

The Family Man

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Extract

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the
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I Hate You Still

HENRY ARCHER DID NOT attend his ex-wife's husband's funeral, but he did send a note of condolence. The former Denise Archer wrote back immediately and urgently: Would he believe, after twenty-four reasonably happy years, that life as she knew it had been snatched out from under her? Her postscript said, 'Your number's unlisted. Call me,' and there it was, a bridge he'd never planned to cross.

His quiet greeting, 'It's Henry Archer, Denise,' provoked an audible sob. She quickly clarified that it wasn't bereavement he was hearing in her voice, but relief, a sense she'd been thrown a lifeline.

'Me?' he asked.

Could he stand hearing the whole sordid story? Had he known that Glenn Krouch had two sons from another marriage? Because they were getting everything, every last thing except the clothes, the furs, the jewelry, and one signed

Picasso, which was only a pencil sketch. Was he sitting down? Because some famously heartless lawyer had set *twenty-five* years of marriage as the watershed anniversary after which the prenuptial agreement would deem her long-suffering enough to be a true wife (voice crescendos) *and not some piece of shit!* It was, in the opinion of two lawyers (husbands of friends, not their area of expertise, should she get a third or fourth opinion?), a hideously airtight legal document. And now these stepsons were taking the will so *literally*, as if twenty-four faithful years didn't render a pre-nup null, void, and vicious. How many times had she asked Glenn if he'd updated his will, meaning, *Am I in it?* To which he'd always said, *Yes, of course.*

The 'of course' amounted to a monthly allowance under the thumb of older son and executor, Glenn Junior. Horrible! And so much for Glenn Senior's famous love for Thalia! Henry remembered Thalia, didn't he? Another indignity: Thalia's portion was in trust until she was thirty-five. How condescending and sexist was *that*? Had she mentioned that these sons, not even thirty-five themselves, were not only Glenn's favorite children but his business partners as well? And who but she, their reviled stepmother, had arranged every detail of the black-tie party celebrating the addition of '& Sons' to all signage and had invited the boys' mother *and* seated her at the head table?

She'd helped raise these stepsons since they were eight and ten, buying bunk beds and electronics for their alternate weekends, enduring camp visiting days and humid swim meets. In some families, the ice might have melted; young Glenn and Tommy could have developed warm filial feelings

toward her as years went by and the marriage appeared to make their father happy. But apparently nothing mended a mother's broken heart like sending the second wife to the poorhouse.

If only she'd known . . . well, she had known. She'd signed the hideous document, thinking divorce was the only thing she had to fear. Besides, who thought Glenn with his good stress tests and low blood pressure would die at seventy? The boys got the business, its buildings and outbuildings, and the unkindest, most ridiculous bequest of all: Denise's marital home, the five-bedroom apartment on Park Avenue! Could Henry even imagine what it was worth now? Her friends said the noninheritance was antediluvian, like a Jane Austen movie or a *Masterpiece Theatre* mini-series where the male heirs get to throw the mother and daughter to the wolves.

Infuriating and unfair! One would think that she, the second wife, was single-handedly the home wrecker, no fault of Daddy's, because of course he had made restitution with cars, then condos, then partnerships. Who could hold a grudge this long? If only she'd had a job that had contributed to her own upkeep and toward the mortgage payments. *Were* there mortgage payments? She wished she'd been paying better attention to that, too. Admittedly, ten rooms were too many for a woman living alone. But wasn't downsizing a widow's prerogative? Three real estate agents from one office, all clucking their condolences as they took measurements, had spent hours counting closets and flushing toilets, exactly two weeks and one day after Glenn's funeral. And yes, the sons did offer something like an extension: Denise could

stay as long as she paid the common charges and the taxes, which, conveniently for her new overlords, exceeded her monthly allowance.

‘I wish you’d been there,’ Denise told her ex-husband.

‘Where?’

‘At the wake! If my friends hadn’t seen it with their own two eyes, they’d never believe that Nanette crashed the receiving line, wearing a black suit that screamed *I’m the widow, too*. Yes, I hugged her and yes, we looked like one big happy family in mourning, but I was numb. I didn’t mean it! I was on widow autopilot.’

‘Maybe,’ Henry ventured, ‘Nanette was there to support her children.’

