
Opening Extract from...

The Marriage Plot

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No one would fall in love if he hadn't read about it first.

—Franscois de La Rochefoucauld

You may ask yourself, How did I get here? You may say to yourself, This is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful wife.

—The Talking Heads

A Madman in Love

To start with, look at all the books. There were her Edith Wharton novels, arranged not by title but date of publication; there was the complete Modern Library set of Henry James, a gift from her father on her 21st birthday; there were the dog-eared paperbacks assigned in her college courses, a lot of Dickens, a smidgen of Trollope, along with good helpings of Austen, George Eliot, and the redoubtable Brontë Sisters. There were a whole lot of black-and-white New Directions paperbacks, mostly poetry by people like H.D. or Denise Levertov. There were the Colette novels she read on the sly. There was the first edition of "Couples," belonging to her mother, which Madeleine had surreptitiously read back in sixth grade and which she was using now to provide textual support in her English honors thesis on the marriage plot. There was, in short, this mid-sized but still portable library representing pretty much everything Madeleine had read in college, a collection of texts, seemingly chosen at random, whose focus slowly narrowed, like a personality test, a sophisticated one you couldn't trick by anticipating the implications of its questions and finally got so lost in that your only recourse was to answer the simple truth. And then you waited for the result, hoping for "Artistic," or "Passionate," thinking you could live with "Sensitive," secretly fearing "Narcissistic" and "Domestic," but finally being presented with an outcome that cut both ways and made you feel different depending on the day, the hour, or the guy you happened to be dating: "Incurably Romantic."

These were the books in the room where Madeleine lay, with a pillow over her head, on the morning of her college graduation. She'd read each and every one, often multiple times, frequently underlining passages, but that was no help to her now. Madeleine was trying to ignore the room and everything in it. She was hoping to drift back down into the oblivion where she'd been safely couched for the last three hours. Any higher level of wakefulness would force her to come to grips with certain disagreeable facts: for instance, the amount and variety of the alcohol she'd imbibed last night, and the fact that she'd gone to sleep with her contacts in.

Thinking about such specifics would, in turn, call to mind the reasons she'd drunk so much in the first place, which she definitely didn't want to do. And so Madeleine adjusted her pillow, blocking out the early morning light, and tried to fall back to sleep.

She might have managed this if the doorbell—a loud one punitively installed by their landlord, who'd grown tired of being unable to rouse his top-floor tenants—hadn't started to ring. The pulse reached Madeleine less as a sound than a sensation, as though the device was connected directly to her spine. She pulled the pillow off her head and looked at the clock, blinking to re-moisten her lenses. Just as she'd made out the time—7:37—the buzzer blessedly ceased.

It was tempting, in the ensuing silence, to pretend that she hadn't heard the doorbell and to go back to sleep. But Madeleine couldn't do that. She knew who was downstairs, ringing. It was her parents. She'd agreed to meet Alton and Phyllida for breakfast at 7:30. She'd made this plan with them two months ago, in April, and now here they were, at the appointed time, in their eager, dependable way. With all the turmoil in her life over the past few weeks, Madeleine had nearly forgotten about graduation, and for a moment it was hard to reconcile the reality of her present state (hung-over and shame-ridden) with a reality that included her proud parents, who'd driven up from New Jersey to celebrate the occasion.

Instead of going back to sleep, Madeleine slid off the mattress and stood up. This seemed to go well at first. Her head felt strangely light, as if it were hollowed out. In the next second, however, the blood draining from her head hit a bottleneck, and the back of her skull exploded in pain.

In the midst of this barrage, like the furious core from which it emanated, the buzzer erupted again.

She stumbled in bare feet to the intercom in the hall, slapping the SPEAK button to block the noise.

"OK!" Madeleine said into the speaker. "God!"

"I was beginning to think the bell was broken," Alton's deep voice came back. "Did we wake you up?"

"I was in the shower."

"Likely story. Let us in, please."

Madeleine hesitated. There were purple spots in her peripheral vision, paramecium-shaped, scooting around. "Wait there," she said. "I'm coming down."

This time, she held the SPEAK button down too long, cutting off Alton's response. She pressed it again and said, "Daddy?" but while she was speaking, Alton

must have been speaking, too, because when she pressed LISTEN she was greeted with static and the rumble of a passing car.

Madeleine took this pause in communications to lean her forehead against the doorframe. The wood felt nice and cool. If she could keep her head like this, pressed against the soothing wood, she might be able to keep from throwing up. And if she didn't throw up, she might successfully have breakfast with her parents, march in the graduation procession, get a diploma, find a job, have children, grow old, and die a natural death, years from now.

Without removing her head from the doorframe Madeleine pressed SPEAK again.

"Daddy?"

But it was Phyllida's voice that answered.

"Maddy, what's the matter? Let us in."

"My roommates are still asleep. I'm coming down. Don't ring the bell anymore."

"We want to see your apartment!"

"Not now. I'm coming down. Don't ring."

Madeleine took her hand from the buttons and stood back, glaring at the intercom as if daring it to make a sound. When it didn't, she returned down the hall.

She was halfway to the bathroom when her roommate Abby emerged from her bedroom, blocking the way. She was wearing a tank top and plaid boxer shorts, her curly hair mashed on one side. She smiled knowingly.

"So," Abby said, "where did *you* disappear to last night?"

"My parents are here," Madeleine said hoarsely. "I have to go to breakfast."

