

Ann, meet Bob

by Stephen Stark

Ann got to Panera in Kingstowne early and found a table outside. Robert always said she drove too fast, and she had driven too fast, but she had the strange the sensation of being some sort of weird superhero, like Mighty Mouse, the sensation that she had to fly back—but for what? The fact was, she knew that what she was doing was right. She knew that Robert was not going to undergo some sort of miraculous change, that he was somehow instantly going to become the man he was at 25.

She was, actually, a little scared of talking to Bonnie and Claire. She had shut them out completely and now she was pleading for their help. She knew they'd be forgiving, but she also knew they'd be hurt. Or were hurt. So as she sat there, outside at one of the café tables, she was rehearsing in her head what she was going to say. It wasn't that she felt that she had to get everything exactly right, it was that she needed to make them understand why, after keeping them out of it for the last six months, she suddenly wanted to talk it out with them.

For years now, it seemed, she had spent her life in quiet rage and a kind of despair, and then claustrophobia, living with a man who had become a husk of a husband. In some respects, he had become a husk of himself. He was a shadow who made coffee in the mornings. A shadow behind the morning paper. An scrape of whiskers or daub of toothpaste unrinsed in the bathroom sink.

He was there without being there. It could be in the middle of dinner, and Robert would suddenly excuse himself, as though the muse had tapped him on the shoulder and commanded his presence. And he would be gone. Possibly for hours. Leaving her to sit there with half eaten food.

She could have shot the muse.

And then there was the childishness. The coming home out of the blue with a motorcycle, which she made him turn around and return because a) they couldn't afford it, and b) he hadn't discussed it with her for even a second. And then the forgetting. Disappearing with Robbie and showing up a day later after having been at the cabin at Hickory Lake overnight, and all the wild and furious imagining of horror that went on in her head before she figured out where they were.

He put her in the position of being his mother. (But, her therapist said, you would have had to agree, on some level, to assume that role. Yes, came her too fast comeback, just as a murder victim would have to agree, on some level, to be on the other end of the gun.) And that was a position that was destined to ruin any relationship.

Charlie Burns here: This is a plain misreading by Mrs. Grayson of her husband's narrative and her own role in it. While she may see herself as having been cast by Mr. Grayson in a maternal role, her own narrative contradicts that almost entirely, despite what Mr. Grayson may say about her sharing some characteristics with his mother. That she finds her own mother to be something of an automaton suggests an unexplored discomfort with the maternal role in general, and a lack of an adequate social model.

So the disappearing thing was pretty huge, actually, because of its passive obliviousness to her, her feelings.

But there were also moments—usually during lovemaking (which was in fact deeply lovely and sometimes profoundly moving sex)—when he was so intensely there, that it gave her the hope that

he would remain there, that there was something left inside the husk. A delusion or hope that was quickly dispatched in the morning when she woke and his side of the bed was cold and he was at his computer. Or the husk behind the newspaper. Evidently no recollection at all of the moment last night when she cried with joy and release in his arms.

It was as though he had an evil twin. Or not so much an evil twin, but some weird doppelgänger type other, because on the one hand was Robert, who could be absurdly funny and touching and such a perfect lover that sometimes she lost it—sobbing with joy or even having what she would call out-of-body experiences except that they were such deeply in-body experiences.

The other took the same form and scent and voice but was a blankness who in the morning looked up at you with glazed and distant eyes as though connected to some extra-planetary neural network, downloading streams of data that no one but he could connect to. Looked at you as if nothing at all had happened last night when you had made spectacular, tender, moving love and made you feel ugly and stupid for even bothering to care, whom you wanted to stab in the heart because he was clearly there to fuck with your soul.

Ann here: I never, ever, wanted to stab you in the heart.

This waiting for the moment when Robert would return to himself, when the man she had married would reawaken and reanimate the husk, had got old a long time ago.

He couldn't work up the imagination to so much as kiss her when

she came in the door in the evening the way her parents still did even now, even if it was just some kind of domestic theater. These things are important. That was the first thing old Jack Miles did when he came in the door, was hunt down her mother and give her a peck on the cheek, even if she was on the phone. It was respect, that kiss. It said, I have returned to you.

