

The Rabbi's Husband's Corduroy Pants

After the incident at Portia's party, Michael found himself remembering the Rabbi's husband's corduroy pants.

They were a tip-off of trouble to come.

When the Rabbi's husband assaulted her, and she feverishly fought back, Michael had been inches away, arm's length. He could have done something, softened or even warded off the blows. He could have stepped in between them, even at the risk of taking one upside the head himself. Instead, he flinched, just stood there. He gasped, a sharp intake of breath that



immobilized him. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was like a yak suddenly popped into being in Portia's capacious Upper West Side living room, complete with hoof-length amber yellow hair, whirled horns and all.

The eruption of violence seemed to tear a rent in the fabric of reality itself. Who anticipates that a well-liked couple, one of them with a spiritual vocation, will start knocking each other around?

Still, afterward, driving back upstate, where his wife Julie waited with a bad cold, Michael mused that there had been a time when any man, faced with the spectacle of a woman being assaulted, would have done something. Simple. Back in the nineteen forties or something, when men wore fedoras.

Not that the Rabbi exactly projected vulnerability. He'd noted, upon being introduced to her, the lean, muscled, sinewy arms. The woman worked out. It was her husband who was short and stocky.

But couldn't he at least have said something? For Christ's sake, he just stood there! Shouted, *"Hey, stop it, for God's sake!"* Something definitive, outraged, firm. Commanding. But his mouth falling open was the only part of him that moved.

He and Portia had been friends since college. She married a guy named Lincoln. Lincoln Hawthorne, a name that sounded like something generated by algorithms for "American,"

though his tall, lean blond good looks were more Nordic. Portia had always complained about Linc. Michael knew she was madly in love with him. When she expressed dissatisfaction with him that only seemed more obvious, too much protesting, all that. She'd dated him, on and off, since college. For years, she would say things like, "It's ridiculous. We're on different planets. He plays squash, and did you know he goes to a firing range downtown sometimes and shoots at targets?" When he started working on Wall Street, she accused him of being a workaholic, never around, but Michael sniffed a perverse pride in it.

Michael once asked Linc what exactly he did. "There's a pipe, Michael," he'd grinned, back in those complacent days when it seemed like just peeking your head out of the subway in the financial district was enough to get rich, "And there's all this money running through it. I just reach my hand in and take some."

You couldn't get mad at him. It wasn't his fault that he seemed to have all the codes. He was a hedge fund guy, a line of work Michael had wondered about to the point of looking up a definition on the internet. He still didn't get it. His brain just didn't seem to wrap itself around whatever those people did.

He'd also wondered, for years, what exactly Linc and Portia could possibly talk about. He and Portia talked about movies, books, shows at the museum, not to mention the people they knew who were sleeping together, or who used to, or who should consider it.

Portia, who'd majored in Art History at college, worked on Seventh Avenue, for a European company that made women's hats. Michael wrote ad copy. Recently, he'd written

lines for a commercial that featured singing vitamins. Since they'd moved upstate, he'd gone freelance. He took what he could get.

He'd never been able to imagine falling in love with Portia. For one thing, her mouth turned down somehow, a vaguely Katherine Hepburn touch, but, in the case of Portia, it always reminded him, freakishly, given that she really was a beautiful girl, of a stroke victim.

Once, after Portia had said something about Linc being "emotionally a closed book," he'd asked, "Why do you stay with him?"

After thinking about it for a moment, she'd said: "I feel comfortable with him."

"You're in love with him or you feel comfortable with him?"

She looked back at him steadily, softly, thoughtfully, a look she revealed only occasionally, but which made her seem girlish, wistful, in contrast to her usual directness.

"Well?" he'd prompted.

"You know what I'm going to say."

"You love him."

"And I'm comfortable with him."

He'd pursed his lips in his own gesture of thoughtfulness. "And if I said you can't have it both ways?"

"C'mon."

"No, really."

“What about you and Julie.”

He’d met her by then, but they weren’t married yet. “Oh, I love her. More than I’m comfortable with her.”

She laughed.

“Why do you laugh?”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m an idiot?”

“I think you’re both of it too, like me with Linc,” she said, with energy.

“In love and comfortable?”

“Yeah. In love and comfortable.”