"*Come* on. Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell. I'm late."

"How come you're wearing the same clothes then?"

Instead of replying, Madeleine looked down at herself. Ten hours earlier, when she'd borrowed the black Betsy Johnson dress from Olivia, Madeleine had thought it looked good on her. But now it felt hot and sticky, the leather belt seemed like something from a dungeon, and there was a stain near the hem she didn't want to identify.

Abby, meanwhile, had knocked on Olivia's door and entered without waiting for an answer. "Wake up. Maddy's back. *Finally*," she said. "She won't tell me who she left the party with."

The path to the bathroom now was clear. Madeleine gazed at it longingly. Her need for a shower was extreme, almost medical. But Olivia's voice was audible. In another minute, Madeleine would have two roommates interrogating her. Her

parents were liable to start ringing again any second. Inching back down to the hall, Madeleine stepped into a pair of loafers left by the door, crushing the heels flat as she caught her balance, and as quietly as possible, left the apartment. The building she lived in—The Narragansett—was a turn-of-the-century building with a stained-glass skylight and ornate banisters. On the way down the wide, carpeted stairs, Madeleine tried to fix herself up. She finger-combed her shoulder-length hair. She polished her front teeth with her index finger. She rubbed the mascara crumbs from beneath her eyes, wet her lips, and pulled the neck of her clingy dress up. Finally, in the lobby, feeling minimally better, she quickly checked her reflection in the small gilt-framed mirror on the wall.

One of the nice things about being twenty-two, or about being Madeleine Hanna, was that three weeks of romantic anguish, followed by a night of epic drinking, didn't do much visible damage. Except for some puffiness around her eyes, Madeleine was still the same genetic sweepstakes winner as always. The symmetries of her face—the dark eyes and eyebrows, the straight nose, the Katherine Hepburnish cheekbones and jaw line—were almost mathematical in their precision. Only the slight furrow in Madeleine's brow gave evidence of the slightly anxious person she felt herself, intrinsically, to be.

She found her parents in the entryway, trapped amid Xeroxed flyers for New Wave bands and undeliverable mail. Alton, who was tall and bald, with strands of hair combed forward across his scalp like a Roman senator, came forward first, beaming. When he bent to hug her, Madeleine stiffened, worried she smelled of alcohol, or worse, of sex.

"You weren't in the shower," Alton said. "Your hair's not even damp. You *overslept*."

"I'm sorry you couldn't sleep in *longer*," her mother said, presenting a cheek to be kissed. "I don't know why we had to meet for an early breakfast on today of all days."

"Because that's what made sense," Alton said. "This has all been discussed."

"Your father insisted on driving up last night. We stayed in the most dreadful motel. Is that a new dress?"

"It's Olivia's."

"I can't get used to these shoulder pads all the young women are wearing. They're so mannish. Are you wearing that to the ceremony?"

"I don't know."

"It's not yours?"

"I'm just wearing it to breakfast, Mummy."

"Oh, well, I suppose you'll have your graduation robe on later," Phyllida said philosophically. "No one will see."

"You look pretty whacked out, Mad," Alton said matter-of-factly. "Big celebration last night?

"Not really," Madeleine replied, and, to forestall further inspection, moved away, leading them back through the foyer and onto Benefit Street.

On top of everything else, the weather wasn't cooperating. Campus Dance, on Saturday night, had been cancelled because of rain. The Baccalaureate service on Sunday had proceeded under a steady drizzle. Now, on Monday, the rain had finally stopped, but the sky was gray. The temperature was closer to St. Patrick's Day than to Labor Day.

It occurred to Madeleine that she hadn't had sex, not really. This was some consolation.

Alton and Phyllida joined her on the sidewalk. "I don't know why you wouldn't let us see your apartment," Phyllida said. "I was looking forward to meeting Abby and Olivia."

"You can meet them later."

"Your sister sends her regrets," Phyllida said. "She has to take Richard the Lionhearted for an ultrasound today."

Richard the Lionhearted was Madeleine's nine-week-old nephew. Everyone else called him Richard.

"What's the matter with him?" Madeleine asked.

"One of his kidneys is petite, apparently. The doctors want to keep an eye on it. If you ask me, all these ultrasounds do is find things to worry about."

"I need to get an ultrasound on my knee," Alton mentioned.

Phyllida paid no attention. "Allie's *devastated* not to see you graduate. As is Blake. But they're hoping you and your new *beau* might stay with them this summer, since you're going to be on the Cape."

You had to stay alert around Phyllida. Here she was, ostensibly talking about Richard the Lionhearted's petite kidney, and already she'd managed to move the subject to Madeleine's new boyfriend, Leonard (whom Phyllida and Alton hadn't met) and to Cape Cod (where Madeleine had announced plans of cohabitating with him). On a normal day, when her brain was working, Madeleine would have been able to keep one step ahead of Phyllida, but this morning the best she could manage was to let the words float past her.

Fortunately, Alton changed the subject. "We need a place for breakfast," he said. "Where do you recommend, Maddy?"

Madeleine turned and looked vaguely down Benefit Street. “There’s a place this way,” she said.

She started shuffling along the sidewalk. Walking—moving—seemed like a good idea.

“Aren’t these sidewalks lovely!” Phyllida said, following along. “We used to have slate on our street. They’re *much* more attractive. But then the Boro replaced them with concrete.”

