

RECONCILIATION

When the phone rang, I was about to have my first sip of Scotch that day. The voice on the other end referred to me as Macheden Smith. I hate the name Macheden. My parents chose it because they wanted me to be a great artist and Macheden, which I think they made up, apparently fit the bill.

“Detective Lucoccio, from Cambridge Police Department. We have, well, that is, we have found a homicide victim in Charles Waxton’s apartment. We think it might be him.”

I was supposed to lunch with Charlie at one. Our daily lunch date was the reason why I dragged myself into the office every day.

“You see sir, we can’t tell -- that is, you see, the gun shot wound. Well, it’s hard to identify him, I mean to say, we need you to identify him. We can’t find any family or relatives. His secretary, Professor Waxton’s that is, said you were his closest friend.”

He was probably shot by someone’s husband. As Lucoccio told me the morgue’s address, I searched my desk for pen and paper to write it down. I did not want to use my yellow legal pad or my Parker 51 which I had freshly filled with ink that morning as part of my morning writing ritual.

After the telephone call, I looked at the Yeats' poem I had been reading while waiting for noon – the start of my drinking day. *I sought a theme and sought for it in vain, I sought it daily for six weeks or so. May be at last, being but a broken man, I must be satisfied with my heart, although winter and summer till old age began.*

I had a couple of Scotches before leaving my office to see Charlie. I was frightened -- not so much of seeing Charlie but of meeting Lucoccio.

“It’s a strange wound. I say it so as to prepare you.” Lucoccio said in the hot basement just as we were about to enter the morgue. His suit and shirt looked damp and shapeless, so he must have been down there for some time. He looked rather like me except fatter. It occurred to me that in another life I could have been a detective rather than a poet. Perhaps Lucoccio was my other life.

“Strange how?”

“Well, the way the gun was pointed, well, that is, the way the bullet exited. Half his face is missing.”

“Oh.”

“I just want to prepare you, you see. I have been doing this for twenty years, I mean to say, well, I had a tough time with this one.”

“How did it happen?”

“You see, we don’t know, I mean, we can’t say for sure. At first, it looked like suicide, but - well, I guess there’s no harm. He was murdered.”

“Murdered?”

“Are you ready to go see the aaahh -”

Looking at the body, I thought of the Charlie I had known, admired, and envied - the handsome and brilliant professor of comparative literature. When Charlie was young, he looked like Peter O’Toole and he made sure he aged gracefully. He washed his mass of limp blonde hair only with the most expensive concoctions available. He used expensive creams to preserve his skin. He wore contacts to display his blue eyes. He exercised his long, lean body to keep it muscular and graceful. He read and conversed to keep his wit sharp and his charm in tact. If I

was gay, I would have had an affair with him. But I was not and neither was he. So, instead, he had an affair with my wife.

“Professor Waxton?”

I focused on the body before me. It was stiff, its hair matted with blood and bits of brain, one of its eyes gone, its most prominent feature now was a grotesque hole of a gun shot wound.

I felt noxious and weak in the knees.

“It’s Charlie. Who did this?”

Lucoccio just shrugged.

Back at my house, I poured myself some Scotch. I wished I had gone back to my office. I hated my house since Carol left me and took the kids a decade ago.

“Yes, I fucked him,” she told me the night I confronted her about sleeping with Charlie. “Charlie made me feel alive. He fucked me and I fucked him back. Do you understand? He fucked me. Do you even understand what it is to fuck? Just pure fucking. He did, and I loved it.”

Carol was a literary woman. She was my goddess, my muse. I would have betrayed my family, friends, and country for her. It would be quite literary for me to say that, in a way, I had always known that she was going to leave me, that I had always thought her too beautiful, too witty, too passionate to be with me. But I had never had a clue. I guess, in retrospect, I should have. Anyway, when she made her announcement, I hyperventilated.

“You’re going to live with Charlie?” I said after I had recovered.

“No. Are you fucking nuts? Listen to me. I’m leaving you. It’s you, not Charlie, listen

to me, Charlie's irrelevant, it's you. I am leaving you.”

“And the kids?”

“Always thinking about yourself, huh? Don't worry, I'm taking them. Unless, you want them? No, that'd be too cruel. They'll like California. Relieved? Free at last, huh? No one to force you to see people, talk to a doctor, or anything. You can just stay home all day and night and not feel guilty about it.”

The night Carol, Emma, and Jacob flew to California, Charlie was at the airport. Despite everything he had done, he was there to say good bye to my kids. He was after all my kids' “Chai” - their name for him. He was closer to them than many fathers and quite possibly me. When Carol and the kids disappeared down the tunnel to their airplane, I collapsed on the floor crying. Charlie got me into his car and drove me to a bar. Later, he took me to his apartment and let me stay there for over a year. He moved his office next to mine. He lunched with me every day and had dinner with me three or four times a week for over the past decade. He kept me alive for ten years.

“Mainly, Professor Smith, you are required to ascertain whether Professor Waxton had any issue.”

When I had first received Mountiford's telephone call two days after Charlie died, I imagined Mr. Mountiford as *Mr. Tulkinghorn* from *Bleak House*. It was probably his pompous, sophisticated British accent. I imagined him as an old sinewy man with strings of hair departing his head in every which direction and spider-like hands. Such a Mountiford would have suited my English professor sensibilities. But, it was not to be. The real Mr. Mountiford was tall,

muscular, and middle-aged. He was a partner at a large Boston law firm perched atop a tall building in the financial district. His corner office was bright and sunny and was decorated in *Navajo* style. There were pictures of his children and his wife on his desk, although the age difference between his wife and his children did not support any suggestion of motherhood. An imposing bull skull sat on a pedestal beside his desk. Quite macabre for an estates lawyer, I thought.

“Issue?” I asked.

