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BORN TO LOVE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Nate Peragine

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

English

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The thesis of Nate Peragine for the degree of Master of Arts is approved.

Chairperson, Douglas Unger, M.F.A.

Examining Committee Member, John H. Irsfeld, Ph.D.

Examining Committee Member, Darlene H. Unrue, Ph.D.

Graduate Faculty Representative, Malvin Miranda, Ph.D.

Dean of the Graduate College, Ronald W. Smith, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Four short stories included in this collection: "Father Confessor," a realistic-symbolic story; "Incontinent," a first-person account by an unreliable narrator; "Punching Judy," a first-person narration of cartoon realism; "Born to Love," a postmodern, minimalist dream.
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ABSTRACT .................................................................. iii

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CHAPTER 1

FATHER CONFESSOR

Father James O'Donnell, spiritual advisor, comforter of the infirm, a man beloved of his small congregation at Goose Neck Falls, sat in the confessional booth on a hot July afternoon, furiously scratching himself as he heard the sins of Mrs. Muller.

It began as an itch in the center of his chest, no more a cause for distraction than the two flies buzzing around the ceiling of the booth. He casually scratched himself, listened, scratched himself some more. With a vague smile on his face, he sat there fifteen minutes, mindlessly scratching, an enormous rash spreading from his collarbone to his navel.

His watery blue eyes narrowed at the figure behind the screen. Some twenty years of hearing confessions had taught him things--tricks of the trade, one might call them. Often he focused on a particular expression he'd heard, then repeat it many times to the delight and recognition of his penitent. Other times, like now, he
simply took a long quiet breath, then expelled it slowly through his teeth, a sound similar to air leaking from a car tire, but one that hid any boredom or exasperation he felt, otherwise expressed through a rude and blowing sigh.

Generally, he tried to listen more to the way a thing was being said rather than to the actual words themselves. Particular transgressions did not interest Father O'Donnell, like they might others. What concerned him most was the genuine tone of repentance in the petitioner's voice. But since his arrival in Goose Neck Falls the previous October, he broke with his custom and began listening to multiple confessions, in all their unseemly detail, as a way to familiarize himself with his neighbors. It had been a mistake, he realized, soon afterwards.

Aside from those improper things related to him, Father O'Donnell encountered in the townspeople something he had never met with before: a note of defiance in their voices during the act of confession. God knew Mrs. Muller was not the only one guilty of it. Nearly everyone displayed it to some extent, though he had found most of the townspeople more than eager to confess within the first few weeks of his arrival.

It was not uncommon, this outpouring of conscience that attended a priest new to a small community. Years of
familiarity with one's own confessor did not necessarily bring comfort like some might think—often, it created reticence and hostility towards a man who walked among the people like a neighbor yet was privy to their most shameful and guarded secrets. Father O'Donnell had also heard unflattering insinuations made about the priest whose place he'd taken—that the man liked his drink, that his interest in the married women of his congregation was suspected, at times, to have been less than Christian.

Mrs. Muller, after confessing just then to scrubbing the toiletbowl with her husband's toothbrush, blew her nose loudly into a tissue. Father O'Donnell realized that he'd been quiet too long.

"Ah, and I assume that you know, that this act you committed, was done in a vengeful spirit."

"I was fully aware of it, Father. I knew exactly what I was doing."

"Yes, I see. And may I ask you if you feel any remorse for what you've done?"

"I do, Father. I feel overwhelmed with a sense of shame and guilt. But, like I said before, he stayed out half that night drinking. If he's not out running around drinking, he's throwing our money away on the horses."

"Yes, I see. Hmm, yes. Are you sorry, then, for all your sins?"
"Sorry? Yes, Father. I am."

"Ask God to make you truly sorry for your sins. Ask Him to forgive you and to wash you in the precious blood that cleanseth all sins. Recite the Act of Contrition once, the Hail Mary ten times, and the Lord's Prayer three times."

When Mrs. Muller had gone, Father O'Donnell swung open wide the door of the confessional. The summer heat made the temperature in the booth torturous, and the perspiration slid warmly down his cheeks like tears. He stood up, loosened his collar, felt underneath his shirt and covered his heart with one hand. It was then that he noticed the rash on his chest. His thin fingers traced the raised patches of skin, and when he drew his hand away his palm was spotted red. "Oh, my God," he whispered, and hurried towards the back of the church, through his office and into his private room.

He'd had an allergic reaction once before like this, in his younger, wilder days, when he'd gone to a Chinese restaurant with some fellow seminary students and had eaten some tainted Shrimp Foo Young; but that had happened years ago, and there was no way to explain the reappearance of the allergy now.

He called Dr. Farley to schedule an appointment. The doctor was out but Cheryl, the youngest of his three beautiful, strawberry-blonde daughters, suggested he come
by the following morning. Father O'Donnell thanked her and hung up, suddenly reminded of the first-aid kit underneath the bathroom sink, next to the bottle of bourbon, which had been left there by his predecessor.

Inside the kit he found a spray can of antiseptic, so old the label curled at the touch of his fingers and dropped off. He gave the can a few vigorous shakes before taking aim. The icy spray stung at first but in a moment soothed the inflammation. He kept his finger down until the can emptied, until the woolen gray hairs on his chest became saturated with a moldering, flowery scent, like chrysanthemums left to wilt in a vase for a week. He moved over to the bed and lay on his back, breathing heavily.

He wondered why he'd never seen Cheryl in church or, for that matter, either of her two sisters. But he did see them in town occasionally, running errands for their father, waiting in line at Jenkin's drugstore or the Foodtown supermarket, where he always seemed to be running into Mrs. Muller lately. She didn't have an easy life, Lord knew, with that husband of hers. Talk of one's neighbors traveled fast in a small town and, sooner or later, Father O'Donnell got all the dirt—if not directly from the wronged spouse during confession than from the casual remarks of bank tellers, shop clerks, garage mechanics, newspaper boys.
In large cities a person could roam among the crowds freely, with neither accountability nor interest in the business of his neighbors. But in Goose Neck Falls it was different. Father O'Donnell knew the whole ugly trail of sin which led from Mr. Hempstead the green grocer, who committed unspeakable acts in his barnyard during the full moon, to Mr. Blifil at the bank, who at night wore stockings and garters and hitchhiked along Route 19 in search of lonely truckdrivers.

All of them came to Father O'Donnell to be purged of their sins on Saturday afternoons, during which time he heard more confessions than the therapist in town did all week. And it was not necessarily, he realized, because people were turning more for religious guidance in this immoral age, but because his services were free and discretion assured. Few of his congregation, by their own admission, ever actually read the Bible with interest, and fewer still tried to live by Christian principles. Confession was not a shortcut to a virtuous life, though many seemed to think it so.

No wonder, then, that sometimes Father O'Donnell felt borne under with sin, harried continually, unable to dispel from mind the image of Mr. Blifil in stockings when he saw him at the Post Office. It was the price one paid for being a man to whom the people took their suffering, poured out their woe. He wondered at times if
they might not be better served at the therapist in town, who operated out of a reconverted chicken coop.

The next day Father O'Donnell pulled his Buick Skylark into the driveway of the old Farley place. He made his way cautiously, in his suede loafers, through the grassy yard, dewy yet from morning and thick with overgrown pokeweed and dandelions. The doctor, a general practitioner, devout equestrian and part-time blacksmith, stood by the entrance of the barn, his palomino quarterhorse haltered and cross-tied between the stalls. As Father O'Donnell walked up, Farley was banging a horseshoe against the anvil with a hammer.