“Assessed us for the bill, too,” Alton said. He was limping slightly, bringing up the rear. The right leg of his charcoal trousers was fattened by the knee brace he wore on and off the tennis court. Alton had been club champion in his age group for twelve years running, one of those older guys with a white sweatband, a choppy forehand, and absolute murder in his eyes. Madeleine had been trying to beat Alton her entire life without success. This was even more infuriating because she was better than he was, at this point. But whenever she took a set from Alton he started intimidating her, acting mean, disputing calls, and her game fell apart. Madeleine was worried that there was something paradigmatic in this, that she was destined to go through life being cowed by less capable men. As a result, Madeleine’s tennis matches against Alton had assumed such outsize personal significance that she got tight whenever she played him, with predictable results. And Alton still gloated when he won, still got all rosy and jiggly, as if he’d bested her by sheer talent.

She led them past small houses bearing historical placards and bigger apartment buildings slightly less grand than the one she lived in. Providence was a corrupt town, crime-ridden and mob-controlled, but up on College Hill this was hard to see. The sketchy downtown and dying or dead textile mills lay below, in the grim distance. Here the narrow streets, many of them cobblestone, climbed past Georgian mansions and gingerbread-covered Victorians, or snaked around Puritan graveyards full of half-eroded headstones, streets with names like Prospect, Benevolent, Hope, and Meeting, all of them feeding into the arboreous campus at the top. The sheer physical elevation suggested an intellectual one.

At the corner of Benefit and Waterman, they crossed behind the steeple of First Baptist Church. In preparation for the ceremony, loudspeakers had been set up on the lawn. A man wearing a bow tie, a dean-of-students-looking person, was tensely smoking a cigarette and looking at a raft of balloons tied to the churchyard fence.

Phyllida caught up to Madeleine, taking her arm to negotiate the uneven slate, which was pushed up and cracked by the roots of the gnarled plane trees that lined the curb. As a little girl, Madeleine had thought of her mother as pretty, but that was a long time ago. Phyllida’s face had gotten heavier; her cheeks were beginning to

sag, like those of a camel. The conservative clothes she wore—the clothes of a philanthropist or lady ambassador—had a tendency to conceal her figure. Her hair was where her power resided. It was expensively set into a smooth dome, like a band shell for the presentation of that long-running act, her face. For as long as Madeleine could remember Phyllida had been never at a loss for words or shy about a point of etiquette. With her friends Madeleine liked to make fun of her mother's formality, but she often found herself comparing other people's manners unfavorably to Phyllida's.

And right now Phyllida was looking at Madeleine with the proper expression for *this* moment: thrilled by the pomp and ceremony, eager to put intelligent questions to any of Madeleine's professors she happened to meet, or to trade pleasantries with fellow parents of graduating seniors. In short, she was available to everyone and everything and in step with the social and academic pageantry, all of which exacerbated Madeleine's feeling of being out of step, for this day and the rest of her life.

She concentrated on getting across the street and up the steps of Carr House with her throbbing head.

The café had just opened. The guy behind the counter, who was wearing Elvis Costello glasses, was rinsing out the espresso machine. "White Wedding" was playing from the stereo on top of the refrigerator.

Phyllida, holding her handbag protectively against her chest, had paused by the door to peruse the student art on the walls: six paintings of small, skin-diseased dogs wearing bleach-bottle collars. At a table against the wall, a girl with stiff pink hair was smoking a clove cigarette and reading *Invisible Cities*.

"Isn't this fun?" Phyllida said tolerantly,

"La Bohéme," Alton said.

After installing her parents at a table near the bay window, Madeleine asked them what they wanted.

"Bacon and eggs," Alton said.

"They don't have that here, Daddy."

Alton looked around, as though put on guard about the situation. "What do they have?"

"Muffins and stuff. Bagels."

"I was looking forward to a good breakfast."

"Maybe we *should* stay for dinner," Phyllida said.

"That's not the plan," Alton said. "Bagel and coffee's fine."

Madeleine went up to the counter to order. When she got back with the coffees,

Alton, who couldn't sit at the breakfast table without reading something, had taken a discarded *Village Voice* from a nearby table. Phyllida was staring overtly at the girl with pink hair.

"Do you think that's comfortable?" she inquired in a low voice.

Madeleine turned to see that the girl's ragged black jeans were held together by a few hundred safety pins.

"I don't know, Mummy. Why don't you go ask her?"

"I'm afraid of getting poked."

"According to this article," Alton said, reading the *Voice*, "homosexuality didn't exist until the 19th Century. It was invented. In Germany."

"Here's your coffee, Daddy."

"Did you put cream in mine?" Phyllida asked.

"Yes."

"Real cream? Not milk?"

"Yes, Mummy."

Madeleine went back up to get the bagels. They were burned, but she didn't want to ask for new ones. She brought them to the table and sat down.

The coffee was hot, life-savingly good. Sipping it, Madeleine began to feel slightly less awful.

After examining his bagel, Alton began scraping it ruthlessly with a plastic knife.

Phyllida asked, "So, are we going to meet Leonard today?"

"I'm not sure," Madeleine said.

"Anything you want us to know about?"

"No."

"Are you two still planning to live together this summer?"

By this time Madeleine had taken a bite of her bagel. And since the answer to her mother's question was complicated—strictly speaking, Madeleine and Leonard weren't planning on living together because they'd broken up three weeks ago; despite this fact, however, Madeleine hadn't given up hope of a reconciliation, and seeing as she'd spent so much effort getting her parents used to the idea of her living with a guy, and didn't want to jeopardize that by admitting that the plan was off—she was relieved to be able to point at her full mouth, which prevented her from replying.

