

ALAN FELTUS

No Words Could Explain, 2008-09
oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 43 1/4 in.



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As You Know, Bob

“As you know, Bob, you and I have been married for seventeen years,” says Mary to Bob, to whom she has been married for seventeen years.

According to Mary, theirs is not a happy union—something Bob seems unable or unwilling to comprehend. So for the second time that day, Mary states, “Ours is not a happy union,” adding, “I may be wrong in doing so, nevertheless, I blame you.” Perhaps it’s worth noting that Mary doesn’t really think it wrong to blame Bob. While she supposes it is theoretically possible for anyone (including herself) to be wrong, saying so would more accurately be described as a small defensive gesture, showcasing her own human frailty. Thus proceeds an escalating onslaught—the cataloguing of Bob’s marital crimes.¹ These include, but are not limited to, the following: he doesn’t listen, he doesn’t understand, he doesn’t recognize her as an essentially loving but complicated person, his love of Vivaldi is immature and annoying. (According to Mary, no one of any gravitas listens to Vivaldi.²) She pauses and repositions the silk cushion for better support. Outside, light breaks through gray skies and does a familiar shimmy on the surface of the pond—something Mary once attempted to capture in poetry and then photography (neither satisfying the initial expressive urge).

Might the problem be the pond itself? The landscape designer had placed it midway between the house and the marsh’s edge. Beautiful, yes, but neither she nor Bob feels quite sure it ended up at the point of greatest aesthetic perfection.

Bob follows Mary’s gaze out the window but can’t see the water from where he sits on the refurbished Eames. He sighs and instead rests his eyes on Mary. He sees a dark-haired woman of fifty-two with a wide mouth that when formed into a smile feels to him exactly like sunshine. Such

1. Since 2005, Mary has diligently attempted to aid Bob in recognizing these crimes. Such recognition, she hopes, may increase his suffering sufficiently that he will join her in concluding that the marriage has, in fact, failed.

2. She regrets introducing Bob to Vivaldi, something she’d done after they attended a symphony concert with the Westins and Bob admitted he’d understood little of what he heard. At the time, Mary thought Vivaldi would bridge a gap to composers of greater depth (i.e., Shostakovich and Mahler), not become a stopping point.

Today, however, he is surprised to realize that Mary’s current indictment makes it nearly impossible for his love to find purchase.

a lovely smile. He can’t help but think Mary should smile more. Bob himself is somewhat squat but remarkably fit for a fifty-four-year-old. Consequently he likes his clothes tailored close to the body. Mary approves, increasing Bob’s sense that his taste has improved through knowing her.

In the silence, they hear but do not recognize the trembling hum of the freezer where they store sides of organic beef and a whole pig Bob has purchased for a summer barbecue. He’d like to have the entire firm come up, someday—cocktails with gin on the lawn and a professional chef to prepare the meat. Why wouldn’t a wife be pleased? Bob uses the notable silence on Mary’s part to remind her that there is, indeed, happiness in their marriage if not today, then tomorrow, if not tomorrow, well, then not so long ago.

“Mary,” he says, the first word he’s spoken within the last ten minutes. The force and pitch of his voice surprise him, yet he continues. “If happiness in this marriage is so goddamned³ impossible then why in our last session with Dr. Howard—who, as you know, has been our marriage counselor for a period of six weeks—did you finally admit that yes, you had, indeed, experienced happiness as my wife? I repeat, Mary, why?” Fact: Bob is happily married

3. Lately, use of this type of diction has surprised Bob. Yet were he to track it, he would quickly learn that over the last few years terms such as *goddamned* and even the occasional *fucking* have begun peppering his speech.

to Mary. He therefore feels no compulsion to blame her for an unhappy marriage. However, years of lawyerly training have taught him that the best defense is a strong offense. In this case, meaning he absolutely must prove to her that she is, indeed, happy—that perhaps she does not, after all, know her own mind. “Do you recall, Mary,” he says, again surprised at the spitting sound his words make in the relative quiet of the room, “what Dr. Howard said about escalating tension between us with these ‘Trauma-Dramas’⁴?” Bob truly believes this is the principle problem in their marriage—Mary’s compulsive need to declare deep unhappiness about small things; he further, and perhaps mistakenly, believes that Dr. Howard concurs with this finding.⁵

