

The several stages of grief

by Stephen Stark

It was the weirdest thing in the world, but his first thought—his first, hardwired, core, essential thought—was to call Ann. A million times he had called her when something had happened, and a million times she had been there. *You're not going to believe this, but...*

The thought was faster than a synapse firing, but at the same time it was a full-blown projection/hallucination of a conversation.

And his second thought was perhaps even weirder, or just plain stupider. I'm being laid off.

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I know this was a stupid thought but maybe it wasn't that far outside the back door of rationality because the economy had been getting worse since the winter, my 401(K) was shrinking like a balloon too long from the party, and now, as the presidential primaries were all but over, the financial landscape had dark clouds roiling across it. Everyday there were dark intimations of disaster. There was an initiative going on at The Firm called Project Alignment, and everyone was a bit nervous about whether they were going to have a job.

There had been rumors of layoffs, and there actually had been some layoffs, though in distant parts of The Firm, not here, and rumors of moving certain fungible sorts of corporate functions either overseas or to godforsaken holes of America where the only jobs currently to be had were in fast food joints or meth labs. This worried me, because writing was one of those jobs that could be done anywhere, supposedly.

The Firm not infrequently undertook initiatives that were intended to streamline processes, leverage synergies, increase shareholder value, build employee engagement. None of them ever seemed to gain much traction. Nor did they ever seem to accomplish much of actual value that I could see. Still, these projects were launched with much fanfare. Thoughtful and sincere communications landed in employee email inboxes all over the

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world. The handsome, affable, glassy eyed CEO would make webcast speeches in his vacant, droning and soporific style. (His name, the CEO, was Ken, and his wife—you cannot make these things up—was named Barbie.)

*These would be followed by 'chats' from the wolfishly reptilian CFO, a man who made attempts at jokes that were so tinny and hollow and, frankly, such blatant attempts to humanize himself**[6]** (an impossible task), that they made you wince. (You could best imagine the CFO—who was tall and gaunt and black-haired, and likely years younger than I—if you pictured him outside a courthouse, with a phalanx of lawyers, having just been convicted of some sort of multimillion dollar financial crime.)*

In these grandiose efforts, princely sums of money would be spent on consultants, vacant offices would suddenly be outfitted and occupied, and analysts, like worker ants, would crawl the company, doing their analyses, and then the offices would go vacant again. In some corner of the company, a piece of the initiative would take hold, and suddenly, people who had had their own, private offices, now shared an office with six or seven other stunned and now sullen people. But then there would be dark rumblings in middle management, hints of rebellion, and the initiative would fade away, but those packed offices in that same corner of the company would remain packed. At least until attrition made them roomy again.

This newest project, though, Project Alignment (after, I had heard, the name Project Realignment had been nixed—even though it was more accurate—as introducing the possibility that the C-level might actually have made mistakes) had a near-mythical status around The Firm the last several months. Despite all the earlier, failed attempts at streamlining, finding synergies, and improving shareholder value, there was the general impression that management, the C-level, was desperate to be seen doing something.

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In the course of about ten seconds after putting the papers down on his desk, he went through all the stages of grief several times,

but kept stopping at denial. But it wasn't so much denial as it was sheer disbelief. Which maybe was denial of denial.

What the fuck was she thinking?

Things in the overall marital sense had not exactly been yippy-skippy for a while—okay, years—but there had never been any sort of intimation, as far as Robert was concerned, or at least any serious intimation that things had gotten to the point of lawyers. Yes, she had said things on occasion about maybe we need time apart. But it seemed to him completely impractical, and she just didn't get it that what he was trying to do in continuing work on *The Sprawling Novel* was for them. For her. His desperation, as he saw it, was to show her that he really was the man she married.[7]

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*And but so okay get this: not last night but the night before, the night before she and Robbie left, we had made love. My and Ann's lovemaking was, actually, something to write home about, assuming someone would have been there to read the letters. I don't want to get all lurid here, but if nothing else in our marriage worked, and I still maintain that this was a very long list, sex was at the top. The kind of thing(s) that happened between the two of us in bed (and, yes, elsewhere) were an evolving masterpiece of personal, irreproducible erotic art. These were the sorts of things that I, as a hormonally turbocharged 19-year-old, could never have begun to imagine that could happen when you were in love with someone, and in love with her body and when that love was reciprocated. If you were never present as such a thing unfolded, which of course took years, you could not imagine how startling and even alarming it could be. Not always, but also not infrequently this was I-haven't-ever-ventured-into-this-territory lovemaking. A long and incremental revelation of beauty and mystery. If you want to know more about this—in the lurid sense, then go read the 'famous sex scene' in *The _____*, which I wrote in bed with Ann before we were married.*