‘All I know is that the minute I turned my back, that self-appointed chief of protocol, Glenn Krouch Junior, pulled his mother into the receiving line. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so utterly alone.’

‘Thalia wasn’t there?’ Henry asked.

‘Thalia was there. Thalia chose to stand at the other end of the line.’

‘Because?’

‘Who knows why daughters do these things? I can’t keep track of my maternal shortcomings. She and I . . . well, never mind. Needless to say, we weren’t speaking before that and we’re not speaking now.’

‘I’m sorry. One would think, especially on that day—’

‘I should have had a child with Glenn, a flesh-and-blood Krouch. And when I think that I viewed his vasectomy as one of the original selling points—’

‘Selling points in favor of your extramarital affair?’ asked

Henry. ‘How soon did that come up? The night you met?’

‘Oh, hon,’ said Denise. ‘Is that always going to be a sore subject? Even though you’ve made peace with your sexual orientation?’

I hate you still, he thought.

How odd to be his ex-wife’s confidant. Henry has done nothing to advance a rapprochement, but Denise has called him daily to rant further about greedy stepsons and the breadline. Her chumminess and her invitations suggest that he is a safe companion for a widow, that a gay ex is something of a status symbol, that her betrayal is not only ancient history, but has been absolved by his subsequent sexual homecoming. When Denise pauses for breath, he asks about Thalia – location, job, marital status, content of their last communication, and particularly what Thalia understands of the short-term father named Henry Archer who didn’t fight for her in court. Invariably Denise, the new woman who has declared herself a work in progress, changes the subject back to Denise.

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A Widow with a Child

HE EXPECTS TO BE astonished by the lavishness and size of the Krouch home, but he is not. Its color scheme is a range from oatmeal to sand. The upholstery is nubby, and the variegated gold carpeting is wall-to-wall. Luckily, Denise had announced while her key was still in the lock, 'You won't be impressed. Glenn liked his furniture pushed against the walls and coffee tables in front of every couch. I finally gave up.' An odor of cigar smoke has lingered, and oversized ashtrays decorate every surface. Henry crosses the room to inspect the photos sitting on a ceiling-high *étagère* made entirely of Lucite. The dominant photograph is a wedding portrait of Denise and Glenn, he in a dark suit and she in a pink ensemble that manages to look bridal. 'It was just before a judge in a private room at Lutèce.' She sighs. 'We ate there on every anniversary until it closed. What a shock *that* was.'

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He would have smiled at Denise's misplaced mourning if he weren't staring intently at a graduation photo, quite surely of Thalia, and then candid shots of her in action: helmeted on a horse, helmeted on skis, in a headlock between two laughing young men. 'That's her, all right,' he says. 'That's the girl I used to know.'

Or is it? The resemblance to the baby Thalia is imperfect, not a time-lapse morph by a police artist. Yes, she is brown-eyed and brown-haired, dimpled still, baby cheeks now defined by excellent cheekbones. The photos convey a fun-loving and friendly girl, but why, he wonders, do they suggest something more immediate, something observed firsthand? He tries to concentrate: Where has he seen this face? 'Trying to place her,' he murmurs.

Denise, wiping her finger along a dusty frame, stares as if he has said something odd and symptomatic of lost brain cells. 'Henry? It's Thalia. You know that. My daughter.'

'I mean – I know her now.'

'She's got one of those faces,' says Denise. 'I often think I see her in a crowd, but then I find myself tapping the shoulder of some other brown-haired girl with a pleasant expression.'

'No,' he says. 'It's more than that. I see her regularly. I know I do. I just can't put my finger on the context.'

'Are you saying that you two are in touch?'

He shakes his head no and closes his eyes.

Denise rattles off impatiently, 'In the park? On the subway? In a restaurant? Maybe you're neighbors. She moves a lot. I can't always keep up with her changes of address.'

An image is creeping closer, and he is relieved: It is neither

compromising nor threatening. It is one of good humor and good service. And now he knows, absolutely: She is the unfailingly friendly girl behind the half door who hangs up his jacket and offers the coral smock before Giovanni cuts his hair. She is the coat-check girl with the big brandy snifter at her elbow in which he places one dollar as he collects his outerwear and she tells him that this is a very good cut for him.