“Whether he sired - no, more appropriate to say fathered - any offspring.” He glanced at his beautiful female associate who smiled back at him. Charlie Waxton would have bedded her within twenty-four hours of meeting her. “You see, Professor Smith, Professor Waxton was very much concerned that he might have shirked his duties as a parent to any such unknown issue. In death, he wanted to act, so to speak, honorably.”

Charlie spoke about wanting children once, on the night Carol took the kids to California, but I chalked it up to his attempt to make me feel better.

“I envy you Mac. You’re lucky man,” he had said.

“Charlie, I’m not in the mood for bizarre witticisms.”

“No, I do. You have kids. You know I love your kids like my own. But I don’t have any of my own and I wish I had.”

“You had my wife, why not my kids, huh?”

He had just ignored my jibe. “Why not follow them to California?”

“I couldn’t handle it. Anyway, you still can have kids.”

“Nah. This is my life now. It’s too late.”

“Why did he pick me as his executor?”

“You were his closest friend, of course. He thought very highly of you.”

And of my wife. “Do I have to?” I was worried about meeting all those strangers in the process.

“I am not sure what you are asking. First, you may be asking whether you have to act as the executor and the answer to that question is no. You may choose to decline that duty, with no prejudice attached to you, except of course, ah, any social or moral repercussions which may accompany such a decision. Second, you may be asking as to whether you are obligated to find Charlie Waxton’s issue, should you accept the burden placed upon you by Professor Waxton. The answer is yes. Of course, we will be here to guide you through the process. You understand that I will be also be an executor.”

“You know, he never married.”

“Yes and we certainly are not attempting to find children of any such formal or legal union, of course. But, as I understand it, and as he told me, he had a very active sexual life.”

“OK. I’ll do it.”

I owed much to Charlie, but that had nothing to do with my accepting the grave office executor. Neither had my acceptance anything to do with my fondness for Charlie or any social and moral repercussions.

It was fear of what I might do to myself if I did not accept. I had nothing else left in my life. Charlie was gone. My family was gone. I no longer wrote. I was not allowed to teach since I had shown up drunk to classes and faculty meetings once too many. I had drowned and

was too tired to swim up for air.

“Good. I will send you a letter with detail of some of the preliminary steps required to discharge your duties. Lisa will see to the letter.”

Mr. Mountiford’s associate looked at me with beautiful hazel eyes set in an old money face. “I studied Literature at Yale. I took a graduate seminar on your poems, it was a very poignant experience for me, my professor thought you should receive the Nobel prize for your work.”

I looked at her as my anxiety mounted. What would Charlie have said to her? Probably something witty and inviting. But I was not Charlie despite the fact that I studied him and his ways for twenty years.

“Well, yes, that’s nice, thank you.”

Oh, I hated you Charlie Waxton. I watched you sleep with all those beautiful women while I waited alone at home or in my office to hear about it.

After the meeting, I went to a restaurant I had spotted earlier. Luckily, it carried a fine selection of single malt Scotches and it was past noon. I ordered a glass of ice, three shots of Glen Moragie, and an empty glass. There are many ways to drink Scotch -- with water, without water, with cool water, with room temperature water. But, there is only one way of drinking Scotch properly. You should use only a single cube of ice and pour a single ounce of Scotch over the ice. Any more Scotch and you will be asking the ice to work too hard. You should never swirl the ice around to cool the Scotch. That would bruise the Scotch. Instead, you should let the Scotch and the ice to sit next to one another for a few minutes. Then, give a single swirl

to mix the Scotch.

I also ordered some food since I did not want to rot my gut.

As I sat there drinking, I thought about going back home. I dreaded it. I had not left my house since Charlie's funeral more than two weeks before. Just the thought of going into the darkness of my house, its curtains drawn and its air stale, containers of food everywhere, laundry and garbage piled up, frightened me. I could not go back in there. I might never come out. This morning, it had taken all my will power to wake up, shave, shower, and leave the house and I was not sure I had anything left in me to do that again.

I should go back to the office and work on Charlie's will. But, doing what? I did not know. I had to wait for Mountiford's letter to figure out what my job was.

Why not figure out why Charlie was killed and by whom. That should be interesting. Yes, why not?

There were many men who would have liked to have killed Charlie. After all, he bedded women and girls regardless of whether they were his friends' wives, his students, or his doctor. He bedded them indiscriminately and unashamedly.

Might Charlie have killed himself? I doubted it. Charlie was not the suicide type. Suicide types were depressed, introspective like me, not like Charlie. Charlie was always happy, always smiling. We were friends for two decades and only on two or three occasions, did he ever talk about his feelings or his life. Even if he was depressed, his sex life alone should have made his life worth living. It would have made mine. But, I guess, he might not have liked the sex, like a professional athlete who did not enjoy the game he played masterfully. In one of those rare introspective occasions, he told me as much. We had been in his study, drunk on Scotch and

talking literature.

“I read *For whom the Bell Tolls* again a couple of months ago,” he had said.

“How’d you like it?”

“Loved it. It’s my romance novel. It relaxes me.”

“Romance novel? Papa’s turning in his grave.”

“But it is. I read it for the love affair between Jordan and Maria. Remember Maria? Did you ever have a Maria? Someone who moved the earth when you made love.”

“Hmm. I guess Carol must have been my Maria,” I had said.

“Did the ‘earth move’ when you made love?”

“I suppose so. Did it for you?”

“With Carol you mean? Oh, no, I didn’t love her, you did. No, never with Carol or anyone else, only once, long ago. No, I think you have to love someone to feel that sort of passion.”

“So who was it?”

“You wouldn’t know her, a librarian at Oxford.”

“What happened?”

“Last I knew, she got married, had a kid.”

I figured the first step in my search was to find out where Lucoccio stood. But when I called him, he would not talk to me unless I gave him a letter stating that I was an executor of the estate.

“The last thing I heard, which in retrospect I should have clarified, was that it’s most likely suicide, but it might have been murder. The detective in charge, I do not recall his name right now,” Mountiford said.