Unbeknownst to Bob, so outwardly calm as he sits dabbing spittle from the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief, it is because of the very same Dr. Howard’s insights that Mary suddenly recognizes a hidden aspect of her negotiations with Bob. In accusing her of creating a “Trauma-Drama” (a term that repulses her bodily and so deeply it hardly registers intellectually and has led her to cancel all future appointments with the doctor), Bob is only fulfilling his own compulsion for maintaining emotional cool. She further concludes that he does this to drive her crazy. This lump of a man, who’s taken to carrying a handkerchief in his pocket like a grandfather, is once again demonstrating the criminally abusive manner in which he appoints himself overall controller of their relationship. So Mary says, perhaps with more vehemence than intended, “Oh no, Bobby-boy! You won’t get that past me. Not this time! I see what you’re up to. Just because one day in 1992

4. Trauma-Drama is under the copyright protection of Dr. Howard, a recognized authority in family relationships who has treated hundreds of couples in twenty-five years of therapeutic practice. The Trauma-Drama concept is part of a larger publishable work. Interested parties should contact the doctor at his Niantic, Connecticut, offices.

5. Fact: it has not been established that Dr. Howard concurs with Bob’s finding, as the doctor is a professional who maintains a neutral position. Years of working with New London County couples has taught him much but not more than his own failed marriage, which ended in divorce eight years ago. The good doctor has not since remarried, though he continues to believe in the importance of marriage—if for no other reason than that he found he is equally unhappy outside a marriage as he was inside one.

you thought I had an orgasm does not mean this marriage meets the defining criteria for ‘happiness,’”⁶ At the word *happiness*, Mary makes the universal air quotes gesture. In this, she is all too aware of Bob’s attitude toward the air quotes gesture. Last summer she heard him discourse with S. Russell Pine, one of his partners, about the gesture’s quick descent from comical representation of cool ironic detachment to a signifier of one’s hoped-for relationship to cool ironic detachment, to a cliché of cool ironic detachment that currently signified little more than the gesturer’s great distance from actual cool ironic detachment, and in so doing marked him (or her) as clueless, pathetic, a fool.

That his wife—knowing how much he detests cool ironic detachment, cliché, and fools—used the gesture anyway enrages Bob with an immediacy that catches him off guard. His wife is either a fool (and he really takes no joy in imagining his wife a fool) or she is making a fool of him because of his hard stance against cool ironic detachment, cliché, and fools. As he ponders these possibilities, Bob’s face becomes red, which Mary points out by saying, “Your ‘face’ is ‘becoming’ ‘red,’” making universal air quote gestures around the words *face*, *becoming*, and *red*.

There is, indeed, a particularly powerful orgasm that looms large in Bob and Mary’s relationship, larger than either of them might fully recognize.⁷ But that is not the happiness to which Bob referred.

He is thinking of a period from roughly 1995 to 1997 (shortly after they were married) when both had jobs in the city and they’d meet for lunch, sitting side by side at a midtown café they enjoyed equally, and which was exactly halfway between their two offices. It was during one of these lunches that Bob looked up and pointed at a tiny yellow finch sitting on a tree limb and staring at them through the window. Out of nowhere Mary said the following: “I love you, Bob. I love you so much.”

As it happens, Mary has, indeed, forgotten that particular moment, which took place during the early, glowing years of their union—when, though they no longer

6. In 1992, three years before their official vows (therefore not technically evidence for or against the happiness of their legal union), Mary and Bob shared a life-changing orgasm.

7. See n. 6 above and n. 25 below.

remember, Bob and Mary talked more than once about quitting their respective jobs and forming some sort of business together in order to prolong such hours of nearness and dearness.

