

I Thought You Were Someone Else

As Peter came out of the revolving door into the lobby of his building on Madison Avenue, he saw the face of a woman in love. She looked steadily at a man standing in front of her, intent, expectant, as if waiting to be told what to do next but delighted nearly to the point of laughter just to be in his presence.

You couldn't miss them if you tried. They stood in front of a set of turnstiles that led to an elevator bank. It was a ridiculous time, 8:45 in the morning, on a wet, frigid Wednesday in early April, to pause in a jammed lobby for a private moment. Everyone else was in motion, just recently out of the rain, trying to get to work. Many were forced to move around the couple, and they didn't look happy about it.



Peter couldn't see the man's face, only the back of his head. He noted a trim, conservative haircut. As he approached them, the woman raised her arm and caressed the left side of the man's face with the back of her right hand. It was a gesture of such tenderness and intimacy he almost felt like a voyeur.

She wore a rather eccentric, billowing white coat, a cape, really, with a blue scarf daubed at her throat. She was pretty, if birdlike, her features a bit sharp, angular. Like the sandy-haired man, she wore her hair, which was black, very short, but if his cut suggested conformity, hers seemed a statement of brisk style. The man was tall, his shoulders beefy, as if he spent too much time on his back, pumping iron from a sweat slick bench.

As Peter moved closer, he noted a kind of determination in how she looked at him. Something in how she'd set her jaw. He liked to think of himself as an acute observer of people, their subtleties of approach, withdrawal. He decided that she had a doubt or two about him.

Moving to within a few feet of them, he was able to see the man's face for the first time. A magazine model look, square-jawed, nose small and straight, eyes light blue, cast a little shrewdly on her, not a jerk, necessarily, but projecting a sense that he was more than entitled to her appreciation of him.

Peter shifted his direction to move within inches of them, as he passed. He did this sort of thing all day, studying people. What did he detect in her eyes? A certain remove, despite the softness in her eyes, which at least portrayed love, whether she really felt it or not.

Looking at her face, he felt a physical yank. It's said love has to do with the heart, but Peter experienced it, at that moment, as largely abdominal. It was a sudden sensation of

wanting to know her, seeing that uncertainty in her closer-up, and a slight tightening of her mouth, the distance in her eyes, even as she grinned, when the man shifted nearly imperceptibly away from her. She had done something to her eyelashes, which were thick, and delicately barbed, like the points of a star. As if she had tried too hard to do whatever she had done with her eyelashes. She seemed a little older, as if a gauze had lifted when he neared, revealing faint creases in her forehead and beside her mouth. He noted the delicacy of her nose, a certain fragility, like it was a beak, almost, unattractively so.

This made her more attractive to him. Her oddities, like the coat, her flaws, like the nose, came as a relief. She seemed to be swimming in the coat. It wasn't the dramatic fashion statement he'd thought at first. It didn't really work. It made her seem vulnerable, like the lashes, like she wanted to say something about herself that wasn't true.

He felt an irrational panic that he might never see her again. What had happened to him sprung from nowhere, everywhere, everything, nothing. It made no sense. But he had no choice in the matter. As for the man, at that instant, the instant Peter fell in love, which is what he absolutely believed had happened to him, he assumed an astronomical irrelevance.

She moved to the man, went up on one toe, draping her hands on the man's shoulders, and she closed her eyes and kissed him. The man's eyes remained open. He seemed impatient to accept her appreciation, but then get on with the day.

Peter passed by, and they were behind him. In years to come, she would say to Peter that he really couldn't have loved her at first sight. You can't truly *love* someone right away like that, she said. Of course, you can, he said. I did. But that's not what happened, she would say.

Then what was it? You liked how I looked, she said. Attraction. Lust, that word. The usual suspects. It wasn't that, he said, everybody looks at everybody, and you decide things about them, you make up stories. I just knew, the first time I saw you. Not everybody, she murmured, doing something on the kitchen counter, her back to him. *I loved you* right away, he said, looking away from her. You can't say that Peter. Well, I just did. You're making it up, in retrospect, and she turned to him. No, I'm not. I knew. You didn't see me when I first saw you. And when you did, after I followed you, it was different, I know that.

What was? She asked it as if genuinely puzzled.

He didn't answer.

Peter reached the turnstiles to his elevator bank, at the other end of the lobby. He stopped, turned around, realizing he was afraid he would never see her again. She was walking towards him. The man had gone. If she had disappeared too, he would have run back to that side of the lobby, before she vanished into the throng on Madison.

He had no plan. Taking up a position against the marble wall, his heart began to race. He felt winded, lightheaded. She's beautiful, was the thought in his head. Tall, but swimming in that coat. She walked fast. Even from a distance he could see that her eyes had gone flat. All the pleasure in her expression had disappeared. No one observing her at that moment would have imagined the joy in her face a minute before, or that she'd kissed her lover an instant ago. She had the gaze of a million other women in the city, eyes set straight ahead, seeing nothing, looking inside, not out.

