



Casting Off the Ropes

by Joseph M. Ditta

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"You're soft as down and sweet as lemon."

She was lying on her side facing away from him. He had run his hand over her leg and hip and up her side in a slow sensual stroke before she stiffened, and he reached to turn off the light. He then made himself comfortable, and she rolled on her back.

"And the one compensates for the other?"

"Compensates?"

In the darkness, she could hear the facial gesture accompanying the word.

"Yes, the downy softness compensates for the bitterness."

She persisted with her usual perversity, knowing the effect it would have. There was a long pause, during which she imagined his disconcertedness. He wanted to sleep. She could hear him breathe.

"Sour. Lemons are sour, not bitter."

"What's the difference? My point is compensation."

"Accuracy. There's nothing like it to help one get through life."

"Sour, then. Have it your way."

"It's not my way. It's the way things are. Lemons are sour."

"Come back to the softness, dear. You like the softness. Does it compensate?"

"Can the one compensate for the other?"

"Oh, don't be difficult. You were appreciating my softness. I just wanted to know how much."

"We live in an age of quantification. All right. . . . Five!"

"Five? What does that mean? There's no scale to make sense of it."

He rolled on his side, facing away, and was silent.

"On a scale of five? Am I that good?"

"Go to sleep, dream of scales."

"Fish scales. I'll dream you're covered with them. Cold blooded as you are. Fishhhh."

"Shut the hell up!"

Ah, she thought, score one.

"What's in a name, dear? Did I insult you?"

"Not at all. You couldn't do that anymore. We're beyond that."

"What do you mean? I can't insult you anymore?"

"Not likely. You've done it too often, it's grown stale. Who laughs at old jokes? Same thing."

He was trying to end it so they could get some sleep. It was two a.m., and he had to get up by six. She could sleep as long as she wanted.

"I'll have to become more inventive. I didn't know that. I didn't realize you had gotten callused, dear."

"Go to sleep."

He hunkered down into his pillow, pulling his knees up.

"Soft as down and sweet as lemon. I took offence. I wasn't callused. You're ahead of me. We'll have to do something about that."

"Go to sleep. The sourness galls, in the mouth, in the soul. Only sleep helps."

"Goodness. You're *way* ahead of me. Listen to him. Listen to my helpmeet, my broad-shouldered man! All right, dear. Sleep for now. Sourness enough. What I want to know is *why now?* What provoked this mood now? Why not last week? The week before?"

She was as talkative as at noon. She didn't even pretend to whisper. Her voice grated on him as he held his eyes shut.

"Why now? You make me laugh. Review the day before you close your eyes. Sweet as lemon. The euphemism detracts. The *human* strategy of speech detracts. The pressure of existence detracts. Presume it said by an iceberg floating by your liferaft and you'll have something of the feeling intended."

"Dear, dear. You *are* in a state. Did I provoke this ill will? I wish you would tell me all about it."

"I know. You'd like to improve upon it."

"I do what I can."

"Sure you do, you're a good girl. Hard working."

"I work hard at lots of things. Want a divorce? We could work hard *together* at that."

"You want that? Not having it is part of what makes you sour? Go ahead. Work it out on your own. I won't stop you. Just let me sleep."

"It's the money, dear. Not you. Being *with* you, *without* you—it's all one. It's only the money. I like money."

"Soft as down. . . ."

“Ha, ha, ha! Sweet as lemon.”

Her father left her an enormous sum of money in a trust which had very detailed conditions attached to it. She had to marry and live with her husband. She could not divorce. She and her husband could not take separate vacations, and if either had extramarital affairs, the trust would revert to the estate. This arrangement was her father’s way of constraining her reckless hedonism and assuring her living the kind of life he would approve. It worked. Each loved the money more than the other, though love had never been a part of the understanding they reached.

She chose him during her senior year in college, knowing him only casually, for no other reason than that he was good looking and seemed pliant, and he agreed for no other reason than the money. His having no objections to her reputation for wild living, their arrangement was quite businesslike, which suited him just fine—wealth and elegant living came hard upon graduation and exceeded even his capacity to dream. Neither had any illusions about what the marriage meant. After ten years, however, their accommodation was beginning to fray. There were no children—the trust didn’t require it—and so, the incentive to fidelity being purely fiduciary, he was beginning to test the waters of independent life.