For Bob, the nearness and dearness remain much the same (that is, as long as Mary isn’t overly dramatizing her suffering). He enjoys the perks of his working life, the prestige and income that come from being a senior partner at a preeminent law firm, but even more than that he enjoys coming home to Mary and their Connecticut dream home, its dappled pond, and the sound of wind rushing over the marsh grass. He brings up good wine from the cellar each night, and his wife sometimes plants little kisses on his cheek as they cross paths in the kitchen, pulling crystal glasses from the cupboards or a corkscrew from the drawer.⁸ Today, however, he is surprised to realize that Mary’s current indictment makes it nearly impossible for his love to find purchase. On this day (this of all days!) her claims mirror in almost every detail the ones she’s presented over the last six weeks to Dr. Howard—whose advice she now refuses to consider. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it was at the doctor’s that Mary once acknowledged being happily married. Today, however, she is suddenly and entirely unwilling to spend time or effort describing that happiness. This is why Bob feels he has no choice. It’s time to counter her argument with his own, beginning with Mary’s lack of gratitude for all he has provided over the last decade (as far as he is concerned, he has been the couple’s sole breadwinner since 2001). And look what he has given her: this tasteful home with its view of the distant sea; a four-car garage that houses two reliable German sedans, plus the MG, an antique they rarely drive (but Mary had wanted it!); the ivory-colored living room that glows in the daylight spilling in from outside because of the specialty paint and hand-dyed upholstery cushions the decorator had said would reflect or diffuse (or was it absorb?) light in the same manner as beach sand under a sunny sky. Plus, once

8. For example, last February as they’d moved about the kitchen, after Bob had returned from a particularly long workday, Mary’s lips brushed his cheek, her breasts pressed lightly against his chest. Bob found these sensations domestic and delicious and through them arose an overwhelming and comforting truth—I am home.

What Bob believes, and continues to believe for at least the next seven minutes, is that he is a lucky man, having as he does, a wife who mirrors all for which his heart longs.

he became partner, other things: magnificent vacations (trips his parents could only dream about); weekend trips to Block Island on the *Serendipity*, their thirty-six-foot sloop; weeklong trips to Costa Rica and Paris; a weird two-week tour of coastal Croatia with their neighbors Todd and Daisy Douglass; and most memorable of all, according to Mary anyway (who neither forgave nor forgot anything), the disastrous Yangtze River cruise of October 2009,⁹ which is why Bob shudders inwardly at the thought of drawing attention to any of the rest.

Mary blames Bob for the whole fiasco—for his sad attempt at a fling with a young Chinese woman (which, truth be told, Mary wouldn’t have minded if the whole thing hadn’t been handled so openly, so poorly¹⁰). More

importantly perhaps, Mary blames Bob for the dilapidated state of the ship—the smell of diesel fuel leaking into their “luxury suite,” even the food poisoning they’d contracted from the five-star hotel in Beijing, which is where they ended up upon suddenly abandoning the cruise (forgoing a refund) and heading home to Connecticut a week early. She is certain she is right to blame Bob. He booked the trip—a fifteenth-anniversary surprise—even though he knows Mary is the one with the skills of a master travel agent, what with her international studies background and a fluency in, well, if not Mandarin, Russian, anyway. Why hadn’t he come to her for help? Bob had undermined the one area where she was confident in her expertise, and look, look at the results. “Look, look at the results,” Mary said to Bob for months after their return.

Bob would like to offer a counter argument, reminding Mary of their first evening on board, after they’d settled into their suite, when they made their way back on deck and turned away from smog-shrouded Nanjing, sipping champagne from the chilled, waiting bottle Bob had arranged for them from all the way in Connecticut (no easy feat what with the language barriers and the various time zones).¹¹ For it was then, at twilight, as they’d drifted past dove-colored cliffs that plunged into the river at dramatic angles and Mary saw first a white crane flying overhead and then the gray muddy fin of a Yangtze River dolphin, that she turned to Bob, tears forming in her eyes and said, “Thank you, Bob. Thank you for this.” Upon returning (and once just last week in the good Dr. Howard’s offices), Bob had reminded Mary of this precise moment but had since come to realize that this was unlikely to sway her opinion in any way. And related, but less serendipitous events¹² prevented him from further mentioning that

with his official cruise title—Nature Guide—and then again when he gripped her knee and chuckled into her ear. That was when a mysterious center of Mary’s being lit up, a quiet hungry center that she’d forgotten existed.