#

The restaurant was near movie theaters, half a dozen or so other restaurants, a liquor store, a bookstore, and all sorts of other shops. There were junior high school kids everywhere, and she guessed a movie had just let out. She was watching a boy and a girl, probably 12 or 13 years old, looking young and naïve and just possibly in love, holding hands and sitting on a brick wall, and, right behind them, strode a man and a woman. The woman was a very shapely, vaguely Asian-looking bombshell, and the man—this was the weird and eye-catching part—was a dead ringer for her husband.

She knew that this sort of thing could happen, that when you have a breakup, you get breakup hallucinations in which suddenly everybody looks like the person you broke up with. This was not like that. Or it was but it wasn't. This was uncanny. The guy was exactly Robert's height, he had exactly Robert's hair, though a better haircut, and he had exactly the same way of walking that Robert did—or, actually, that Robert used to. She knew that walk. He didn't walk that way any more. It was one of the sexiest things she had ever seen, the way Robert walked. His hips were just a little loose, and his legs were thick and muscular from running, and his walk gave him a sort of coiled and wiry look. She stared at the two of them in something like shock. The woman had long, dark hair that she wore tied up behind her, and both of them were wearing business clothes. The woman was totally well-endowed, like not back-problem-inducing, but the kind of endowment that could make you look down and check your

own.

But suddenly, there was Claire.

There was something about Claire Dickens that Ann had always envied a little. There was an essential coolness to Claire that was almost guy-like. Which wasn't to say that she looked like a guy in any way. It was just that she had that inherent sense of entitlement that guys did.

She had wildly curly hair that she wore at shoulder length, except with her hair it never quite touched her shoulders, and most of the time she wore it either pinned back or tied up. Ann suspected that she had never touched a blow dryer, which wasn't to say that her hair looked bad: precisely the opposite. She also wore either no or next to no makeup. She had an athletic build, slender and lithe. She was one of those big boobed women who were small framed, relatively speaking, with compact, explosive hips. Claire was a sexual rocket with dual nose cones. Where it took most women she knew at minimum half an hour, but likely longer, to get ready in the morning, Claire was the sort of woman who could be ready in five or ten minutes. She'd just jump in the shower throw on some clothes and be out the door. If she did put on makeup, it was as a little around the eyes. And she was gorgeous. All of which was lost on the kindergartners in her care at the Accord School.

Claire said, What'cha lookin' at, girlfriend?

Ann stood up, but put her hand against the chair to steady herself because suddenly she was dizzy.

It was the weirdest thing, she said. There was a guy over there—she said—pointed. She looked, but now she couldn't find him.

He looked just like Robert.

Claire moved forward and put her arms around Ann and held her friend close. Tough day, huh?, she said.

Ann laughed. Yeah, Ann said, An extremely awful, totally weird and loathsome day. She held Claire and did her best to keep from sobbing.

Claire put her hands on Ann's shoulders. Do you really want coffee, or wouldn't drink be better?, Claire said.

Bonnie came up just then, her purse over her shoulder, the strap crossing the middle of her chest. Ann hugged Bonnie, then Bonnie hugged Claire.

We're trying to decide. Claire said. Coffee or drinks, Bonnie?

I don't know. Maybe a drink would be in order, Bonnie said.

Drinks, Ann said.

Beyond the movie theaters, there was a bistro. They went across the plaza, dodging children, teenagers. They walked three abreast, but Claire was leading and nobody really said anything. Ann kept glancing around, looking for the man she'd seen, but he had disappeared as completely as if he were smoke.

When they got to a table, Ann said, You guys, thanks. Thanks for coming.

There were hugs. Ann's eyes got a little wet.

I know I must seem like a crazy person, she said.

Yeah, there's a little bit of the wild-eyed mad woman going on, Bonnie said, smiling. She had a great, warm smile. The kind that a

fourth grader needed on a bad day. The kind of smile that said that some things—caring people—are eternal and you can count on me.