“Detective Lucoccio?”

“He was not very clear. I found it rather difficult to receive a clear answer from him. Any way, Lisa will send you the letter you need, if she has not already. Allow me to ask her and call you back. Where can I call you?”

“Well, I’m at a pay phone.”

“Then, let me transfer you to her.”

Before I had a chance to stop him, he transferred me. I became quite agitated and anxious and leaned against the wall to steady myself.

“Professor Smith, I am so glad you called.”

“Well, yes, ah, I wanted to talk to Detective Lucoccio to discuss Professor Waxton’s case. Apparently I need a letter -”

“Yes, you do, I’ll draft it right now and overnight it to you.”

“Oh, OK, actually, can I come and pick it up? I’m just down the street from your office.”

I told her the name of the restaurant.

“Oh, I know where that is. Well, in that case, why don’t I draft it right now and bring it to you? It’ll take only a second and I haven’t had lunch. Perhaps we could have lunch together?”

I felt the room close in on me. “Ah, well, no, I’ll come to your office and pick it up.

From the receptionist, if that's OK?"

It took me an hour and more Scotch to get enough of a hold on myself to pick up the letter.

"You see, normally, this wouldn't be a suspicious death, that is, it looked like a suicide. I mean, we think it may be suicide, I mean, we don't really know."

"Why not?" I asked Lucoccio.

"You see, just the physical characteristic of the thing, the death that is. He blew, that is, it seemed that he shot himself but there was the thing with the angle."

"The angle?"

"The way he pointed the gun, I can't describe it, gotta show you." He pulled out his gun, pointed it to his head. "Normally, you see, people point the gun to their temple like this. Or, they put the gun in their mouth, like this. But, Professor Waxton, well, the gun was pointed to this part of his head, to the side and back, you see what I'm saying. It's uncomfortable to hold a gun like this, you understand what I'm saying. It's -"

"I don't understand."

"Why'd someone do that? It's uncomfortable."

"So he was murdered?" I asked. I sat up a bit in my chair.

"That's what we thought, you see, we didn't find a note. People like to tell others why, well you know, why they kill themselves, apologize, blame, whatever. But no note, no history of depression, I think -"

"Do you have any suspects?" I hoped that they had not figured out whom. I reached into

my briefcase to get pen and paper to take notes. I only had my Parker and my pad of yellow paper in there. I took them out to take notes.

“Suspects? Well, no. We considered, well, you know, he slept with many women, some of them married, that’s a powerful motive. You want some coffee or water?”

“No, no, no. Please go on.”

“You sure? It’s no problem, I mean, we have everything right next door,” he said. He wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“No, no, thank you. So, who shot him?”

“Well, it’s not that simple, you see, after we got the bullet, well, the slug part of the bullet from the wall, we figured he had his head turned, like this. Almost toward his front door. We figured the gun was level with his head, that is, Professor Waxton’s. Weird huh?”

“Why?”

“Well, that meant that if someone else shot him, he or she, I guess, held the gun. Well, let me show you what I mean.” He got up and walked towards me. He then pointed the gun at my head to show me how someone would have held a gun if they had shot Charlie. “So, this was how the killer held it, you see. Oh, don’t be nervous, it’s not loaded, not even one in the chamber, I’ve not loaded this thing or even fired it in ten years. Anyway, you see, the person had to be either a midget or kneel down or sit down or hold the gun with a bent wrist which’d be stupid, the recoil would break his wrist. You see what I’m saying? Makes no sense, does it?”

“May be the killer knelt or sat down.”

“Nah, the blood pattern on the chair and carpet would be different, I mean. Oh, I almost forgot. There were powder burns on Professor Waxton’s fingers. So, he fired the gun himself.”

“So it was Charlie.”

“Most likely, we think so, we got nothing else to go on. Everything, that is, the evidence points to nobody else being there.”

I felt deflated. I wished I could have had some Scotch.

We both fell silent.

“Wait, may be you can help with this. We found a picture and an academic article - in German near him, also.”

“A picture?”

“He was holding a picture in his hand, some girl. We don’t know who, that is, the girl in the picture. June 1970 - well, that is, at least the date on the back of the picture. Let me get it.”

I shuffled through his desk and found the picture. I looked closely at the picture. It was a picture of a young girl of about twenty in front of an old building. She had long blonde hair parted in the middle. She was wearing a multicolored tunic, although you could only see her shoulders. She was smiling broadly and tilting her head to one side, inviting whoever was taking the picture into her bed. She seemed a bookish sort, probably because of her glasses. She had stunning green eyes which shone through her glasses, the three decades of wear and tear, and Charlie’s blood and brain.

She seemed familiar to me. I tried to think back to the June of 1970. I would have been in England, finishing up my last year as a Rhodes Scholar at Baliol. Had I met her there or at home in Philadelphia? If so, how would Charlie have met her that June? He would have been in Boston finishing Harvard and getting ready to leave for Baliol in September.

“We don’t know who she is. Do you know her?” Lucoccio asked.

“No.”

“Well, another dead end, I guess. You know why the article was in German?”

“Charlie specialized in comparative literature, German literature namely. If you give me the cite or title and author, I can get a copy for you.”

“Sure. It’d be nice for the file, no rush though sending it to us, well, I mean, we’ve so many real crimes and this one has so much physical evidence pointing to suicide. What I’m saying is we’re not doing anything more on this one. We consider it a suicide.”

I wrote down the information on the article. Lucoccio also thought, as Charlie’s executor, that I should have a copy of the police report. I did not know what for.

I walked from the Police Department to my office. I took a detour to walk along the Charles. I felt let down by Lucoccio. I felt lost and purposeless again. At my office, I poured myself some Scotch and sank into my chair. I did not know what to do. I recited *Lycidas* out loud in Charlie’s honor. *For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime, Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer: Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew Himself to sing, and to build the lofty rhyme.*

I began to cry. I sobbed loudly. I wish I could say that I was crying for Charlie but I was not. I cried for a long time before I fell asleep on the couch in my office.

