What I Loved

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Extract

ONE

YESTERDAY, I FOUND VIOLET'S LETTERS TO BILL. THEY WERE HIDden between the pages of one of his books and came tumbling out and fell to the floor. I had known about the letters for years, but neither Bill nor Violet had ever told me what was in them. What they did tell me was that minutes after reading the fifth and last letter, Bill changed his mind about his marriage to Lucille, walked out the door of the building on Greene Street, and headed straight for Violet's apartment in the East Village. When I held the letters in my hands, I felt they had the uncanny weight of things enchanted by stories that are told and retold and then told again. My eyes are bad now, and it took me a long time to read them, but in the end I managed to make out every word. When I put the letters down, I knew that I would start writing this book today.

"While I was lying on the floor in the studio," she wrote in the fourth letter, "I watched you while you painted me. I looked at your arms and your shoulders and especially at your hands while you worked on the canvas. I wanted you to turn around and walk over to me and rub my skin the way you rubbed the painting. I wanted you to press hard on me with your thumb the way you pressed on the picture, and I thought that if you

didn't, I would go crazy, but I didn't go crazy, and you never touched me then, not once. You didn't even shake my hand."

I first saw the painting Violet was writing about twenty-five years ago in a gallery on Prince Street in SoHo. I didn't know either Bill or Violet at the time. Most of the canvases in the group show were thin minimalist works that didn't interest me. Bill's painting hung alone on a wall. It was a large picture, about six feet high and eight feet long, that showed a young woman lying on the floor in an empty room. She was propped up on one elbow, and she seemed to be looking at something beyond the edge of the painting. Brilliant light streamed into the room from that side of the canvas and illuminated her face and chest. Her right hand was resting on her pubic bone, and when I moved closer, I saw that she was holding a little taxi in that hand—a miniature version of the ubiquitous yellow cab that moves up and down the streets of New York.

It took me about a minute to understand that there were actually three people in the painting. Far to my right, on the dark side of the canvas, I noticed that a woman was leaving the picture. Only her foot and ankle could be seen inside the frame, but the loafer she was wearing had been rendered with excruciating care, and once I had seen it, I kept looking back at it. The invisible woman became as important as the one who dominated the canvas. The third person was only a shadow. For a moment I mistook the shadow for my own, but then I understood that the artist had included it in the work. The beautiful woman, who was wearing only a man's T-shirt, was being looked at by someone outside the painting, a spectator who seemed to be standing just where I was standing when I noticed the darkness that fell over her belly and her thighs.

To the right of the canvas I read the small typed card: *Self-Portrait* by William Wechsler. At first I thought the artist was joking, but then I changed my mind. Did that title next to a man's name suggest a feminine part of himself or a trio of selves? Maybe the oblique narrative of two women and a viewer referred directly to the artist, or maybe the title didn't refer to the content of the picture at all, but to its form. The hand that had painted the picture hid itself in some parts of the painting and

made itself known in others. It disappeared in the photographic illusion of the woman's face, in the light that came from the invisible window, and in the hyperrealism of the loafer. The woman's long hair, however, was a tangle of heavy paint with forceful dabs of red, green, and blue. Around the shoe and the ankle above it, I noticed thick stripes of black, gray, and white that may have been applied with a knife, and in those dense strokes of pigment I could see the marks left by a man's thumb. It looked as if his gesture had been sudden, even violent.

That painting is here in the room with me. When I turn my head I can see it, although it too has been altered by my failing eyesight. I bought it from the dealer for $2,500 about a week after I saw it. Erica was standing only a few feet away from where I am sitting now when she first looked at the canvas. She examined it calmly and said, "It's like looking at another person's dream, isn't it?"