“Well, you’re wrong. I just love her.”

Black pierced only by intermittent little squares of lights in windows in houses on the rural hillsides accompanied him as he drove north on the thruway. He felt blodgy, a little thick, stomach sick from the wine he’d drunk and the eruption of marital conflict. He felt drained, thrown off.

He remember, crisp cords on a guy so otherwise dumpy. A ridiculous thought, but there it was, something he’d noted. Odd thing to remember, after such a bizarre night. But for some reason it stuck out in his wrung-out brain. Just a great-looking pair of pants.

He was godawful tired, dangerously so. His eyelids weighed a ton and wanted to close. What a long drive. Why'd they leave the city? That question again.

The new loft was beautiful, and they could never have afforded it anywhere in New York. Loft was beautiful. Had some room, for the first time in his adult life. Julie's studio, where she made her jewelry, glistened with silver and turquoise scattered on the huge table. He had his corner of the place, where he would get around to writing the novel. The huge kitchen. Why'd they leave the city? For that. And yeah, Covid, but they were thinking about it before that. A big part of the idea of moving out had been so that she could have room to paint. Then she'd found a job teaching art to kids at a private school near where they'd found the loft, and that had been that. Maybe they'd have a kid before they ran out of time. He could write a novel. That had been part of the plan too, sort of. Or he'd learn to fly fish, which seemed to come with a good clothing line. Or he could try cross-country skiing. You could snowshoe. Hike.

But maybe he'd become one of life's bystanders. Removed from the fray. He just stood there, the two of them whaling away at each other on the floor at his feet.

Portia was who intervened, and another guy, someone he didn't know. Then Linc, Portia's husband, had come over. Had he glanced at Michael accusingly? But it had been like a gun going off, bang! It was a good thing neither one of them had a gun. This kind of thing, if someone's packing, someone's dead.

Soon after they'd started talking, he knew the rabbi's husband was a nut. It should have put him on guard, made him at least a little more wary, more alert.

Portia had introduced him to the Rabbi's husband in the course of steering him into the throng stuffed into her apartment, her hand lightly in the crook of his elbow. The guy had suddenly simply been there, in the way.

"Oh, Michael, this is Gus Feder."

The Rabbi's husband's outsized, bald, broad-foreheaded skull seemed oddly molded directly to his round shoulders. It was as if in his case nature skipped a neck. He had a shape like something a kindergartner might fashion from clay. Or some hulking, prehistoric human prototype. Michael also observed the thickets of tangled gray hair at his temples and glimpsed the prodigious riot of follicles sprouting from the rims of cartilage at each ear opening. The hairless dome gave him a shiny, neat look. But the eruptions of hair fought that impression. It was Michael's first awareness that this was a conflicted guy. Like how the casual elegance of the pants seemed to contrast with the belligerence that, it would turn out, resided in the rest of him.

The man's aquiline nose conveyed a degree of authority, even assertion, though his moderate height undermined this. He only reached Michael's collar, meaning he probably topped out at no more than five seven. In a social situation, this forced him to spend much of his time looking up. That in turn meant the underside of his significantly flared nostrils were more evident than perhaps would be considered ideal. Still, he had a twinkle. This glistening in his eyes, of apparent warm-heartedness, couldn't help but make him, despite his oddly hunched body, and the flagrant hair, appealing. The man's constant, mild smile also caused his

eyes to narrow slightly, which in turn created a further suggestion of gentle, bemused merriment. Beatific, really. If he'd crossed his arms on his stocky chest and placed the palms of his hands on opposite shoulders, fingers extended, his head turned slightly in profile, this Jewish man in his fifties could have even reminded you of the Virgin Mary Herself, he mused, that serene gaze, as she is often depicted in paintings of the Quattrocento. Not that the Mother of God is much of a twinkler, but her quality of maternal sweetness was detectable in the expression of the Rabbi's husband.

In short, he seemed as decent as decent is likely to get in a guy. Sympathetic. Liberal-minded. An appreciator of other people and their foibles.

Then they began to speak.

"Hey, Gus, good to meet you."

"Gus is Rabbi Sharon's husband," Portia added.