When I woke up, it was dark. I was hungry and had a pounding headache. I went to the bathroom, washed my face and wetted my hair. I looked in the mirror. I had dark bags under my eyes, my skin was pasty white, and the skin on my face was loose and flabby. My shirt was

discolored, its top button was missing, and my tie was stained. My suit, the same one I had worn everyday for three months, was threadbare and discolored.

I walked to an Irish bar in Harvard Square. The young, leggy hostess sat me at a table and gave me a menu.

I ordered some food and Scotch. The food had been sunning itself under a heating lamp all day. The Scotch was an indifferent blend. Nonetheless, I did my duty by both.

As I was eating, a man walked out of the bathroom. Instinctively, I turned my head to see him. Suddenly, it occurred to me that Charlie must have done the same thing – someone, at the front door or thereabouts, had startled him.

Who was that someone? Was he the one who called the police? Was he in the apartment or outside? Maybe there were two people - one forced him to hold the gun to his head and the other was by the front door. What if Charlie had killed himself? Then, why would Charlie have committed suicide in that person's presence?

I felt purposeful and intrigued, even slightly invigorated. I fetched the police report. I began to read through it. I took out my Parker and my yellow legal pad.

The mystery man had not called the police. It was Charlie's next door neighbor who heard the shot and called the police. She was a septuagenarian widow who was too afraid to even come to her door when the police knocked several hours after the gun shot.

The police did not find anyone else in Charlie's apartment when they got to the apartment. They also questioned Charlie's other neighbors but nothing unusual turned up. The neighbors claimed they did not see anyone leave the apartment.

I decided to go to Charlie's apartment to look at the scene of the crime for my self. I almost laughed out loud at my thoughts. I was imagining myself to be a detective and it was even a bit fun. I felt guilty that Charlie's death was almost rejuvenating me. Thank you, my friend. Even in your death you take care of me.

I ordered a cappuccino and some vanilla ice cream.

* * *

I walked along the Charles River to Charlie's apartment that night. I recalled Whitman's lines about a Civil War march. *I wander all night in my vision, Stepping with light feet ... swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping, Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers; Wandering and confused ... lost to myself...ill-assorted...contradictory, Pausing and gazing and bending and stopping.*

I thought about the photograph. The photograph was the real mystery. The person in the photograph had looked familiar, but not the photograph itself. I did not think that Charlie had that picture out in his apartment. I could confirm that easily by looking for an empty picture frame in his apartment.

But, even if there was not, he might have had the photograph somewhere else. But, where did he store his photographs? Charlie had been a voracious photographer. He almost always carried a camera with him and took pictures of almost every event and person. I always thought that it was a manifestation of his fear of death, his fear of his life being forgotten.

Nobody ever saw the photographs he took, except for the few he put around in his apartments. He never gave copies of his photographs to anyone and never showed any photo albums to anyone. Carol thought that Charlie preferred the act of taking pictures rather than

developing the films. I always thought that he never developed them which to me made him a more intriguing literary character.

I used my key to his apartment to get in.

I first set about to figure out where the photograph in Charlie's hand came from. I went from room to room and looked at all the framed photos. I did not find any empty frames.

I decided to search his apartment to find where he might have stored his photographs. I systematically looked through every drawer, closet, cushion, nook and cranny in his kitchen, living room, dining room, and bedrooms. It took me more than four hours but I did not find anything.

Only one place was left - my favorite room, the study. It was the largest room in his apartment. Charlie and I had spent much time in this room drinking and discussing literature in our self-serious, middle-aged manner. Two of the study's walls were covered with antique mahogany bookshelves Charlie had bought at an insurance company's bankruptcy auction. The bookshelves were filled with books including many twentieth century and a couple of nineteenth century first editions. A large mahogany desk he had bought from a Fall River shipping company sat near the large window overlooking the Charles. Behind the desk, an imposing mahogany armoire sat like a barrel-chested Buddha.. An overstuffed sofa and two wing-back chairs, all upholstered in rich gold, burgundy, and yellow fabric, were arranged around the fire place. His father's old Persian rug laid on the floor.

In that room, for the first time since his death, I realized that more than his mere presence in my life, I was going to miss his kindness, friendship, and love. My chest ached for him. I

wished I could have hugged him and told him what he had meant to me.

My hands shook and I realized I had not had a drink since I had left the pub more than five hours ago. I got out of the study, got myself one of Charlie's fine single malts, and downed a few ounces quickly.

I decided to sleep in Charlie's apartment that night. I chose one of Charlie's T-shirts and a pair of his pajama bottoms. Clothes of the man I had so long admired were much too big for me. They hung off me like an old woman's skin. I crawled into his bed. How many women had slept in that bed? Had Carol?

The next day, I was back in the study at ten and began my methodical search of his study. After having searched through much of the apartment last night, I was getting good at searching through other people's belongings. At his desk, I looked through the drawers and papers. I looked behind the books on the book shelves. I examined the walls for secret doors. I did not find anything.

The only place I had not searched was the armoire behind Charlie's desk. It was locked and looked like too much trouble to open. I felt like Don Quixote, about to attack a dragon to rip its chest open and grab its beating heart to peer into it to uncover its secrets. Of course, unlike Don Quixote, I was going to use a key I had found in his desk.

The armoire was a treasure trove of secrets. Charlie was a fastidious man and his armoire showed it. Charlie had divided the space inside the armoire into a lower and an upper segment. In the lower segment, rows of shoe box-sized cardboard boxes were stacked on top of one another. Each one was labeled with dates spanning a particular period of Charlie's life. In

the upper segment, series of meticulous photo albums sat. Each one of the albums carried a label identifying a period of time. I looked through the labels and picked the album that was labeled “January 1969-May 1970” covering the date of the photograph.