When I turned to the picture after Erica spoke, I saw that its mixed styles and shifting focus did remind me of the distortions in dreams. The woman's lips were parted, and her two front teeth protruded slightly. The artist had made them shiny white and a little too long, almost like an animal's. It was then that I noticed a bruise just below her knee. I had seen it before, but at that moment its purple cast, which was yellow-green at one edge, pulled my eyes toward it, as if this little wound were really the subject of the painting. I walked over, put my finger on the canvas, and traced the outline of the bruise. The gesture aroused me. I turned to look at Erica. It was a warm September day, and her arms were bare. I bent over her and kissed the freckles on her shoulders, then lifted the hair off her neck and kissed the soft skin underneath it. Kneeling in front of her, I pushed up the material of her skirt, ran my fingers along her thighs, and then I used my tongue. Her knees bent slightly toward me. She pulled down her underpants, tossed them onto the sofa with a grin, and pushed me gently backward onto the floor. Erica straddled me and her hair fell forward onto my face as she kissed me. Then she sat back, pulled off her T-shirt, and removed her bra. I loved that view of my wife. I touched her breasts and let my finger circle a perfectly round mole on the left one, before she leaned over me again. She kissed my

forehead and cheeks and chin and then began fumbling with the zipper of my pants.

In those days, Erica and I lived in a state of almost constant sexual excitement. Just about anything could spark off a session of wild grappling on the bed, the floor, and, once, on the dining room table. Since high school, girlfriends had come and gone in my life. I had had brief affairs and longer ones, but always there had been gaps between them—painful stretches of no women and no sex. Erica said that suffering had made me a better lover—that I didn't take a woman's body for granted. On that afternoon, however, we made love because of the painting. I have often wondered since why the image of a sore on a woman's body should have been erotic to me. Later, Erica said that she thought my response had something to do with a desire to leave a mark on another person's body. "Skin is soft," she said. "We're easily cut and bruised. It's not like she looks beaten or anything. It's an ordinary little black-and-blue mark, but the way it's painted makes it stick out. It's like he loved doing it, like he wanted to make a little wound that would last forever."

Erica was thirty-four years old then. I was eleven years older than that, and we had been married for a year. We'd literally bumped into each other in Butler Library at Columbia. It was late on a Saturday morning in October, and the stacks were mostly empty. I had heard her steps, had felt her presence behind the dim rows of books illuminated by a timed light that gave off a low humming sound. I found the book I was looking for and walked toward the elevator. Except for the lamp, I heard nothing. I turned the corner and tripped over Erica, who had seated herself on the floor at the end of the stack. I managed to keep my footing, but my glasses sailed off my face. She picked them up, and as I bent over to take them from her, she began to stand up and her head knocked against my chin. When she looked at me, she was smiling: "A few more like that, and we might have something going—a regular slapstick routine."

I had fallen over a pretty woman. She had a wide mouth and thick dark hair cropped to her chin. The narrow skirt she was wearing had

moved up her legs in our collision, and I glanced at her thighs as she tugged at her hem. After adjusting her skirt, she looked up at me and smiled again. During the second smile, her bottom lip quivered for an instant, and I took that small sign of nervousness or embarrassment to mean that she was susceptible to an invitation. Without it, I'm quite sure I would have apologized again and walked away. But that momentary tremor in her lip, gone in a moment, exposed a softness in her character and offered me a glimpse of what I guessed was her carefully guarded sensuality. I asked her to have coffee with me. Coffee turned into lunch, and lunch into dinner, and the following morning I was lying next to Erica Stein in the bed of my old apartment on Riverside Drive. She was still sleeping. The light came through the window and illuminated her face and hair. Very carefully I put my hand on her head. I left it there for several minutes while I looked at her and hoped she would stay.

By then we had talked for hours. It turned out that Erica and I came from the same world. Her parents were German Jews who left Berlin as teenagers in 1933. Her father became a prominent psychoanalyst and her mother a voice teacher at Juilliard. The Steins were both dead. They died within months of each other the year before I met Erica, which was the same year my mother died: 1973. I was born in Berlin and lived there for five years. My memories of that city are fragmentary, and some may be false, images and stories I shaped from what my mother told me about my early life. Erica was born on the Upper West Side, where I ended up after spending three years in a Hampstead flat in London. It was Erica who prompted me to leave the West Side and my comfortable Columbia apartment. Before we married, she told me she wanted to "emigrate." When I asked her what she meant, she said that it was time for her to sell her parents' apartment on West Eighty-second Street and take the long subway ride downtown. "I smell death up here," she said, "and antiseptic and hospitals and stale Sacher torte. I have to move." Erica and I left the familiar ground of our childhoods and staked out new turf among the artists and bohemians farther south. We used the money we had inherited from our parents and moved to a loft on Greene Street between Canal and Grand.