11. Bob had ordered a bottle of Veuve Clicquot (Mary’s favorite) but what waited was a bottle of brut.

12. An additional element of the Bette Woo incident was the temporary “misplacement” of Bob and Mary’s passports, which, Mary pointed out, coincided remarkably closely with Bob’s French kissing. Mary freely repeated this observation to Bette Woo herself, coming across

anything else had been particularly pleasant about the disastrous Yangtze River cruise of October 2009.¹³ Nevertheless, with memories of their travels running through his brain, Bob wants to reposit what Dr. Howard said only last week: “Mary, whether or not you and Bob remain together, you simply must learn to celebrate life’s good times.” Yes, Bob would like to remind Mary that they had, indeed, shared life’s good times, as the doctor would put it. At the moment, however, he is aware of a throbbing in his left temple. He looks down at his lap only to see (to great despair) each hand clenched in a tight ball. His breath comes hard and fast. Bob decides to follow this breath in hopes it will calm him and he will finally be able to say, in a calm, simple voice all the things he wants to say to Mary. (If. Only. She. Would. Let. Him. Calm. Down.) Surely, he will at last convince her of the importance and veracity of their shared and permanent happiness. But at the moment, just as present is the growing fear that has inserted

the translator in the bleach-stained hallway outside their “stateroom.” That was just before Mary threatened to ring Bette’s “little yellow neck.” Despite the language and cultural differences, one can imagine that Bette understood perfectly as Mary habitually enunciated her words clearly, in this case, even the word *yellow*. Perhaps it was then that Bette realized the American woman had crossed a line of decorum and entered a world of racial slurs and ugliness suggesting that Mary, unlike the other wealthy Americans whom Bette accompanied each month on these mind-numbingly repetitious journeys up and down the Yangzte, might, indeed, be capable of murder. The passports were later “discovered” inside Bob’s waist wallet with the Velcro straps, which, to Mary’s horror, circled his hips like a fanny pack. In Mary’s mind, such an item was meant only for women—unfashionable, middle-aged, midwestern women. To this Bob had no reply.

13. A final note about the disastrous Yangtze River cruise of 2009: Bob confessed to kissing Bette Woo only because of a conversation he had with Frank Canada, a fellow passenger and actual Catholic deacon in his Indiana hometown. Frank convinced Bob that confessing “was the right thing to do,” as Frank and several other cruise mates had been reluctant witnesses to the Bette Woo “affair.” In the hushed tones that Bob assumed were those of confession itself, Frank said Mary must be told all rather than blindly face the whispers of her shipmates. In truth, Bob had no memory of kissing Bette and therefore could only go by Frank’s recollection. Bob half suspected someone had doctored his drinks, a suspicion he did not mention to Frank because Frank kept repeating how “delectable” he found Bette, “what a living doll,” and how terribly tempting Frank would have found it if Bette were to have set sights on himself instead of Bob.

itself into Bob’s days (and nights) since they’d begun seeing Dr. Howard—the inner gnawing realization: perhaps Bob doesn’t understand his wife as well as he thinks.

Of course, Mary never loses her certainty that she understands Bob. For her, Bob is the same Bob each and every day, so she never (not even for a moment) senses this growing fear, keeping him up at night long after she’s fallen asleep. In any case, she now looks across the expanse of glowing sofa and sees a man with fists clenched tight over his knees and a face filled with obstinacy and rage. Anger is an emotion to which Bob has never admitted having; according to Mary this is how he justifies his “lording everything” over her. Lording what over her is never entirely clear—other than everything, which might possibly include the fact that Bob has a seemingly important job and is the sole breadwinner in their family, if and only if, you “minus” out her trust fund, which why would you do other than because it is money she was born to and hasn’t earned through completing her degree and working hard like Bob?

What Bob believes, and continues to believe for at least the next seven minutes, is that he is a lucky man, having, as he does, a wife who mirrors all for which his heart longs.¹⁴ Via association alone, Mary has always made Bob feel that, yes, he belongs. In contrast, through his years first in business school, and later at Columbia law, he found his fellow students (the privileged bastards) couldn’t help but remind him that he was only a pretender to the very things that came most naturally to them.¹⁵

14. Bob enjoys having a wife with the expertise necessary to choose his ties and sport coats, ensuring, as Mary does, that he always displays the correct signifiers of the class to which he so thoroughly aspires. Equally important to Bob, Mary knows how to sail, which means he feels relatively safe on their weekend jaunts around the bay. It is with similar ease and authority that she shares her lifetime’s knowledge of wine, travel, and interior design.