When they sat down, a waiter came with a bowl of salsa and a paper-lined basket of tortilla chips.

I'm Mike, he said cheerily. Can I get you something to drink?

Hi, Mike, Claire said.

He was a twenty-something with broad shoulders and a generically handsome, squarish face. Home from college, maybe, a wrestler, maybe.

Claire eyed Mike-the-waiter lasciviously.

Ann and Bonnie both saw her looking.

What can I get you, ladies?, Mike said.

Claire put a finger in the bowl of salsa on the table, then drew it out and thrust it in her mouth and pulled it out with a wet smacking sound. Matter-of-factly, she said: margarita for me, Mikey. Annie?

Ann shook her head and looked at Bonnie, who rolled her eyes.

Margarita, Ann said. Yeah, okay.

Two margaritas, then? And you?

Chardonnay?, Bonnie said. Mike nodded warmly.

Ann said, Claire, don't even think about it, as Mike walked away.

She said: Oh, I'm going to think about it a lot. He's cute.

Bonnie laughed, then leaned across the table to Ann and said, Have you eaten anything?

No, Ann said, and I'm not sure if I even can.

If we're gonna drink, then I think you need to eat something, Claire said.

The table was outside, with a view of the plaza, and Ann kept glancing around to see if she'd see the Robert-looking guy with the bombshell again.

For Ann, this kind of put it in a nutshell: Sometimes I feel like if I died, he'd, like, forget to come to the hospital or something to claim me.

Both Bonnie and Claire laughed.

Ann said: No. Like, I know it sounds funny, but I have, like, nightmares. I'm on the street, and alone and I keep waiting for him and Robbie but they never show up.

Mike-the-waiter returned, dealt cocktail napkins, and presented them with margaritas ludicrous in their enormosity and frosty with ice and salt. (This was actually kind of a nifty maneuver, the drinks balanced on on a tray—two whopping margarita glasses and one delicate-bycomparison wine glass—and cocktail napkins spun out as his left biceps bulged, and then he deftly placed the drinks on their respective napkins.) Bonnie's white wine seemed so much more reasonable. Ann looked at her glass, a long-stemmed fishbowl.

Ann sipped at the tequila concoction and savored the way a drink feels when it first hits your stomach and there's heat there and then you can feel the heat in your face, in your limbs, making everything

loose. And the fact was, when it came to alcohol, it didn't really matter what you liked or didn't like, as soon as it started hitting you, it tasted good. Period.

Mike-the-waiter disappeared back inside and Ann watched Claire watching him go. Again she glanced around the darkening plaza to see if she could catch a glimpse of the guy who looked like Robert. Sodium vapor lamps made the concrete look ugly.

So how's Robbie handling things?, Bonnie said. Did you tell him?

Not exactly, Ann said, a crystalline image of her son emerging in her head. (She was terrified that they were going to think her not having told him was the stupidest thing in the world.) I wanted to talk to you guys, first. I don't know what to say to him. I mean I do and I don't. I'm so fucking confused.

This seemed like a good time to find a tongue depressor and a funnel and just pour the contents of her fishbowl down her throat. But she would have to be content with a long pull from it, which made her shiver.

Just tell him the truth, Claire said. But don't tell him too much. Like, you know, Mommy and Daddy need some time apart. That kind of thing.

Bonnie said: And if he asks if you're getting divorced, you can tell him, you know, that you might—

—Or you might not, Claire cut in. It just all sort of depends. And listen to him, you know?

Really, Bonnie said. He's a bright kid. You never know how he's going to react.
Robert's his idol. Robert's everything.

Are you jealous?

I don't know. Maybe a little, sometimes, but that doesn't have anything to do with this. I just don't want to do this wrong.

Bonnie and Claire were nodding when Mike-the-waiter returned. How's everybody doing?, he said in a DJ sort of voice, which made Ann want to laugh. The words, not the voice. Horrible, thanks for asking, she wanted to say, but didn't. Fine, fine, they all murmured, because that's what you did.