Denise is dusting like a novice, using a tissue from her purse. 'Do you have it yet?' she asks.

It's too soon, and he can't be sure what an ambitious mother would do with this knowledge. 'Not quite,' he lies.

Because his next haircut isn't for another ten days, he makes an appointment for a procedure he's never wanted: a manicure. 'I'll take your first opening,' he tells the receptionist. One hour from now, she tells him. Can he make noon? He says he can.

'Special occasion?' she asks.

He says yes, then not really, distracted by another question on his mind: Shall he confirm the name of the coat-check girl, ask if she's working today and at what hour she goes to lunch? Fearing that such unwelcome interest would be within seconds shouted across the room to Thalia, he says, 'Till then,' and nothing more.

How could he not have noticed the resemblance between baby Thalia and this woman now reaching across the partition to take his navy blue blazer? How had he failed to spot the same shiny brown hair framing the heart-shaped

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face captured twenty-five years ago in photos that have never left his mantel? He says, 'I'm only having a manicure today. Do you think I need a coverall?'

She scratches her chin and narrows her eyes as if his question requires deep concentration. 'It depends on who you get and what color polish you choose,' she says, then laughs. She asks, rather miraculously, he thinks – that she would start a conversation on this signature day – 'This isn't your first manicure, is it?'

'Yes,' he replies, adding, 'I'm Henry Archer,' but without a paternal or confessional timbre, nothing that says, *That name should ring a very profound bell in your head because I was your father for a while.*

'Want me to hold your newspaper?' she asks.

'Will you be here when I'm done? Because I know I'll forget to ask for it if someone else is covering for you.'

'I'll be here,' she says.

He decides that the moment is right: He doesn't care about a manicure. If what he brings up gets complicated or emotional, he'll reschedule. 'Is your name, by chance, Thalia?' he begins.

She is not even close to being astonished. She does not seem to feel that it is a missing person's case solved, but merely a long-standing client trying to recall her name. 'That's me,' she says. 'It's Greek. One of the three Graces.'

When he doesn't answer, she adds, 'Also, one of the nine Muses.'

He is never tongue-tied, so what is wrong with him? A thunderbolt from Zeus might as well have smote him because he loves this Thalia instantly.

*

Throughout his manicure – how foolish he feels to be seen having his nails buffed and cuticles discussed – he ponders how to reveal himself to be the John Henry Archer whose fatherhood dissolved with a divorce. He hates deception and is not good at it. But is Thalia’s workplace the proper setting to announce a fact that would most certainly startle her? As he sits even more foolishly, fingers splayed under a contraption with lights and a whirring fan, he decides what to do: He will buy a card with a blank interior at the nearest Duane Reade, write the truth, seal it, return to the salon, and leave it in Thalia’s wide-mouthed brandy snifter. He will say, as he exchanges his token for his blazer, ‘I’ll be right back,’ implying that he is off in search of change for a twenty.

Fifteen minutes later he is shrugging into his blazer when Thalia says, ‘Not so fast; I want to see those new, improved hands.’ Sheepishly, he holds out his fingers and thumbs. Thalia says, ‘Very nice. Think you’ll make it a regular thing?’

He is unable to give the simple yes or no the inquiry would require. He says, ‘Let me get some change. I’ll be right back. Will you be here?’

‘You don’t have to get change on *my* account,’ she says.

‘I know,’ he says. ‘But I’d like to.’

‘May I point out that change is available on-site, at a little invention we have called a cash register?’

He smiles. ‘In that case . . .’ but doesn’t walk away. ‘I know this is coming completely out of the blue, but may I have a few minutes to speak with you in private?’

‘About what?’

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‘About a personal matter.’ He remembers one of the tactics he had rehearsed on the subway: Invoke, if necessary, his attorney-hood. He continues. ‘Personal only in that it does involve a family matter.’

‘Is this a coffee-break-length talk or lunch? Because I can do either.’ She checks her watch. ‘I usually go from one to one forty-five.’

‘Lunch, please,’ he says.

How is it possible that Thalia Wales Archer Krouch, child of divorce, child of Denise, estranged daughter, and coat-check girl, can appear so well adjusted, so content? She sits across from him at an Italian bistro on West 57th Street, where he encourages her to order the three-course lunch.