As wealthy as they were, employment for him was mostly a matter of putting in time. But he was taking his recent work very seriously, and after two long years of constant effort, the business he founded was soaring—a fact that drove her to distraction. If he became independent enough, he just might leave her, and where would she be then? It was intolerable. The circumstances of her life were becoming doubly hard. She resented him for what was happening, and she knew that that resentment was the very wedge separating her from her inheritance. Also, her superiority was threatened—as he succeeded in business, his reputation grew, and as it did, hers became more and more exclusively tied to her father’s money. For the first time, her personal future was looking grim. She hated him for it, all the time knowing that her feelings were creating the very conditions she dreaded.

Review the day before you close your eyes.

He was breathing steadily, and she knew he was asleep. She lay on her back, her eyes closed, doing as he said, trying to recall what she might have said or done that he felt so bitter about. There was nothing she could think of that was out of the common way of their mutual nastiness. They had friends to dinner. “Friends,” she thought. “I haven’t any.” No one she knew could actually be regarded as a friend. In her circle associations were determined by the traditions of family wealth and status. These were her grandfather’s and father’s people. They never were her own. Even her husband wasn’t a friend. She reached over and put her hand on his arm, and in his sleep, he shook it off.

The reflexiveness of the rejection devastated her. She couldn’t go on living like this. Unable to recall what she had done or said that so alienated him, she realized she had as unconsciously offended him as he had her, just now, by shrugging off her hand in his sleep. What was that all about, his running his hand over her leg and side?

“Tomorrow,” she resolved as she gave in to sleep, “tomorrow is not too soon to begin.”

They lived in her father’s home, which sat on a bluff overlooking the Sound. They were secluded by several heavily wooded acres through which a narrow road wound up to the courtyard in front of the house. On the face of the bluff her father had had a staircase built which led to a boat house on the beach below and a dock with a

long pier and a dozen slips for guests coming by sea. Her father had provided for the maintenance of two handymen who kept the grounds, and she called one of these and ordered him to prepare a boat. She couldn't recall ever feeling affection for her father, he was never paternal and had little to do with her as a child. Later, as a young woman, his interest in her was primarily that she should avoid scandal and observe custom. Neither of which she did. Her mother was of little help to her in the years when she needed help the most and was as distant as her father, but in her case, it was because she was always sick.

She thought of both of them as she sat in the sun room and gazed out the window. She leaned back into the rattan chair and seemed to merge with the plants luxuriating in the cool morning light. The Sound was calm and smooth, and the sun whitened its surface. She remembered her father as he was in his last years, his face pale and sagging and his hair steel gray, his old eyes magnified by the large round lenses of his gold frame glasses. They were blue eyes and when they looked upon her, they seemed to be gazing from far away. She couldn't remember ever having a conversation with him. She knew nothing of him as a man—what he loved and cared for, what dreams he might have harbored, what his youth was like. The impression that filled her when she thought of him was annihilation, a feeling of nothingness, as though his presence in her mind canceled her out. She wondered if her mother's endless sicknesses weren't a response to the same feeling. It must have been a horrible marriage. As bad as her own? she thought. Worse.

Somehow, she would extricate herself from the vice into which he had clamped her. She could have done that early on by walking away. But why should she have to choose between her inheritance and her life? She would defeat him, she thought. She would find a way. She turned her thoughts then to her husband, for whom she had no feeling but contempt. He was her fault, entirely. She wanted no man, but she had to marry to receive her inheritance, and her father's will left her no time. His willingness to marry was, to her, both monstrous and a relief. She despised him for the one and owed him for the other.

Will, the younger of the two handymen, waved from the yard, indicating her boat was ready. She wanted to leave the house to get away from her father's influence, especially the feeling of disconnectedness living there as her father's daughter made her feel. Away from the house that disconnectedness felt more like detachment and independence, the last of which feelings rose in her fiercely whenever she thought of her father. She had no plan, except to succeed in imagining a future.