I looked at my watch and it was already half past noon. I was late for my first drink, but I was too excited to leave the album alone. I decided to look through it quickly, before getting my drink, to find out whether there was a photograph missing. There was not.

I got my scotch and sat at Charlie’s desk to look through the photo album more carefully. I was hoping to find a picture of the girl. At the bottom of the fourth or fifth page, I did find a photograph of her. But it was not another photograph of her; it was the same one Lucoccio had shown me.

I got my pad of paper and fountain pen to take notes.

I used Charlie’s magnifying glass to study the photograph closely. As I did, I remembered where I had seen the building behind her. It was Baliol’s library.

I then remembered her. She worked at the Baliol library. I had had a crush on her.

She had moved the earth for Charlie. But why after all these years was he holding a photograph of her? Had she come to see him that night?

Then, it occurred to me that the photograph in Charlie’s hand was not his. He had his own copy of the photograph and I was holding it.

Charlie’s copy had a hand-written inscription on its back.

mon cheri charlie

moonlight, love and, entrances

our first but not last

the depth

you are my hercules.

j

october 10, 1970

Mon Cheri? Was she French?

Whitman's lines wondered into my consciousness. *Wandering and confused ... lost to myself...ill-assorted...contradictory, Pausing and gazing and bending and stopping.*

There were hardly any photographs of Charlie in the album. Most of the photographs were of the girl, J. There were photographs of her in cafés of various European cities. There were photographs of her at Oxford and Baliol. She looked beautiful and full of sex.

But, then, suddenly, there were no more photographs of her. I took out the next three albums. There were no photographs of her in those albums either.

I considered looking through the rest of the albums, but I was intrigued by the neatly stacked cardboard boxes. I took the one labeled August 1969 - July 1970. It was filled with momentos - a stack of letters, newspaper clippings, a pair of earrings, a pen, several birthday cards, and Charlie's Oxford thesis paper. I guessed Charlie collected momentos to stave off death.

I chose the stack of letters to look through first. They were neatly wrapped in a blue silk ribbon as if they were letters of a schoolgirl. I half expected the scent of perfume on them. I opened the ribbon and looked at them. There were five letters, all stamped and mailed in England. Three were mailed to Charlie at Oxford and two to Charlie in Boston. They were all sent by Janine Morgecestor. I assumed it was the girl in the picture since they shared the same

first name initial.

When I read the first letter, I became certain the letters were from her. She referred to him as my *mon cheri* and my Hercules. She referred to the picture of herself she had enclosed and the poem at the back. I would hardly have called her inscription a poem. She wrote of their first night together, their love making, and him. I understood “the depths” in the poem did not refer to the depths of their conversations. Neither was Charlie Hercules because of the size of his courageous heart.

She rambled on and on in the letter and it was hard to keep track of her train of thoughts. She wrote in a style I assumed she thought was literary - half formed sentences, no punctuation, no capital letters. I could almost hear e.e. cummings howling at the Lord, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” Her attempts at subtle sensuality were crass; her attempts at sophistication, immature; her attempts at witticisms, dismal. It was a letter by an ill-educated high school dropout who mistook pretensions for art.

I felt sorry for Charlie if she was the only one Charlie had ever loved.

The next two letters were sent within a week of one another in early January 1970. Her style had changed by then. She used capital letters, punctuation, grammar, although not very well. Her letters were in response to Charlie’s accusations that had she loved him, she would have been monogamous. She wrote in what she must have assumed was the logical and argumentative style of university research papers. Alas, she did not. Her prose was insufferably circuitous and inconsistent. In each letter, for ten pages, she alternated between denying the fact that she had slept with anyone and defending her right as a woman to sleep with other men as the natural expression of her sensuality and feminism.

Her next letter was sent to Charlie in Boston. It was dated May 31, 1970. At first, I found it curious that she had sent the letter to Boston since Charlie's term at Oxford would not have finished until July. As I read on, I gathered that Charlie had left Oxford in late April because his father was dying. Her style once again changed in this letter, but unfortunately not the incoherent, rambling nature of it. She wrote in the style of university *faux*-Marxists. I gathered from the letter that she was sleeping with a Marxist student, of course only to "further the cause of the Proletariat." I was happy that the lot of the British workers had begun to improve because Janine had opened her legs to Marxism. However, her efforts on the behalf of the cause did not prevent her from wishing that her "Hercules" would come back.

One interesting note in her letter was her amusement at Charlie handing in a foreign article, which he had translated, as his thesis. Janine thought Charlie was very clever for fooling his Bourgeois pig professors.

Was that the German article Charlie's head had decorated? Was she in Charlie's apartment that night?

Her final letter to Charlie was dated August 20, 1970. Charlie's father had died by then. She no longer wrote of the Proletariat. They had to fend for themselves from then on, I guessed. In the first few pages, she talked about her pregnancy and the fact that she was about to get married. She told Charlie not to worry about her and the baby, that he did not have to come back for her, and that she would take care of the baby. She said that she was going to marry a truck driver who had dated her sister. She wrote with a domestic coyness. She talked about the baby in her "tummy" and how the little one will be strong like his daddy. But, after seven pages, her tone suddenly changed to being accusatory. She accused him of being jealous of her sexuality.

She praised her “husband” for not being at all like Charlie. She wished she had never met Charlie. She wrote that she was happy and Charlie better sod off or her husband would kill him.

I read the letter several times and could not figure out whether she was married by the time she wrote the letter or was yet to marry.

Why did Charlie not go back? Was it his fear of her husband? Respect for her wishes? Fear of disgracing his family? Why was he not more explicit in his will about his child?

Whitman wandered in again. *A march in the ranks hard-pressed, and the road unknown, A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness.*

I needed to track to down Janine Morgecestor. I thought I could call Mountiford to have him hire a private investigator. After all, a Waxton junior was involved.