The thing was, now, fifteen plus years later, the thing that amazed me more than anything was that she continually amazed me. But I don't want to overstate this: What I mean is that I could walk into

the bedroom and she would be getting ready for work or something, partly dressed, and I would see her in a way I was pretty sure I'd never seen her before. Or I could see her across the room at a party and she'd be talking to someone else, and it was like I simultaneously recognized her and didn't recognize her. And that was maybe the thing that was so annihilating to me, right then, on the day of the paperwork: I mean, an hour ago I would have said to anyone, if the topic had come up, that the single thing that most amazed me about my marriage was that someone I had lived with for more than a decade could continually surprise me. That the universe was such a place that you could actually have, as your mate, your sexual partner, someone whose desire for you matched or even outdid your own desire for her, whose core erotic impulses sparked every corner of your imagination, even corners you had no idea existed—and never once grossed you out. And that night, the night before she left town, was no different. Fireworks. [8]

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And so what was up with that?

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Ann here: I was trying to make up my mind. Or I was saying goodbye.

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Okay, just to give you an example of how totally cool she was, and how easily it all worked between us. One time I was being silly, and, honestly, I don't know where this stuff comes from, but we were naked, and I said, in one of those fake two-way radio voices, [crackle noise] Houston, approaching the mothership, request permission to initiate docking procedures, and I mean, without missing a beat, she says, Grayson One, this is Mission Control, permission granted, and she was totally doing her own [crackle] voice, it could've been the two of us cracking up, but it wasn't. I don't know exactly how long it was, but we kept doing this, the whole, Houston/Mission Control stuff, in these third-party voices, we ended up describing the entire business. I don't want to get too graphic about this, but, for example,

she'd say, Grayson one, request you apply more pressure to docking port. Or I'd say, Mothership, request initiation of zero gravity roll.

It sounds utterly goofy, I know, and it wasn't like we did a lot of game playing, but things would just happen spontaneously like that, and it could've been either of us starting it, and it just worked.

And the other thing about it was, to the best of my recollection, that never happened again. There were other things, games, if that's what you wanted to call them. But it wasn't like I ever said to her, Let's go play NASA.

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Ann here: I had completely forgotten about that. It was so funny but it wasn't funny at all. There was something so spontaneous and honest about it. That was what made it so erotic.

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Robert's phone rang and he ignored it after he determined it wasn't Ann, but stared at the papers now on his desk.

They had got the wrong Robert Grayson.

That could be the only explanation. There must have been, somewhere, a Robert Duke Grayson, Jr. who had a wife named Ann and a son named Robbie, and a marriage that was evidently so damaged that the only answer for that other family, that other marriage, was its dissolution. But they were not those people. He was not that Robert. She was not that Ann.

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I could not have known, at that moment, how completely right I was that there must have been another Robert Duke Grayson, Jr. But I had no idea how far off the mark I that whimsical thought was. For me, at that moment, it was just, I would guess, denial.

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Yes, it was true that she had thrown the D-word at Robert more than once. But it was something she said in heated moments, something he never thought she really meant. Like when he did something she found head-spinningly idiotic. Like going to a water park with Robbie when he was four or five with some friends and realizing after a long afternoon that the friends had left and the two

of them were stranded and she had to drive the hour plus to come get them.

What is wrong with you, Robert? I clean up after you like you're a kid, and I'm not just talking about the crap all over the house, I'm talking about life, here, Robert.

But they left.

I talked to Jim and Sandy and they said you told them to go ahead. I did?[9]

Head shaking and incredulity.

Oh, and let's not forget the time he forgot her birthday—or not so much forgot it as completely and unforgivably let it sail past on the calendar, and in some sort of test that she had devised to evaluate his attention, his emotional availability, she had not reminded him, nor had she reminded Robbie, and so had actually let the two of them disappear and go to their cabin at Hickory Lake for the day, only to return in the evening to Ann sitting in the kitchen, the house unbelievably scrubbed and scoured (she tended to clean when she was pissed off; generally speaking, the cleaner the house was, the more pissed off she was) and she was just sitting there, glaring, silent, cartoon steam coming out of her ears, her incredibly gorgeous pale and creamy skin gone completely red in the face, and it was only then that he had remembered, only then that he stopped in his tracks and just gaped in horror at the awfulness of the crime that he had committed. (His mind went blank—there truly was a complete whiteness that came up like an ocular migraine behind his eyes—and he could feel his heart suddenly drop out of chest and fall through the floor.)