She would make for the Seaways, the yacht club which provided her father with his only recreation, breakfast there, and see where the day led. She climbed aboard, and Will untied the ropes from the stern cleats. She was free. She took the wheel standing under the blue canvas sunshade, pushed with the heel of her palm against the throttle, and eased the boat out of the slip. Once away, she tapped the throttle again. The stern sank and the prow rose as the blue and white Seaswirl Cordova churned up white water. That moment always thrilled her. The jolting feeling of freedom and power it gave was unmatched by any other experience. Gazing through the windscreen, she surveyed the north shore of the island as she sped over the unresisting flatness of the Sound. She turned to look at her wake spread out on both sides behind. The sight impressed her as a symbol of what she wanted.

Wanted, but could not get by anything so simple as leaving behind a wake.

"What if," she thought at times early in her marriage, "What if I should grow to love him?" It was not that love never came. The "arrangement" foreclosed the possibility from the beginning. Sex was never good between them, either, for the same reason. Because of the terms of her inheritance, they had to always be discreet when taking lovers, which they did according to a rule they both followed scrupulously—lovers must be and remain strangers. And so they stayed together, the strangeness of their lives a barrier to intimacy, each needing but resenting the other, without the relief of having anything to do about it—except finding the courage to end it and making a life on their own.

From the Sound the sign of the Seaways was a flagpole flying the stars and stripes beneath which flapped a blue triangular banner embossed with a white clipper. Behind the flagpole, about twenty yards from the docks, was the imposing, glass-fronted clubhouse. As she approached the basin, she throttled back, and the boat buoyed on the water. Chugging slowly through the channel, easing her way along the docks, she came upon the slip that had belonged to her father and now was hers, and backed expertly in. She killed the engine, tied up the boat, and went inside.

She was small framed and slight of build and this morning had her dark brown hair pulled tight into a ponytail. She wore white shorts and a navy blue blouse to match the colors of the boat, which colors, of course, also matched the Seaways. Removing her sunglasses, she crossed the entryway to the doors leading to the dining room and looked in. No one there. Good! she thought. But then she saw Mrs. Pickering entering from the parking lot doors, and just as she turned to flee, the woman called to her.

"Janice! Oh, Janice! Janice, don't go, wait!"

Avoiding the rudeness of pretending she didn't hear, she turned back into the dining room and approached her. Mrs. Pickering's daughter and her daughter's husband were the guests she had to dinner the night before, and she knew she would have to give an account of the evening before she could escape. She wanted to be alone to think, to be away from the house and the influence of her father. But she would need now to put the best face she could on last evening.

"Are you breakfasting here?" Mrs. Pickering inquired.

"That was my plan," Janice replied pleasantly, reconciling herself to Mrs. Pickering's company. She put her sunglasses in her purse, put the purse on a chair, and sat down at a small table beside the window, where she could see the docks and her own boat. The morning sky was very blue. Seagulls sailed over the orderly rows of masts and trolling poles crowding the basin, and the piers were busy with people tending their crafts. It was that time in the morning when people readied their boats for a day on the Sound, and the channel would soon be busy with crafts of all sorts making their way slowly to open water.

"We had a wonderful time last night," Janice began, a little distracted from looking out the window, trying to numb the irritation that was beginning to rise from recalling the night before.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Pickering replied, clearing away the pretense immediately.

"Nonsense?" Janice returned, her eyebrows arched, her inner alarm warning her to be cautious. She looked inquisitively at Mrs. Pickering.

"I came here looking for you. I called the house and one of your people told me you had taken a boat just a few minutes before. I thought you would come here."

A waitress approached the table and set glasses in front of them and filled them with water from a pitcher, which she also set down. They both asked for coffee and toast, the coffee coming immediately. The hiatus gave Janice time to wonder about Mrs. Pickering, for her manner suggested she had something urgent to discuss. The older woman was a motherly type, heavy breasted and large girthed by comparison, but she was stylish and attractive. She sat across from Janice and looked at her with visible concern.

"We're old friends, you know that. Our families go way back. You may not feel the obligation that imposes, I do." Mrs. Pickering paused and looked again with the same expression of concern.