15. In fact, other students rarely mentioned Bob’s modest hometown of Collingswood, New Jersey. While Bob was acutely aware of each classmate’s pedigree—prep school attended, undergraduate degree gained, fellowship earned, father’s profession, and so on—he made an error in assuming that they, in turn, were constantly measuring him: Why didn’t Bob lie about his background and claim more than he’d actually been given (his parents owned a hardware store above which the family lived)? Bob would never lie.

Looking back, Mary feels sure Bob wanted her to quit her job at the Hankings Institute because he wanted to impregnate her. But she hadn’t become pregnant, had she? Not once in the entire decade since she left the institute. Instead she sat and did nothing for about a year. Then they bought the dream home, and she worked with a decorator to finish it just so. No easy task. Then she attempted to start her own consulting firm, drawing on her knowledge of Russian and her graduate-level training in multiparty complex negotiations on an international stage. She discovered that there wasn’t much call for such skills in Niantic, Connecticut. But by then landing another think tank job and having therefore to resume a daily commute with Bob to the city seemed impossible. Finally, she’d taken up with her friend Glenda Phillips, who ran a curio shop downtown. Mary works there one or two days a week just to help out a friend, but really (she is loath to admit it) mostly so she has somewhere to go and a time and a space in her life with a defined and focused purpose. She—Mary—with advanced degrees from very good schools,¹⁶ helping run—no!—not even run, manning the station, every so often, at a little curio shop in downtown Niantic, so Glenda Phillips can slip out and post the mail, or buy a coffee, or Lord knows, take a nap, and why can’t Bob see what a failure that makes Mary and how he himself might, at least in part, be responsible for such a giant misstep in her life? And this is why, despite his clenched fists and face of rage Mary says, “As you know, Bob,” with renewed focus and intent, “I quit Hankings only because you said it was a good idea. I never would have quit without your encouragement, and if I find that at this point in my life I am less than satisfied, well, I think you are largely responsible. After all, in retrospect, Bob, your ulterior motives are only too obvious.”¹⁷

Bob, who remains on the Eames, looks flummoxed. “Ulterior motives!”¹⁸ He is once again surprised to find he

16. Mary completed all coursework toward a PhD in international studies from Columbia the year she met Bob. The dissertation was far more difficult to finish than Mary had expected.

17. One (though not Bob) reasonably assumes that Mary is referring to her conviction (accurate or not) that Bob had encouraged her to quit Hankings in hopes that she would become pregnant.

18. All Bob recalls saying is the following: “If you’re not happy, no need

is shouting. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why can’t you just be happy?”

“‘Hell!’ Oh, is that the word of the hour?” asks Mary. “Time to gutter ourselves up, is it?” Despite herself, she sobs—a terrible inner weakening that must be stemmed.

Bob watches Mary take the sleeve of her cashmere cardigan and use it to wipe first the corner of her eyes and then (to his horror) under her nose, a behavior he has never seen in Mary. This may be why something in him suddenly cracks. Her nose is impossible and red in the light that bounces off of the cushions and into her liquid weeping eyes. Words spit out of him with greater force than ever. “You hated Hankings! Every day I had to fucking listen to you go on and on about how horrible they all were, Rockmeyer and the rest, making life oh so miserable for you.¹⁹ Well, haven’t I given you everything you could want since then? Haven’t I? Things even your parents couldn’t provide?” He waves his arms over his head, gesturing wildly around the room, indicating the specially dyed cushions, the rare imported Italian credenza, and a three-foot-tall hand-enameled vase by a particularly talented eighteenth-century Chinese artisan.²⁰

Bob seems suddenly to tower over Mary—both bully and baby. As a result, Mary leans away while nevertheless noticing how easily he took credit for everything they’d purchased together and so proudly displayed. How bulky he is! How tightly his muscles ball up under the polo shirt she had chosen for him that very morning. As Bob continues

to keep working. We’ll be fine with the one income.” Bob has yet to acknowledge (even to himself) how very much he wanted children with Mary—one little boy perhaps to talk to about law and how he, Bob, had come to love Vivaldi after growing up in modest Collingswood, New Jersey, and how anything was possible in America and in life because if Bob had come so far and had such a great job, a great life, married to a woman as wonderful as Mary York, then just imagine what might be possible for their son. But Mary had never become pregnant and therefore such a boy was nonexistent.