"Well, you're an adult now," Phyllida said. "You can do what you like. Though, for the record, I have to say that I don't approve."

"You've already gone on record about that," Alton broke in.

"Because it's still a bad idea!" Phyllida cried. "I don't mean the propriety of it. I'm talking about the practical problems. If you move in with Leonard—or any young man—and *he's* the one with the job, then you begin things at a disadvantage. What happens if you two don't get along? Where are you then? You won't have any place to live. Or anything to do."

That her mother was correct in her analysis, that the predicament Phyllida warned Madeleine about was exactly the predicament she was already in, didn't motivate Madeleine to register agreement.

"You quit your job when you met me," Alton said.

"That's why I know what I'm talking about."

"Can we change the subject?" Madeleine said at last, having swallowed her food.

"Of course we can, sweetheart. That's the last I'll say about it. If your plans change, you can always come home. Your father and I would love to have you."

"Not me," Alton said. "I don't want her. Moving back home is always a bad idea. Stay away."

"Don't worry," Madeleine said. "I will."

"The choice is yours," Phyllida said. "But if you *do* come home, you could have the loft. That way you can come and go as you like."

To her surprise, Madeleine found herself contemplating this proposal. Why not tell her parents everything, curl up in the back seat of the car, and let them take her home. She could move into her old bedroom, with the sleigh bed and the Madeline wallpaper. She could become a spinster, like Emily Dickinson.

Phyllida brought her out of this reverie.

"Maddy?" she said. "Isn't that your friend Mitchell?"

Madeleine wheeled in her seat. "Where?"

"I think that's Mitchell. Across the street."

In the churchyard, sitting Indian-style in the freshly mown grass, Madeleine's "friend," Mitchell Grammaticus, was indeed there. His lips were moving, as if he was talking to himself.

"Why don't you invite him to join us?" Phyllida said.

"Now?"

"Why not? I'd love to see Mitchell."

"He's probably waiting for his parents," Madeleine said.

Phyllida waved, despite the fact that Mitchell was too far away to notice.

"What's he doing sitting on the ground?" Alton asked.

The three Hannas stared across the street at Mitchell in his half-lotus.

"Well, if you're not going to ask him, I will," Phyllida finally said.

"Ok," Madeleine said. "Fine. I'll ask him."

The day was getting warmer, but not by much. Black clouds were massing in the distance as Madeleine came down the steps of Carr House and crossed the street into the churchyard. Someone inside the church was testing the loudspeakers, fussily repeating, "Sussex, Essex and Kent. Sussex, Essex and Kent." A banner draped over the church entrance read "Class of 1982." It was emblazoned with the university seal, which showed the sun, the light of knowledge, fighting its way through a bank of clouds. It wasn't clear if the sun was going to make it. The expression on its human face was hard to read. Beneath the sun and clouds was a crest containing a St. James cross and four open books. Beneath the banner, in the grass, was Mitchell. His lips were moving silently, but when he noticed Madeleine approaching they abruptly stopped.

Madeleine remained a few feet away.

"My parents are here," she informed him.

"It's graduation," Mitchell replied evenly. "Everyone's parents are here."

"They want to say hello to you."

At this Mitchell smiled faintly. "They probably don't realize you're not speaking to me."

"No, they don't," Madeleine said. "And, anyway, I am. Now. Speaking to you."

"Under duress or as a change of policy?"

Madeleine shifted her weight, wrinkling her face with woe. "Look. I'm really hung-over. I barely slept last night. My parents have been here about ten minutes and they're already driving me crazy. So if you could just come over and say hello, that would be great."

Mitchell's large emotional eyes blinked twice. Despite the warm weather, he was wearing a vintage gabardine shirt, dark wool pants, and beat-up wingtips. Madeleine had never seen him in shorts or tennis shoes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "About what happened."

"Fine," Madeleine said, looking away. "It doesn't matter."

"I was just being my usual vile self."

"So was I."

They were quiet a moment. Madeleine felt Mitchell's eyes on her, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

What had happened was this: one night the previous December, in a state of anxiety about her romantic life, Madeleine had run into Mitchell on campus and brought him back to her apartment. She'd needed male attention and had flirted with him, without entirely admitting it to herself. In her bedroom, Mitchell had picked

up a jar of deep-heating gel on her desk. He asked what it was for. Madeleine had explained that people who were *athletic* sometimes got sore muscles. She said that she realized that Mitchell might not have experienced this phenomenon, seeing as all he did was sit in the library, but he should take her word for it. At that point, Mitchell had come up behind her and wiped a gob of the heating gel behind her ear. It felt gross. Madeleine jumped up. She started shouting at Mitchell, and wiped the gunk off with a T-shirt. Though she was within her rights to be angry, Madeleine also knew (even at the time) that she was using the incident as a pretext for getting Mitchell out of her bedroom and for covering up the fact that she'd been flirting with him in the first place. The worst part of the incident was how stricken Mitchell had looked, as if he'd been about to cry. He kept saying he was sorry, he was just joking around, but she ordered him to leave. In the following days, replaying the incident in her mind, Madeleine had felt worse and worse about it. She'd been on the verge of calling Mitchell to apologize when she'd received a letter from him, a highly detailed, cogently argued, psychologically astute, quietly hostile, four-page letter, in which he called her a "cocktease" and claimed that her behavior that night had been "the erotic equivalent of a bread and circus, with just the circus." The next time they'd run into each other, Madeleine had acted if she didn't know him, and they hadn't spoken since.