‘Will I need a glass of wine?’ she asks.

‘Please. I’ll have one, too.’

‘House red,’ she says to the waiter.

‘Which is what?’ asks Henry.

‘It’s fine,’ says Thalia. ‘I’m sure it’s good here.’

‘Chianti Classico,’ says the waiter.

‘Fine,’ says Thalia. And when Henry doesn’t object she says, ‘Two glasses, please.’

The waiter leaves them with menus and now it is time. Henry says, ‘Thalia? That personal matter? It involves me. I could say that I am an old friend of the family who knew you as a child, but let me say this, which might do the job on its own: My full name is John Henry Archer.’

Thalia reaches for the bread, dips a piece into a saucer of olive oil, then asks calmly, focaccia poised in midair, ‘The John Henry Archer who used to be married to my mother?’

There it is, the huge and homely fact, the one that testifies to his inadequacies and lifts the curtain on decades of paternal regrets. He says, 'Yes. I was married to your mother for two years, technically three when the divorce came through.'

Thalia asks easily, 'Did you know at the time that you were gay?'

Isn't this generation wonderful? he marvels. He says, '*Unacknowledged* might be the best word to describe what I was.'

'But it was a real marriage?'

'It was.'

'And I was how old?'

'Three.' And then, unexpectedly, his voice fails him. Here before him is that same little girl. True, she is cross-examining him; but she is calm, judicious, accepting. His mind floats outside the frame, views the tableau, and thinks, *the reunion of my dreams*. 'Three then four,' he manages, 'and then she left and took you with her.'

The waiter arrives with the wine. With hardly a glance, Thalia signals, *Leave it. Come back later*.

'I'm sorry,' Henry says. 'I didn't know I would get this emotional.'

Thalia pats the closer of his two hands, the one that is clenched around the stem of his wineglass. He blurts out, 'I didn't do enough. I could have done more. I had my rights.'

'As a stepfather?' she asks. 'For a year or two? I don't know why you're beating yourself up over this. I mean, did you love her?'

Her? he thinks. *Not her. You!* He manages to say, 'It was

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time for me to get married, or so everyone thought. Your mother was rather obviously put in my path—’

‘By?’

‘A colleague, well-meaning. His fiancée was from the funeral director’s family that conducted Denise’s first husband’s burial service. They sat us together at their wedding reception, at what was designated the singles tables except everyone else there was engaged. Quite awkward. But after a few glasses of champagne, the joke of the night was that we’d be next. As it turned out we were. She liked me well enough, and I was very good with you.’ He adds, sounding apologetic, ‘I found the idea of a widow with a child very appealing.’

‘And now? Do you hate her?’

‘I did when she left. The *way* she left.’

‘But not anymore?’

The waiter is back, pen poised over order pad. Thalia asks Henry if he wants to share. He doesn’t, but he recognizes that this might be a symbolic gesture. He says, ‘Yes, let’s. You pick one and I’ll pick one and how about an antipasto?’

‘Calamari?’ she counters.

‘Absolutely.’

For her entrée she picks the dish he believes should have been retired with the fall menu – pumpkin ravioli – but he says yes, he likes that very much. What would she think would be a good complement to that? Without hesitation she says, ‘No, your turn. As long as it’s not the tripe.’

‘Do you eat veal?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Shall we have the one with the capers and lemon juice?’

‘Love that,’ says Thalia.

He pays some needless attention to the cloth napkin on his lap before announcing, ‘Your mother and I have been in touch since the death of her husband.’

Thalia, after a pause that he senses is his to fill, adds, ‘Glenn. My father of long duration.’

‘Of course. I’m sorry. I should have expressed my condolences the minute we met.’

‘Did she send you to talk to me?’

‘Absolutely not. She doesn’t even know that I know you from the salon. I made the connection myself after seeing photos of you in her apartment.’

When the waiter sets a glistening heap of calamari between them, Henry waits and watches. He doesn’t see Denise in her, except for the eyes. But the echoes of the baby Thalia seem so obvious now, so unmissable. The rest must come from his predecessor, the doomed biological father who fell off a mountain in Peru, who had been tall, long-legged, known to successive husbands as a photograph in the nursery: hands on his hips and a tolerant grin that seemed to say, *Okay, I’m posing. Take your photo and let me get on with my adventures.*

Thalia picks up her fork, puts it down, and says, ‘Okay. I confess. I’ve known about you for a long time. Well, a long-ish time.’