Suddenly, she veered right, down a corridor that led to a set of revolving doors which led to the street.

He lingered an instant after she disappeared before he launched himself from the wall. As he turned left down the corridor, he could see her about to enter the revolving door, seeming to shove it forward, hard. He broke into a kind of skip, and then, as she vanished into the door, he jogged. By the time he made it to the street, he didn't know whether she'd gone east or west. Incredible how easy it is to vanish into the mob in New York. He looked left and saw her at a startling distance, a glimpse of the white coat. She was headed west, toward Fifth Avenue. Had he looked to the right he could have lost just enough time to miss her. With a couple of quick steps, dodging pedestrians, he drew within a few feet of her.

What if she took a cab? He couldn't dive in after her. But she kept walking for more than half an hour. He followed her all the way to the West Village. He had a meeting at ten o'clock. He'd think of something. He concentrated on how he could possibly meet her. He could come up behind her, he thought, call a name, and when she glanced around say, *Sorry, I thought you were someone else.*

But it would never work, would it? It was creepy. Absurd. She could make a scene and have a right to.

She crossed the West Side Highway, evidently planning to walk along the Hudson.

But on the promenade, she ambled to a bench. She sat at the edge of the water, leaving him exposed several yards behind her, standing with his hands in the pockets of his wool sport jacket, in the cold, thick mist, amid a scattering of joggers, bicyclists, and dog walkers. He sat on

a bench about fifty yards behind her, at a diagonal. She'd have to twist all the way around to see him, which seemed unlikely.

"OK, this is nuts," he said aloud, quietly.

She sat upright, very still, looking out at the river. A tugboat slowly pushed a barge. You could barely see New Jersey, across the river, shrouded in cloud.

For ten minutes or so, they sat there. He decided to call in and say he'd gotten sick in the middle of the night, been up for hours, and then fallen back to sleep without setting an alarm.

She arched her back, stretching, as if about to stand up. He couldn't follow her around all day. If he was going to do something crazy, the best place was here, where if she went off on him on him few would notice.

He needed a name. Sarah. He sat with Sarah Chase at the Wednesday meeting. They'd gossip and crack jokes.

She stood up, and so did he.

He felt weak, his heart thudded, his throat tightened. He took a long, determined stride, and he was on his way toward her. Within seconds, he was right behind her.

"Sarah?" His voice seemed higher than usual. "Is that you?"

She turned, slowly, completely composed, not at all thrown to have a stranger at her back. The sharp bone of the nose. Cheekbones darkened with make-up. The chopped hair.

"Oh, wow, sorry," Peter said.

She looked steadily at him, as she had looked at the man. She appraised him, her blue eyes alert and amused.

"Sorry," he apologized again.

She said nothing, just took him in.

"I thought you were someone else," he said.

"That's all right." Soft voice, in a low register. She kept looking at him.

"I thought you were someone else," he repeated.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She turned away. She folded her arms, got up, stood looking out at the water. Was he supposed to walk away? Wasn't that his cue to disappear? It wasn't an option for him, but she didn't know that.

She turned back to him again. She appeared upset; her brow furrowed. Then she looked away again. They stood there for a good minute. He looked down, unable to leave. He waited for her to tell him to leave her alone.

Still with her back to him, she asked: "Are you still there?"

"Yeah."

With her arms still folded, her head down, she began to walk, rounding the end of the bench. She didn't object when he fell into step beside her. It occurred to him she might be afraid he was crazy. Maybe she would bolt suddenly, screaming.

They reached the traffic light at the highway. She asked, lightly, as if merely curious, not looking at him as she said it, "I really don't like this. What's going on?"

"No, no, I apologize, I'm, I'm crossing here too," he lied.

"Maybe it would be better if you left me alone after that, OK?"

"I will. I will."

On the other side of the street, though, he stayed beside her, ashamed, unable to move or to speak.

"Bye," she said, pleasantly enough, but with an edge that suggested he should go.

"Uh, yeah, only, I was just wondering if you wanted to get a cup of coffee or something."

"What? Are you serious? Why are you asking me that?" She looked at him now, aghast.

"I know, I'm sorry, I, uh, right, sorry."

"I can't do that." But, in his mind anyway, it was almost as if she meant the idea was more preposterous than disturbing.

"I understand." But he stayed beside her when she began to walk.

“Um,” she said, after a moment, “Look, seriously, this is getting a little worse than awkward, and I really have to ask you to leave me alone.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, but compelled to take one last shot, he lied again, “I really did think you were someone else, but, now that I see who you are, I just thought, insane as it may seem, I like your coat, I wanted to say that.”

“My coat,” she stated.

“Yeah, I – I just think it’s interesting. You’re – interesting.”

She stopped again, not looking at him, and she shook her head, but she seemed bemused, not angry.

“I don’t do this sort of thing,” he said, softly, looking at her in the eyes, which were pale blue. “I’ll get you a donut. I know a place on Hudson.”