Michael couldn't remember who Rabbi Sharon might be. Portia noticed. "You know, the Rabbi who did the bat mitzvah for Lenny's daughter?" Lenny was another college friend of theirs. The bat mitzvah, though, had been a good three or four years before. Portia had a way of expecting that anyone who'd ever experienced anything with her would maintain it in the fore-front of his or her mind pretty much forever.

"Oh yeah, good to see you," Michael said, vaguely recalling the phenomenon of a female rabbi.

“Likewise,” said Gus, twinkling, his hand small and meaty in Michael’s.

“All right,” said Portia, “You two talk, and I’ll catch up with you later.”

And she swept away. It occurred to Michael that she’d been sweeping away, leaving him stranded, pretty much since he’d first met her. Alone, when it was just the two of them, she was all there. But with others, she could be easily distracted.

Their friendship sometimes seemed little more, for her, than a break in the action.

“How are you?” asked the Rabbi’s husband in an orotund voice.

“All right, you?”

“You live here?”

“Used to, for a long time. Now I’m upstate a bit.”

“Oh? Covid, right?” was the response of the Rabbi’s husband, and his tone had an unexpected quality in it, as if Michael had said something provocative.

“Not really, but yeah. We were already thinking about it. Lived here a long time.”

“It can be nice, the city. Some regretful now that they pulled out. For Florida, some, imagine,” and he shook his head ruefully.

“No, right, but like I said, we were already thinking of making a change, really for a lot of reasons.”

“No place like it.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You drive in?”

“Yup, sure.”

Gus Feder nodded. “How was the parking?”

“Oh, yeah, I had a hell of a time parking.”

“Trouble parking?”

“I drove around for 40 minutes. Finally put it in a garage on Broadway.”

“That’s a hike.” Gus looked at him steadily, compelling Michael to observe him more closely. In the guy’s black eyes, he now realized, there was a kind of remove. It was another of the guy’s contradictions. The friendly, flowing, welcoming quality, and weirdly lifeless eyes. Then Michael took note of his mouth. It was full, sensual, a liverish color. He detected a sensuality, concupiscence in the lips. They curled a little too severely, nearly how the Joker leers in a Batman comic.

The Rabbi’s husband said something Michael couldn’t quite hear amid the din.

“Sorry?” he apologized, leaning in to encourage Gus to repeat himself.

“You can’t try to park around here,” said the Rabbi’s husband.

Michael felt an instantaneous, near electric annoyance. He tilted his head to one side to indicate his surprise. Absurdly, he felt like his masculinity had somehow been challenged.

Gus Feder then asked, skeptically, scrunching his brow: “Broadway?”

“Yeah. Broadway.”

“There’s lots on Amsterdam only 3, 4 blocks away.”

“Really? I didn’t –“

“You don’t live in the city now.” He still twinkled.

“No. No I don’t.”

“What kind of space do you have up there?”

A deadness, absolutely, Michael thought, in the man’s black eyes. “Well, it’s a loft. We didn’t have 6 million dollars to buy one in Tribeca or Brooklyn or something.”

“A loft,” said Gus, pursing his lips. It was almost as if he were saying, “Look at Mr. Big Shot, with the loft.”

There was an awkward silence between them. “Your wife’s Rabbi Sharon,” Michael finally said. Had he said it to somehow emasculate the guy, like how Gus, maybe, had taken a dig at him? Suggest that in Gus’ world, the wife was the more compelling character? She was a Rabbi, still a calling not all that common for a woman. Yes, he had. The thing was, Michael felt he knew about as much as anybody about finding a place to park in Manhattan. He’d kept the Toyota in the city for years. He knew the ropes.

“What do you do?” asked Gus.

“Advertising.”

“Advertising?”

Michael now felt a weariness with the guy. He wanted to move on from the Rabbi's husband.

"Freelance?" Gus Feder continued, "You're not commuting every day, I imagine."

"Well, I have steady clients, so you can work remotely –"

"Everybody with the remote," the Rabbi's husband interrupted, looking at him steadily, "Stay at home, all that. I like to get out, personally." His gaze had shaded from inquiry to a kind of appraisal, if still with the beneficent smile playing on his lips.

"Is that all right?" Michael asked, suddenly not hiding his irritation.

"Is it all right?" asked the Rabbi's husband, startled, or at least play-acting as much.