"Morning, Father. Hot enough, for ya?"

"Yes, so it is. I apologize if I came at an inconvenient time, but your daughter told me ten o'clock as I recall."

"No bother at all," Farley said, giving him a squinting glance. "Daughter told me you had some kind of rash. Let me just put this last shoe on here. Whoa, Dumpling. In the meanwhile, take off your shirt, Father, let's have a look there."

"I'd rather wait until we got inside your office, if you don't mind."
"Suit yourself. Guess we can't have a priest undressing hisself in the middle of the barn, can we?"

Farley put some nails in the corner of his mouth before grabbing the right fetlock of his horse. Sunlight glanced off the mare's rump and its blonde tail swished to one side. Father O'Donnell felt the coarse hair brush against his arm, and he stepped back as the horse's flanks quivered, its rear leg poised to kick.

"Stay still, sumbitch." Farley was bent over in an uncomfortable posture, sweating fiercely while he nailed the shoe onto the hoof. "There. That should do it. Let me just put her in the stall, then we'll take care of you."

The men walked across the yard, past two lollloping Great Danes. The bewildered Farley goat, its jaw sliding right to left, looked them over keenly before lowering its head back into a garbage can near the cellar door. In the foyer, Farley sat on the steps and pulled off his mud-spattered boots.

"You know, Father, I been meaning to get down and talk to you." He gave the priest a smile that exposed a row of uneven, gray teeth. "Sometimes, I don't know why, but I just feel like getting nekked and driving around town in my pick-up. That don't strictly qualify as a sin now, does it?"

"Well, Dr. Farley," he began. "A thought such as, such a temptation, so to speak, might lead to some sinful
action in the future. Perhaps you'd like to come to church on Saturday?"

Farley took his stethoscope off the coat rack. "We don't need to stand on ceremony, Father. Unbutton your shirt here."

He thumped the priest's chest with two fingers.

"Breathe deep, there. Uh-huh."

"Does it look serious?"

"Well, can't really tell. Looks like an allergic reaction, you ask me. If you want, you might go to County General where they could run up some tests, but I don't see no cause for worry here. Just put some calamine lotion on it."

Farley folded his stethoscope in half and laid it on the banister. "No charge, today, Father. But that thing I told you before, it don't go no further than me and you, does it?"

"I can assure you that it doesn't. As a servant of the church, it's my obligation, no my responsibility...."

"Then I got something else to tell ya, Father, seeing that we're done here. Let's you and me go into the kitchen. I think one of the girls made coffee a little while ago."

Pressed by his hospitality, and feeling a confused sort of gratitude that the doctor hadn't charged him for diagnosing the rash, Father O'Donnell sat in the kitchen.
and listened for the next hour. The way Farley gloated and harped on details was unconscionable. He didn't ask for guidance or forgiveness but tried to draw him in as a fellow conspirator, and Father O'Donnell left the house scratching himself worse than ever.

On his drive back to church, he decided to stop at the supermarket to pick up some things. He entered Foodtown and waved to the check-out girls, a little like the Pope might. He took his bottle of calamine lotion and package of Stella D'oro cookies to the front cash register when he noticed Cheryl, the youngest Farley daughter, leaving the store.

To his dismay, immediately from behind him came the growling, cigarette-husky voice of Mrs. Sutton.

"Good afternoon, Father. Fancy running into you here. I saw you the other day, jogging on Springer Road."

Father O'Donnell stared at the liver spots on the backs of her hands and imagined tufts of hair sprouting from them. But it was only the lighting of the store which gave him that momentary impression.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Sutton. Yes, I do jog every so often. It is difficult to find the time, but I find it very relaxing, that is, rewarding, to go jogging."

Mrs. Sutton pressed into him, part seductive and part leering, bright orange lipstick scaling at the corners of her mouth.
"Do you ever get out for cocktails, Father? The way the church is changing nowadays, letting homosexuals become priests, you'd think everything was allowed. Can priests go out once in a while now and let their hair down?"

He nervously glanced at Betty the check-out girl, who was smiling to herself as she rang up his things.

"No. It's true Mrs. Sutton, I don't get out much, though last week some of us did get together after the PTA meeting for Cokes. We went to the bowling alley on Route 19." He smiled. "I'm not so shut out of the world as you might imagine. I even have a television in my room at the back of the church. Black and white--but it's all I need."

He felt awkward for telling her this. She was one of those people who could invest a quasi-sexual significance to even the most casual remark. She came periodically to confession and told him of her affairs, and Father O'Donnell remembered saying that repentance meant nothing without a desire to change, that in making a confession, it was implied that the person would desist from such actions in the future. He was not merely a receptacle, he'd thought at the time, into which anyone who cared to might pour her guilt.

She followed him into the parking lot and pinned his forearm with her chipped, gold fingernails.
"Father, please, I have a confession to make. I think that I'm--"

"Yes, yes! Please come see me on Saturday, and come to services either that evening or Sunday. Yes, I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Sorry to be so abrupt. Yes, Mrs. Sutton, I look forward to seeing you."

He struggled into the front seat and left her standing there, not without feeling a faint trace of guilt on his drive home. In his muggy room that evening, he stripped to his undershirt and boxers, then got into bed and lay stiffly on his back, like a corpse patiently awaiting the resurrection. His sleep that night was restless. He got up once to take some Alka-Seltzer, and in the morning awoke from a nightmare involving Mrs. Sutton, lying in bed next to him with her arms coiled around his neck, her orange lipstick crudely smudged, her throat and wrists slashed.

Father O'Donnell's physical complaints worsened as summer came to an end. The stifling humidity of Goose Neck Falls left him with shortness of breath as he wrote sermons, pulled weeds in the front lawn, or bent over to count the pittance in the collection box. His rash reappeared often, and the cremes, ointments, and horse liniment that Farley prescribed him gave little relief.
He stood with one hand on the altar rail, lost for a moment in reflection of his quaint old church. The confessional booth, he thought, with its cherrywood panelling and slightly warped floorboards, was still more dignified than the narrow cubicle found in a modern church. In Sayersville, the next town over, they even had green and red lights over the confessional doors, like a four-way stop at an intersection, a traffic light signaling STOP/GO. He'd also heard talk of them planning to install coin-operated votive candles—a quarter in a slot to light an electric bulb. No, give him the old church anytime with its regal past, its history scratched into the wooden pews, the smoothly worn steps out in front a testament to those who entered seeking salvation; never mind the buckling floor, the mildewed smell, the termites in the basement.

He sat in the confessional the last Saturday of August, hearing the sins of his fellows, giving penance and reserving judgment as best he could, when his final petitioner arrived.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned."

The voice sounded like that of a young man. Father O'Donnell kept his own voice modulated and low. The temperature in the booth was unbearable, and for a second he imagined licks of flame darting out from beneath the wooden floorboards.
"How long has it been since your last confession, son?"

"A long, long time."

He tried to make out the figure behind the screen. The boy was breathing hard and his voice had that trace of weary defiance Father O'Donnell had been hearing all afternoon. He'd never heard the voice before and assumed that perhaps it was someone from Sayersville.

"I'm a killer, Father."

For a second he thought he'd heard him wrong, and wondered if the boy might not recant.

"If you like, my son, you may continue. But when you say you are a killer, do you mean you actually killed someone, or perhaps killed a parent's ambitions for you, something along those lines?"

"No, I killed a person. Old man Baker, who owns the feedstore in town. Last night. Just did it."

"Son—" Father O'Donnell hesitated. Only the two of them were in the church right now. The altar boys would not be in until after four o'clock to make preparations for evening mass.