Now, in the churchyard of First Baptist, Mitchell looked up at her and said, "O.K. Let's go say hello to Phyllida and Alton."

Phyllida was waving as they came up the steps. In the flirtatious voice she reserved for her favorite of Madeleine's friends, she called out, "I thought that was you on the ground. You looked like a swami!"

"Congratulations, Mitchell," Alton said, heartily shaking Mitchell's hand. "Big day today. One of the big milestones. A new generation takes the reins."

They invited Mitchell to sit down and asked him if he wanted anything to eat. Madeleine went back to the counter to get more coffee, glad to have Mitchell keeping her parents occupied. As she watched him, in his old man's clothes, happily engaging Alton and Phyllida in conversation, Madeleine thought to herself, as she'd thought many times before, that Mitchell was the kind of smart, sane, parent-pleasing boy she should fall in love with and marry. That she would never fall in love with Mitchell and marry him, precisely because of this eligibility, was yet another indication, in a morning teeming with them, of just how screwed up she was in matters of the heart.

When she returned to the table, no one acknowledged her.

"So, Mitchell," Phyllida was asking, "what are your plans after graduation?"

"My father's been asking me the same question," Mitchell answered. "For some reason he thinks Religious Studies isn't a marketable degree."

Madeleine smiled for the first time all day. "See? Mitchell doesn't have a job lined up, either."

"Well, I sort of do," Mitchell said.

"You do not," Madeleine challenged him.

"I'm serious. I do." He explained that he and his roommate, Larry Pleschette, had come up with a plan to fight the recession. As liberal-arts degree-holders matriculating into the job market at a time when unemployment was at 9.5%, they had decided, prudently and after much consideration, to leave the country and stay away as long as possible. At the end of the summer, after they'd saved up enough money, they were going to backpack through Europe. After they'd seen everything in Europe there was to see, they were going to fly to India and stay there as long as their money held out. The whole trip would take eight or nine months, maybe as long as a year.

"You're going to India?" Madeleine said. "That's not a job."

"We're going to be research assistants," Mitchell said. "For Prof. Hughes."

"Prof. Hughes in the Theater Department?"

"I saw a program about India recently," Phyllida said. "It was terribly depressing. The poverty!"

"That's a plus for me, Mrs. Hanna," Mitchell said. "I thrive in squalor."

Phyllida, who couldn't resist this sort of mischief, gave up her solemnity, rippling with amusement. "Then you're going to the right place!"

"Maybe I'll take a trip, too," Madeleine said in a threatening tone.

No one reacted to this. Instead Alton asked Mitchell, "What sort of immunizations do you need for India?"

"Cholera and typhus. Gamma globulin's optional."

Phyllida shook her head. "Your mother must be worried sick."

"When I was in the service," Alton said, "they shot us up with about a million things. Didn't even tell us what the shots were for."

"I think *I'll* move to Paris," Madeleine said in a louder voice. "Instead of getting a job."

"Mitchell," Phyllida continued, "with your interest in religious studies, I'd think India would be a perfect fit. They've got everything. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jains, Buddhists. It's like Baskin & Robbins! I've always been fascinated by religion. Unlike my doubting-Thomas husband."

Alton winked. "I doubt that doubting Thomas existed."

"Do you know Paul Moore, *Bishop* Moore, at the Cathedral of St. John the

Divine?" Phyllida said, keeping Mitchell's attention. "He's a great friend. You might find it interesting to meet him. We'd be happy to introduce you. When we're in the city, I always go to services at the Cathedral. Have you ever been there? Oh. Well. How can I describe it? It's simply—well, simply *divine*!"

Phyllida held a hand to her throat with the pleasure of this *bon mot*, while Mitchell obligingly, even convincingly, laughed.

"Speaking of religious dignitaries," Alton cut in, "did I ever tell you about the time we met the Dalai Lama? It was at this fundraiser at the Waldorf. We were in the receiving line. Must have been three hundred people at least. Anyway, when we finally got up to the Dalai Lama, I asked him, 'Are you any relation to Dolly Parton?'"

"I was mortified!" Phyllida cried. "Absolutely mortified."

"Daddy," Madeleine said, "you're going to be late."

"What?"

"You should get going if you want to get a good spot."

Alton looked at his watch. "We've still got an hour."

"It gets really crowded," Madeleine emphasized. "You should go now."

Alton and Phyllida looked at Mitchell, as if they trusted him to advise them. Under the table, Madeleine kicked him, and he alertly responded, "It does gets pretty crowded."

"Where's the best place to stand?" Alton asked, again addressing Mitchell.

"By the Van Wickle Gates. At the top of College Street. That's where we'll come through."

Alton stood up from the table. After shaking Mitchell's hand, he bent to kiss his Madeleine on the cheek. "We'll see *you* later. Miss Baccalaureate, 1982,"

"Congratulations, Mitchell," Phyllida said. "*So* nice to see you. And remember, when you're on your Grand Tour, be sure to send your mother *loads* of letters. Otherwise, she'll be frantic."

To Madeleine, she said, "You might change that dress before the march. It has a visible stain."

With that, Alton and Phyllida, in their glaring parental actuality, all seersucker and handbag, cufflink and pearls, crossed the beige and brick space of Carr House and went out the door.