"Sure, it's all right."

"No, I just –"

"All right with me." Twinkling, he shrugged.

Michael looked over the guy's head to survey the crowd for someone familiar to whom he might wave and escape. When he looked back, the Rabbi's husband had an even jollier glint in his eyes.

"So," Michael said.

"Enjoy it?" inquired the Rabbi's husband, arching his brow.

"What, advertising?"

“I was thinking about the freelance work,” replied Gus Feder, in his sonorous voice,
“You enjoy that aspect?”

“I do.”

“It can be freeing to escape the grind.”

There was another awkward pause, which offered Michael a perfect opportunity to extricate himself, but he hadn’t identified someone to flee to. He decided to launch himself anyway. “So I should –“

Gus said quietly, evenly: “Anyway, word to the wise, you can’t park around here.”

He had repeated it. *Repeated* it. Michael said evenly: “I’ve parked here many times.”

“Well,” said Gus, his expression still happy, his eternal smile interrupted only by a light smacking of his curled lips, “You live here, you get to know how it is.”

“How what is?”

“Parking.”

“What about it?”

“Tricks of the trade.”

“Tricks of the trade?”

“You get to know the tricks, the –“

“Are you talking about alternate side of the street parking?”

“Maybe. But not only.”

“All that takes is having nothing to do at eleven in the morning a few days a week.”

The Rabbi’s husband calmly took his measure, clearly reveling in their confrontation.

“Well, the hours do vary, and it’s also knowing your neighbor’s habits, working with the doorman.”

“Do you have a car here?”

“No, yeah, sure. We’re not big drivers, but –“

“Who parks it?” Michael asked.

The Rabbi’s husband hesitated a moment. “Me.”

“You must have a pretty free schedule.”

“Time I have.”

“You’re around during the day to move the car around?”

“Most days.”

“You work from home or something?”

Michael watched his happy glimmer fade for an instant, though Gus recomposed it quickly.

“Lucky for me, I’m a house husband.”

“Yeah, lucky.”

“Since the kids. That’s a commitment I made years ago.”

“You don’t work at all?”

“Some freelance computer work.”

“OK.”

Gus smiled. “And raising two very precocious kids.”

“Right.”

“You married?”

“Married? Yeah, we – “

“Children?”

“No.”

It was then, right at that moment, he noticed the corduroy pants.

They were of a lustrous, charcoal gray color. What was it about them that seemed connected somehow to what had happened? Nearly black, like creamy smoke pouring from an industrial fire. Almost wet; you felt you’d stain your finger if you ran a digit along the fabric. Roomy pants, as this stocky man required, but with the previously noted clean line, sharpness, even refinement. They were pleated. Not the kind with a merely flat front. The Rabbi’s husband had opted for that ornamentation. The crease was perfect. Michael admired it, having never been able to maintain a decent crease in a pair of pants for more than an hour. Gus Feder had a line in his trousers as rigid as a guy wire. It was as if he’d somehow changed at the dry cleaner

minutes before arriving at Portia's party. The crease literally stood out from the rest of the fabric. Razor sharp. It could give you a paper cut. To complete his ensemble, Gus had worn a snowy white dress shirt, which seemed expensive. And loafers with little leather tassels.

That was it, Michael realized. What was so off. He dressed like a preppy. He could have shown up at a Halloween party dressed like that and gotten a good laugh. "Gus, what are you supposed to be?" "Oh, me, I'm a WASP," followed by an outbreak of hilarity. Only this was a party in mid-summer, to which he'd worn the outfit of a guy walking a golden retriever in the Berkshires on an autumn afternoon. That had been it. The tip-off that something was off with the guy, of a piece with the incessant expression of good will, that sparkle lambent in his otherwise dead eyes.

Tasseled loafers.

He'd cloaked his furies behind a façade of friendliness and mild-mannered clothing. It had not been surprising, in retrospect, after he'd skillfully and willfully bred an argument about parking in Manhattan, that within half an hour he practically killed his wife.

The pants gave it all away.

As he drove, he thought about Portia again. Years before, they'd had an affair that lasted exactly one night. If you can call that an affair. You could call it a one-night stand. But it wasn't really like that, because they knew each other so well. She and Linc were broken up at the time.

