“I know you, don't I? I hear a woman's voice saying. I was on my way to the Surrey, on Seventy-sixth, to pick up a book from a client. 'I know you,' I hear, and then I see her, framed by a shop entrance on Madison, but I don't place her right away. I'd only seen her with Gordon.

“Now I remember,' she said. 'You came to Mr. and Mrs. Logan's?' 'Of course,' I said. 'Polly. And Gordon, how's Gordon?' 'No more Gordon . . .' said Polly, with, I thought, a serious look. I started to say, 'He's not ...' and caught myself. 'Not . . .' said Polly, finishing my sentence, 'married to me anymore. Is that what you're trying to say? He's not married to me, and I'm not married to him. We're not married anymore.' But I just kept looking at her as if I didn't understand. 'We're divorced,' Polly said. '*Divorce*—ever hear of it?' And then she asked for my card in case she ever came across any books I might be interested in.

“Well,” Denny says to me, “now I have to revise my memory of the whole evening, and maybe everything since. But that doesn't mean I'll sleep any better tonight.”

Girlfriend aside, I want to go to bed. And it's not that I'm tired of Denny—I'm just tired. I decide to try wrapping it up on a light note. “Denny,” I say to him, “so you're not a specialist in everything. But you *know* Polly has at least a million dollars. And now she's *not* married. And she's got your card...”

But then I see Denny's not laughing or even listening to me. He's just sitting there with his feet up on the coffee table, and I guess correctly that he's still running a six-month-old movie of that evening back and forth in his mind, trying to figure out if there was something he hadn't paid enough attention to. “It *was* getting dark,” he says after a while, “in that yellow dining room.”