The new neighborhood with its empty streets, low buildings, and young tenants freed me from bonds I had never thought of as constraints. My father died in 1947, when he was only forty-three years old, but my mother lived on. I was their only child, and after my father was gone, my mother and I shared his ghost. My mother grew old and arthritic, but my father remained young and brilliant and promising—a doctor who might have done anything. That anything became everything for my mother. For twenty-six years she lived in the same apartment on Eighty-fourth Street between Broadway and Riverside with my father's missing future. Every once in a while, when I was first teaching, a student would refer to me as "Dr. Hertzberg" rather than "Professor," and I would inevitably think of my father. Living in SoHo didn't erase my past or induce forgetfulness, but when I turned a corner or crossed a street, there were no reminders of my displaced childhood and youth. Erica and I were both the children of exiles from a world that has disappeared. Our parents were assimilated middle-class Jews for whom Judaism was a religion their great-grandparents had practiced. Before 1933 they had thought of themselves as "Jewish Germans," a phrase that no longer exists in any language.

When we met, Erica was an assistant professor in English at Rutgers, and I had already been teaching at Columbia in the art history department for twelve years. My degree came from Harvard, hers from Columbia, which explained why she was wandering in the stacks that Saturday morning with an alumni pass. I had fallen in love before, but in almost every case I had arrived at a moment of fatigue and boredom. Erica never bored me. She sometimes irritated and exasperated me, but she never bored me. Erica's comment about Bill's self-portrait was typical of her—simple, direct, and penetrating. I never condescended to Erica.

I had walked past 89 Bowery many times without ever stopping to look at it. The run-down, four-story brick building between Hester and Canal had never been more than the humble quarters of a wholesale business,

but those days of modest respectability were long over by the time I arrived to visit William Wechsler. The windows of what had once been a storefront were boarded up, and the heavy metal door at street level was gouged and dented, as if somebody had attacked it with a hammer. A man with a beard and a drink in a paper bag was lounging on the single front step. He grunted in my direction when I asked him to move and then half-rolled, half-slid off the step.

My first impressions of people are often clouded by what I come to know about them later, but in Bill's case, at least one aspect of those first seconds remained throughout our friendship. Bill had glamour—that mysterious quality of attraction that seduces strangers. When he met me at the door, he looked almost as disheveled as the man on the front step. He had a two-day beard. His thick black hair bushed out from the top and sides of his head, and his clothes were covered with dirt as well as paint. And yet when he looked at me, I found myself pulled toward him. His complexion was very dark for a white man, and his clear green eyes had an Asiatic tilt to them. He had a square jaw and chin, broad shoulders, and powerful arms. At six-two, he seemed to tower over me even though I couldn't have been more than a few inches shorter. I later decided that his almost magical appeal had something to do with his eyes. When he looked at me, he did so directly and without embarrassment, but at the same time I sensed his inwardness, his distraction. Although his curiosity about me seemed genuine, I also felt that he didn't want a thing from me. Bill gave off an air of autonomy so complete, it was irresistible.

"I took it for the light," he said to me when we walked through the door of the loft space on the fourth floor. Three long windows at the far end of the single room were shining with the afternoon sun. The building had sagged, which meant the back of the place was considerably lower than the front. The floor had warped as well, and as I looked toward the windows, I noticed bulges in the boards like shallow waves on a lake. The high end of the loft was spare, furnished only with a stool, a table constructed from two sawhorses and an old door, and stereo equipment, surrounded by hundreds of records and tapes in plastic milk

crates. Rows of canvases had been stacked against the wall. The room smelled strongly of paint, turpentine, and must.