As though to signal their departure, a new song came on: Joe Jackson's high-pitched voice swooping above a synthesized drumbeat, the notes flying past like lights inside a tunnel. The guy behind the counter cranked up the volume.

Madeleine laid her head on the table, her hair covering her face.

"I'm never drinking again," she said.

"Famous last words."

"You have no idea what's been going on with me."

"You haven't been speaking to me."

Without lifting her cheek from the table, Madeleine said in a pitiful voice, "I'm homeless. I'm gradating from college and I'm a homeless person."

"Yeah, sure."

"I am!" Madeleine insisted. "First I was supposed to move to New York with Abby and Olivia. Then it looked liked I was moving to the Cape, though, so I told them to get another roommate. And now I'm *not* moving to the Cape and I have nowhere to go. My mother wants me to move back home but I'd rather kill myself."

"I'm moving back home for the summer," Mitchell said. "At least your near New York."

"I haven't heard back from grad schools yet and it's *June*," Madeleine continued. "I was supposed to find out over a month ago! I could call the admissions department, but I don't because I'm scared to find out that I've been rejected. As long as I don't know, I still have hope."

There was a moment before Mitchell spoke again. "You can come to India with me," he said.

Madeleine opened one eye to see, through a whorl in her hair, that Mitchell wasn't entirely joking.

"It's not even about grad school," she said. Taking a deep breath, she confessed, "Leonard and I broke up."

It felt deeply pleasurable to say this, to name her sadness, and so Madeleine was surprised by the coldness of Mitchell's reply.

"Why are you telling me this?" he said.

She lifted her head, brushing her hair out of her face. "I don't know. You wanted to know what was the matter."

"I didn't, actually. I didn't even ask."

"I thought you might care," Madeleine said. "Since you're my friend."

"Right," Mitchell said, his voice suddenly sarcastic. "Our wonderful friendship! Our 'friendship' isn't a real friendship because it only works on your terms. *You* set the rules, Madeleine. If you decide you don't want to talk to me for three months, we don't talk. Then you decide you *do* want to talk to me because you need me to entertain your parents—and now we're talking again. We're friends when you want to be friends, and we're never *more* than friends because you don't want to be. And I have to go along with that."

"I'm sorry," Madeleine said, feeling put-upon and blind-sided. "I just don't like you that way."

"Exactly!" Mitchell cried. "You're not attracted to me physically. Ok, fine. But who says I was ever attracted to you *mentally*?"

Madeleine stiffened, as if she'd been slapped. She was outraged, hurt, and defiant all at once.

"You're such a . . ."—she tried to think of the worst thing to say—"you're such a *jerk*!" She was hoping to remain imperious, but her chest was stinging, and to her dismay, she burst into tears.

Mitchell reached out to touch her arm, but Madeleine shook him off. Trying not to look like someone weeping, she stood up straight and walked out of Carr House. At first, she thought she felt rain, but it was just the wind scattering droplets from the wet trees. Madeleine turned away from the churchyard, heading downhill toward the swollen, polluted river. And the entire way, she couldn't stop wondering why everyone was being so mean to her.

Madeleine's love troubles had begun at a time when the French theory she was reading deconstructed the very notion of love. "Semiotics 211" was an upper-level seminar taught by a former English department renegade. Michael Zipperstein had come to Brown thirty-two years earlier as a New Critic. He'd inculcated the habits of close reading and biography-free interpretation into three generations of students before taking a Road-to-Damascus sabbatical, in Paris, in 1975, where he'd met Roland Barthes at a dinner party and been converted, over cassoulet, to the new faith. Now Zipperstein taught two courses in the newly created Program in Semiotics Studies: Department of Semiotics, "Introduction to Semiotic Theory" in the fall and, in the spring, "Semiotics 211." Hygienically bald, with a seaman's mustacheless white beard, Zipperstein favored French fisherman's sweaters and wide-wale corduroys. He buried people with his reading lists: in addition to all the semiotic big hitters—Derrida, Eco, Barthes—the students in Semiotics 211 had to contend with a magpie nest of reserve reading that included everything from Balzac's *Sarrasine* to issues of *Semiotext(e)* to xeroxed selections from E.M. Cioran, Robert Walser, Claude Levi-Strauss, Peter Handke, and Carl Van Vechten. To get into the seminar, you had to submit to a one-on-one interview with Zipperstein during which he asked bland, personal questions, such as what your favorite food or dog breed was, and made enigmatic Warholian remarks in response. This esoteric probing, along with Zipperstein's guru's dome and beard, gave his students a sense that they'd been spiritually

vetted and were now—for two hours Thursday afternoons, at least—part of a campus, lit-crit elite.