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Ann here: You have no idea, Robert, how lonely it is when you're completely and utterly ignored. I know you didn't see it that way, but I felt like there was furniture that you thought more highly of than me. And maybe it was a test, maybe I wanted some sort of sign from you that I wasn't just some sort of babysitter or *au pair* for you. The complete absence, on your part, of recognition—how many birthdays

had we shared together?—of acknowledgment was simply devastating.

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Or likely it was not a test. She said later, in one of a series of 'exchanges' between them, that she had hoped, hoped, and then prayed, on her fucking knees, that it was some kind of elaborate joke, that it was a set up for a surprise. And what a fucking elaborate joke it was, goddamn you. What a marvelous fucking surprise, thank you, Robert.

It was not the first such thing he had forgotten in his absorption in his work (his real and true work, his writing) and in his absorption in Robbie's life. And in his—frankly—pre-adolescent fucking self-absorption. (Ann's words.)

Where are you? We promised Leo and Bonnie we'd come down for dinner and I'm sitting here, all dressed and ready to go.

I promised Robbie I'd take him to the movies and we just bought tickets.

Depredations of that nature. He'd stand there and grab at his hair involuntarily, both hands clutching the hair at the sides of his head, pulling, as though that would usher in some kind of sense.

The birthday debacle was two years ago, and there had ensued one of the more astoundingly brutal and lengthy arguments they had ever had—argument really not being up to the task of describing the conflagration that ensued. Not even close.

How he had done it, forgotten so completely, was a mystery to him. There was a part of him that knew her birthday, that knew how much things like that mattered to her, and kept abreast of them aggressively and assiduously[10]. And but yet there was another part of him that was just out there, in some kind of platonic alternate universe in which nothing existed except him and his work, or him and Robbie[11], and time had no particular constraints. That was the place he wrote from, a place like a book, which you could always pick up on page whatever and Count Vronsky was on his horse, racing, and the horse was yet alive, and would, forever on that page, be alive but also be headed for its doom. Life, in this case,

did not in anyway imitate art. Time went past, dates were dates, and you couldn't rewind.

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Ann here: I have to say, Robert, that I actually find this particular passage pretty angry-making and self-serving. I'm not going to argue that it's not true, but you're painting the Robert character here in a more saintly and benign light that you/he would have appeared to me/Ann. It's your story, though, and it's still too early yet to tell how you're planning on using this. But you have no idea—or, I dearly hope *had* no idea—how hurtful all that was. I'm not saying that I handled it in the best way possible. But that's about us and not about the text.

That whole business about 'emotional availability' above is something I think your narrator ought to explore a little, perhaps from Ann's point of view. Her sense of claustrophobic frustration.

Living with someone whom you love but who ignores you to the point of complete absence (i.e., is emotionally unavailable) is a lonely experience. You might want to consider her/my perspective, because not to be validated, not even to be *acknowledged*, is a desolate state of affairs. You/Robert might not get it—at this point in the story I understand that that's part of the point—because of the way he's/you're wired, you/he are/is getting all necessary acknowledgement and validation from Robbie/Robbie and your/Robert's imaginary friends.

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Ann was the smartest and prettiest, and often the funniest, woman Robert had ever met, and so but the thing about her being funny what that it had its obverse in that she could be astoundingly brutal, even cruel, in her verbal assaults if you happened to get on the wrong side of her. And apologies were really not enough to assuage such depredations as forgetting a birthday. Prostration at her lovely feet was not enough. There were moments when ritual disembowelment didn't seem as though it'd be an adequate display of the appropriate regret or remorse.

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Ann, here, again: In forgetting/ignoring a person's birthday, there's an implicit, passive-aggressive statement that cannot simply be withdrawn by an apology—or even ritualized self-mutilation. It's something that has to be got over. Which takes time.

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He honestly had no idea why these situations happened. How he could get so absorbed in one particular avenue of thought and everything else simply disappeared. She wanted him to be absorbed in the avenue of thought of Ann, and he was, but in a vastly different way than she wanted him to be.

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Ann: I don't think I can fairly comment on this.

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But of course you could not get past the reality that there was some complicity in the whole gruesome affair on her part. *You could have reminded me.* You could have thought about me, for once.

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Ann: Complicity? Oh, for fuck's sake, Robert. [12]

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This is not about us. Or it is but it isn't. This Robert has to have scales on his eyes so that they can fall off later on.

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Ann: I understand that, darling, but please. Don't you think that's taking it a bit far? *I could have thought about you.*

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The thing was, he loved his wife. He loved her in a way that he apparently could not satisfactorily express, or could only express in ways that were apparently as incomprehensible to her as whatever it was she wanted him to do or be or say was to him.

And one night during a lull in the storm after the birthday situation—the lull being not any sort of actual ebbing of the anger and general vitriol and disbelief at his completely-fucking-stupid-and-thoughtless behavior as it was pure exhaustion—she said, Maybe you do love me, Robert, in your own way.