Mike-the-waiter said: Can I get you ladies something to eat?

If Ann wasn't mistaken, Mike-the-waiter had unbuttoned a couple of buttons on his shirt that hadn't been unbuttoned before.

Claire said: What's the most disgusting appetizer thingie you have that we could share?

Disgusting-disgusting, or disgusting-decadent?, Mike said.

Decadent, Claire said.

Ann said: Do you actually have stuff that's truly disgusting?

Mike-the-waiter said: I guess that all depends upon your idea of disgusting. We have a sampler plate with a bunch of our appetizer, mini quiches, stuffed jalapeños, mini spring rolls, fried mozzarella—

We'll have that, Claire said.

Ann looked into her fishbowl and noticed that her drink was mostly gone. This surprised her because she did not quite remember drinking it so fast. Either that or time had sped up. She looked at

Claire's, and it, too, was. Was. Was gone. Almost. Her head was swimmy.

Mike-the-waiter asked if he could bring a second round. Bonnie lifted up her wine glass and nodded. Claire looked at Ann, then at the waiter. She, Claire, was undressing him with her eyes, groping him, almost. Ann thought she saw lipstick smudges on his cheek, so maybe he was getting actively groped backstage, or wherever it was waiters went when they weren't circling tables. When Ann thought of sweaty grappling, all she could think of was Robert. Not that she hadn't occasionally found someone attractive. But what she thought of was Robert fifteen years ago. Which was kind of interesting. Mike was gone now, and time really was behaving strangely.

Claire put her finger in her glass and stirred. Bonnie said, We didn't know.

Claire licked her finger and said: So, the thing I don't get is you were saying about him not being there.

Ann sighed. It's like this: He's in his office in the basement when I leave and then he's at work when I come home, and then when he comes home, he goes straight to his office. And I mean that's not what happens every day. It's just that when, when he's actually physically present, he's not there. There's no, like, warmth. Claire was probing, and Ann didn't necessarily mind it—she always found that Claire's probing made her think better. She, Claire, said: So why now? Ann picked up her glass—you could kill someone with one of these glasses, it was that heavy—and sipped, or started to sip, but then thought oh, what the hell, and took a long pull from it. Salt sizzled her lips. She knew the answer: this was an easy question. Except right this second, she didn't know the answer.

She said: I don't know what I'm doing. I have no fucking idea. I don't. I love him, yes, and I've tried to be supportive, because I know he's had a lot of anguish with *The* _____ and then with his dad, and...

But it's been years since everything with *The _____*. He thinks of it as a colossal failure, but how many people want to publish books and never do?

Ann here: Weirdly, Robert, this isn't how it happened at all and but also it is. I knew exactly the answer to the "Why now?" question, except there was no single precipitating factor, and that was hard to explain. It wasn't like you had gone and had an affair with another woman, or I had found someone else, or you had beat me up and now I was going to escape. I just couldn't take it. But that wasn't it, either. I had clearly proven to myself that I could take it. The thing was, I didn't want to take it that I could take it anymore. I felt that inaction was going to make me hate you, or hate myself. It's way more complex than I could have explained over drinks.

It's a good book, Bonnie said. Claire nodded. Ann said: I mean everybody goes through grief. It's just part of life. Yeah, but still. Robert and his dad were really close, Bonnie said. Even Leo was close to Duke. Maybe Robert's feeling his own mortality. Well, so am I. Ann was surprised that she had raised her voice. This was almost the same conversation she'd been having for weeks, solo, in her own head. But is he there for the important stuff?, Claire said. I mean there as in there-for-you? Ann sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. Sometimes, she said with a long sigh. Claire crinkled up her eyes and rolled her lips into an O and said, Oooo. Ann said: I guess maybe it depends on how you define important.

She watched as a bus girl—bus person?—unloaded a massive tray of fried stuff—cheese and potatoes and other less easily identifiable food-like products—onto the table and passed them each a plate.

We're actually going to eat that?, Bonnie said.

Claire said: Annie at least needs to eat something.