Which was exactly what Madeleine wanted. She'd become an English major for the purest and dullest of reasons: because she loved to read. The university's "British and American Literature Course Catalog" was, for Madeleine, what its Bergdorf equivalent was for her roommates. A course listing like "English 274: Lyly's Euphues" excited Madeleine the way a pair of Fiorucci cowboy boots did Abby. "English 450A: Hawthorne and James" filled Madeleine with an expectation of sinful hours in bed not unlike what Olivia got from wearing a Lycra skirt and leather blazer to Danceteria. Even as a girl in their house in Prettybrook, when Madeleine wandered into the library with its shelves of books rising higher than she could reach—newly purchased volumes like "Love Story" or "Myra Breckinridge" that exuded a faintly forbidden air, as well as venerable leather-bound editions of Fielding, Thackeray, and Dickens—the magisterial presence of all those potentially readable words stopped Madeleine in her tracks. She could scan book spines for as long as an hour. Her cataloguing of the family's holdings rivaled the Dewey decimal system in its comprehensiveness. Madeleine knew right where everything was. The shelves near the fireplaces held Alton's favorites, biographies of American presidents and British prime ministers, memoirs by warmongering Secretaries of State, novels about sailing or espionage by William F. Buckley, Jr.. Phyllida's books filled the left side of the bookcases leading up to the parlor, NYRB-reviewed novels and essay collections, as well as coffee-table volumes about English gardens or Chinoiserie. Even now, at bed & breakfasts or seaside hotels, a bookshelf full of forlorn books always cried out to Madeleine. She ran her fingers over their salt-spotted covers. She peeled apart pages made tacky by ocean air. She had no sympathy for paperback thrillers and detective stories. It was the abandoned hardback, the jacketless 1931 Dial Press edition ringed with many a coffee cup, that pierced Madeleine's heart. Her friends might be calling her name on the beach, the clam bake already underway, but Madeleine would sit down on the bed and read for a little while to make the sad old book feel better. She'd read Longfellow's "Hiawatha" that way. She'd read James Fennimore Cooper. She'd read "H. W. Pulham, Esq." by John P. Marquand.

And yet sometimes she worried about what those musty old books were doing to her. Some people majored in English to prepare for law school. Others became journalists. The smartest guy in the honors program, Adam Vogel, a child of academics, was planning on getting a Ph.D. and becoming an academic himself. That left a large contingent of people majoring in English by default. Because they

weren't left-brained enough for science, because history was too dry, philosophy too difficult, geology too petroleum-oriented and math too mathematical—because they weren't musical, artistic, financially motivated or, really all that smart, these people were pursuing university degrees doing something no different from what they'd done in first grade: reading stories. English was what people who didn't know what to major in majored in.

Her junior year, Madeleine had taken an honors seminar called "The Marriage Plot: Selected Novels of Austen, Eliot, and James." The class was taught by James McCall Saunders. Saunders was a seventy-nine-year-old New Englander. He had a long horsey face and a moist laugh that exposed his gaudy dental work. His pedagogical method consisted of his reading aloud lectures he'd written twenty or thirty years earlier. Madeleine stayed in the class because she felt sorry for Prof. Saunders and because the reading list was so good. In Saunders' opinion, the novel had reached its apogee with the marriage plot and had never recovered from its disappearance. In the days when success in life had depended on marriage, and marriage had depended on money, novelists had had a subject to write about. The great epics sang of war, the novel of marriage. Sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel. And divorce had undone it completely. What would it matter who Emma married if she could file for separation later? How would Isabel Archer's marriage to Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a pre-nup? As far as Saunders was concerned, marriage didn't mean much anymore, and neither did the novel. Where could you find the marriage plot nowadays? You couldn't. You had to read historical fiction. You had to read non-Western novels involving traditional societies. Afghani novels, Indian novels. You had to go, literarily speaking, back in time.

The title of Madeleine's final paper for the seminar was titled, "The Interrogative Mood: Marriage Proposals and the (Strictly Limited) Sphere of the Feminine." It had impressed Saunders so much that he'd asked Madeleine to come see him during office hours. In his office, which had a grandparental smell, he expressed his opinion that Madeleine might expand her paper into a senior honors thesis along with his willingness to serve as her advisor. Madeleine smiled politely. Prof. Saunders was eager enough. He specialized in the periods she was interested in, the Regency leading into the Victorian era. He was sweet, and learned, and it was clear from his unsubscribed office hours that no one else wanted him as an advisor, and so Madeleine had said yes, she would love to work with him on her senior thesis.

She used a line from Trollope's "Barchester Towers" as an epigraph: "The way of true love never works out, except at the end of an English novel." Her plan was

to begin with Jane Austen. After a brief examination of "Pride and Prejudice," "Persuasion" and "Sense and Sensibility," all comedies, essentially, that ended with weddings, Madeleine was going to move on to the Victorian novel, where things got more complicated and considerably darker. "Middlemarch" and "The Portrait of a Lady" didn't end with weddings. They began with the traditional moves of the marriage plot—the suitors, the proposals, the misunderstandings—but after the wedding ceremony they kept on going. These novels followed their spirited, intelligent heroines, Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer, into their disappointing married lives, and it was here that the marriage plot reached its greatest artistic expression.

By 1900 the marriage plot was no more. Madeleine planned to end with a brief discussion of its demise. In "Sister Carrie," Dreiser had Carrie live adulterously with Drouet, marry Hurstwood in an invalid ceremony, and then run off to become an actress—and this was only in 1902. For a conclusion, Madeleine thought she might cite the wife-swapping in Updike. That was the last vestige of the marriage plot: the persistence in calling it "wife-swapping" instead of "husband-swapping." As if the woman were still a piece property to be passed around.

Prof. Saunders suggested that Madeleine look at historical sources. She'd obediently boned up on the rise of industrialism and the nuclear family, the formation of the middle class, and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. But it wasn't long before she'd become bored with the thesis. Doubts about the originality of her work nagged at her. She felt as if she were regurgitating the arguments Saunders had made in his marriage plot seminar. Her meetings with the old professor were dispiriting, consisting of Saunders shuffling the pages she'd given him, pointing out various red marks he'd made in the margins.