"You have something to tell me?" Janice replied, sipping the coffee but looking Mrs. Pickering straight in the eyes. "Something that concerns me? Is it a family thing?"

"Of course it's a family thing. I have a right to speak to you of it, a responsibility, even. You are in danger, Janice. Or should I say your inheritance is in danger. We have to protect one another, and I would expect you to do the same for me or for Lillian and Tom if the circumstances were reversed."

"What are you talking about?" She was becoming nervous. The effort she had made to review the evening before to try to discover what she did or said that so alienated her husband came back vividly, and her failure now loomed with a new significance. Lillian and Tom seemed to have picked up on it and told Mrs. Pickering, and that's why she was here now.

"I, for one, you know, deplored what your father did regarding the terms of that trust."

Janice straightened and got wide-eyed at the reference to the trust, and the older woman, noticing, continued:

"Oh, we are old, old friends, don't look so shocked. My husband was one of your father's intimates. Your father was a great deal older than my husband and he loved him like a son."

"I didn't think my father capable of love."

"Your father was a good man, don't say such harsh things."

"He drove my mother into her grave, and I have to say I never knew him. Let's not talk about him."

"You're bitter, and why shouldn't you be? What your father did was wrong, the terms of your inheritance. When I heard about them I said at the time they would guarantee your unhappiness. I told your father that. But he was old, you know, you were such a late-life baby. He was unable to see the world from your point of view. He was ailing, and he had serious doubts about you. Your college career was a family scandal, you know that. Your father did what he thought was best for you, though I told him it would be your undoing, that you'd never be happy because of it."

The intimacy of this talk and the revelations about her father and her circumstances evoked both resentment and wonder in Janice. All along there was someone who knew the particulars of her life and sympathized with her!

"Family scandal?" Janice picked up on Mrs. Pickering's reference to family in a tone of heated resentment. "Family scandal? My mother was already gone. There was no *family*. There was only him. Family! We never were a family."

"Let's leave this. It's not what brought me here. Besides, I'm not an apologist for your father. It's you I'm concerned about."

Their toast came. They sat quietly, neither having an appetite left.

"What about me?"

"Everybody who knows you and Scott knows your marriage is loveless. That's no secret. What's secret is why, and why you stay together. And I know the answer to that."

Janice squirmed in her chair and reddened, the embarrassments coming like

waves. She never made pretense of loving her husband. People live under all kinds of arrangements. She didn't care what people thought. But she didn't like talking about it.

"Scott let fall to Tom last night that his business has enough financial backing now to go public and that he stands to profit handsomely in the very near future. Now, we both know what that means. If Scott becomes independent enough to leave you, you lose the trust. We can't let that happen. After all, his credit was guaranteed by the existence of that trust. It wouldn't be fair. But that's life, and life isn't fair. You're in a pickle, dear."

It was not her father's money Mrs. Pickering was concerned about, it was her; what that meant moved her very deeply and made her feel for the first time like she had an ally in life. It also opened her up, and she had a heart-to-heart with the motherly woman, whom she had known all her life but never before regarded as a friend. It wasn't easy. Never having been intimate even with her mother, she had to depend on Mrs. Pickering's intelligent prodding and questioning. It turned out the older woman had, from a sense of duty to the memory of her father, kept a close watch on her and knew more about her than she could ever have imagined. What moved her most, and made the conversation possible, was the older woman's sympathy, unsought and genuine.

She felt high and a little dizzy, as though lifted by a wave out of a dark trough into sunlight and air. She felt connected to Mrs. Pickering, both emotionally, by the long, intimate talk, and by her personal history, which, aside from the wealth, she had never credited before with any value or meaning to herself. Between them, the beginnings of a plan emerged. Mrs. Pickering had already discussed the matter with her husband, and he had suggested a number of ways Scott could be controlled, if that was what Janice wanted. New possibilities now beckoned for her; new feelings had surfaced; and, at least for the immediate future, her life had found direction. Her sense of drifting unhappily—in a liferaft among icebergs, as her husband imaged it last night—had suddenly, as a consequence, faded, as though she had wakened from an unpleasant dream.