"Son, there is only one who can forgive this sin, and you must ask Him in your prayers. Of course, you must go to the police and tell them as well."

"I'm not gonna confess to the police but I'll confess to you, Father. Last night I caught the old man
by himself, locking up the store. He kicked me out once for stealing and I figured I'd get even. I came up behind him and hit him in the head with a shovel. The old man cried when I hit him and begged me to stop. Then I dragged him to the back of the feedstore. I couldn't believe I had this old man begging and crying just like a little girl. Then I pulled my knife out."

"Excuse me," Father O'Donnell said, trembling as he stood up. "This is not the proper place for exposing the details of this crime. This is a confessional, not some sort of--I must insist that you go to the police."

"After that, I hogtied him with a rope, and stuck him. There was so much blood. But it was like I couldn't stop myself. I kept stabbing him with the knife, over and over again."

"Stop it, please!" Father O'Donnell yelled. He thought of stepping from the confessional but fear kept him cramped up inside it. Suddenly the other door banged open, and the boy could be heard running down the aisle towards the front. Father O'Donnell opened his door just wide enough to peer out. The boy's scraggly black hair flew behind him as he ran, and his ugly laughter resounded throughout the church.

Father O'Donnell stepped from the booth, shaking. In his room a few minutes later, he picked up the telephone and dialed Baker's feedstore.
Baker answered on the second ring. "What can I do for ya?"

He quietly hung up. With the phone still in his hand, he reached for the bourbon underneath the sink, twisted its cap off and sat on the edge of the bed. He could hear the altar boys, Ralph and Billy, out in the vestibule, there to make ready the host and wine for tonight's services. Father O'Donnell drank while they made preparations. Half an hour later, one of them knocked gently at his door.

"Yes, I'll be right there, son."

He set the bottle on the floor, then entered the bathroom and washed his face at the sink. He donned his robes and studied himself in the mirror before leaving his room. Other than the warm glow on his face and neck, he seemed to look himself.

Standing at the altar with the sweat rolling off his cheeks, Father O'Donnell realized he had no idea what he was going to say—he had forgotten his notes for the sermon in his room. Undaunted, he looked around the crowd, his eyes blazing mightily with a holy fire, like Moses on seeing the Israelites dancing madly and worshipping the golden calf. Yes, these were his people, and he must be as stern as a loving father would be. He glanced around the crowd. It seemed as if more than half the town were there.
"We are gathered here today--yes, we are gathered here today, my friends, but for what reason? Do we come to the house of the Lord because there's nothing else to do on Saturday night? Do we come to parade our sins in the house of the Lord? Since my arrival in Goose Neck Falls, my friends, I've heard everything a man of my vocation is wont to hear, and I must tell you that confession means nothing without a desire to change. I am not a therapist or a psychologist who gets paid to listen to your dirty secrets and your brazen indiscretions! I cannot refrain, at this moment, from telling Mr. Blifil, in the third row, that his behavior is an outrage to decency!"

Blifil shrank in his pew, and Father O'Donnell shook his finger at others.

"I would not look so shocked Mrs. Sutton if I were you, for your sins are no less revolting! Where is Dr. Farley? You might like to know that your good country doctor violates the oldest taboo known to mankind. And you Mr. Hempstead, you sir--you are a reprobate of the vilest sort!"

Loud voices broke the quiet rumblings in the church, and people near the back began filing out. Father O'Donnell yelled to them.

"I cannot save you! You must seek your own salvation!"
He tripped and fell as he got down from behind the pulpit. The altar boys rushed to his side and each grabbed an arm, helping him back to his feet. "No," he said, waving them aside. "Don't leave, stay here. All you good people, stay here. I am going away."

Father O'Donnell left the church by a side entrance. The night was cool. Voices came from the parking lot. For a moment he thought someone would follow him, but no one came. He made his way in the direction of the woods and shed his robes along the ground as he walked.

While trying to yank off his shoe, he lost his balance and fell into a pile of leaves. On his back, he looked up at the stars whirling dizzily overhead, yanked off the other shoe, then took off his socks, pants, boxer shorts and shirt, and then, completely nude, entered the thicket leading to the river.

He took no notice of the brambles or twigs leaving scratches on his body. At a narrow part of the river, he descended the bank carefully, felt the cool mud suck his legs downward, felt the icy black water wash over his body and rush swiftly downstream.

He emerged from the other side of the river and climbed to the top of the bank. Shivering, he rested there a moment, crouched on all fours. Then, staring up at the moon, he suddenly let out a whooping cry, and continued to cry out until his voice became hoarse, until
his scratched and bruised body turned numb with fatigue, until drowsiness overtook him and he lay curled upon a rock, peacefully, sleeping the sleep of the just.
CHAPTER 2

INCONTINENT

Three weeks have passed since I suffered a stroke and lost the use of my voice entirely. Though unable to speak, I'm sure no one would dispute the fact that my condition has certain advantages.

Firstly, I am spared the chore of greeting people, which has always seemed an utter waste of time and energy, a small ritual torture one must endure on a daily basis. Secondly, without a voice to engage in meaningless chatter or banal gossip, I am never misunderstood or urged to explain myself. Thus, I am spared the conversation of fools and bores, no small luxury for a man in my condition.

As for my prognosis, the doctors refuse to give me any indication good or bad, but occasionally I glean what I can from the male nurse who hides in my closet and injects himself with Dilaudid. According to Hector, my chances of leaving this institution are not very good;
nevertheless, I spend day and night between this collation of institutional-gray sheets knowing full well that I will recover. At the very least, I still have my wits about me.

Two weeks ago, I think, I was admitted here anonymously. I dimly recall lying in the Intensive Care Unit before that for several days, unable to control my bowels. A humiliating and ridiculous position, as one might imagine, for a man of my stature. How I ranted inwardly as my caretakers changed the bed sheets! A sick man confined in a hospital enjoys no more privacy than a jailhouse inmate, and dignity becomes merely an illusion with which one tries hopelessly to stave off the ugliness of ill health.

My doctors, of course, held divergent opinions regarding my condition, while my wife of thirty-seven years—that magnificent bitch whom I hate with all my heart and soul—sat by the bed and patted my hand as if I were a child of three. I am in this institution now due to her conniving.

It happened late one evening, amid guarded conversation between my wife and doctors: two men with all the grace and care of professional wrestlers came and laid me on a gurney. When I silently raised a hand to call attention to the forgotten catheter in my arm, a nurse rushed to my bedside and tenderly unhooked me. The
night of my abduction was the last I ever saw of that kind woman.

The hoodlums who wheeled me down the corridor mashed my homburg over my face so that I was unable to see where they were taking me. I believe they acted in collusion with the doctors, who took orders from my wife. I was cognizant of the fact that the driver of the ambulance made, initially, a sharp left turn, followed immediately by four right turns, which gave me reason to believe that we arrived directly back at the hospital, at which time they went through the elaborate charade of shifting me to another wing in order to make me believe I'd been moved to an entirely different institution.

My wife has always been extremely clever and devious, and it is not beyond her means to have had such a display staged for my benefit. *Ipso facto* as long as I live, I shall never forgive her.

She now visits me once daily, her sculptured fingernails dripping blood, her hair a livid red bouffant with a slight orange tint, suggestive of those fright wigs worn by circus performers. When she comes into my room after her beauty salon appointment, I can smell a trace scent of cigar smoke, though she tries to mask it with some ballooning fragrance that precedes her into the room by five minutes. I've always possessed the most acute senses and can state with certainty that only one
person in our circle smokes hand-rolled Cuban cigars: Ira Rabinowitz, of the firm Sancho, Rabinowitz, Goldstein, and Gonzalez. Unbeknownst to the two, I have known of the affair for quite some time.