‘That’s not possible,’ he says.

‘It’s very possible! I’m in my little cage under the stairs and over there is the reception desk, and I hear you walk in and say, “Henry Archer . . . I have a one o’clock with Giovanni . . .” So I look up your address on the computer

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and I do a little Googling, and I figure out that you are *that* Henry Archer. Besides, you look the same.'

'The same as what?'

Thalia says, 'This is going to embarrass you.'

'Maybe not.'

'I know already, after ten minutes, that it will. But here it is: Denise always claimed you were the handsomest of her many husbands, with photos to prove it. Even with red-eye, you had the bluest eyes.'

Thalia has guessed correctly: He is not good at fielding compliments. He says only, 'My hair used to be dark. And not this short.'

'Hmmm. Twenty-four years go by. Hair turns gray. I didn't need a salon colorist to solve that mystery.'

'Still, you had no desire to introduce yourself?'

'What would I have said?'

'Just, "I'm Thalia." I would have known immediately what that meant.'

'But I didn't know how you'd react. What if I'd said, "Here's your smock and – by the way? – I'm Thalia Krouch. Didn't you use to be married to my mother?" You might have run out the door, never to return.'

He says no, he hopes not, then asks how long ago she Googled him.

'Just two or three months ago. Maybe four. Not that long.'

'A long time to keep something like that to yourself.'

'Not that hard. Not for me, anyway.'

'Because we've hardly exchanged any words?'

'No,' said Thalia. 'What I meant was not very hard to play

a total stranger . . . because I'm an actress.'

Henry wants to appear enthusiastic, but he is a seasoned New Yorker who translates 'actress' as workshops taken and head-shots posed for against the odds.

'I was waiting for an opening,' she continues. 'If you had introduced yourself or asked my name . . .' She adds, after a pause, 'Or asked me a question about myself.'

'Do you remember me at all?' he asks. '*Anything?*'

Thalia says, 'I have memories I never quite knew what to do with: Did we ever take a carriage ride around the park on a really cold day?'

'We did! Christmas Day. You were four and a half.'

'And was there a cat somewhere in the picture? Or a kitten?'

'Almost. I took you to the Humane Society and you picked out a kitten – neglecting to clear that with your mother first. Very bad preemptive move on my part.'

Thalia finally sticks a fork into a calamari ring and pronounces it the best ever. 'Did you imagine what the next step would be after you announced that we're long-lost step-relatives?' she asks.

He isn't sure from her tone whether the door is opening or shutting. He says, 'I imagined that I would ask you questions about the intervening years, and vice versa, in the manner of two people getting to know each other.'

'Okay,' says Thalia. 'You first.'

Out of politeness, he asks about her acting.

'One commercial and one movie,' she says.

Her answer fashions a whole new view of Thalia. 'A movie! How wonderful! That means you aren't just hoping to break into acting, but you're on your way!'

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‘Not quite,’ she says. ‘Do you know what a stand-in does?’

Henry chews, swallows, asks with fork poised over the next piece, ‘I’m guessing it’s something like an understudy?’

‘It’s a person who substitutes for the actor *before* filming, for things like lighting. Once in a while, depending on the director, you read some lines.’

‘Have you stood in for anyone I might know?’

‘I was a stand-in for the mean secretary, the one with seniority, in *The Devil Wears Prada*, but only when the real stand-in went home sick. And I was a clacker in another scene, which is what they called the editorial assistants running around in high heels. Unfortunately, no sign of me in the final cut.’

‘Still,’ says Henry. ‘A foot in the door and a very real credit on your C.V.’

‘And you’re a lawyer, right? At least I know you went to law school. Vanderbilt, correct?’

‘Once upon a time I practiced law. I quit after Thanksgiving. Retired. Quite early, unrelated to my lack of affection for the law. And I’ll tell you why: My father keeled over of a heart attack at fifty-five, and I thought I should get out in time to enjoy life in case I inherited his arteries.’