Then one Sunday morning, before winter break, Abby's boyfriend Whitney materialized at their kitchen table, reading something called "Of Grammatology." When Madeleine asked what the book was about, she was given to understand by Whitney that the idea of a book being "about" something was exactly what this book was against, and that, if it was "about" anything, then it was about the need to stop thinking of books as being about things. Madeleine said she was going to make coffee. Whitney then asked asked if would she make him some, too.

College wasn't like the real world. In the real world people dropped names based on their renown. In college, people dropped names based on their obscurity. Thus, in the weeks after this exchange with Whitney, Madeleine began hearing people saying, "Derrida." She heard them saying "Lyotard" and "Foucault" and "Deleuze" and "Baudrillard." That most of these people were those she instinctually disapproved of—upper-middle-class kids who wore Doc Martens and anarchist sym-

bols—made Madeleine dubious about the value of their enthusiasm. But soon she noticed David Koppel, a smart and talented poet, also reading Derrida. And Pookie Ames, who read slush for *The Paris Review* and whom Madeleine *liked*, was taking a course with Prof. Zipperstein. Madeleine had always been partial to grandiose professors, people like Sears Jayne who hammed it up in the classroom, reciting Hart Crane or Anne Sexton in a gag voice. Whitney acted as though Prof. Jayne was a joke. Madeleine didn't agree. But after three solid years of taking literature courses, Madeleine had nothing like a firm critical methodology to apply to what she read. Instead she had a fuzzy, unsystematic way of talking about books. It embarrassed her to hear the things people said in class. And the things she said. I felt that. It was interesting the way Proust. I liked the way Faulkner.

And when Olivia, who was tall and slim, with a long aristocratic nose like a saluki, came in one day, carrying "Of Grammatology," Madeleine knew that what had been marginal was now mainstream.

"What's that book like?"

"You haven't read it?"

"Would I be asking if I had?"

Olivia sniffed. "Aren't *we* a little bitchy today?"

"Sorry."

"Just kidding. It's great. Derrida is my absolute god!"

Almost overnight it became laughable to read writers like Cheever or Updike, who wrote about the suburbia Madeleine and most of her friends had grown up in, in favor of reading the Marquis de Sade, who wrote about anally deflowering virgins in 18th-century France. The reason de Sade was preferable was that his shocking sex scenes weren't about sex but politics. They were therefore anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois, anti-patriarchal, and anti-everything a smart young feminist should be against. Right up through her third year at college, Madeleine kept wholesomely taking courses like "Victorian Fantasy: From "Phantastes" to "The Water-Babies," but by senior year she could no longer ignore the contrast between the hard-up, blinky people in her Beowulf seminar and the hipsters down the hall reading Maurice Blanchot. Going to college in the moneymaking eighties lacked a certain radicalism. Semiotics was the first thing that smacked of revolution. It drew a line; it created an elect; it was sophisticated and Continental; it dealt with provocative subjects, with torture, sadism, hermaphroditism—with sex and power. Madeleine had always been popular at school. Years of being popular had left her with the reflexive ability to separate the cool from the un-cool, even within subgroups, like the English department, where the concept of cool didn't appear to obtain.

If Restoration Drama was getting you down, if scanning Wordsworth was making you feel dowdy and ink-stained, there was another option. You could flee James McCall Saunders and the old New Criticism. You could defect to the new imperium of Derrida and Eco. You could sign up for Semiotics 211 and find out what everyone else was talking about.

Semiotics 211 was limited to ten students. Of the ten, eight had taken "Introduction to Semiotic Theory." This was visually apparent at the first class meeting. Lounging around the seminar table, when Madeleine came into the room from the wintry weather outside, were eight people in black T-shirts and ripped black jeans. A few had razored off the necks or sleeves of their T-shirts. There was something creepy about one guy's face—it was like a baby's face that had grown whiskers—and it took Madeline a full minute to realize that he'd shaved off his eyebrows. Everyone in the room was so spectral-looking that Madeleine's natural healthiness seemed suspect, like a vote for Reagan. She was relieved, therefore, when a big guy in a down jacket and snowmobile boots showed up and took the empty seat next to her. He had a cup of takeout coffee.

Zipperstein asked the students to introduce themselves and explain why they were taking the seminar.

The boy without eyebrows spoke up first. "Um, let's see. I'm finding it hard to introduce myself, actually, because the whole idea of social introductions I so encoded. Like, if I tell you that my name is Thurston Meems and that I grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, will you know who I am? O.K. My name's Thurston and I'm from Stamford, Connecticut. I'm taking this course because I read 'Of Grammatology' last summer and it blew my mind." When it was the turn of the boy next to Madeleine, he said in a quiet voice that he was a double major (biology and philosophy) and had never taken a semiotics course before, that his parents had named him Leonard, that it had always seemed pretty handy to have a name, especially when you were being called to dinner, and that if anyone wanted to call him Leonard he would answer to it.

Leonard didn't make another comment. During the rest of the class, he leaned back in his chair, stretching out his long legs. After he finished his coffee, he dug into his right snowmobile boot and, to Madeleine's surprise, pulled out a tin of chewing tobacco. With two stained fingers, he placed a wad of tobacco in his cheek. For the next two hours, every minute or so, he spat, discreetly but audibly, into the cup.

Every week Zipperstein assigned one daunting book of theory and one literary