I did not confront my wife immediately because I wanted further proof—all I had to go on at the time was a half-inch smear of cigar ash on the armrest of my white Lexus SC400 coupé. Obviously, she chose to rendezvous with her lover in my own car to make me look even more ridiculous. I can't remember how many sleepless nights I experienced, nights when I would go to the garage in bathrobe and slippers—my fist clutching a glass of rye whiskey, my blood pressure skyrocketing through the roof—nights when I would sit in that car for hours, in that majestic isolation only money can buy, and stare at the half-inch smear of cigar ash on the armrest. How that cigar ash plagued me! It became a symbol of everything I detested about my wife and I found myself unable to stop thinking about it.

For years she'd been odious and disagreeable, and we'd been living together like sister and brother ever since the children left for college—George to Humboldt State, Lucy to Calvary. And in the thirty-seven years of our fraudulent marriage, though tempted on many occasions, I never once succumbed to the lures of the office help, nor did I pad the expense account with
pricey mistresses like my colleagues did. For thirty-seven years I was the model husband, the model father, a respected member of our community in Garden Grove. Now, as my reward, I have been committed to this institution, mocked and scorned by this overweight adulteress, this amoral spendthrift, this floozy with a fright wig, my confidante, my jailer, my wife.

I concede now to the certainty that I am actually in a different institution. Here it reeks of formaldehyde and mortified flesh. I've always had a superior olfactory sense and I never once associated these odors with the former institution. Furthermore, Hector placed me in a wheelchair this morning and transported me to the end of the hallway and back, confirming my opinion. Never before in my life had I witnessed such a scene.

The halls were lined with invalids, all of them crooked and bent with age. Some lay crumpled on the bed in their rooms while others, half-robed and muttering to themselves, shambled along the corridor. A huge sign on the wall read: THE SEASON IS WINTER. THE NEXT HOLIDAY IS APRIL FOOL'S. THE WEATHER IS COLD AND CLEAR. In the middle of the hallway arranged in a semicircle, four elderly women, either asleep or drugged, sat pitched-forward in wheelchairs. In each of their laps was
a wooden paddle with a tiny red ball dangling from it.

Subsequently, we passed the room of a sickly black man whom I at first mistook for a corpse. He lay in profile with his mouth wide open, his chin elongated and pointed like a knife. From the room came the foulest stench imaginable and had it not been for his mumbling, punctuated suddenly by a high-pitched scream, I would have thought that he'd been lying there dead for months.

As Hector turned me around, the oxygen tank and metal-tree trailing behind us, I felt as if I'd been eternally doomed. Nothing could hold back that carnal stink of the dying, and I felt my bowels unleash as we entered my room. Hector nonchalantly waved his hand when he realized I'd suffered a lapse of control. He then gave me a thorough sponge-bath with an accompanying prostate massage which seemed a little excessive; nevertheless, Hector takes pride in his work, and at this point in my life, he appears to be the only human being I can trust.

Later, he informed me that I will probably never taste food again.

Since my arrival I ate portions of the brown-colored meat and wax beans they serve here, but recently I've been unable to keep anything down. A spoonful of water makes me regurgitate a pint of fluid. I am told my only sustenance will be a nutritious milkshake fed through a tube that enters the hole in my belly.
I was not aware of the hole in my belly until this afternoon; no one ever told me of the hole in my belly, nor was I informed that I'd undergone an operation. If Hector hadn't changed the yellowish gauze, I would still be unaware of this hole in my belly. I am not aware of my body. In fact, I no longer believe this is actually my body. I have no sensation of a body, this is not my body, my body has been stolen. The body that lies here immobile is the withered body of an old man. It is not my body, it is not me—or is it I? It is I, or rather not I, not me. I must rest now.

After wobbling into the room on stiletto heels, she sits in the chair across from me looking positively radiant. Underneath her is a small maroon cushion which she purchased especially for the occasion. I sleep on and off while she speaks and suddenly I feel as if I'm at home on the couch. She makes absolutely no mention of the fact that her husband is lying across from her, heavily sedated, with a hole in his belly. She speaks. I sleep. Suddenly she accosts me with a litany of complaint, forcing me to pay attention.

Her talk then becomes an admixture of non sequiturs and pathetic inquiries regarding her appearance. I open
my eyes and shake my head in response. No, darling, of course your lipstick is not too red. Soon I have completely "tuned out," as the kids like to say nowadays. I acquired this habit of shutting my mind off to all she says long ago. Actually, I believe it was 1974 when I stopped listening to her altogether.

I'm now of the opinion that my ill health was brought on by some slow-acting poison she administered to me over the years. For as long as I can remember, the morning coffee she served always had a distinctive salty aftertaste. I possess an extraordinary palate and I'd mentioned to her several times that the coffee tasted strange. When she smashed the pot on the kitchen table one morning I stopped mentioning it. But I could not ignore the fact that I felt chronically fatigued, depressed, out of sorts.

An insidious change began to occur in a man who always took the minor indignities of life in stride. I found myself growing anxiety-ridden, testy, foul of mood, and capable of taking offense at the smallest provocation. I watched those around me prosper while my own financial situation worsened for a time. I watched my colleagues garner promotions whereas I was slighted at every turn. I watched helplessly as our children turned from my counsel to that of their mother. This change did not occur overnight. It was the cumulative effect of the
poison in my system, a toxin that ravaged my personality before claiming my body. I know my wife is responsible for this, though I have no way of proving it in a court of law.

I tolerated the intolerable for years, silently endured the attacks on my character or the blame she assigned me regarding the precarious state of her own mental health. I literally ingested her venom for years, hoping, always hoping, that one day I would rouse myself out of my lethargy and tell her off. I rehearsed the speech I was to give that would utterly demolish her— I would start from the beginning of our marriage up to the present day, making her accountable for everything. In point of fact, I took meticulous notes for such a speech.

In the early years of our marriage I would shut myself up in the den after dinner, on the pretext that I needed to arrange some briefs for the following morning, and then make lists on a yellow legal pad of precisely how she had annoyed me that day. The locked file cabinet in my office-den contains two hundred such legal pads filled with my handwriting. With the advent of the personal home computer, I began to transfer hard copy to disk. The computer made life so much easier.

Suddenly I was able to cross-reference a particular fault of hers, tardiness, for example (morning, noon, night); and as far as humanly possible I kept a running
total over the years. Unnecessary expenditures like face-lifts and lipo-suction came under two headings: Vanity and Extravagance. I also indexed the times when she put our personal savings in arrears and when she called me particularly filthy names.

Whenever I received an especially cutting blow I kept the incident alive in my mind for later notation: the exact words she used, the time and date of the incident, and if she happened to humiliate me in public, the names of the parties who were present. But in the ensuing years I stopped recording her faults because I came to realize what an incredible amount of energy I'd wasted. I reached the conclusion that everything she'd done in the past she would do again; every name she called me would be repeated with, perhaps, slight variation; all the profound suffering I experienced would continue unabated. So I stopped listing her faults but through force of habit, I became unable to stop collecting them in my mind.