19. Mary distinctly remembers such misery, yes. But for her, part of it arose from long drives to and from Connecticut with Bob, during which she vied with Vivaldi for her husband’s attention.

20. The vase is the only tangible item accrued during the disastrous Yangtze River cruise of 2009. Factoring in shipping fees, it cost them nearly twelve thousand dollars.

screaming out his every contribution, a little drop of spittle flies free of his tongue and catches in the afternoon light. It arcs upward and then loses itself into nothingness, casting her normally reserved husband as someone dangerous and out of control. In fact, Mary glances sidelong at the hand-enameled vase, calculating how long it might take to grab it should Bob lunge.

Bob, however, doesn’t recognize Mary’s wide-eyed gaze or the shrinking of her body into the cream-colored sofa as an indication of fear. He sees it only as another sign of her willingness to abandon him over his rare display of emotional intensity, an intensity that seems perfectly apt, considering the years he put in listening to her constant griping about Bill Rockmeyer and Hankings and their long-ago daily commute to the city. And then Bob realizes, clearly, horribly, how he has replaced Bill Rockmeyer in Mary’s mind as the sole cause of her utter dissatisfaction in life. He whispers, with considerable force, “You, you ungrateful . . .” and because he is unwilling or unable by personality or training to say the words *bitch* or *cunt*, Bob starts to cry.

At this Mary herself sobs with greater force, in part because she detests Bob for his tears—she wants a man, and at the moment Bob looks like a very little boy who needs a mother’s comforting arms. And after all, isn’t she, Mary, the injured party, the one who deserves comforting because for a few seconds there she’d actually been afraid her husband might hit her? And never for an instant does she forget the suffering she’s endured in the years leading up to this terrifying moment, which is a direct result of being stuck in this beautiful house, here in beautiful coastal Connecticut with a horrible husband, and none of it would have happened if only she hadn’t quit her job at Hankings.²¹ “My God, Bob, you’re crying,” Mary says.

21. Why did Mary quit? Bill Rockmeyer! After all her years of graduate-level training, to her surprise Mary was relegated to an entry-level position translating and writing fact sheets for internal distribution at the Hankings Institute. In this position, she was forced to endure Bill Rockmeyer, who told Stan Kornblum’s assistant, Tina Lopez, (or so said Tina, anyway) that Mary did not actually have what it took to conduct multiparty complex negotiations on an international stage. Rockmeyer believed (or so said Tina) that Mary was incapable of communicating with the thugs who actually ran Eastern Europe

“You raise your hand as if to hit me and then come the tears! Textbook! What do you want after all these years of misery? My sympathy?”

“Mary, please.” Bob hides his face in one hand but reaches out to her with the other.

Mary shrinks still further away. “Crybaby. Crybaby,” she whispers under her breath as if she were a seven-year-old schoolgirl and Bob were a boy she’d pushed on the playground (not senior partner of a preeminent law firm).²²

Finally he lifts his head and looks at her over his tear-stained cheeks. “You don’t love me anymore, Mary?” Bob asks. “This is it then? This is how you want it to end?”

For a moment she is startled at the brightness and pain in his eyes. Then she collects herself into something like a woman with graduate-level training in multiparty complex negotiations on an international stage. “Bob,” she says, “at

for three reasons: (1) her years at Choate, (2) her years at Princeton, and (3) her years at Columbia. Later, he accused Mary of mistranslating the word for *beet* with the English word *sugar*. Mary was, of course, correct. At the time she wanted this officially documented but could not achieve her aim because, while Rockmeyer had no direct authority over her, he was, indeed, her boss’s boss. Unofficially, however, to Bob or to anyone else that would listen, Mary said freely, “Bill Rockmeyer doesn’t know his ass from a hole. Ask Dmitri.” Dmitri who? Dmitri (policy section) who concurred with Mary one afternoon when others were out of the office; the word for *beet* was, indeed, more accurately translated as *sugar* in the context in which it appeared. Where others might merely use *bribe* (thus missing subtle linguistic possibilities), Mary had “gotten it!” This being the late nineties and accounting for all the post-perestroika changes. Something Rockmeyer, with his ancient Cold War perspectives, could never do. “And people still listen to him, Bob. People still listen.”