In your own way. What other way does a person have to love someone else?

Still, there were heated exchanges that went into the evenings, late. Sleep was lost by all, save Robbie, who was given a complete pass, because, as a child, he could not be held accountable for his father's completely-fucking-stupid-and-thoughtless behavior. Such exchanges continued in the mornings, with entire agendas of grievance, old and new, with acid recollections of crimes and affronts appearing from the ether.

She threw the word 'divorce' at him more than once throughout the duration of that situation. At first he had pleaded with her not to say it. And then, trying another tactic, said, Okay, so just tell me how that would help, please?

He was on pins and needles for weeks. Even in the shower she might hunt him down and start in on the 'conversation' they had left in exhaustion the night before.

He thought of leaving for a while, of staying with Leo for a few days—thinking about it now, or not exactly thinking about it but reliving it in a sort of nonlinear time, maybe he should have. He had no idea.

He had no honest recollection of when it had finally gotten to be too much for both of them and not so much gone away as attenuated. Her birthday was in April. By Christmas, maybe, it was over. Or passed.

But even in the savagery that went on, there were moments of purely insane lovemaking. A lot of it wordless except at certain moments (mostly navigational, regarding physical geography). And at least for Robert these lovemaking sessions were miraculous indentations in the gravity of events.

He had made sure that Christmas, and their anniversary, were good. And subsequent birthdays. That was two years. He tried to think what could have happened. What straw it was that might have broken the putative camel's back. Nothing came to mind.

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He felt so dizzy that he was not sure he could stand.

It was astonishing to him that a piece of paper, with its own weird and deeply sinister counter-narrative of divorce, could bear so much weight. The weight of the world, in fact.

The screen on his computer went dark. Which meant it was about exactly half an hour since he last touched it. It was entirely likely that every neuron in his brain was misfiring. It was entirely likely that his sanity had vacated the premises entirely.

He stared at the office wall, white in the sub-visual flicker of the fluorescent lights, and marveled—more a kind of stunned wondering—that he had been in the same office for at least five years. Maybe it was more than that. Every day, five days a week, vacations excluded, he had sat here. Unlike the women—Darlene for example—he had never decorated. The one thing he did have was a Library of America poster of William Faulkner, and the man glowered down from the wall. (Oh, the alcohol.) There were pieces of swag that he had picked up here and there, a baseball with an eyeball painted on it, a stress ball in the shape of a brain, several coffee mugs stuffed with pens and pencils. No plants, no warm little touches of home, because frankly he had not expected to be here this long. When he started working for The Firm eleven years ago, when it had become clear that *The _____* was not going to be paying too many more bills, he needed some kind of stopgap. He'd found the job through a temp agency, then converted to full time. He had never dreamt it would be a career.

He read the letter again. Her lawyer, Elaine S. Powers, had kindly invited him to call her. He was supposed to inform her of his response to the letter so that all of this didn't have to go to court. He had no idea who Elaine S. Powers was, but he knew instantly that he hated her more than he had hated anyone in his life.

He studied the documents. The hardest one to take was the one restraining him, *enjoining* him, in contact with his son. How on earth could a person do such a thing? Looking at it made him feel as though he might vomit again, but he did not.

He picked up the telephone and punched in the telephone number of her parents' condo. Her father, Jack, picked up on the first ring. Hello, Robert, he said.

Jack..., Robert started, but Jack cut him off.

Don't think I'm not unsympathetic, Robert, Jack said. Because I am. I know it's painful. (Robert tried to work out all of the negatives in the sentence.)

Jack Miles, Anne's father, was a powerful lawyer, a guy who seemed to have been born in a bespoke Savile Row suit, with a briefcase in one hand and some sort of writ in the other, and really expensive Parisian cologne artfully applied. Robert had always got along with them, Anne's folks, but part of him figured that Jack had to be behind this. He had been prepared to be incredibly pissed off, to shout, perhaps scream, if only to vent some of the anger and grief boiling inside him. Maybe it was merely tactical, but Jack had made that impossible now.[13]

I'm only going to say two things, Jack said.

Okay, Robert said.

The first is: my daughter makes her own decisions. And the second is, until further notice, I do not want you calling here again. Are we clear?

Thanks, Jack, you're a fucking mensch.

The line went dead.

He stared at the handpiece of the phone and was almost glad that Jack had hung up on him. He had no idea what he would have said to Ann.

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Ann here: He never told me you called. I don't know whether I should be glad or not. But anyway you have no idea, Robert, how much I wanted you to. How much I wanted to hear your voice.