Now, what I regret most is the fact that I never told her what I really thought after the first six months of our life sentence together. Priding myself on a remarkable sangfroid, I patiently waited years for the one day that never came. Even after my ulcers began to flare-up periodically, I did not seriously consider leaving her because I knew in doing so I would be giving
her exactly what she wanted. All things considered, as horrible as my domestic situation was, I experienced a peculiar comfort in that atmosphere of bitchy familiarity, that endless drone of dissatisfaction which permeated our home from top to bottom. Even an inmate locked in a prison cell grows accustomed to the relative safety of his environment and if, by some oversight—say the warden leaves the door ajar—the prisoner in most cases will not venture outside, so adapted is he to the situation.

I similarly adapted to my situation, just as I have adapted to the endless hum of machinery around me. I've been merely switched from one prison cell to another. And after all those years of waiting to tell her off, to draw myself up to full height and speak weightily, deliberately, watching as every word brought a twitch of pain to her cow-like features, I now find myself in the ridiculous position of no longer possessing a voice.

One day, though, when she goes through my personal effects she will find the legal pads in the file cabinet. In my personal computer she will find the index of her faults and the various subsections, and she will see with her own eyes the record of how she has tortured me these thirty-seven years. It is likely she will go through a humiliating and painful ordeal herself, repent and beg forgiveness. But by that time it will be too late, by
that time I will be no more.

It becomes impossible to tell day from night, and it seems as though I'm merely imagining my past in order to hold off this consciousness of the present--this psychic entropy threatening to engulf me. Former friends, colleagues, acquaintances, people whom I have helped over the years arrive at my bedside, each one looking thoroughly embarrassed. I raise a hand to acknowledge their presence, then wave them away. It is better for both of us if they don't linger.

Some time ago I think my children visited me. At first I did not recognize anything in them that resembled my likeness. Their faces seemed like scaled-down versions of their mother's, with no features indicative of my own. It's as if my identity has been erased. The boy appeared strapping and handsome, now that he's outgrown his ugly adolescent phase. The girl, inclined to resemble her mother, has already adopted most of the affectations of dress and appearance of a woman twenty years older.

I find it hard to believe that I am actually their father. It's strange how one can raise children, suffer through their numerous crises and stages of growth yet lose all feeling of affection for them somewhere along the way. I feel as though my memories of fatherhood do
not really belong to me. They are the memories of someone else, of a man I no longer recognize. In fact, I believe the possibility exists that they are not my children at all.

Those strangers who stood before me were vibrant, alive, full of youthful ambition and illusion; they bore no resemblance to the invalid lying before them. Yet I am not altogether without feeling. I pity those two, the suffering they will endure throughout their lives, the loss of reputation, security, faith, trust—all the usual fol-de-rol of this monstrous repetition called Life.

Hector is no longer with me. They have taken him away, my one friend, my one comfort. At this moment, a blonde female comes to siphon the liquid through the tube in my belly. I think I will cause a stir by doing something totally out of character.

I raise a hand to her breast and squeeze. Instead of looking amused or even indignant that someone as old and hideous as myself has touched her, she gives me a blank smile and guides my arm back down to the bed.

She picks up my chart and scans it, regally bored. Her hips sway healthily as she walks out, the fetid air now charged with a scent of her perfume, and as I look down at my side, I find the wooden paddle with the dangling red ball she has left on my bed.
CHAPTER 3

PUNCHING JUDY

I was eating a cannoli at our favorite Italian restaurant the first time Judy hit me. I had just finished telling her that we didn't have time for the waiter to make a second trip with the pastry cart—we were already late for a movie—when she punched my arm so hard I almost tipped back in my chair. I apologized to her immediately, then called to the waiter. Judy's wide-set eyes grew moist as the busboy weaved the pastry cart through the noisy dinner crowd and over to us. She gave my hand an extra hard squeeze under the table, letting me know she would make it up to me later that evening.

I had never taken a punch from a woman, but before long I got used to it, because I realized that Judy is the kind of lady who comes along only once in a lifetime. After years of dating stick-figure women who starved themselves to achieve that prepubescent, androgynous look so popular among models, I answered an ad in the
personal's one day (BIG, NUBILE, RUBINESQUE BEAUTY seeks....) and met my destiny. I've always aroused the mothering instinct in women due to my small build and less-than-average height, but with Judy I never felt coddled or patronized, quite the opposite. It was as if Fate had been molding and shaping her for no else but me. The chemistry between us was indescribable and once we set eyes on each other our whirlwind courtship began.

Our first date was at Pasta Heaven in Laguna, where I watched Judy devour a Caesar salad, an appetizer of clams casino, a main dish of linguine alfredo, a side order each of meatballs and gnocchi, three baskets of bread, and two disks of spumoni for dessert. I can't describe the satisfaction I took in watching Judy eat. A dreamy look came over her face as she daintily raised each bite to her mouth, the fork lightly clicking against her teeth, her eyes closing gently before she pulled the tines out clean.

Dining out with Judy became the high point of my life. She chewed everything slowly, savoring each morsel of anything set in front of her on a plate. Our dinners often stretched out beyond three hours. During all our time together I never saw her eat a rushed meal, except for the occasional fast-food hamburgers she wolfed down in the car on our way to a restaurant. If we went to a Sunday brunch, the crowd parted for us majestically--Judy
with that look of rapture, carrying three plates to our table, me behind her, carrying her purse, my own plate filled with all those delectables that Judy didn't have room for, so she could at least taste everything.

It went on like this for six months before I broke down and confessed my love for her: I had to have her, possess her, love her like no other man could. So, one evening, between fried zucchini appetizers and platters of baby-back ribs, I told her everything I felt and begged her to come live with me and be my love.

Before she moved in, I made a trip to Nordstroms and outfitted the kitchen with everything I thought I needed to keep her happy. Living alone all those years, I had managed to get by with the typical bachelor utensils: one fork, one knife, one spoon, one plate. Now I stocked the kitchen with saucepans, crock pots, Dutch ovens, woks, grills, wafflemakers, casserole dishes, mixing bowls, Tupperware, silverware, plates, glasses. I bought a refrigerator twice the size of the former one and even had a commercial-sized meat-locker installed in the basement.

Every morning she would come down to breakfast and find the table set for a banquet. I watched lovingly as she devoured a half dozen waffles in pools of heavy syrup, a five-egg omelet stuffed with assorted cheeses and bell peppers, a foot-long link of hot and spicy
sausage, and a pile of thick, freshly baked biscuits slathered with butter.

Afterwards, I would drive her down to The Last Nail where she did manicures, then come home and try to get some of my own work done. Being a self-employed design consultant, I took only the jobs I wanted and set my own work schedule and pace. I'd usually sit at my drafting table and get in two good hours of work in the morning, because I knew that when noon rolled around my Judy would be hungry again. I always prepared her a big lunch and packed it in a wicker basket, complete with one long-stemmed rose. Whenever I entered the salon with the basket, the women there fawned over me. There's a sort of childlike, elfish quality about me, I've been told, which makes the opposite sex want to either manhandle me or sit me in their laps.

About a year after we first met, I proposed to Judy and we got married in a small ceremony at a nondenominational church in Newport Beach. On our honeymoon we strolled barefoot in the hot sand, Judy slightly out in front, her shadow twice as large and overtaking mine. We ordered room service in between our deliciously slow, lovemaking marathons—Judy fulfilling a secret fantasy of mine I've had since adolescence, which included a whole roast chicken and a chocolate cream pie.

I fell into her voluptuous body every night as if
into a dream. Engulfed in every fold and wrinkle, her white legs as cool to the touch as squat marble pillars, her slender veins an intricate pattern of lapis lazuli, I listened to the waves outside lapping the shore while I lay there, exhausted, my faced pressed against Judy's rounded shoulder, her gelatinous flesh pouring through my fingers. It was like lying atop a waterbed during an earthquake, with someone you love.