As Portia returned to his bed that Saturday night, having used the toilet following their lovemaking, he saw her unclothed in the candlelight. He'd felt embarrassed, almost like he should look away, although he had not. It seemed strange to see her naked, like her body had nothing to do with the Portia he knew. She slid immediately back under the sheets and said:

"This is a little weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah, a little."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry!" She embraced him. They remained locked like that, as if they both knew they'd never do it again.

And they never did.

"Anyway, I should mingle," said Michael to Gus.

"Go ahead," said the Rabbi's husband.

He fell in with a couple of groups. The subject of him living upstate kept coming up. Everyone expressed admiration and envy that he'd found a beautiful space to live in for so much less money than it would have cost in the city. Most agreed they'd thought about it during Covid. A few had gone to see places.

Portia materialized before him. "You all right?"

"Sure."

“You sure?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“I know you don’t know a lot of people here.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, though he did, a bit. “How’s the little one, by the way?” Branch was the name of Portia’s newborn son. He couldn’t quite bring himself to say it.

“Fine,” she said, looking away from him for someone to settle her eyes on.

“Portia!”

It was Rabbi Sharon.

“I haven’t met your friend!”

“Oh Rabbi, this is Michael Fitzgerald.”

He barely remembered her from the bat mitzvah. She was a tall, attractive, raven-haired woman in a short gold dress and sharp-toed black high heels. She had burning eyes, sapphire blue. And when her face erupted into a smile it was so bright it seemed crazed, as if she were hysterical. She gave Michael a feeling of being devoured with appreciation, in contrast to her husband’s seemingly tender twinkle. The woman’s intensity nearly knocked him over.

“This is Rabbi Sharon, Michael.”

Her eyes, which became upside down crescent moons of joy when she grinned, gleamed fantastically, a lunatic glow. Her white teeth seemed launched from within her mouth by a spring device of some kind. If Michael had heard a loud *boing!* when she smiled it wouldn’t

have surprised him a bit. She seemed too incredibly excited for the experience of simply meeting him, Michael thought.

Rabbi Sharon said: "You're an *ooold* friend of Portia's, right?"

"Yup, old friend, back to college."

"U Penn?" she inquired, her face suddenly deadly serious, as if he'd just told her he was recovering nicely from a serious car accident. But then the smile returned, like the sun had emerged from behind a bank of cloud: "Wonderful school."

"Yeah, it was OK."

"Our daughter, who wound up at *Bowdoin*, had it on her list at one point."

He nodded, unsure where to take the conversation next.

At that moment, from the corner of his eye, he realized that, off to the right, Gus Feder had returned. In his crisp cords. And he hovered, in Michael's peripheral vision. Michael glanced just long enough to see Gus pop a mini-frank in his face, selected from a tray brought around by a beautiful Asian teenager.

"Long relationships between a man and a woman that are *truly* friendships, but not *intimate*, you know, are *so rare*," she said, switching back to a more reflective mode, as if she suddenly had a congregation before her. "And yet," she said, intensely, "It's so important."

"I guess so," he said.

She nodded, her eyes bulging fanatically. "So unusual. You are both very lucky, and you both deserve a world of credit."

"Well, thanks," said Michael, feeling peculiar to accept congratulations for his friendship with Portia. In her very short red skirt. Long legs. Somewhere, Lincoln lurked. Father of Branch, the 3-year old with the name of an adult, assuming anyone even had that name.

Rabbi Sharon's empathy had a gargantuan quality to it, like an elephant bearing down on you on the veldt. You just had to stand there, take it like a man. The Rabbi brightened again, and her wall of immaculate overbite again burst forth: "And you're married to Julie!"

"Oh yeah –"

"She does beautiful work," said Rabbi Sharon, shifting her tone back again to solemnity.

"You know her work?"

"I do."

"Through Portia?"

"That's right."

"Well that's nice of you to say."

"No, I mean it," she said, with crinkled brow.

He wondered whether she'd ever bought any. He resisted asking.

"And you're a - ?"

"Advertising."

“That’s great.”

Was it, he wondered? She kept looking at him. It meant he had to say something. He finally responded in a tone that suggested he was telling her something she already knew: “I’ve been talking to Gus.”