When they parted, she returned to the boat. She wanted to think about Mrs. Pickering and all the feelings that rose in her during their talk. Something new had come into her life, something important. It came to her, this taste of honey, out of the bitterness that drove her here, and she wanted to contemplate that, too, to rethink everything, especially the evening before, because there were so many things about it that puzzled her. And finally, she wanted to think about Scott, why he slept with her last night, what his remark about her being soft as down meant, and his touching her the way he did. Something was going on in his head, and she should have sensed more about it than she did. But also there was his resentment of her for something she had said or done during the evening which she could not recall. She needed to think it all through.

She started the engine, and the pier attendant cast off the ropes and climbed out of the boat. Careful not to rouse the neighboring boats and those across from her, she motored slowly into the channel, marked on either side by buoys with little red flags on their tops, and fell behind an old Criscraft with a party of children aboard—a family heading out for an afternoon of play on the Sound. She watched them for a while, slowly following, feeling the absence of ordinary connections upon which she could draw to appreciate the sudden looming of Mrs. Pickering into her life. Once on the Sound, she turned the prow towards home, but about halfway, she cut the engine and tossed the anchor overboard. In the cabin she put on a bathing suit, creamed herself with sunscreen, took a chaise out of the storage bin, and laid out on the stern deck.

"*Don't get sodden,*" he always says, "It's unbecoming." I have to worry about my

reputation to please him.”

“I refuse to take sides. I’m a guest.”

“And you don’t want to impose on our hospitality. That’s right of you, Lillian. You’re always right.”

“Janice, let’s go to the garden and get some air. Air will be good for you.”

“Not for us?”

“Well, for us, yes.”

“And leave Tom to hear Scott’s side all alone? If you love your husband, you’ll save him from the boredom.”

“I want to go. We can talk better out there.”

“Then you’ll hear my side. When you get home you can compare notes.”

“Lillian and I don’t do such things. Frankly, we don’t care. We do. But we don’t, if you get me. I mean, we care, but you have your own lives. . . .”

“Never condescend to your hosts. You should make that a rule, it’d keep you in good stead.”

“Sorry about that, Scott.”

“Never mind, we put you on the spot. Apologies belong to you.”

“Accepted.”

“Change the subject! New subject. Another round of whiskey sours, first. . . There, everybody refilled? Passion. What about passion? Can one talk about passion without getting personal?”

“Passion for money, dear? That may be much too personal. Nothing more personal. Kampai. I learned that from a trip Scott and I made to Japan, how long ago dear? Was it six or ten lifetimes? Kampai!”

“Not for money. I mean passion as between men and women.”

“Romance? Passion in the Romantic sense?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

“Lillian and I have. . . , yes. . . , we have. . . .”

“Oh, just say it Tom. You have good sex.”

“Oh, that’s not what he means! He means we have deep feelings for one another. Passion isn’t always sex.”

“No. Most of the time it’s money. Money is the passion and the consolation of life. ”

“Money, Janice, is a consolation only if you do things with it that personally interest

you.”

“Otherwise?”

“Otherwise, it’s a bore, a responsibility and a bore.”

“What about you, Scott? Does the business bore you?”

“It distracts me from what bores me.”

“Oh, Scott, that’s heavy.”

“Oh, Lillian, that’s true.”

“What’s true, dear? That the business distracts you or that I bore you is, as Lillian says, heavy?”

“You don’t bore me. That’s not what I meant.”

“What bores you dear? Tell me what I can do to spice up your life.”

“We can change this conversation, for one thing, and talk about something else, something less. . .passionate!”

“Poor Scott, he has a head for business but no head for me. He leaves me too much to myself. I’m interesting, I know, but I can’t seem to keep myself occupied thinking about myself for very long. How do *you* do it, Lillian? What does Tom do to keep you from thinking for ever about yourself?”

“For one thing, he kisses me when we greet.”

“So innocent and humble—look how she reddens! Would you like me to redden like that when we talk about love, dear?”

“Shut up, Janice. Why must you embarrass her?”

“Perhaps because I can’t any longer embarrass you?”

“You do a pretty good job of it.”

“But you’re not reddening, dear. What can I say that would redden you like poor Lillian?”

“Not much.”