But then I would have to wait. I decided to track her down myself. Her last name was unusual enough that I thought I could find her in the phone book if she still lived in Oxford.

I called my secretary. I missed Tanya and her shapely figure. She used to be Charlie’s and my secretary. But, since I did not have much work for her, she now also worked for our department head, the tireless Professor Johnson. She protected me from intruders during my drunken afternoons like a mother protecting her ill-fortuned son.

“Tanya, I’m trying to get a hold of British phone books. Do you know where I could get them?”

“The librarian should be able to get them for you.”

“Oh, you’re right. It’s been so long. Working, doing research I mean. I’d forgotten.”

“But you don’t need phone books these days. You can find phone numbers on the

Internet.”

“How?”

“I could do it for you. What’s the name of the person and the city in England?”

“Janine Morgecestor. She might be anywhere in the world in fact, but the last place I knew where she was is Oxford”

“O.K. I’ll do it and get back to you.”

I then remembered the German article under his head. I thought it would be a good idea to compare it to Charlie’s thesis. Maybe Charlie was being blackmailed by Janine. “Another thing. I wanted a copy of a German academic article. On second thought, I guess I’ll ask the librarian.”

“I’ll get it for you. Just give me the information and I’ll email the librarian.”

“Oh. Thanks Tanya. How long do these things take these days?”

“Well, the telephone number, I can do it now while you’re on the phone. But the article will take a day or so unless I ask her to rush it. In that case, maybe a couple of hours.”

I looked at my watch. It was already four o’clock.

“Would that be too much trouble, I mean rushing it?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

“Would you mind doing it right away? I’ll call you in half an hour for the telephone number, if that’s OK?”

“Absolutely.” She paused. “It’s nice to see you work again.”

I had nothing to do for the next half an hour and decided to catch up on my drinking. I

had fallen behind and was starting to feel unsettled. At the end of the half an hour, I had finished four Scotches and starting on my fifth. I called Tanya back.

“Oh, Professor Smith. I just spoke to the librarian. She’s going to call me back in a few minutes. She said that she needed to check to see whether we had the German journal at Harvard. She said she’d be surprised if we didn’t.”

“And the telephone number?”

“There was only one listing in Oxford for Morgecestor, but it’s under Linda.”

“What about the rest of the England?”

“You can only check town by town.”

I dialed the number in Oxford. A shouting woman with a rich cockney accent answered.

“Hello. I am calling from America. I am looking for Ms. Janine Morgecestor,”

“Is this a prank? I swear I’ll call the coppers.”

“No, ma’am. I’m an attorney - a lawyer in Boston, Mack Smith. One of my clients left some money for Ms. Morgecestor in his will. My client recently died and I’m trying to find Ms. Janine Morgecestor.”

“She’s passed on. This is her sister”

“Passed on?”

“Aye. Took her own life, may she rest in peace.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. Was it recently?”

“Oh, no, dear. It was long ago, thirty years if a day, ‘72 it was.”

I paused to digest the news. “Did she have a child? He may be entitled to her share of

the money.”

“What about me?”

“No, unfortunately only Janine’s child, if she had any. Of course, we’ll reward you amply for any information you can give us to help find such a child, if any.” I tried my best lawyer impression.”

“How much, love?”

“Depends how much you can help us.”

“Let me see, Janine got knocked up by this sodding American, may he rot in hell. Janine was so beautiful, you know, an angel, may she rest in peace. She had the girl and killed herself three days after.”

“What happened to the child?”

“Oh, I wanted to keep her as my own, loved her so, you tell her that when you see her. But me husband didn’t want it. I was young, what did I know, listening to him. No bastards in my house, he’d say, the drunken sod.”

“So, what happened to her - the child I mean?”

“We put her up for adoption and some Scotts took her. Nice family they seemed, we made sure of that, you know, only the best I said.”

“Have you seen her since?”

“I’d not seen her for thirty years till last year. I tried, I swear on Janine’s grave, I did. She came by last year. I told her all about her mother and how beautiful and smart she was and all that. She was at Oxford you know, worked at the library, wrote poetry. I told her all about her, I did. I told her about her father too, that sodding American, Charlie Waxton.”

“Where does she live?”

“Don’t know. She said she was going to America.”

“What was her name?”

“Sharon McGurdy, McCurdy, something like that. That’s all I know, I swear. You send us the money fast, you hear me, my lazy sodding husband is no good, too drunk all the time to drive trucks anymore.”

“Thank you. I’ll send you the money as soon as possible.” I got her address.

My hands were shaking and I was close to having a panic attack. I thought of the beginning of *Samson Agonistes*. *A little onward lend thy guiding hand To these dark steps, a little further on; For yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade, There I am wont to sit, when any chance Relieves me from my task of servile toil, Daily in the common Prison seen enjoin’d me, Where I a Prisoner chain’d, scarcely freely draw The air imprison’d also, close and damp, Unwholesome draught: but here I feel amends, The breath of Heav’n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet, With day-spring born; here leave me to respire This day.*

“Professor Smith. I was about to leave. I talked to the librarian. You’re in luck.”

“Do we have the journal?”

“No. But, she said you were lucky, professor. Apparently whenever she requests an article we do not have, she keeps a copy for the library and adds it to her database. She said that someone had requested it a couple of months ago.”

“Professor Waxton?”

“Oh, No. One of our new grad students. Did you hear about her?”

“Hear about who?”

“The grad student. Poor girl just fell apart by after Professor Waxton’s death. Not sure why. It wasn’t as if he was her supervisor. May be because she lived in the same building. Anyway, she’s practically locked herself in her apartment since the day Professor Waxton died. She hasn’t come in to the school even once. Professor Johnson thinks she’s going to quit and go back to Scotland.”

“Scotland? What’s her name?”

“Sharon McCurdy. Anyway, I have to go home now The librarian will leave a copy of the article at the reference desk for you to pick up.”