All the necessities for daily life had been crowded into the low end. A table knocked up against an old claw-foot bathtub. A double bed had been placed near a table, not far from a sink, and the stove protruded from an opening in an enormous bookcase crammed with books. There were also books piled in stacks on the floor beside it, and dozens more on an armchair that looked as if it hadn't been sat on in years. The chaos of the loft's living quarters revealed not only Bill's poverty but his obliviousness to the objects of domestic life. Time would make him richer, but his indifference to things never changed. He remained curiously unattached to the places where he lived and blind to the details of their arrangements.

Even on that first day, I felt Bill's asceticism, his almost brutal desire for purity and his resistance to compromise. The feeling came both from what he said and from his physical presence. He was calm, soft-spoken, a little restrained in his movements, and yet an intensity of purpose emanated from him and seemed to fill up the room. Unlike other large personalities, Bill wasn't loud or arrogant or uncommonly charming. Nevertheless, when I stood next to him and looked at the paintings, I felt like a dwarf who had just been introduced to a giant. The feeling made my comments sharper and more thoughtful. I was fighting for space.

He showed me six paintings that afternoon. Three were finished. The three others had just been started—sketchy lines and large fields of color. My canvas belonged to the same series, which were all of the dark-haired young woman, but from one work to another, the woman's size fluctuated. In the first painting, she was obese, a mountain of pale flesh in tight nylon shorts and a T-shirt—an image of gluttony and abandon so huge that her body appeared to have been squeezed into the frame. She was clutching a baby's rattle in her fat fist. A man's elongated shadow fell across her right breast and huge belly and then dwindled to a mere line at her hips. In the second, the woman was much thinner. She was lying on a mattress in her underwear looking down at her own body with an expression that seemed to be at once autoerotic and self-critical. She was grip-

ping a large fountain pen in her hand, about twice the size of a normal pen. In the third picture, the woman had gained a few pounds, but she wasn't as plump as the person in the canvas I had bought. She was wearing a ragged flannel nightgown and sitting on the edge of the bed, her thighs casually parted. A pair of red knee socks lay at her feet. When I looked at her legs, I noticed that just below her knees were faint red lines left by the elastic of the socks.

"It reminds me of Jan Steen's painting of the woman at her morning toilet, taking off her sock," I said. "The small painting in the Rijksmuseum."

Bill smiled at me for the first time. "I saw that painting in Amsterdam when I was twenty-three, and it got me thinking about skin. I'm not interested in nudes. They're too arty, but I'm really interested in skin."

For a while we talked about skin in paintings. I mentioned the beautiful red stigmata on the hand of Zurbarán's Saint Francis. Bill talked about the skin color of Grünewald's dead Christ and the rosy skin of Boucher's nudes, whom he referred to as "soft porn ladies." We discussed the changing conventions of crucifixions and pietàs and depositions. I said Pontormo's Mannerism had always interested me, and Bill brought up R. Crumb. "I love his rawness," he said. "The ugly courage of his work." I asked him about George Grosz, and Bill nodded.

"A relative," he said. "The two are definitely artistic relatives. Did you ever see Crumb's series *Tales from the Land of Genitalia*? Penises running around in boots."

"Like Gogol's nose," I said.

Bill showed me medical drawings then, a field I knew little about. He pulled out dozens of books from his shelves with illustrations from different periods—diagrams of medieval humors, eighteenth-century anatomical pictures, a nineteenth-century picture of a man's head with phrenological bumps, and one from around the same time of female genitalia. The latter was a curious drawing of the view between a woman's splayed thighs. We stood beside each other and stared down at the detailed rendering of vulva, clitoris, labia, and the small blackened hole of a vaginal entrance. The lines were harsh and exacting.

"It looks like a diagram for machinery," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I never thought of that." He looked down at the picture. "It's a mean picture. Everything is in the right place, but it's a nasty cartoon. Of course the artist thought it was science."

"I don't think anything is ever just science," I said.