22. It is precisely these moments that most confound Dr. Howard. In an attempt to better understand his own failed marriage, he sometimes invents or conjures, really, an amalgam of “characters” from the hundreds he’s encountered while treating some of New London County’s finest families. He hopes, he supposes, to better understand love’s challenges and at last use such knowledge to secure his own happiness, if not that of thousands of the potential readers he might address were his agent, Marty, to ever actually interest a publisher in *Avoiding Trauma-Dramas: Six Guidelines to a Good Marriage*. But just as in his office, as on paper, in his only half-conscious imaginings, no one behaves. Each character invests his or her own story with greater and greater significance until the stories themselves collapse under their own weight and specificity. All that remain are silent rooms, very much like the one in which Dr. Howard now sits, staring at the blank gray sea outside his office window.

some point we made a mistake. It hardly matters when. Perhaps it was seventeen years ago when we married.²³ I'm willing to say half the error is mine, if that in the least way makes any of this better. Now, however, is the time for rectification, not ongoing analysis."

Bob looks at his wife blankly and without purpose. The shuttering ugly sound of her voice awakens in him an understanding that he is entering a new era. At the moment, Mary is just a dark-haired woman with a wide attractive mouth, high cheekbones, and seemingly no other particularly positive distinction. Her words begin taking shape inside Bob, forming a solid concept that is not entirely discomfiting. Even her eyes, with their current display of focused ferocity, disappoint. For they contain no love. In the end isn't that all Mary wants to say to him, that she has no love? He knows deep inside and with complete certainty he is not meant to be alone. Unbidden a picture comes to him of Becca, a woman who works in his office. She is without Mary's breeding, but she is also younger than Mary and carries an air of optimism and joy. Yes, Mary can leave. The house will remain just as it is, a delightful home for a wife, and it will, of course, continue to reflect Mary's good taste but will be enjoyed by a new couple (he and Becca, or if not Becca, someone like Becca²⁴) who can truly appreciate life's good times. Surely that is justice, and it isn't too late, after all. Not for him.

Mary sees Bob's flattened gaze and correctly recognizes that Bob has, at last, resigned himself to her truth. She isn't a cruel woman; of course it will take Bob time to find a place in the city. Isn't that where newly divorced men restart their lives? Certain rooms of the dream home might be redecorated to reflect her final liberation from a man who never truly took the time to know or understand her. Of course, they will sell the MG; neither one of them ever took to driving it. Maybe even the sloop will go. Anything

23. Seventeen years to the day. It was, in fact, their anniversary that set the stage for today's argument. Bob—keen on celebrating, Mary—not.

24. Bob flashes forward to a time when light will fall into their home exactly as it falls today but with sounds of Vivaldi flooding the living room rather than an argument between husband and wife. "Listen, Becca," (or whomever she might be) he hears himself say, "listen and learn."

that reminds her too much of this husband, whom she is already beginning to think of as "former," will eventually have to go; that much is clear. It isn't too late for her to reshape her life into what it might have been, could have, even should have been, but for her long unhappy marriage. What all that might mean remains fuzzy. It might not, after all, include multiparty complex negotiations on an international stage. But surely there is something to be done, something challenging and important and waiting for a woman of her talent and skills. She recognizes the rush of excitement warming her low belly as a signal that her true journey is just beginning.²⁵