It's funny—funny-odd, not ha-ha funny—that in our limitations, in the sort of mono-linearity of our own narratives (however multivalent we may think them), there are so many missed connections. What if I had talked to you? I actually think I might have known what I wanted to say to you that I couldn't say to you

when we were both in the same house, living the same rote existence we'd lived for so long. But Jack was trying to protect me, living in his own mono-linear narrative of 'protective father.'

And, anyway, it didn't happen.

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Next, he started to call Ann's cell phone. But then he didn't. Again, he had no idea what he would have said.

Then he got up and tied up the plastic garbage bag in his trash can so the vomit wouldn't stink too much, and headed for the elevator. It hadn't been more than an hour since he'd gotten the paperwork, but it felt like forever.

The air in the stumbling hallway tunneled ahead of him and he was thankful that the hallway was empty.

And then, as he was waiting at the elevator bay, nauseated again, head spinning, *the girl* came up and smiled. *The girl*—okay, woman—merited italics because in the vast grayness of The Firm's cube world, she was as bright a slash of color as the reddest lipstick. She appeared to be a multiracial melting pot that seemed to have gotten the sexiest possible genes from her very generous ancestors. Her wide, dark eyes had a vaguely Asian look. Her light coffee skin could as easily have come from the Dominican or Puerto Rico as it could have North Africa or South Asia or any combination of warm and cold climes. But it had a numinous beauty, her skin, even in the awful fluorescent lighting of the hallway.

He didn't want to be disrespectful of her, or of his wife, but she was hard not to look at, even in an essentially sub-hysterical state. She was almost as tall as he was—which made him average and her taller than average—and she had a classic bombshell figure, luscious hips and a narrow waist and wonderfully generous breast-titure. Robert had—when he was in her presence—spent no small amount of time groping her with his eyes. For example if he happened to run into her in the kitchen and she happened to open the refrigerator, which, even on a good day, was a foul-smelling collection of lunch boxes, long-forgotten leftovers, personal cartons of half and half, with threatening warnings affixed by their owners, and the like. And

so but the way she would open the refrigerator, with her right hand up resting on the closed freezer door handle, and her left hand holding the open door was a particular configuration of body position, of arm and door and light that gave a marvelous view of said breastiture, and maybe if it was a lucky day, she would be wearing a blouse open far enough that he could see the way that skin descended from her neck and shoulder and expanded into a black or red or (once) purple brassiere. (Not that he was actually tracking such things as the color of her bras.) She also had dark, straight hair (Robert suspected a European-Filipino mashup where her hair was concerned), which she wore—today at least—pulled back in some sort of complicated hair-thing that probably had its own software to manage.

He knew from Greg, who was trying to get her to model some of his designs, that she was a coder, like Leo. So she had to be the best looking geek on the planet. And now here she was, a remarkably sexy cavitation in the space around him.

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Okay, I admit it. She was sexy, yummy-sexy, with an aura of sexual charisma, and if I were ever going to have an affair with someone (and maybe now would have been a good time to jump on that idea) the woman would have been tops on my list—not that I had a list. I had no idea what her name was, though Greg had probably told me, but she was the kind of woman that made heads turn the way that Ann did. She was maybe ten years younger than I was, a detail that I could pretty much figure because when she wore slacks, she tended toward low-rise slacks, and once, on a Friday, I saw her emerge from the ladies room in what I guessed was her evening party wear—tight low-rise jeans and a midriff type blouse that showed off her belly and the two wonderful dimples moonlike above each hemisphere of her ass. And there was, thankfully, no tattoo.

It is perhaps axiomatic that any man's description of a certain kind of woman is going to seem sexist to some in that it pretty much only involves secondary sexual characteristics, or at least initially focuses to a fault on such things. So, guilty as charged, but it

seemed a minor miracle to walk down the hall behind her and watch the roll of her hips, the curvature of her buttocks. In addition, and I don't mean this just to try to offset the aforementioned sexism, she seemed really nice, and according to Leo's intel she was pretty close to one of the most brilliant people around.

But of course that didn't change the fact that my wife had just served me with papers and she could have ripped off her blouse and invited me back to her office for a roll in the putative hay and I would not have accepted the offer.

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Ann here: Robert, it's not so much that it's sexist. More that it's demeaning to be thought of first as a sex object, only to have the lame appendages 'nice' and 'brilliant' tacked on as a (really lame) afterthought, as though in the face of her overall sexiness, that seemed to be out of the ordinary. And then there's the way you dwell on it.