She held his gaze, her teeth illuminated. Michael realized she would not respond to what he’d said. He stated in a quizzical tone what he already knew the answer to: “You have children.”

“Two.” She nodded.

He nodded.

“And you?”

“No, no kids.”

“Well, you’re devoted to what you do,” said Rabbi Sharon, an explanation for his childlessness that made him wonder if she even knew what she’d just said.

“Hello Sharon,” said a very short, pudgy woman with short, frizzy hair and elaborate earrings, in a tone indicating she expected she’d just taken the Rabbi by surprise.

“Rina!”

“How *ARE* you?” asked Rina.

Michael stood there uneasily. At that moment, he made up his mind to leave altogether in half an hour or so. Sharon and Rina spoke. He slipped away easily, after being introduced

perfunctorily to Rina, who was a lawyer. He stood uneasily in another group. Or two. He drank another glass of wine, or two. He wanted to go home, though he already dreaded the long drive. It had been a bad idea to drive two hours for this. He could say he had to get home to Julie because she was ill, even if it was just 9:30. It seemed a good time, given how far away he lived, to make his move.

A thank you to Portia, and Linc, and he was out of there.

He didn't realize he'd somehow ended up between Rabbi Sharon and her husband. She in her gold dress, and he in the corduroy pants.

The Rabbi and her husband were perhaps three feet apart. Empty space had somehow formed around them. They just stood there, abstracted from each other, and everyone else. The two of them hadn't seemed to talk to each other all evening. Michael stood there like that too, actually. Oddly alone, amid all the others. There they had been. The three of them. He didn't sense any tension in the air. There had been a classic calm before the proverbial storm. A silence, as if the din of the party had mysteriously died away around them.

When Gus leapt at his wife, he passed Michael like a blur. It would have been impossible to dive in front of him. What was strange, too, as he thought about it later, was how instantaneously the Rabbi began furiously slapping back at her husband. It was as if Gus's assault had not taken her by surprise. She said nothing, eerily. She didn't scream. The only sound, in the zone of silence that had formed around them, was the sudden, sharp smack of slaps. Followed by the thud, as the two of them hit the floor.

On the ground, with her under him, Michael saw Gus punch her in the jaw, a swift jab, with all his weight behind it. The blow twisted her long, narrow face sideways.

Even then, Michael did not move. And still, there was no sound from either one of them. No swearing, no cry for help. Nothing. Then, finally, there were screams from the women, a horrified wave of howls, and the men began to shout, in loud, jagged bursts, "Stop this! Stop it!"

Rabbi Sharon and Gus had become a ball, wrestling crazily, enraged, but each holding so tight to the other that no more blows could be exchanged.

Portia had swept in, with some other guy he didn't know, and then, a moment or two later, blond Linc, and others. It seemed to be Linc who ultimately did the most to separate them.

Only when Rabbi Sharon had been extricated from the embrace of her husband, lying on her side on the floor panting, did she finally mutter, "Oh God, oh my dear God, oh God, God."

Gus Feder said nothing. He got up rather quickly, dusting his cords with his hands.

Sitting up on the floor, Rabbi Sharon began to cry.

Like a boxer at the end of a round, Gus rolled his shoulders once and simply left the field of battle, speaking to no one. And he was gone, presumably to get his coat and just leave.

The group around Rabbi Sharon, comforting her, included Portia, who had her arm around her, and Linc, who squatted, looking as somber as Michael had ever seen him. It was at

that moment he glanced at Michael and may have scowled, briefly. If he had, it would have been the only time he'd ever expressed much interest in Michael, one way or another.

Shocked, feeling useless, Michael stood there. He'd almost had a role in the incident, given his proximity to it, but no one approached to discuss it with him. Portia had gotten Rabbi Sharon to the couch when Michael finally moved. He followed his friend into the kitchen. She'd presumably gone to get Rabbi Sharon some water, or something stronger.

From behind Portia, imagining she would recognize his voice, he said, stupidly, "Wow." She kept moving, went to the sink, shaking her head. He couldn't tell if she meant to suggest astonishment at the incredible turn of events, or to express disappointment that he'd been paralyzed by the fight.

He'd left Portia's apartment with no goodbye, from anyone.