He nodded. "That's the problem with seeing things. Nothing is clear. Feelings, ideas shape what's in front of you. Cézanne wanted the naked world, but the world is never naked. In my work, I want to create doubt." He stopped and smiled at me. "Because that's what we're sure of."

"Is that why you've made your woman fat and thin and in between?" I said.

"To be honest, it was more of an urge than an idea."

"And the mixture of styles?" I said.

Bill walked to the window and lit a cigarette. He inhaled and let the ash drop on the floor. He looked up at me. His large eyes were so penetrating, I wanted to turn away from them, but I didn't. "I'm thirty-one years old, and you're the first person who ever bought one of my paintings, unless you count my mother. I've been working for ten years. Dealers have rejected the work hundreds of times."

"De Kooning didn't have his first show until he was forty," I said.

"You misunderstand me," he said, speaking slowly. "I don't ask that anyone be interested. Why should they be interested? I'm wondering why *you* are interested."

I told him. We sat down on the floor with the paintings in front of us, and I said that I liked ambiguity, that I liked not knowing where to look on his canvases, that a lot of modern figurative painting bored me, but his pictures didn't. We talked about de Kooning, especially one small work that Bill had found inspiring, *Self-portrait with Imaginary Brother*. We talked about Hopper's strangeness, and about Duchamp. Bill called him "the knife that cut art to pieces." I thought he meant this in a derogatory way, but then he added, "He was a great con artist. I love him."

When I pointed out the razor stubble he had included on the thin

woman's legs, he said that when he was with another person, his eyes were often drawn to a single detail—a chipped tooth, a Band-Aid on a finger, a vein, a cut, a rash, a mole, and that for a moment the isolated feature took over his vision, and he wanted to reproduce those seconds in his work. "Seeing is flux," he said. I mentioned the hidden narratives in his work, and he said that for him stories were like blood running through a body—paths of a life. It was a revealing metaphor, and I never forgot it. As an artist, Bill was hunting the unseen in the seen. The paradox was that he had chosen to present this invisible movement in figurative painting, which is nothing if not a frozen apparition—a surface.

Bill told me that he had grown up in the New Jersey suburbs, where his father had started a cardboard-box business and eventually made a success of it. His mother volunteered for Jewish charities, was a den mother for the Cub Scouts, and had later gotten a real estate license. Neither of his parents had gone to college, and there were few books in the house. I imagined the green lawns and quiet houses of South Orange—bicycles in driveways, the street signs, the two-car garages. "I was good at drawing," he said, "but for a long time baseball was much more important to me than art."

I told him that I had suffered through sports at the Fieldston School. I was thin and nearsighted and had stood in the outfield and hoped that nobody would hit the ball in my direction. "Any sport that required a utensil was impossible for me," I said. "I could run and I could swim, but put something in my hand and I dropped it."

In high school, Bill began his pilgrimages to the Met, to MoMA, to the Frick, to galleries, and, as he put it, "to the streets." "I liked the streets as much as museums, and I spent hours in the city wandering around, inhaling the garbage." When he was a junior, his parents divorced. That same year he quit the cross-country team, the basketball team, the baseball team. "I stopped working out," he said. "I got thin." Bill went to college at Yale, took studio art, art history, and literature courses. That was where he met Lucille Alcott, whose father was a professor at

the law school. "We were married three years ago," he said. I found myself looking for traces left by a woman in the loft, but I saw nothing. "Is she at work?" I said to him.

"She's a poet. She rents a little room a couple of blocks from here. That's where she writes. She's also a freelance copy editor. She copy-edits. I paint and plaster for contractors. We get by."