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Well, my love, okay so I'm sexist, which I'm not even sure what means in the context of describing a sexy female character. If it means that I'm envisioning her from the viewpoint of my gender, then, whatever. She was quite attractive, and initially it had nothing to do with brilliance, although something to do with niceness. I would argue that it's pretty much completely natural for a male to evaluate pretty much any female as a potential procreational partner on a sort of prima facie basis. And maybe facile basis. If you, my dear, with your heart- and traffic-stopping beauty and sexual charisma, could feel all of the gazing that goes on around the general vicinity of your very lovely bottom, and if those gazes gave off heat, then I'd guess your lovely ass would pretty much feel as though it were constantly on fire.

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I don't know what to say to that, frankly. I will try to take it as a compliment, though one prefers not to be distracted by thoughts of all the potential gazes that might alight on one's posterior.

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She smiled, and Robert made a face that was supposed to be a smile, but looked more like a grimace.

Cold?, she said.

The elevator pinged and he looked for the light that would tell which one had arrived.

Do you have a cold?, she said. He liked the way she dipped her head toward him, and angled her face.

They were both moving toward the open door, and he held it for her. He nodded as they got on the elevator because it was a lot easier to claim he had a cold than to try to explain that he'd been sobbing in his office.

The door closed and he had a sensation of falling even though the elevator wasn't moving yet.

I hate summer colds, she said. They're the worst. She pressed six.

Now, with the door closed, Robert was pretty sure he was going to vomit again, and he pressed his head against the wall hoping it would be cool.

(It was curious to him that even as awful as he felt, he still could not help but gaze at her, although surreptitiously.)

The elevator opened and she got off, saying, Bye, and he croaked out a 'Bye' of his own, and, until the door closed, he watched the way her marvelous black skirt draped to take on the precise contours of what appeared to be a naked bottom beneath its flimsy curtain.

Downstairs, he hurried outside, and it had to have been the most perfect day yet this late spring, but he was gasping. He hurried into the parking lot and searched for his Civic, but finally just squatted down between two cars and sucked for air. He wasn't crying, he wasn't throwing up, he was just hyperventilating.

There was an element to all of this of the immediate, pre-death, life-before-your-eyes routine. And it was, more or less, routine. He was remembering Ann when they met in college, the way she'd sat down next to him in a nearly empty classroom, the yellow blouse she wore. He remembered talking with her in a hallway, the air filled with sexual tension as they arranged to get together. He

remembered shopping with her in a thrift store, her going nuts over a dress, as in, *This is the coolest dress*, and marveling that this could be happening to him, this extraordinarily smart and sexy woman in a thrift store marveling over a dress that he was imagining removing from her at the earliest possible convenience. He remembered—entirely without any sort of volition—her writing on the sidewalk near his apartment a love note in sidewalk chalk. He remembered leaving her notes. Sending her emails loaded with silly double entendre. Re: Mulberry bush. May I dance around yours? He remembered the 'birthing room' where Robbie had emerged pink as seven-pound four ounce wad of Big League Chew. There was no particular chronology, just a jumble of often discontinuous moments, as though the garrote around his chest was squeezing so hard it had pushed something vital all the way up inside his skull that was now squeezing some sort of memory secretion gland and had it working in hyperdrive, spewing out all sorts of new love/lust type crap.

So much that was once true that was no longer true.

He started walking, and the sensation of his chest being garroted was bad now, the garrote getting tighter, and he thought of his father in the bed at the nursing home the night before he died, the toughest man he'd ever known now frail and wheezing with every breath, and utterly alone even though Robert and his mother, Arlene, were there. He thought about how it all came down to that, how brief and ultimately futile, as Shakespeare had it, was our time upon the stage.

He walked.

Tyson's Corner was not a good place to walk, as in treacherous. What sidewalks there were had been installed more as a civic responsibility (or legal requirement) than with any kind of real utility. The whole area was concrete, asphalt, steel, office towers and parking garages, shopping malls and hotels. You heard stories about people dying on certain McLean streets, just trying to cross. Even so, people walked, and during lunch hours in reasonable weather, people ran, jogged, speed-walked. The area was actually better for these kinds of pedestrian pursuits, because they weren't really about

getting anywhere, just about going a certain distance and then turning around and going back to work.

He crossed Route 7, which was roughly eight lanes of savage traffic, but when he was on the other side, he had no idea how he had got there, or if he had waited at the light. He just stood there, looking back down the highway at the high-rise where his office at The Firm was. The Firm's corporate headquarters, its flagship building, was absent any sort of feature you would remember—a characteristic, or non-characteristic, it shared with its interior.

He had no idea why he was on this spot. Perhaps he had thought that the mere act of getting outside, of fleeing the place where the paperwork lay, he could flee the reality of it.

It was then—in a moment of something like delirium—that he turned and collided with a very sweaty man.