I think it was the middle of our third year of marriage when Judy began sleepwalking. It was impossible not to wake up when she got out of bed: our California king-sized mattress swayed a little each time despite the cinderblocks which supported it in all corners. A frozen expression on her face, Judy would stomp down the precariously narrow stairs, seat herself at the kitchen table and eat through a gallon of ice cream. As the months passed, her trips downstairs became more frequent—sometimes two, even three a night, by which time I realized that she was partly awake whenever she left the bed, and that I wouldn't find her sprawled in a heap at the bottom of the stairs in the morning.

Occasionally, I would follow her to the kitchen where I could secretly watch her eat. At times, she would cry softly as she sat there at the table, munching away
on potato chips or pretzels or pig's knuckles. In a gentle manner, I confronted her, but she never told me exactly why she cried during those midnight visits to the kitchen, though she did once offer by way of explanation that when she was a little girl, she was constantly unhappy and often ran away from home. Her parents always found her, after a few heart-wrenching hours, at a Burger King or McDonald's, but they let her eat until she got drowsy before taking her home.

If obesity worked as a shield to ward off admirers when she was younger, as she once told me, then there is no way to account for my attraction to her. The more Judy ballooned, the larger her thighs got, the more corpulent her hind end became, the more I fell in love with her. The sight of her naked body filled me with a kind of awe and wonder. I'd watch her standing in our Roman bathtub, her massive legs like two fabulous Palm trees wading upright in a sewage lagoon—or, stepping out of the tub, one foot on the tiled floor, her calf as big around as a bucket, and I'd be seized with an overwhelming passion that needed to be satisfied right then and there.

I bought her special clothes at the Big Beautiful Women Boutique and gave her gifts constantly. I kept the nightstand by the bed filled with all her favorite candies, Doe-Doe's, Licky's, and Fa-Fa Bees. Under my loving attention, she blossomed to a whopping
three-hundred-twenty-eight pounds. At night when she got home, tired from doing nails all day, I'd hand her a large shrimp cocktail, which she would soundlessly devour as she sank into the couch. For a special treat, I'd leave enormous boxes of chocolates on top of her pillow and, after my evening shower, find each wrapper crumpled on the floor. Our marriage was idyllic.

Over the years, I became an excellent cook and kept the refrigerator as well as the meat-locker in the basement always stocked. And anytime Judy had a craving for a particular food, I would drop whatever I was doing to go get it. If it was Chinese takeout, I would fill the back of our Range Rover with two huge shopping bags. No craving or desire of Judy's ever went unfulfilled for long. And she always rewarded me with amorous pleasures on Saturday night, our special time, when she would come to bed wearing her red satiny teddy, a container of Häagan-Daz in one hand, a package of Oreos in the other.

Judy developed some problems walking, and she became conscious that she was putting on a few extra pounds, so everyday before work, like the ideal husband, I'd wrap her ankles thickly with masking tape, before putting on her shoes for her. She also complained about constant tiredness and a feeling of being worn out, and sometimes I would lie there at night feeling totally helpless and inadequate. In the dark, I often stared at the ceiling.
while listening to the sound her belly made. Usually, it sounded like a brick splashing at the bottom of a long, deep well, over and over again. One night, though, her stomach made fierce growling noises, and I mistakenly thought for a second that some kind of animal was in bed with us, when suddenly Judy screamed.

"What is it!" I cried.

"Arthur, I just can't live like this anymore. Today, when I went for a snack after lunch, some twelve-year old kids started calling me names. They surrounded me and shouted, 'Look at the fat lady! Look at the fat lady!' Oh, Arthur, I could have passed out right there! When I look in the mirror lately, I don't recognize myself. Have you looked at me lately?"

I strained my eyes in the dim light to look at her, her round face a study in self-reprobation, her forehead glistening like a casaba melon. I told her that kids enjoyed being cruel at that age and that she shouldn't use it as a reason to be depressed.

A little while later, I felt her leave the bed to go downstairs. When I heard the spattering of grease and smelled the bacon cooking, I turned over on one side, knowing that Judy would be just fine in the morning.

But once Judy took hold of an idea, she couldn't be
persuaded by reason. One evening after a light meal at Pizzaluna (calzones, eggplant subs, zeppoles), she said that we were going to a group meeting of overeaters, a place where "people understood." I'd never attended such a get-together but knew instantly that it would be filled to the rafters with comely, amply endowed beauties, women who lived to eat and ate to live. Though Judy was more than enough woman for me to handle, I have to admit I got a little excited thinking about all the buxom divas that might be there.

It was in a clubhouse centered in the middle of bland-looking, identically roofed condominiums; a gated community in an anonymous section of Marina Del Rey. I was surprised to find that no one there—eight women, half as many men—seemed to be particularly overweight.

The group leader was wholesomely unattractive, a stocky but slight woman in form-fitting blue slacks and corporate-red blazer, her hair cut short in a mannish wavy shingle. She bored us for nearly a half-hour with tales of binging and purging, and I felt myself growing uncomfortable in that muggy room. The only one who looked as if he could talk genuinely about overeating was a man I hadn't noticed at first. Bald-headed, dressed in a dark robe with a cowl, he must have tipped the scales at four-hundred pounds. Ironically, he was chosen next by the leader to speak.
"Hello family, I'm Bill, and I'm here tonight because I couldn't trust myself to be alone. Yesterday my agent sent me on an audition for a part in a new movie, *The Life and Times of the Three Stooges*. I knew I was perfect for the part of Curly—my agent thought so too. My nickname is Curly, people have been calling me that most of my life, and I can imitate all of Curly's mannerisms, even that little shuffle he does when Moe pokes him in the eyes. Anyway, the audition went well, but I overheard one of the producers say that I was too fat for the part."

Here, he stopped, pulled a tissue from a pocket in his robe, wiped his eyes, then continued.

"They never called me back. Today I hit four brunches in Encino, I just couldn't help myself. It was as bad as my binge in Las Vegas when I hit every buffet along the strip in two days. I felt desperate, frightened, I thought I was going out of my mind—"

Curly's crying was infectious and soon half the room was in tears. There was something phony and exhibitionist about his self-revelation, and I grew irritated by the whole vulgar display. Next to me Judy sat sniffling. I grabbed her arm and whispered to her that we should leave immediately, but she jerked away, unintentionally punching me in the chin. I got up and headed towards the door.
Now everyone was gathered around Curly, the women embracing him, the men giving him words of encouragement. I stood watching them all from the far end of the room, when suddenly, as if by magic, a cascade of jelly beans spilled from Curly's robe, particolored candies streaming to the floor like tiny pieces of stained glass.

The congratulatory mood was shattered and a hushed gloom fell over everyone. One woman bit her lip and muttered something like a prayer to herself. No one in that room could take their eyes off the jelly beans. After an uncomfortable silence that lasted nearly a minute, I moved towards the jelly beans to pick them up, but Curly was suddenly down on his knees with a force that shook the room. "No! I can't take it anymore!"

Crying hysterically, he grabbed fistfuls of jelly beans and shoved them into his mouth. A commotion and scuffle ensued. A woman got down on her knees alongside him and grabbed his arm, yelling "Let go, Curly! Let God!" Three more ladies, their mumus flowing and filling with air like sailboats, rushed in unison and snatched at Curly's hands. During all the confusion, I noticed Judy off to one side, talking to a man who might have been overweight at one time but who now possessed comic-book, superhero muscul arity. When he met my eye, he moved to the center of the room and picked Curly up from the floor, effortlessly, then enclosed him in a bear hug. I
was grateful for the chance to grab Judy's arm and, unnoticed, sneak out of the room.