A sympathetic doctor saved Bill from Vietnam. Throughout his childhood and youth he had suffered from severe allergies. When they were bad his face swelled up and he sneezed so hard he got a neckache. Before he reported to the draft board in Newark, the physician added the phrase "with a tendency toward asthma" to the word "allergies." A couple of years later, a tendency might not have earned Bill 1-Y status, but this was 1966 and the full force of Vietnam resistance was still in the future. After college, he spent a year working as a bartender in New Jersey. He lived with his mother, saved all his earnings, and traveled in Europe for two years. He moved from Rome to Amsterdam to Paris. To keep himself going, he took odd jobs. He worked as a desk clerk for an English magazine in Amsterdam, a tour guide of the catacombs in Rome, and a reader of English novels for an old man in Paris. "When I read to him, I had to lie on the sofa. He was very particular about my position. I had to take off my shoes. It was important to him that he had a clear view of my socks. The money was good, and I put up with it for a week. Then I quit. I took my three hundred francs and left. It was all the money I had in the world. I walked into the street. It was about eleven at night, and there was this wasted old man standing on the sidewalk with his hand out. I gave the money to him."

"Why?" I said.

Bill turned to me. "I don't know. I felt like it. It was stupid, but I never regretted it. It made me feel free. I didn't eat for two days."

"An act of bravado," I said.

He turned to me and said, "Of independence."

"Where was Lucille?"

"She was living in New Haven with her parents. She wasn't very well then. We wrote to each other."

I didn't ask about Lucille's illness. When he mentioned it, he looked away from me, and I saw his eyes narrow in an expression of pain.

I changed the subject. "Why did you call the painting I bought a self-portrait?"

"They're all self-portraits," he said. "While I was working with Violet, I realized that I was mapping out a territory in myself I hadn't seen before, or maybe a territory between her and me. The title popped into my head, and I used it. Self-portrait seemed right."

"Who is she?" I said.

"Violet Blom. She's a graduate student at NYU. She gave me that drawing I showed you—the one that looks like machinery."

"What's she studying?"

"History. She's writing about hysteria in France at the turn of the century." Bill lit another cigarette and glanced at the ceiling. "She's a very smart girl—unusual." He blew the smoke up, and I watched its faint circles combine with specks of dust in the window light.

"I don't think most men would portray themselves as a woman. You borrowed her to show yourself. What does she think?"

He laughed for an instant and then said, "She likes it. She says it's subversive, especially because I like women, not men."

"And the shadows?" I asked him.

"They're mine, too."

"Too bad," I said. "I thought they were mine."

Bill looked at me. "They can be yours, too." He gripped my lower arm with his hand and shook it. This sudden gesture of camaraderie, even affection, made me unusually happy. I have thought about it often, because that small exchange about shadows altered the course of my life. It marks the moment when a meandering conversation between two men took an irrevocable turn toward friendship.

"She floated through the dance," Bill said to me a week later over coffee. "She didn't seem to know how pretty she was. I chased her for years. It was on again and off again. Something kept bringing me back." Bill made

no mention of Lucille's illness in the following weeks, but the way he talked about her led me to think she was frail, a woman who needed protection from something he had chosen not to talk about.

The first time I saw Lucille Alcott, she was standing in the doorway of the Bowery loft, and I thought she looked like a woman in a Flemish painting. She had pale skin, light brown hair, which she had tied back, and large, almost lashless blue eyes. Erica and I had been invited to have dinner on the Bowery. It was raining that November night, and while we ate we heard the rain on the roof above us. Somebody had swept the floor of dust and ashes and cigarette butts for our visit, and somebody had put a large white cloth over Bill's worktable and set eight candles on top of it. Lucille took credit for cooking the meal, a tasteless brown concoction of unrecognizable vegetables. When Erica politely inquired after the name of the dish, Lucille looked down at her plate and said in perfect French, "Flageolets aux légumes." She paused, raised her eyes, and smiled. "But the flageolets seem to be traveling incognito." After stopping for a second, she continued, "I would like to cook more attentively. It called for parsley." She peered down at her plate. "I left out the parsley. Bill would prefer meat. He ate a lot of meat before, but he knows that I don't cook meat, because I have convinced myself that it is not good for us. I don't understand what it is about recipes. I am very particular when I write. I am always worrying about verbs."

"Her verbs are terrific," Bill said and poured Erica more wine.

Lucille looked at her husband and smiled a little stiffly. I didn't understand the uneasiness of the smile, because Bill's comment had been made without irony. He had told me several times how much he admired her poems and had promised to give me copies of them.