Or, rather, the man ran into him. There was no sound—or likely if there was, it was all grunting and other unintelligible nonsense, but the noise of the highway drowned it out. There was momentary grappling as both of them struggled to not to fall.

And then they were face to face. Which was extremely weird. Not because Robert's hands were slimy with another man's sweat. Nor because it was embarrassing to have a collision where conceivably no collision should ever have taken place. There was plenty of room.

The extremely weird thing—which adverb, extremely, does not even begin to cover the true, extreme, elemental weirdness of it—the extremely weird thing was that suddenly Robert was looking at himself.

That conclusion was clearly dawning on the other Robert in pretty much watches-synched simultaneity. Given that this was simply *not possible*, there were moments of extreme and rigorous mental calisthenics on either side of this embrace as both Robert—and apparently, the other Robert—grappled with the obvious but impossible. This was not something a person ever experienced—even a person with an unknown but identical twin suddenly meeting that twin. There would always be in those cases enough differences that you could instantly say, well, yes, that could

be my twin. This particular situation was not that kind of situation. And in this situation Robert was not in any sort of metaphysical or spiritual sense seeing himself, as in the scales falling from his eyes and seeing himself as he was. He was a long way from that kind of insight.

What it was was this: He was literally seeing *himself*. Which takes a little more than a few moments to get your head around, frankly.

This was he. Him. Robert Duke Grayson, Jr., in the flesh. Admittedly, this other Robert Grayson was trimmer and more fit, and sweating—as Robert did—like he'd just run through a sprinkler. But he was still him. And of course *not* him. Which was kind of the problem.

There was a moment in which Robert completely forgot everything else and was flushed with embarrassment. As far as he could tell, either then or later, there was no rational basis for being embarrassed. It was just the first thing that happened, that is, after the totally mind-fucking confusion. But then the embarrassment gave way to a series of highly complex emotions that came and went so fast they could not be listed much less categorized.

And now the thinking reader is no doubt asking the obvious question: What made him so sure the other guy was him? He? Whatever.

The kicker—the thing that made him believe that either the impossible had happened or he had completely lost his mind—was the T-shirt of the running man.

This was the kind of thing that might have been faked by well-funded and technologically adept intelligence organizations in order to gaslight a person, but since there was no especial reason that Robert could think of why a well-funded intelligence operation would want to waste such resources on him—and clearly, as a school teacher, Ann didn't have the resources for such a thing. So he had to go with the idea that this was real. Or as real as anything was at the moment.

The T-shirt was one that Robert himself owned and used to run in—it had been months since he'd run, maybe even more than a year.

And but so the kicker part of the kicker was that this was not an off-the-shelf sort of T-shirt that any of a million people might be wearing. No, it was one of a kind, and he had made it for himself—the iron-on decal, that is, not the shirt. The decal across the front said, Flanders' Buttocks Ointment, and there was a line drawing of a happy baby joyfully flinging its arms in the air.

(The possibility flitted through his head that Ann had given away the shirt, or loaned it to someone, and the someone who ended up with it looked exactly like him. But the odds of that were so slim that it took mere nanoseconds to dismiss it.)

The shirt was a joke that likely only Robert found funny; Ann, for example, hadn't. And for another example, no one had ever stopped him on the street and said, Gosh, Where'd you get that most excellently funny T-shirt?

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Ann here: It was just stupid, Robert. I know you thought 'buttocks ointment' was funny, but seriously. What am I to think about this kind of stuff other than it's just another symbol of your childishness.

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I still think it's funny, frankly, because it's so seldom that we ever call things what they are. The only thing that would have been funnier is if it had been called anus ointment.

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Which, again, would not have been funny in the least. It's embarrassing.

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To you.

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That's my point, Robert.

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There had been a little display of this product in the pediatrician's office, and there was something about the straightforwardness of the language, combined with the line drawing of the happy baby, that I found hysterically funny. That may be overstating it, actually, but I did find it funny. I had asked the receptionist if I could have the

box, as it only had one packet of buttocks ointment left. At home, I'd scanned the logo, reversed it and transferred it to iron-on inkjet paper.

The baby is so happy. (I was being purposely silly.)

Robert, buttocks ointment?

He's happy because he's got happy buttocks. I laughed hysterically. And, yes, I was overdoing it. Ann looked mystified.

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Robert stared. A quick visual inventory showed a scar from a bike accident at twelve that wouldn't have been visible three or four years ago before the receding hairline. Another on the side of his nose, where he'd (they'd?) been hit on the backswing of a Louisville Slugger® while playing catcher without a mask in elementary school. Another on the left knee that had happened during a sledding accident when an inopportunistically placed tree branch, covered with snow, stabbed him right through the leg of his favorite jeans.