25. There was something of this feeling in Mary shortly after she and Bob first met—when they spent a tranquil solitary weekend at the summer cottage of one of the senior partners, who lent it to Bob as a favor for some excellent work the young man had done. Hour after lazy hour, Mary lay belly down on the sand, Bob rocking the small of her back with his hand or shading her face with his own. They would enter the water and gasp at the clarity and astringency it brought to their overheated bodies. Their fingers and toes suddenly precious to them, lengthening out to sea, electrified as jellyfish strands. Her legs wrapped tightly around his waist. Bob holding her while waves knocked their pelvic bones together. His arms, solid and assuring, holding the weight of her torso above the sea. Her wrists, slender and featherlight, across his back. Evenings they rode bikes to the local grocer and cooked grand meals, feasting on raw oysters and drinking the partner's effervescent wines. Bob bit into a fig. And soon Mary tasted its seeds with her own tongue. She pitted cherries, dropping their torn pieces one by one into Bob's mouth. For entire hours, he held her hand on the sofa, while they watched a collection of Antonioni films. His palm pillowy and warm. Her fingers slender and cool. His arm. Her shoulder. His chest. Her head. His pulse. Her ear, resting like a little shell over his heart, magnified it, encircled and shaped its rhythm. Beat, beat, beat of her own blood where his thumb rested on her wrist. Long minutes at a time, he moved his eyes away from the screen to admire her blue living veins. One crooked course ran up her forearm like a little river, and he lightly rested his fingertip on it, feeling for its subtle throb. In the silver light of the television screen (a kind of moonlight), their mouths met. Tongues slippery little fish, dipping into each other, tasting—gently at first—but then she was surprised, and he was surprised; it was not possible to get close enough. His hands under her shirt, removed the bra, slid up and then down her hip, over her thigh, softening her body as it went. Her name across his lips in exaltation: Mary, Mary, Mary. Body against body, up the narrow staircase, bumping into walls. Sheets pressed, thick, flat, clean, and cooling like another skin against their skins, which stung, but only a little from the sun and the sand and the salt and the wind, and Bob pressed his body into hers, grinding her into the sheets, then sliding her body over his, she rocked against

The sun is in slow descent, coloring the room in quiet haze. Marsh grasses blow in the late afternoon breeze. For a moment, Bob and Mary might imagine they can hear blades rustling against one another and gulls squalling at the distant beach over desiccating remains of tourist picnics. Remarkable patterns of light and dark shift across the surface of the pond in time to a rhythm each senses but has never named.

Once, shortly after the pond was dug but not yet filled, Bob and Mary took a walk around its perimeter—the place where their pond would one day be. They considered its placement; should it, in fact, have been dug fifty feet to the left? From there, one would be able to stand on a hillock and view both the pond and the sea. But in its current position one sees only the house and its rolling green lawn. No, they had agreed; this was fine for now.

Bob said he would stock it with fish. "Koi," he said, which they could admire from the bank.

Mary said, "No. Koi will freeze in winter."

Bob said fish must have a way of surviving because so many of them did. Derrick's pond in South Hampton had fish.

"Not koi," said Mary. "Koi don't survive."

Instead, Bob and Mary had waited for wild things to come on their own—frogs and turtles and toads. By the time Mary saw the heron, she thought of all of them as her own. The bird, for example, now hunting, one leg cocked, beak hovering above what might be anything, anything but a koi; she'd insisted and was the victor in that dispute. By now, all the other creatures had become strong enough to create a home in the pond (an entire ecosystem, really). This despite its chemical clean, for it had come to pass that maintaining the small body of water, keeping it algae-free and reflective of the sky above, required one specially trained man and truckloads of powders, tablets, and jugs of acrid liquids. It is in this crystal water that the heron Mary thinks of as hers stands poised and picture perfect.

Across the white rug falls a ray of light, a momentary blinding glare. Long shadows gather behind the sofa. The

him slickly like waves against the shore and she was the wave or he was the wave and she was the wind but more solid and whole, something each of them could cling to forever and a day as love songs go.

room's corners darken, obscuring the credenza and the vase. Bob sees bits of dust shimmering in a band of golden light. Dust, of course, surrounds them. But he sees only the fluid glittering motion inside the single shaft.

Five hundred miles out to sea, a group of right whales makes its way from Florida to the Bay of Fundy. A black hump, shining silver in the dusk, breaks the surface, falls under, breaks, surfaces again.

Once, and only once, there had been a fantastic orgasm on Mary's part, ending an entire day of unparalleled happiness. That was Bob and Mary's first weekend together at the Connecticut shore, and she fell completely and thoroughly in love with him,²⁶ thought she had fallen in love. Bob's love for Mary? Bob's love for Mary was as close as Bob could get. Very, very close.

26. See n. 6 and n. 25 above.

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