Ann picked up something that appeared to include bread crumbs, cheese and a whole jalapeño pepper and bit into it. Yes, it was a jalapeño, and it brought tears to her eyes. She was chewing and wiping away the tears as she said, Most of the time, I mean. He's there, but he's not there. And if he's not going to be there, then what's the point? Where's the future? I didn't get married to grow incredibly not close to someone.

This made Claire laugh. And then Bonnie laughed, too. Claire reached across the table and took Ann's hand in her own and said, I think you've hit upon the elemental mystery of marriage. Ann was sort of laughing and sort of crying, and somehow, they had ordered more margaritas. Ann was unsure of the mechanics or logistics of anything—a state that was not preparing her well for the surreal chance meeting that was just over the horizon.

The margarita was a drink Ann generally despised—she did not have a happy history with tequila (tonight would not improve that record). She wasn't sure if this was number two or three. She grabbed another of the jalapeño thingies and nailed it with her teeth.

When the waiter left, Claire said, He is so cute. Ann hadn't even been aware he was there.

Can we talk about Ann?, Bonnie said.

I'm just looking.

Bonnie said: See this is what, this is what I'm not getting. The 'not there' thing. I mean to hear Leo talk about Robert, that's all he ever talks about. I mean, you're all he ever talks about. You and Robbie.

It was getting dark, and Ann was feeling sort of drunk, warm, the top of her head light. She felt stupid and negligent for abandoning Robbie with her parents in West Virginia, and she still wasn't sure that being here was the wisest thing in the world, but she was glad to be here. Glad to try to find some way to unravel the mess in her head, even if that hadn't actually happened yet.

At least she wasn't by herself, which was usually the case.

Bonnie was saying, I mean I guess—

Claire said bluntly: How's the sex?

Ann laughed. You know.

No, Claire said. I wouldn't ask if I knew.

Ann rolled her eyes and dipped her head. Sex isn't everything.

Yeah, it is, Claire said. It is.

Why is everything always about sex?, Bonnie said.

Because ultimately, why else would you be together?, Claire said to Bonnie. Mates mate, you know? Mating is kind of about mating. When there's no mating, then it's kind of not about mating anymore. Bonnie gave the appearance of someone trying to unpack a really complex metaphor or line of reasoning. She then said to Ann: You're evading my question. How's the sex?

The sex is good. The sex is spectacular. It's always been spectacular.

Decrease in frequency?

Bonnie laughed. You sound like a doctor, Claire. 'How are your bowel habits?'

No, Ann said, hiding behind her margarita. No decrease in frequency that I can think of.

How often?

Like what do you mean? Ann was grinning now, a stupid grin, a grin that, if she could see it in a sober mirror, would make her retch.

You mean like monthly? Weekly? Per annum? She was joking now, perhaps vamping for time.

Oh, pick one, Annie, Claire said. Ann could see her watching the waiter again, and she grabbed her hand and hissed, Stop that.

Weekly, Bonnie said, just to get the conversation back on track.

I don't know. Five, six times. Maybe four sometimes.

Claire let out a marvelous guffaw and bent close. You are shitting me, she said, way too loud.

Ann got a look of innocent chagrin and shook her head, eyes wide. The kind of look school kids got when they'd unexpectedly said something true and profound and the adults looked on in amazement—or embarrassment.

Again, way too loud, Claire said: Nobody fucks five or six times a week after they've been married as long as you guys have.

Well, Ann said, but didn't know what else to say.

There was an awkward moment of silence, women closely examining cuticles. People at other tables looking at them, but thankfully

mainly at Claire.

#

Ann here: Robert, I know that our sex life has been a source of amusement for a lot of our friends and neighbors. Because of the scene in *The _____*, and then because of Bonnie and Leo and the boys next door and others overhearing us and maybe especially the boys next door cheering that time when the windows were open. But at this particular point in time, we weren't having very much sex. It was more like once or twice a month, and frankly, while I know you're going for humor here, and it is sort of funny, it also doesn't make that much sense. It would be inhuman to have that much sex and not be close. And sex is so fraught. There is so much of it that is subtext.