With the exception of the other man's fitness and his own lack of it, and the clothing they wore, there really was no difference between the two of them that Robert could see.

Not for a moment did he believe this was actually possible. But the shirt offered itself as absolute proof of the impossible.

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It may be worth adding, here, that not for a moment, a few hours ago, did I believe that my wife would have served me with divorce papers. But this was a difference—as Robbie and I liked to discuss—between the impossible (the former) and the improbable (the latter).

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And since this was entirely one hundred percent *impossible*, Robert wondered if he wasn't experiencing some sort of mental breakdown. Something, perhaps, related to the hideous surprise and trauma of his wife's sudden decision that their marriage should end.

The stood man stood back a little, and after a momentary quizzical gaze, thrust out his hand and said, Hi, Bob Grayson.

Robert put out his own hand. Robert Duke Grayson, Jr., he said.

No shit, said Bob, who was shaking his head and trying to wipe a very sweaty hand off on his very sweaty running shorts.

Robert shook the other man's hand—if he had ever wondered what his own handshake felt like, this was what it felt like and it wasn't bad, except for the excessive dampness—but then withdrew his own hand. The last thing he was going to need, in any sort of impending legal matter, was a doppelgänger. Or the belief that there was another him around.

Thinking about it, the implications of it, that this other Robert, this Bob, might run around ruining his life—or had, already, done something to fuck up his life—made him want to tear out his hair.

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This is not a figure of speech. I reached up and grabbed the hair in front of my ears, which was a thing I sometimes did and mostly was not aware of doing when I was in times of stress. I looked at him again, and everything that seemed to be striking me as horrific and life-changing in a bad way seemed to strike him as amusing, given the assumption that relatively similar things were going on in our heads.

[6] Seriously, it was almost like he was pleading with God to make him human in these little forays into attempted humor.

[7] Charlie Burns here: I'm sensing here in this section some self-serving narrativization, or circum-narrativization in which Mr. Grayson appears to be rather selfishly justifying his own actions without really examining their ramifications. Perhaps he did convince himself that he was doing this for the Grayson family, but simultaneously he also seem to deny or not even admit that he was doing it for himself. In much of his discussion of *The _____*, and its 'failure' (which he perhaps not entirely correctly reads as his own failure) I have heard this: emasculation, confusion in his reading of his gender discourse. Deep down I'd say that a great deal of his sense of his own manhood is connected with his success as an artist.

(And here I think we can read success not so much as 'real success' but as acceptance.) And his lack of success, his lack of acceptance, especially by his wife, and his 'failure' to make a living at your art—these things served to make him feel less than a complete man. And this justification is more about a) making himself feel a more complete man so that he can feel that the woman he has often said is much smarter than he might perhaps see you as an equal, and b) making himself worthy of a woman he has often said he doesn't feel he deserves.

To me, Charlie, a) and b) sound like the same thing.

[8] Ann here: I hate to be the person who is forced to bring a bit of fact into this fiction, Robert, but I keep a calendar. These are things a woman does. Do you know when—prior to that night—the last time we'd had sex 'to write home about' was? I'll tell you. Seven weeks prior. *You were never around.*

[9] Charlie Burns here: Mr. Grayson's attitude and behavior—plus his failure to recognize it—truly beggars the imagination. There is, throughout this narrative, a deep subconscious subtext of emasculation. Self-emasculation. The passive-aggressive nature of such depredations is, to use Mr. Grayson's words, head-spinning. It was almost as though he was crying out to her to accept all responsibility for his manhood, it would seem. His narrative is positioned more as a child's narrative. One can only wonder if he felt that her own narrative wouldn't permit a parallel, male narrative alongside it. Such feelings can only be attributed to Mr. Grayson.

[10] Robert, this is simply bullshit.

[11] And what about 'him and Ann'?

Yes, there was a 'him and Ann' but I was referring to when him-and-Ann was not in play.

[12] Charlie Burns here. Mrs. Grayson, to the contrary, what I'm hearing is a certain level of the passive-aggressive in your *own* actions. Your narrative is your own. My contention is that one can choose to act or not to act. If your birthday was so important, you could have done some foreshadowing by giving gentle reminders to Robert of its importance, and its immanence.

Fuck off, Charlie.

[13] Charlie Burns here: The failure on Mr. Grayson's part to even attempt to take control of the situation continues this narrative subtext of childishness, and continues the theme of emasculation. I realize, of course, that Mr. Grayson had at this point been blindsided, and found himself in a situation that was, in terms of narrative, mostly out of his immediate control. However, that it never occurs to him to attempt to wrest control out of the chaos, speaks to a fundamental lack of awareness of his own objective narrative—even though he talks about his own "narrative"—and his ability to change its basic terms.