Lying in bed the next night, Judy made one of those requests which, in the context of a marriage, translates into a subtle command.

"I'd like you to buy me a scale."

"Honey," I said. "You know the scales they make aren't for us. Don't you remember the last time we had one?"

"I know. But you can get me a different one; the kind they use at the butcher's market. You could put it down in the basement."

"Judy, I don't think it's good for your self-esteem. You have it in your mind that you should look like one of those frigid, anorexic models on the cover of Vogue. You know that the feminine image in this country is unfairly dictated by a bunch of fashion designers, who all happen to be limp-wristed perverts from New York."

"I don't care. I want this scale for me. I can't go on living like this anymore. Do you know what it's like to feel imprisoned in your own body? Do you know what it's like to be so tired you can't walk from one room to the next? Do you know what it's like to have this hole inside yourself that nothing can fill?"
I smiled. "Judy, I love you exactly the way you are."

She returned my smile coldly. "Arthur, something Biff told me the other night made me think that--"

"Hold on just a minute! You don't mean that muscle-bound guy at the meeting, do you?"

"Biff said that perhaps you're enabling me, letting me stay fat because you're afraid I might leave you if I was attractive. I would never leave you, honey. Please don't worry about that. But I have to do this for myself. I have to go on a diet."

"Fine! Go on a diet! And what about that suckling pig I ordered for your birthday? What about that deer in the meat-locker, all that venison! Do you think it'll stay frozen forever? And how about the five pounds of chop meat I was going to barbecue for us this weekend?"

Judy's eyes misted-up and teared. "Tomorrow, Arthur, I'm going on a low fat, high protein diet. I'll only eat fresh fruits, salads, fish. Things like that."

"All right, eat whatever you like."

I turned my back and fell asleep shortly afterwards. Later, I awoke when I heard Judy crying beside me. The following morning, strewn across the floor, from the foot of the bed to the bathroom, was a magnificent trail of crumpled candy wrappers.

But I do have to give her credit: she kept to her
low fat diet religiously for the next two weeks. Instead of waking up early to cook for her, I began to sleep-in weekday mornings. For breakfast Judy would eat two cantaloupes, four Bartlett pears, a pound of Bing cherries, and an enormous honey dew. While getting ready for work, she told me not to bring her any lunch because she would pack her own, a huge salad in a Tupperware bowl. On my next trip to the market, I picked up three cases of diet soda, plus anything labeled "low fat"—meats, cheeses, candies, cookies.

Judy was noshing on a stalk of bananas one night when I came home from a meeting with a new client.

"Arthur, I'm miserable. All this low fat food has no taste."

I was glad to hear it. I wondered if she'd had enough of this dieting nonsense. Then, careful to disguise the triumph in my voice, I said, "You're right dear, there's little taste in low fat food. Along with the fat, they rob the taste also, probably along with its nutritive value. What good is food if you can't enjoy the taste?"

Judy stared at me. "I haven't enjoyed the taste of food in years."

I turned away, confused, and went into the study to draft some work for my new client. When I emerged three hours later, the house was dark, Judy nowhere in sight. I
found her eventually in the kitchen, sitting there with the lights turned off. On the table before her was a large pizza box. As she folded each slice daintily in half, I could see by the faint moonlight coming in from the window that she was crying, softly, in between bites—eating without seeing, chewing without tasting, tears rolling off her cheeks as she silently ate the whole pizza.

No doubt, Judy and I were growing apart. She bought an industrial-strength bathroom scale and weighed herself each morning. She packed her own lunch now: sprout sandwiches on whole wheat bread, figs, prunes, raisins and kumquats. At night she would come home exhausted, put on spandex leotards that made her rear end look like a packing crate, adjust her radio headset, strap on a pair of ankle-weights, then walk around the block for several hours, her arms swinging up and down like a madwoman.

A few weeks later she came to me with talk of wanting to join a particular health club. Had I known she was still in touch with Biff and that he exercised at the same place, I would have forbidden her, but she managed to keep it a secret right up until the time she joined.

Soon she began rising earlier so she could walk two miles before breakfast. She bought a juicer and concocted
the foulest drinks I've ever tasted, stringy juices made from combinations of parsley, celery, and pineapple, or kiwi, banana, and tomato. Where there were once potato chips and pretzels in the pantry, there were now packages of flavored rice cakes. Every night she weighed her dinner—one plain chicken breast—on a small digital scale. Gone were the days when she would consume a gallon of ice cream at one clip. Now she was jerking herself up with the AB-Definer every night while we watched TV. Needless to say, I was irritated beyond belief.

Then she began working out twice a day, a split routine, she told me. In the morning it was three miles on the treadmill, followed by sit ups. In the evenings she lifted weights. After she'd dropped about sixty pounds I found myself becoming clinically depressed. I went through the motions of going to the gym with her a few times, just to show my support. But as I stood there by the treadmill, handing her a towel or some bottled water, I knew she would have much rather preferred the company of her personal trainer and motivator, Biff.

The months passed and Judy kept losing weight. What was happening to her body was remarkable. That plump moonface which I had once loved so much was now developing cheekbones; the tire around her midsection was deflating; the muscles on her legs became so tight you could actually see the outline of her kneecaps and
ankles. She was shrinking and wasting away before my eyes. But when she began to lift dumbbells twice a day, her body took on even more definition. She'd come home from the gym after midnight, sweaty and excited, saying things like, "I really got a massive burn in my rhomboids tonight with a new move Biff showed me!" And I would mutter something, thoroughly miserable.

The cupboards now contained powders that she mixed in the blender and drank before and after her workouts; vitamins she took six times a day without fail; potions and elixirs, granules and herbs; ephedrine, glutamine, alpha-ketoglutarates, creatine monohydrate, chromium piccolinate, desiccated raw liver tablets.

Things looked hopeless until one night Judy told me she'd suffered a possible avulsion fracture of her serratus anterior; that is, she pulled a muscle underneath her breast. I spent the next afternoon working up an elaborate feast while she rested, but Judy would have none of it. Later, in an effort to recapture those magic, intimate moments of our honeymoon, I brought a whole roast chicken and chocolate cream pie to bed with me.

From a reclining position, Judy hit me right in the solar plexus, and her punch packed a wallop like never before. As I lay on my back, dazed, she yelled at me.

"I can't believe you! You want me to go off my diet."
You know what you are? You're a control freak!"

I slowly got up, leaning one arm on the nightstand for support. "Oh, am I?" I said, trying to catch my breath. "And where did you learn that word, from Biff? Biff who bench presses three-hundred and fifty pounds...Biff who does donkey squats, or whatever they're called, with two steroid abusers sitting on his back? Judy, can't you see that you're ruining our marriage?"

She got up from bed, strapped on some ankle weights, then went downstairs and ran for three hours on the new treadmill she'd had delivered the week before.

When she lost more than a hundred pounds I felt as though my life had come to an end. She is no longer the woman I married; I hardly recognize her. In place of that soft, yielding flesh I loved so much, all I see now are rippling muscles, rock-hard bulges all over her body. She not only works out twice a day but also lays in a tanning booth at the gym. Her skin is taking on that rough texture and bronzed-orange color that most women here in Southern California have, the kind of outdoorsy tanned look which I've always considered repellent. She chopped all her hair off, too, and is now a full-fledged peroxide blonde. I don't know if our marriage will survive.