I mean if you want honesty, there were moments during that time that I could be with you, physically, or carnally, since you've already claimed 'physically' for other purposes, and not feel very close at all. Like we were exercise partners.

I just said, What's normal? And Claire said, Twice a week, I just kind of nodded. But it had been a while, frankly, since we'd been having a lot more than that. And so to be silly, because I was drunk, I said more and it was sort of a guessing game until I got to five or six. It's fun-ny—No. Honestly, I can't tell if it's funny. In either case, I think you should change it because it's almost entirely impossible to believe.

#

Then Claire said, I know you think that sex isn't everything, but doesn't it bring you, like, closer?

I don't know. It's strange. I mean I know that you guys think we're like rabbits or something, but when it comes to sex lately it's been

more like we're in a kind of zone gym buddies.

Zone?Gym buddies? Bonnie said, What do you mean? She wasn't quite looking at Ann, but dipping a bit of tortilla chip out of her glass.

Like sex for us was a place outside of everything. Dreamy and sort of completely outside of the real world.Like it was exercise. Just the animal part. No kissing.

Ann sighed. The day, the accumulated weight of the months prior and all the surreptitious planning and scheming, felt like it had now crested and was coming down on her. She, Ann, was now close to officially drunk, close to if not officially beyond emotionally exhausted, and the weight was coming down, a broken wave, and she wanted nothing more, right this second, than to crawl into bed and curl up and put her hands over her head and sob. This was not how—not any of it was how—she thought it would be.

Claire leaned close to her. Annie, she said, I'm kind of, like, I mean, I don't get it. I mean, you guys. Sometimes you see these things coming—

Bonnie said: Like you remember Jad and Susan. I mean you could tell, right from the start, that they were doomed.

Could you?, Ann said. I didn't see that, at first.

Jad was hot, Claire said.

Bonnie said: Like, I was so surprised that he even married her. Because she always seemed to want him to be—

Somebody else, Ann said.

Yeah, Bonnie said. Exactly.

Claire ignored her. Whatever happened to them?

I think Jad is in Florida or something, Bonnie said. Selling real estate. Susan teaches in the public schools out in Prince William.

Ann could feel herself shrinking. It was maybe because she was drunk, but it felt like it was actually happening. You knew it, of course, that people were watching what you did, judging your marriage. Not in a bad way. It was just what people did. You were a part of a community. Her brain wasn't working right.

I just never would have thought, Bonnie said. I mean, about you and Robert.

Never, Claire agreed, picking up what could have been a fried cat turd off the appetizer plate, and examining it for a moment before munching on it. Maybe that's why you're confused.

Actually, Ann said, but whatever was coming next had stopped in her throat. The shrinking sensation was a whole body thing, skin and bones and everything—dizziness, the sky and sidewalk and everything around them getting bigger while she got smaller.

She, Ann, looked at Bonnie. She probably knew more about Ann's difficulties with Robert than Claire did.

Ann took a deep breath and tried to start again. Her whole narrative for this evening had been derailed, everything she thought would get said had not gotten said. Whatever that was, though, was as gone as it was unsaid. Everything she had thought would get worked out was still unresolved. She took hold of a damp napkin and squeezed it for poise. She said: What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you? (Although, because of the tequila, it did not come out quite so coherently as all that.)

What do you mean?, Claire said.

I mean the worst thing. Really. Car accident, getting dumped by a boyfriend? Losing a job? Liver eaten by microbes?

Speaking of liver, Claire said, and she raised up her fishbowl and caught the eye of Mike-the-waiter, who now seemed to have some vague notion that this suburban mom was cruising him.

Seriously, Ann said, almost pleaded. She wanted to get up and go pee, but she was afraid she wouldn't be able to make it there without doing some crawling.

What're you getting at?, Claire said, but now Mike-the-waiter was there.

Can we have another round?, Claire said. She didn't seem to get it that Ann was undergoing weird bodily transformations. That pretty soon, she'd be standing on the chair, on tiptoes, just to peer over the edge of the table.