‘And do you?’ she asks. ‘Enjoy life?’

‘In my own quiet way, I think I do.’

‘How are *your* arteries?’

‘Good. As much as my cholesterol count testifies.’

‘As you know, Glenn also died prematurely, a massive heart attack, and his cholesterol was good.’

‘I’m being followed, just in case.’ He smiles. ‘I only have fried calamari on special occasions.’

‘Do you live alone?’

‘I do.’

‘Are you in a relationship?’

‘You first. It’s bound to be more interesting.’

Thalia says, ‘That’ll be easy: There’s no one.’

‘Even in the wings? On the horizon? Recently decamped?’

‘I’m between boyfriends. Which is fine. I try not to date actors or hairdressers. What about you?’

‘No one.’

‘Even in the wings? Recently decamped?’

‘Recently deceased,’ he says quietly.

‘A longtime companion?’

‘Very.’

‘Please tell me it wasn’t AIDS.’

‘It wasn’t AIDS. It wasn’t even a male companion.’

‘A woman? As in girlfriend?’

‘A very dear woman friend, Celeste. Cancer. “Companion” in the sense she was my movie date, my dinner date. We liked the same theaters and the same desserts, and neither of us put that much stock in reviews so we saw almost everything. We’d go to an early screening and grab a bite afterward. Sure enough some dame – her word – would waltz into Trattoria Dell’Arte with a grotesque hat or sequined ruby slippers, and Celeste would lower her eyes and make one of her trademark cynical remarks, and I’d practically need a Heimlich.’

‘Was she a lawyer, too?’

‘She was a teacher, kindergarten, public school. She threw herself into it and the kids loved her. She’d wear crazy stuff to school – shoes with bows like Minnie Mouse or big polka

dots, pop beads. You're too young to remember pop beads. But she collected things just for their effect on five-year-olds. You know how little girls are – you were like this – anything fancy or glittery or pink is a work of art.'

Smiling, Thalia says, 'Go on.'

'Every once in a while, a girl or boy, grown up now, would come up to her and say, "Miss McGonagle? I think you were my kindergarten teacher." And she'd always pull something out of her hat, some memory that was absolutely spot-on. As soon as they were out of earshot, she'd say, "Don't be impressed. For my entire career I recycled the same unit on sinking and floating."'

Thalia says, 'That does it. Now I want to go into teaching and change my name to Miss McGonagle and have grown-up students deliver testimonials . . . But I guess I meant go on about me – details my mother would have to refer me to a nanny for.'

Henry, so very happy to relate the Thalia lore he's bottled up, says, 'I remember the oddest things. You loved olives. You snacked on them like they were – what do toddlers usually snack on? – raisins. And you liked strawberry ice cream better than those more complicated flavors, but you'd spit out the bits of actual strawberries.'

'Still do.'

'You wouldn't go down the slide in the park. And when you finally worked up the courage, you went on your stomach, headfirst, and banged into a little boy who didn't get out of the way fast enough. Wham. An hour later you had a black eye. And your favorite thing, at least in the coloring book genre, was dot-to-dot. When you were three,

I was buying the ones that were recommended for ages five to seven.'

'Such a girl genius,' she murmurs.

'I know all parents think that, but in so many areas—'

Thalia leans forward. 'It must have been a shock to find me passing out smocks in a hair salon.'

'No!' he says. 'Don't say that. I couldn't be happier. If Celeste were here, she'd be dancing on the table.'

'Because . . . ?'

'Because she loved children and she knew about you, knew I wanted to fix this. And even though I wouldn't call it her dying wish, she'd open her eyes during that last week and say, "She's probably right under your nose. Make some phone calls, for chrissakes."''

Thalia's eyes – and should this alarm or thrill him? – are now red-rimmed.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'Let's change the subject to something less lugubrious.'

'Not at all,' says Thalia.

'I only meant to say that she was a marvelous friend.'

Thalia leans in. 'I bet she thought you were marvelous, too.' She pronounces it '*mab-velus*' and she is teasing him. Is she an aristocrat directed by the Marx Brothers, or is she vintage Billy Crystal on *Saturday Night Live*? He doesn't care. Her timing and delivery are excellent, and within the tease lies a compliment. He is smiling again and hungry. Thalia can act!