Downstairs, I hear her panting on the treadmill and talking to Biff on the cordless phone.

"Sure, I'd love to learn how to box, what a great
workout that must be. Do you think we can go tonight? Oh, guess what? A new vein just popped up on the medial head of my right deltoid! No, silly, my flexors aren't sore after the preacher bench curl. Arthur? he's watching TV. Yes, I know, honey. I'll see you in a little while."

Less than an hour later, a truck pulls up to the curb out in front, its windows tinted black, its pounding stereo rocking the whole house. Biff waddles into my home as if he owns it, two weightlifters from the gym behind him. Both are hard and tanned, exotic dancers or male escorts, each one wearing those ridiculously small T-shirts, the shoulders cut thin as spaghetti straps.

Judy leaps off the treadmill, suave and svelte. The men gather around and walk her outside. I'm filled with longing and sadness as the truck goes thumping down the block. I realize that she is not my Judy anymore. Now she's just like the rest of those anorexics, those health worshippers and body-building addicts. And I cry, not for the first time, because I just can't stand the thought of what will become of my punching Judy.
CHAPTER 4

BORN TO LOVE

Shortly after the last scream, three elderly women gathered at the open door of the hotel room. They wore long black shrouds, and whispered urgently among themselves in Latin. One stepped past the door then quickly withdrew. From the edge of the bed, Wineholtz looked up sadly at the old women.

Drummel came out of the bathroom and glared.
"Move along, you old crows! You've nothing better to do than to peek in at open doors?"

They quickly moved down the hall.

Drummel handed Wineholtz a glass. "Take this, brother."

Wineholtz waved it away.
"They will be here soon. What are you going to say to them?"

"I will tell them that all my life I've been waiting to do this."

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"That is no explanation, brother. They will want to know how it began. What she said to you, for instance."

"I will tell them what I did was out of my control. I will tell them that."

"They will not be satisfied with that answer."

"You do not believe me, then?"

"It is not that. For your own sake, you must give them an explanation for what happened. If you do not, they will be merciless with you."

A concierge paused in front of the door; a black man in a large red coat, with two rows of gold buttons down his chest. He took off his cap and stared at the floor a few moments. Then he walked on.

Wineholtz whispered, "I've felt it controlling me a long time."

"Yes, yes," Drummel said impatiently. "But if you do not give them a satisfactory answer they will treat you like an animal."

Wineholtz pressed his fingertips together. "I felt it begin this morning, on my way to the factory. I had a minor argument with the foreman. He has never liked me, you know. He began to insult me in front of the others."

"So that is the reason for this! At least go and wash your hands, otherwise they will come in with their pistols drawn."

Wineholtz got up, staring at his hands.
"I will tell you now exactly what I am going to say—yes. Wait. Suddenly I have forgotten what it is."

"Go inside and wash your hands."

"Yes."

Drummel heard the water splash. He looked down at the floor. One moment in time, one single instant, and a man’s life had been changed irrevocably.

Wineholtz stepped from the bathroom, rubbing his hands together.

"I remember what it is now. I remember what it is I will tell them."

"Please, begin."

"Ever since I was a child, there were misfortunes which I did not deserve. On my way home from the factory tonight, I came to a sign that read STOP. The sign, I am sure, had never been there before. Then I realized that the sign had been put there for me. It said to me, ‘Stop, Wineholtz. Look at your life. You have suffered many things, innocently. You must strike back now. You must show life that it can no longer have its way with you; you must strike back like a man.’"

Drummel avoided his eyes. "I am afraid they will commit you. I have never heard you speak this way before. You are not the person I knew."

"You are right, brother. This is not me. I am not myself. I have not been myself today."
"Sit down and be quiet. You are talking nonsense."

At the front door, three elderly women dressed in black appeared. Drummel nodded to them.

"What do they want?" Wineholtz asked.

"They have come for you. You invited them here."

"Then you see them, too?"

"Of course I see them. But they are here for you."

Wineholtz pointed. "I will not go with them."

"No, you will not go with them now. But they will be back. They will come visit you in your cell. There is no way you can be free from them. You have invited them into your life."

"Ridiculous." Wineholtz moved towards the door. "Get out, you old women, go away! You are not wanted here!"

They whispered in Latin; then, voices low and deep, they began a dirge.

"Get away from here, I say!"

He slammed the door shut but could hear the women on the other side. Quickly, he flung the door open and found the women no longer there.

He left the door open, and sat on the bed.

"Do you believe they will really be back?" Wineholtz asked meekly.

"Yes, and they will bring others. Right now, there is nothing for you to do but wait. The authorities will be here shortly."
Drummel stood facing the window with his hands clasped behind his back. A distant siren could be heard.

At the door suddenly a man appeared in a white top hat and full-dress suit. He was holding a dead cat by the scruff of the neck. The man coughed several times before continuing down the hall. Drummel shut the door and said to Wineholtz—

"Why did you leave the door open, imbecile?"

"Does it matter? Everyone in the hotel has seen it now. I do not care what these people think. It is these same people who have put me in this position."

"Come now, you cannot blame others for this."

"If you say that again, you will regret it."

"Take hold of yourself."

"Let me explain to you. Every encounter I have had with people today, every foul glance, every slight remark—everything coerced me into doing this. My insides had grown cancerous. I struck back. This is my explanation."

"Did you love her?"

"Don't ask such nonsense. I loved her in a way that you would not understand."

"I must open the door."

"Stay still, brother. Suddenly you are afraid of me, no?"

"Don't be a fool."
“Yes, you are afraid. Tell me as much. You are afraid that with the door closed something might happen. You are afraid. It is because you are guilty.”

“Guilty? What nonsense are you talking now?”

“You are guilty of loving her as well, but not in the way that I did. Yours was a disgusting, conventional love. Mine was eternal, spiritual.”

“What are you saying?”

“If you lie to me, you will make me very angry. You do not want me to become angry. Admit that you were here many times when I was gone.”

“Enough! You are insane. I must let in some air.”

Drummel opened the door.

Wineholtz began to cry. He cried for several minutes without making any noise. Then he spoke quietly.

“I waited all my life for this moment and it was gone instantly—I waited all my life for this moment, and even this was a cheat, a fraud.”

Drummel laid a hand on his shoulder. “Take hold of yourself, brother. They will be here soon. Come. Be done now. A grown man looks disgusting when he cries.”

“Do you think she loved me?”

“Well, if she did, I can tell you that it’s over!”

“Yes. Over. Look there.”

Three elderly women in black stood outside the door, whispering. Drummel walked over to them.
"What can I do for you fine ladies? Would you like to come in and have a look? Please, step inside so you can see more closely."

The old women, their eyes closed, chanted in Latin.

"Did you hear me, ladies? You are welcome to come inside."

All at once they wailed, imploringly, arms raised over their heads. Drummel moved his leg to kick them, but they hurried away.

"Get the hell out of here, you old crows! You can have him later, when he is alone! My God!"

A distant siren could be heard. Then all was quiet. Drummel poured a drink into a small glass and handed it to Wineholtz.

He waved it away.

"They will be here soon. What are you going to say to them?"

"I will tell them that all my life I've been waiting to do this."

"That is no explanation, brother. They will want to know how it began. What she said to you, for instance."

"I will tell them what I did was out of my control. I will tell them that."

"At least go wash your hands, otherwise they will come in with their pistols drawn."

Wineholtz got up, staring at his hands.
"I will tell you now exactly what I am going to say—yes. Wait. Suddenly I have forgotten what it is."

"Go wash your hands. They will be here soon."