Sure, he said, and as he walked away, she gave his butt a caress, which he either didn't notice, or was too polite to let on that he noticed.

The point I'm trying to make, Ann said, Is that he's never gotten over *The _____*.

The _____ was a good book, Bonnie said.

A really good book, Claire added. So sexy. I used to be so envious of you being married to a writer.

That's it, Ann said, almost shouted.

What?, Bonnie said.

Used to be, Ann said. She rose up in her chair a little, and then came back down again. Somewhere there was 80s music playing and she didn't much care for it. She tapped her forefinger against the tabletop. Used. To. Be. Why not now?

Claire said: Well, that's not quite—

No, it is. *The _____* was supposed to put him on the map, and then stuff happened and no one bought it. And then..., Ann trailed off.

She had never connected with the second novel. She had read it, way back when, and she could tell that it was well-written, but she couldn't feel it. It was sort of experimental and long and seemed to be trying too hard to be flashy and with-it. In *The _____*, the characters had been thoroughly imagined and believable people that you could laugh with and cry with—and Claire was right, it was sexy. The 'famous sex scene,' as it had become sort of jokingly known, at least between Ann and Robert and their friends, was their own lovemaking rendered in words. And from her point of view, rendered pretty much perfectly. Robert had written it over a few days in bed before they were married, a torturously marvelous and prolonged lovemaking session that stopped and started while he did things to her and then took notes. Which was sexy beyond belief, the starting and stopping, his otherworldly concentration when he'd sit up, naked, and get his notebook and stare—no, not stare—observe her (No, don't move, he'd say, and in that there was a kind of objectification of her as a thing of beauty that should have pissed her off, maybe, but actually had made her feel like a goddess, the sheets barely covering her, his eyes seeming to take in every inch of her, both the visible [and everything was visible] and the not visible, scents and emotional color, the movement of time). And then he would come back and there would be more. The 'research' had gone on for days, and it seemed like all they did, make love, except it wasn't. Even if the writing had been crap, it would still have been

great lovemaking.

But it wasn't crap. At the time she first read it, it had felt like a kind of miracle, the marriage of fiction and reality, the way she could see herself as imagined by her husband, which was also incredibly erotic. The layers of the erotic in it—on the page and in her life—were so thick they had always been too difficult to unpack. And at the time, back then, she thought that there was no more she could ask for. That some essence of her, of them, had been preserved in amber. She had never suspected, then, that their lives would not be like the book, or that the book might have stolen some life from them. He still had that otherworldly concentration, except it wasn't focused on her, if it ever had been.

#

The thing is, Ann was saying, He hasn't gotten over it, and he hasn't gotten on with life. I mean I've been thinking about this a lot, trying to figure out what happened to the man I married. Part of him just hit the pause button when no one wanted the second novel. He's been writing and everything, but then his dad died—and they were really close—and it's like he put himself on the shelf alongside his novel. You know? I've just been shut out. I've gone from being his muse to being—, I don't know.

Now Ann saw the waiter coming and got up to use the ladies'. It took real concentration to walk inside the restaurant to the the bathroom. She didn't notice the Robert-looking guy sitting at a table nearby with his friend, the Bombshell. Good thing, actually, because she likely would have hit the concrete beneath her feet like a fly on a windshield.

She didn't see them on the way back, either, but she was concentrating so hard on her footsteps across a moving floor, an unstable earth. She didn't drink this much pretty much ever, and so

each step was a trial.

Sitting again was much better. She looked at her new margarita and knew if she finished it, Claire was going to have to find a gurney and wheel her to the car.

I just can believe you did this behind our backs, Bonnie said, fortified by a few drinks, but instantly regretting the way it came out. Ann could see the torsion in her face.

She put her hand out, laid it on Bonnie's. I had to, she said.

And it was pretty much there that it happened. The so-far-untouched margarita on the table in front of her, her hand on Bonnie's.

Ann had felt, at that point, that she was finally getting somewhere, and things had sort of piled up in her head, ready—actually sort of jumping around—to be said. Except they wouldn't be.