I sat back in my chair and breathed in deeply. My hands were trembling and my mind was racing. She must have been involved. She must have been at Charlie’s apartment that night. But was she? If so, what had happened here that night? Did she kill her own father? Did she do it by herself or did someone else helped her? Did she force Charlie to hold the gun so it appears as suicide? Or, perhaps it was suicide, after all. Maybe she drove him to suicide. Did she threaten to expose the fact that he had abandoned his daughter? Did she threaten him with exposing his plagiarism at Oxford? Or, maybe something more macabre and twisted - she slept with him and then revealed to him that she was his daughter.

I wanted to run to her apartment to talk to her. She was in the same building after all. I wanted her to tell me what happened that night. But I stopped myself. There was absolutely no reason for her to talk to me if I went down there. No, I had to get her to talk to me willingly. But how?

I tried to imagine what I would be feeling if I was in her shoes. She had learned many painful facts in the past year. She had learned that her natural mother killed herself shortly after she was born, that her aunt and uncle did not want to raise her and put her up for adoption, and that her father did not come to rescue her. Then, three weeks ago, she either killed her father or witnessed his suicide. She was clearly devastated by whatever happened that night. Since then, she had locked herself up in her apartment, had not talked to anyone, and was about to drop out of school and go back home. Some part of her must have wanted to talk. Well, at least, that was what I told myself.

A little onward, I thought.

I decided to go see her that night. I had a plan, as good a plan a poet turned detective could come up with.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I considered going see to her in Charlie's clothes, but I decided I wanted my own clothes for meeting her. I left Charlie's apartment building and walked to my house. The house stank and was dark. I drew open some of the curtains and opened some windows to let in some air. I showered and shaved. I put on one of my nicer suits, shirt, and tie

When I got back to Charlie's apartment building, I first searched the mail boxes for her apartment number. She lived two floors down from Charlie. I took the elevator up. When in front of her door, I steeled myself and tried to control the shakes I was getting. I had not drunk much and it was affecting my nerves. The prospect of the event was giving me a panic attack. I took some deep breathes and tried to calm down. I wished I had my bottle with me.

I knocked.

“Who is there?”

“Professor Smith from Harvard. The librarian told me that you have a copy of a hard-to-find article I desperately need for a project. I hope I have the right apartment. Is this Sharon McCurdy?” I had rehearsed my opening statement and shouted it as calmly as I could manage.

“Please come back at another time.”

“I wouldn’t have bothered you unless it’s very important. It’d only take a few seconds. May I come in?”

She came to door and opened the door. I walked into the foyer of the apartment. Stench of body odor and stale food rushed at me. I looked at her. Even in her unkempt state, she was very attractive. She was tall, had Charlie’s limp blonde hair, and the green eyes of her mother. Was her mother’s crazy mind behind those eyes? Or, perhaps, a murderous mind.

“You see I’m doing very specific research and this article’s essential to my research. Unfortunately, I’m coming up against a deadline - you know how it is - and this is a special request article that has to come from Oxford or somewhere and I need it tonight.” I walked closer to her and she stepped back. I was almost in the living room. “Boy!” The apartment looked dirty and messy. Pizza boxes, empty beer bottles, and laundry were strewn everywhere. It reminded me of my own house. “Tanya told me that you weren’t feeling well, that you’re quite shaken by Charlie Waxton’s death, I hope you’re all right. It looks like you’ve been locked up here for some time now. Did you know him?”

“No. Not really.”

“I’m sure you knew that he lived in this building, Just a couple of floors up. Perhaps you

had seen him around, he was a rather tall man, quite handsome.” I wondered if she could see me shake or tell that I was about to vomit.

“Yes, I’d seen him.”

“He had aged by the time he died. Well, you should’ve seen him at Oxford - we’re both there at the same time. He was a heart throb back then.”

“Were you at Oxford with him?”

“Oh, yes.. We’re both Rhodes Scholars back then. At any rate, he’s dead now, if he was alive, I would’ve asked him for the article. He specialized in this stuff. But alas he’s dead. Poor man. They wanted me to identify him, it was horrible. Half his face was gone, the bullet just blew a hole in his face, right through one eye.”

She burst into a crying fit.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” That was a lie, of course. I had meant to upset her, to knock her off balance. I moved towards her to hug her, half expecting her to reject my clumsy movement. But, she did not move away and I hugged her in as fatherly a manner as I could manage. “It’s OK, it’s OK.” I petted her hair the way I used to pet my children’s hairs.

After a while, I decided to take away the comfort. Perhaps that would make her talk. I let her go.

“Any way, it’s a German academic article I’m looking for. I’m in a terrible rush to get the article. The librarian said that you’d requested it and that you may have a copy. I’d very much appreciate it if you could lend it to me so that I can photocopy it. I’ll return it to you immediately.”

She sat up suddenly trying to compose herself and stop herself from crying.

“I don’t know the article you’re talking -”

“Oh, of course not, I haven’t even told you the name of the article, have I? I’ve the title and the citation written down. Let me find it.” I pretended to search my pockets. “If Charlie was alive, I would’ve asked him, he was an expert in German literature. He probably would’ve had a copy of the article. Oh, here it is.” I showed her the title and the citation of the German article found under Charlie’s head. She began to cry again. She walked backwards to the couch and sat there crying.

“Oh, I am sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” I sat down beside her, reached for her and hugged her. She willingly submitted to my embrace. “Were you in here that night?” I asked as I petted her hair.

“Uhuh.”

“Did you hear the shot?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised. I didn’t think the sound would carry all the way down here.”

“I was up there.”

I almost asked her if she meant she had been in Charlie’s apartment, but I stopped myself.

“That must’ve been horrible.”

“I can’t get the sound out of my head.”

“You must’ve been close by.”

She did not answer me. I continued to pet her head. I had no idea what to do, so I decided to again take my comfort away in the hope that it would shake something loose in her.

“I shouldn’t impose on you any more.”