“Such a man! Here, peck my cheek, let’s see if that does it. A kiss in public! There, you may linger if you like.”

“Janice, Lillian and I have always liked each other.”

“Now you hit the target, Tom. It’s my turn to redden, only I can’t seem to make it happen. Scott, do you like me?”

“I like lots of things, you’re one of them.”

“Wow, that was a sophisticated answer! I’m dumbfounded. I can’t tell what he means by it. Can you, Lillian? ‘I like lot’s of things, you’re one of them.’ Maybe he means I’m a thing? Is that what you mean? You’re not a ‘thing’ to me, husband

dear. You're my *animal*. Animals are not things. I love the *beast* in animals. Tonight you must play the beast for me."

"Lillian and I have our moods, too. We go off somewhere together when they get really bad. It helps, you know. Maybe you two should take some time for yourselves. Get away from the business for a week, from this place. Try the tropics."

"If we got away, Tom, I'd pack Janice off to the Antarctic, where the climate and her moods match more nearly."

"Bored in Antarctica! Sounds like a title, doesn't it? I'd rather be bored in the tropics. Besides, a little heat might jumpstart you, Scott, and who knows what might come of it?"

"See? Who knows? You should do it. Sounds like Janice is up to it."

"Lillian, you're a dear. More whiskey sours, anyone?"

"Lillian and I have always liked each other. Lillian and I have always liked each other. Lillian and I . . . Lillian and I . . ."

The words came to her as she gave herself to the rocking of the boat, and as the sun beat on the tops of her legs and on her belly, they gradually altered to "Scott and I hate each other." Tom was gentle and well meaning and quick on the uptake, but he couldn't fathom the depths of hers and Scott's ill will towards each other.

They exchanged looks, as they had become accustomed to do when they were in company and behaving badly, and knew they both had gone too far. So they changed tracks and took their lead from Lillian, "Who knows?—they should do it, they were both up to it." During the rest of the evening, they relapsed only occasionally into laceration, and when she and Lillian went off by themselves to the garden, the evening actually became pleasant for her.

She tried to recall every detail, but she could find nothing that would explain the intensity of Scott's bitterness. Last night he chose to sleep with her. Did she kill the impulse? Soft as down and sweet as lemon. Was an impulse there to kill? Her stomach growled. She thought again of Mrs. Pickering. Her life was careening. Plots and counter plots. She felt helpless. But there the older woman was, sympathetic, genuine, a haven. She wished she had had her opening with Mrs. Pickering before Lillian and Tom came last night. She yearned to be with Lillian again, to talk about her mother, to feel sisterly with her, connected, at ease and open with her. She doubted that would ever happen. Not, at least, before she got free of Scott, got free of him and overthrew her father. Then, starting over, it might happen.

She rose. There was nothing to eat on the boat and she took nothing with her. Shielding her eyes, she gazed over the Sound. The wind had picked up, and the boat was rocking more vigorously. There was no one near. She was a good distance from the bluffs, more than a mile out, and quite alone. She pulled up the anchor, started the engine, and pushed the throttle all the way forward. Power and freedom, luxurious feelings, rumbled into her legs and arms and filled her, and in the joy of it she turned the wheel all the way to starboard. The Seaswirl Cordova cut a giant circle in the choppy Sound. Then she pointed her prow for home.

The boat bounced violently as it sped. The Sound had changed and the jolting made her teeth chatter in time with the boat's pounding of the waves. And if she could have shoved the throttle any further forward, she would have. The shore raced by. Too soon she came beside the bluffs of her own house, and in the

distance she could see Will waiting on the pier. He had spotted her from above and come down to take care of the boat.

"Agnes and Julian are coming tonight. You must be here."

"The Pickerings? When did they become Agnes and Julian?"

"They've always been. I guess for the last fifty years or so. I believe they were christened Agnes and Julian. Not together, of course, dear. That came later."

"Get real, Jan. God, you're aggravating. So, they're coming. Not to see me, I gather. I had no idea. Maybe to absorb your sweetness? Why do I have to be here?"