Claire said: Annie. Oh. My. God.

Claire was looking right over Ann's shoulder, and Ann had to crane around and screw up her face in order to see what had so profoundly got her attention.

What?, Ann said, but Bonnie was looking now too, with the same look of astonishment.

Ann finally got her eyes to focus, and there he was, her husband, looking better and happier than she'd seen him in ages, with the same Bombshell she'd seen him with earlier (So it was him). His hand was on the small of her back and he was talking and she was smiling and then laughing. There was a moment there before pure recognition hit that he looked kind of dashing in his blazer and button down shirt. Not that anyone was asking.

He actually didn't notice them at all until she turned around—which,

when she thought about it much later, should have tipped her off that something was amiss. But this amiss-ness was so completely and thoroughly out of the normal bounds of amiss-ness that it was to be forgiven that she had no clue that the Robert who was now standing a few feet away, wearing a look somewhere between amused and aghast, was not in fact Robert at all, but Bob.

And Bob, for his part, had no way of knowing—at that particular moment—that this Ann was not his Ann, but Robert's Ann.

Hello, Ann, Robert said as he approached. He removed his hand from the woman's back and gave a little wave to Bonnie and Claire and showed no sign of recognition whatsoever.

Ann could taste tequila in her throat, in her sinuses. She had the very strong sensation that her internal gyroscope had made a hard tilt and she was about to fall out of her chair and hit the concrete, hard.

Hello, Robert, Ann said, her words choking.

I don't believe we've had the pleasure, Robert said right past Ann, to Bonnie and Claire. Ann shot them a quizzical look (the doing of which made her more dizzy) and both of them seemed slightly amazed as he leaned in and offered each of them his hand.

Claire first.

Bob Grayson, he said, And you are?

Claire said, Claire, and giggled because what else could you do.

Then Bonnie.

Bob Grayson.

Bonnie, Bonnie said and giggled, too, because it was such a silly put-on.

But it was a silly and sexy put on, is what Ann was thinking.

Ann, Bonnie, Claire, this is Mia. Mia, Ann here is my soon-to-be ex-wife, whom you've no doubt heard about, and her friends Claire and Bonnie.

In a very weird, school-girlish and shockingly embarrassing moment, the three of them said, all at once, Hi, Mia.

They would have laughed had it not been so weird.

I see Ann is enjoying her favorite pastime, Bob said, glaring at Ann, but she had no idea what he was talking about and he didn't elaborate. He and Mia stood there for a few more moments, and then said goodbye.

And then he was gone and Ann could do nothing but sit there, her head craned around, and stare at the space that he'd occupied.

It took a couple of minutes for them to recover.

What the fuck just happened?, Claire said.

If she, Ann, had been confused before, that was pretty much nothing compared to the overwhelming mental dishevelment she was undergoing this moment. It was like he had supernatural powers, like he'd been slain and reborn.

#

Ann here: I think you've done as good a job at capturing the way I

felt, but it still doesn't quite get to how fast I had gone from weirdly hopeful to completely devastated. And I wasn't supposed to feel that way, is the thing. I think it's the most confused I ever was, right then. Not only did I hate you, I felt like I'd been completely had. I mean I'd been stuck with this inert man who had once been so sexy I couldn't keep my hands off him, who'd once been so handsome and funny and athletic and now was just sort of drifting in his own imaginary world. And then, as soon as he got the papers, he'd been transformed. That's what I was thinking. And I blamed myself. Because it was clearly my fault.

The other thing, though, was there was also another element of wonder—that you could actually be you again. Which is just what I had wanted. Just not with the Bombshell on your arm.

#

She wasn't on my arm—she was on Bob's arm. She was a colleague of his.

#

They looked like people who had been fucking.

#

They might have been. But you had no way of knowing that, then. Neither did I.

#

I cannot believe that, Ann said. Her mouth just dropped. All three of them just sat there in stunned silence. Finally, Claire said, Jesus. I never would have thought Robert— Bonnie said: Annie, I had no idea. I'm so sorry. And things had changed, just like that.