“No, please stay. I haven’t left this flat since that night. I haven’t talked to anyone. I do not want to go back being alone in here.” She stood up. “May I get you something?”

“Do you have any scotch?”

She brought me a bottle of a J&B and glass. I wanted some ice, but I didn’t ask for some.

“Thanks. So what should we talk about?” I asked.

“Please tell me about Professor Waxton. At Oxford.”

“Well, what can I say about him? He was the same Charlie back then, though much younger. Tall, handsome, funny, outgoing. Girls loved him over there. He dated many, but he was really smitten by one woman. Come to think of it, he dated only one woman at Oxford. Wow, that’s right. I’d forgotten. Amazing. For almost the whole of that year he dated her and no one else. He was utterly in love with her, worshipped her. Since that time, I don’t recall him dating any one for more than a couple of weeks.” *A little onward.*

“Oh?”

“Yes. She was from Oxford. The town I mean. A very smart woman. She couldn’t attend Oxford because of the money situation, but she read most of the time and wrote quite good poetry. I always wondered if she ever pursued it professionally. Anyway. she was very active in the various events that were going on around the campus back then. After all, it was the sixties, or rather, the end of them.” I took a deliberate sip of my drink. “She was beautiful. She had stunning green eyes as I recall. Come to think of it, they were very much the same shape and color as yours.”

“You’re serious? Did my, her eyes really look like mine?”

“Oh, yes. Very much the same. Strange, huh? Anyway, I should go. I’m sure I’m

boring you. I'll finish this drink and leave you in peace.

"Stay. Please. Tell me about her."

"Well, what is there to tell, they loved each other, Charlie wanted to marry her. They traveled a lot. I remember the three of us having many late night talks about literature and politics and feminism. She was very active."

"Professor Waxton really want to marry her?"

"Why're you so interested? This was thirty years ago, people you didn't know."

"I knew her."

"You did? How strange? But, how could you? That was thirty years ago."

"Well, I didn't actually know her. She was related to me."

"Really? How's she?"

"She is dead. She killed herself."

"Oh, when?"

"March 14, 1972. You said he wanted to marry her?"

"You know the exact day?"

"Yes, three days after I was born it was."

"Mmm, let me see, so, that's why you're interested, she was your mother, right?" I wished I had not said that but there was not going back.

She did not answer me. Instead, she began to cry again and again I held her.

"So, Charlie was your father?"

She did not answer.

"Did you tell him?"

She still did not answer. She just continued to cry. I held her and petted her.

After a while, she began.

“I did tell him. I’d gone to his apartment to tell him. I was mad. I’d seen him around the department, I’d seen him go through the female students one by one, they called it being ‘Waxtoned,’ like some right of passage.”

I did not know the joke. Had Charlie?

“I figured to him, my beautiful, beautiful mother was just another piece of ass and I was nothing to him. So I went to him and told him. I told him that he’d abandoned me and that he’s a bastard. He looked at me with this, this, this tenderness. I got even angrier, but the angrier I got, the gentler he got. He said he was so glad that I’d gone to him, that he didn’t know that he’d had a daughter, that he wanted to make it up to me. He wanted to be my father.”

She began to cry again.

“But I didn’t want that, he’d abandoned my mother, abandoned me. He said it was my mother, she didn’t want him, said my mother was going to marry someone else and didn’t want him to interfere. He wanted to respect her wishes, he said, thought I be better off if her husband thought I was his.

“But I knew my mother begged him to come back, her sister, my aunt, told me that. She begged him, told him he was my father, told him to come back, wrote him. But he just ignored her, stopped writing, stopped answering her letters. My aunt told me all of it, the whole story of what’d happened.”

She began to cry again and stopped. I let her gain her composure before spurring her on.

“So what happened?”

“I was angry, I thought fuck you, I told him I knew. That he was lying. Told him he killed my mother. Told him I didn’t want anything to do with him, to go fuck himself, that I hated him, that he was a bastard for leaving my mother and me.”

She paused and then became silent. I was not sure whether she was going to tell me more or she had reached her limit. We sat there and I waited. Then she began again, much calmer.

“When I’d first learned of him from my aunt, I wanted to kill him, you see, so I studied him, read everything about him, read everything he wrote. I found out that he translated a German article - the one you’re looking for - and handed it as his own at Oxford. Isn’t life strange, I studied German literature in Hamburg, I like German literature, just like him. So I knew I could do better than kill him. I could ruin his precious life, so I came to America. After I watched him here, I knew what kind of bastard he was. That night told him I was going to ruin him.”

“So what happened then?”

“I threw the article at him. I was hysterical and crying. I ran to the bathroom and tried to get a hold of myself. I was afraid of coming out, but I did. He was sitting at the dining room table holding and looking at a picture of my mother I’d shown him earlier. Then he said, ‘Sharon, I love you and I loved your mother. I wanted to marry her but she didn’t want me. I know you don’t believe me, and I don’t blame you for not believing. I wish I’d come to find you. It doesn’t matter now, I guess. May be you would’ve loved me. I love you.’”

“I was confused and felt like I was going to lose control again. I yelled at him ‘I wish you were dead’ I walked out of the flat. At the elevator, I suddenly remembered the photo he’d had in his hand. I didn’t want him to have it. I ran back to his apartment and just as I knocked I

heard the gun.”

I held Sharon until she fell asleep. Then I wrote this story. This is the first piece of fiction I have ever written. As I wrote, I went over the events of the past couple of days. I went through all the clues and facts. I considered my own life and decided to make some decisions about my life - what was I going tomorrow. I considered whether I should call Lisa or perhaps go to California. I thought about drinking and writing. I could not make any decisions about me. The only decision I made concerned Charlie. I figured that, as far as Charlie was concerned, Sharon was the most precious gift he had ever been given and I was not going to take that gift away from him; so, I decided not to tell anyone, not even Sharon, that she was not his daughter.