"Have? You don't have to do anything you don't want to. They've never come socially, just to visit. I would think you'd *want* to be here. The last time Julian came, you remember, was to advise us, to warn *you*, about that trip to Paris. You remember? 'Business my left foot,' he said. We almost lost the trust over that."

"We-e-ll, yea, that was. . . ."

"Two years ago!"

"It was business, though, in a way."

"Monkey business. Little I cared, or care. But he saved us. Tonight is a social visit, and you owe it to him to be here."

"I do. I do. You're right. You see? I'm not as vulgar and ungrateful as you would make me out."

"Not as? Is that an admission? A confession? 'I am vulgar and ungrateful, Lord, but not as. . .?'"

"Shut the hell up! Just shut up, will you? Why must you? We could get along if you would make an effort. You're always like that. It's a wonder I don't have ulcers. Maybe I do. Maybe that feeling of hollowness I get when I have to be near you IS an ulcer."

"I can't help myself. Maybe, after tonight, I'll be nicer."

"Why? What's up for tonight? What could make you nicer?"

"You mean besides dying?"

"Well, since you put it that way."

"Oh, nothing much. I've been getting on fine with Agnes these last few months, and she has a way of tempering me. She affects my moods."

"Too bad we can't buy her and install her here."

"I'll be sure to mention that."

"You would. You're a dear."

It was a Saturday morning and they were breakfasting, like any other married couple, spreading marmalade and jam, sipping coffee, glancing at the newspaper. A small breakfast table was placed in the sun room, where they had a view of the Sound, and the air was cool and bright. It was late September, and the weather was just beginning to turn. In another month, the world would look quite different.

"What about Tom and Lillian?"

"What about them?"

"Are they coming, too?"

"I doubt it."

"Didn't you ask them? Maybe you should."

"I don't think they'd want to."

"Why?"

"Oh, I'm sure they have other things to do on a Saturday night."

"I'll call and see. Why not make a night of it? The more the merrier."

"You mean, to keep the evening from being intimate? But that's why Julian and Agnes are coming."

"I get the feeling you're up to something. I can just tell. What is it, Jan? What are you up to?"

"Oh, I think Julian has some news for you."

He sat up straight and tight and looked at her. She had the sweetest smile on her face. She was, in fact, just beaming with sweetness. He knew what it meant.

"News? What kind of news?"

He put his coffee cup down and sat very still, his hand resting on the table. She could see him trying to control himself. The effort was taking its toll, his hand ever so slightly twitching.

"That's for him to tell. I shouldn't anticipate, should I? Or there'd be no need for a visit."

"I thought this visit was a social call."

"So it is. We will all be very social, tonight."

"And afterwards, what then?"

"And afterwards, dear, nothing much is going to matter."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, you will. You will."

“And afterward?”

“The settlement will leave you plenty.”

“How? How did you manage it?”

“Julian is a dear. Oh, the sweetest dear of all.”

He threw his napkin on the table, pushed back his chair, and rose.

“I have the business. That’s mine. The rest can go to hell, along with you.”

“Just so. But the business is exactly what Julian has in mind to talk about. Something about the Trust buying it up.”

“Some social visit. You bitch.”

“Yes, yes. I think you earned the right to call me that. For once, I admit to it.”

As he walked out of the sun room, she shouted at his back, “Soft as down and sweet as lemon!”

He stopped and came back to the table.

“I remember that night. Why do you bring it up now?”

“No reason.”

“I wanted to make love to you that night. We bickered as usual, embarrassing poor Tom and Lillian. They’ve got class, those two. They took our ill tempers in stride and never admonished us. What he said made me feel monstrous, though. You remember?”

“What did he say?”

“That business about him and Lillian liking each other. I don’t know why it hit me the way it did. But it did. I went to bed with you that night, feeling like, why not? We could get by this thing and make a life, make a life in spite of everything.”

“So? What happened?”

She, too, tensed. After all these weeks, it was coming out at last, what had driven her to where she was.

“You were *you*. It wasn’t ‘everything.’ It was *you*. Just you.”

“You bastard!”

“I tried. What did you do?”

“You bastard!”

“I don’t know whether I’m glad or not, or what I’m going to feel tomorrow. I’ll let you know. See you around sometime.”

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