Nearly home now, driving through the deserted little town with its one traffic light dutifully, if pointlessly, flashing bright green, yellow and red, he thought she probably felt a bit of both.

He'd slipped into bed. His hand drifted absently onto her back. She wore a t-shirt. He asked, groggily, after a while, if she were still sick. She mumbled sleepily that she thought maybe she was a little better.

The next morning, light with yellow in it flooded the loft's high, lead-paned windows. On a signal neither could have described but which each knew well, they got up separately, to brush their teeth. After that, with mouths that were Listerine fresh, they made love.

At the old oak table that she'd found in an antique store just a few miles down the road, over the border in Connecticut, they drank coffee with steamed skim milk frothed on top. She asked how it was. He said there'd been a big argument between a couple.

"Really?"

"Yeah, it kind of ruined it."

"Who?"

"That woman who's the Rabbi? You know?"

"Who did Lenny's thing?"

"Yeah. She and her husband."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"Like yelling? –"

"No, they actually were hitting each other, I mean, really, they were wailing on each other."

"You can't be serious."

"It was highly surreal."

“Wow. How’s Portia?”

“All right, I guess. I have to call her. It just got to be about her taking care of the Rabbi, and I got out of there. I barely said goodbye, in fact I don’t think I did.”

“What about the kid, the one with the ridiculous name.”

“Branch? Well, you know, I’m not sure. I guess he was in another room, you know how big that place is. With the nanny.”

“Does she look tired?”

Who, he wondered, for an instant. The baby? The baby’s a boy. Portia, idiot, he scoled himself. “Portia? No, she seems all right, at least until all this happened.”

“Of course. She’s always gorgeous.”

He wouldn’t see Portia for a while, Michael thought. Had that feeling.

Later in the morning, after he’d exhausted the paper, and she’d tinkered a little at her work desk, amid the spilled silver and turquoise, they decided to go to brunch at a rather fancy place in an old stone mansion beside a brook. Julie still felt lousy, she said, but she had to get out of the loft for a few hours. After brunch, they walked down the main street of the quaint, expensive village, amid used bookstores, gear outfitters for hikers and kayakers, and places that sold perfumy little bars of soap shaped like seashells.

“You need clothes,” Julie said.

"I do?"

"Yeah, you do."

"No, I don't," he laughed slightly, if pleased somehow that she had these concerns about him.

"Let's just go in this place." She slipped her arm lightly through his and guided him into a low-lit men's clothing shop.

"You need a sport jacket. All your sport jackets are from the twentieth century."

"It's not that bad."

"Actually, it really is."

So, he tried on a sport jacket that was on sale. He looked at himself in the three-way mirror, noting his profile. His nose longer and more pronounced whenever he saw it at an unaccustomed angle like this. Weird how he really didn't know how others saw him. The back of his head, so familiar to those who knew him, was a mysterious image to him, despite the fact that it was his very head. He had a faintly vulnerable sensation. The entire world, except him, knew the back of his head. He did admire the thick curls of his hair back there. Trim in the waist. Hanging in there.

At that moment, she asked, from a small distance away: "What size pants are you Michael?"

It was strange that, somehow, he knew what was coming.

“Michael?”

“Pants? 34-32 I guess.”

“What about these?” she asked, coming around the corner of an aisle, to where he stood at the mirror. “They’re nice, and they’re on sale.”

He didn’t know what to say.

“Not usually your sort of thing, but I think you might look nice in them.”

And it was true. He had never even thought of wearing a pair of corduroy pants.

“They’re pleated,” he said.

“Yeah, actually. They are,” Julie said. “Try them on.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Yeah. Let me think about it.”

“Just a pair of pants.”

“Just a pair of pants, yeah.”

“Try them.”

He looked at her. And he kept looking at her. “What?” she said and smiled.

“Corduroy? I’d feel like I was 10 years old.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Come here,” he said.

“Why? What are you doing?”

He stepped to her and took her gently in his arms and held her, which was something he never did, at least with their clothes on.

“Michael, um, we’re in a store.”

But he held her anyway, lightly, with no intention of letting her go.

“Try on the pants,” she whispered.

“No,” he whispered back.

“But why?”

“Kiss me,” he said.

“Michael, c’mon, you’re acting dumb.”

But they did.

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