Behind Lucille, I could see the obese portrait of Violet Blom and wondered if Bill's craving for meat had been translated into that huge female body, but later my theory was proven wrong. When we had lunch together, I often saw Bill chewing happily on corned-beef sandwiches, hamburgers, and BLTs.

"I make rules for myself," Lucille said about her poems. "Not the usual rules of metrics, but an anatomy I choose, and then I dissect it.

Numbers are helpful. They're clear, irrefutable. Some of the lines are numbered." Everything Lucille said was characterized by a similarly rigid bluntness. She seemed to make no concessions to decorous conversation or small talk. At the same time, underneath nearly every remark she made, I felt a strain of humor. She talked as if she were observing her own sentences, looking at them from afar, judging their sounds and shapes even as they came from her mouth. Every word she spoke rang with honesty, and yet this earnestness was matched by a simultaneous irony. Lucille amused herself by occupying two positions at once. She was both the subject and object of her own statements.

I don't think Erica heard Lucille's comment about rules. She was talking about novels with Bill. I can't imagine that Bill had heard it either, but during the discussion between them, rules came up again. Erica leaned toward Bill and smiled. "So you agree, the novel is a bag that can hold anything."

"*Tristram Shandy,* chapter four, on Horace's *ab ovo,*" Bill said, pointing his index finger at the ceiling. He began to quote, as if he were hearing an inaudible voice somewhere to his right. "'Horace, I know, does not recommend this fashion altogether: but that gentleman is speaking only of an epic poem or a tragedy—(I forgot which);—besides, if it was not so, I should beg Mr. Horace's pardon;—for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived." Bill's voice rose on the final clause, and Erica threw back her head and laughed. They meandered from Henry James to Samuel Beckett to Louis-Ferdinand Céline as Erica discovered for herself that Bill was a voracious reader of novels. It launched a friendship between them that had little to do with me. By the time our dessert arrived—a weary-looking fruit salad—Erica was inviting him to Rutgers to speak to her students. Bill hesitated at first, and then agreed.

Erica was too polite to ignore Lucille, who was sitting beside her, and some time after she asked Bill to visit one of her classes, she focused all her attention on Lucille. My wife nodded at Lucille when she listened, and when she talked her face was a map of shifting emotions and thoughts. In contrast, Lucille's composed face betrayed almost no feeling. As the

evening went on, her peculiar remarks gained a kind of philosophical rhythm, the clipped tone of a tortured logic, which reminded me a little of reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. When Erica told Lucille she knew of her father by reputation, Lucille said, "Yes, his reputation as a law professor is very good." After a moment, she added, "I would have liked to study law, but I couldn't. I used to try to read my father's law books in his library. I was eleven. I knew that one sentence led to another, but by the time I got to the second sentence, I had forgotten the first, and then during the third, I forgot the second."

"You were only eleven," Erica said.

"No," she said. "It was not my age. I still forget."

"Forgetting," I said, "is probably as much a part of life as remembering. We're all amnesiacs."

"But if we've forgotten," Lucille said, turning to me, "we don't always remember that we forgot, so that to remember that we forgot is not exactly forgetting, is it?"

I smiled at her and said, "I'm looking forward to reading your work. Bill's talked about it with a lot of admiration."

Bill lifted his glass. "To our work," he said loudly. "To letters and to paint." He had let himself go and I could see he was a little drunk. His voice cracked on the word "paint." I found his high spirits endearing, but when I turned to Lucille with my glass lifted for the toast, she smiled that tense, forced smile a second time. It was hard to tell whether her husband had brought on that expression or whether it was merely the result of her own inhibition.

Before we left, Lucille handed me two small magazines in which her work had appeared. When I shook her hand, she took mine limply. I squeezed her palm in return, and she didn't seem to mind. Bill hugged me good-bye, and he hugged and kissed Erica. His eyes were shiny with wine, and he smelled of cigarettes. In the doorway, he put his arm around Lucille's shoulder and pulled her close to him. Next to her husband, she looked very small and very self-conscious.

It was still raining when we stepped outside onto the Bowery.