“I don’t eat donuts.” She laughed, slightly, and shook her head again, and started walking, and she didn’t object when he again fell into step with her.

“OK,” she said, in her low voice, “Do you live down here?”

“Yeah, I do, more or less. A little farther down, near the financial district.”

She nodded, proceeding slowly, her arms bunched at her chest, her head still lowered, as if primarily occupied with thoughts that had nothing to do with him. But she asked, distantly, “Is that what you do, work on Wall Street?”

“No, no, I’m an editor, assistant editor,” and he named the well-known magazine where he worked.

“That’s interesting.”

“What about you?”

“I mostly give piano lessons.”

“Really? You’re a musician?”

“Sometimes.”

“That’s cool.”

“Sometimes, maybe.”

“No, really.”

She never actually agreed to the coffee, they just arrived at a place that served it, and when he said, “This is the place,” she walked in the door when he held it open.

She didn’t dislike the look of him. Tall, thin, a bit stooped, his skin pale, face boyish, if tempered by a couple of days growth, his eyes large, which always conveyed a certain innocence to her, whether justified or not, his smile, big and bright, which flashed when she said she hated any form of popular music, and he said, “Because you hate it or because it’s popular?”

They bandied like that. She wondered if she’d been tricked, if there was a Sarah. Maybe he had mistaken her for someone else. She would admit to herself, later, much later, that she wanted to believe that.

He said his name was Peter Hayes. She gave just her first name, Regine. She had ordered a latte, which he'd planned to do, but to avoid sounding like he'd copied her, he had his black. She learned that he'd grown up in Rockland County, north of the city, son of a doctor and a schoolteacher. He learned that she'd grown up in Vermont and had gone to the Berkeley School of Music, in Boston. She'd come to New York following a guy. Not the guy in the lobby, because she said she'd broken up with him years before. She played around town, mostly as an accompanist, making ends meet by teaching classes and working as an adjunct professor at a music college. Had a tiny apartment on the Upper East Side.

She asked him what he was doing out on the promenade on a Wednesday morning.

"Oh, I don't know. I just decided to come in late. They owe me time, you know."

"Have you called them?"

"Not yet."

"What are you going to say?"

"Hm, yeah, I guess that I got sick in the middle of the night and I overslept. That's the plan."

"So, you've thought this through."

"Sort of." She didn't like that, he thought.

"So, are you a good liar, Peter Hayes?"

"No, no, I don't think so."

She flicked up her brow, took a sip of coffee.

He asked her, "What brought you all the way down here?"

"It's just a place I like. I was thinking of having an early lunch with a girlfriend who works near here." He wondered if that was a lie too. "Anyway, I really should go now. Thanks, Peter Hayes, for the coffee."

"Yeah, sure. Definitely. But, you know, can I see you again?" He felt like an idiot when he said it, but he could not help saying it.

"C'mon, Peter Hayes. Look, I really shouldn't be sitting here in the first place. I'm quite seriously involved with someone." She slid her eyes from Peter, and her brow tensed.

"No, sure, OK. I just thought maybe we could hear some music or something."

She looked at him again. "I don't think so."

"Fair enough, I understand."

He thought she would get up, but she didn't, and she said, "What about you, Peter," and it was the first time she'd called him by his first name only. It felt intimate, almost like her gesture with the man, her hand on his face. "Are you involved with someone?"

"Involved? Somewhat, I guess, to be honest, I'm kind of off and on with someone." In fact, he and Allison had been going out for nearly a year.

“So,” she inhaled, lightly, and laughed, “You say you’re being honest but you’re also suggesting we start sneaking around.”

He smiled, but felt a quiver of annoyance rise in his chest. “No, not saying that. Not sneak around, just hear some music.”

“Would you tell your girlfriend if we did?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“I’m not sure I believe that,” she smiled, and now she was getting up.

The waitress came. “Anything else?”

“Just the check,” she said.

After a moment, he said: “I really would like to see you again, and I really do know that’s a little crazy.”

“No, Peter, really, that’s just not a good idea right now. Thank you, though, but I can’t do that.”

“Right now,” he thought. He stood up, said, “Why don’t we just go hear some music?” as if genuinely puzzled that she would refuse, not that he was.

She said: “I don’t know.”

He felt a spear of excitement in his lower stomach. "Give me your number, and maybe one of these days we can hear some music."

The waitress loaned him a pen and he wrote her number on the corner of the paper placemat.

He showed up four hours late to work, having called with his excuse while he walked all the way back uptown, jubilant, despite the miserable weather. When he ran into Sarah Chase, she was sympathetic. The meeting had seemed endless without him, she said, and then she asked, slyly, Where the hell *were* you?

"No comment," he said, "I'll tell you later," which he never did.

They went out on a Tuesday night to a piano recital. She'd planned to go anyway, she said. She loved Bartok. She seemed jumpy, he thought, like the awful, pounding, discordant music.

They had a drink afterwards. She found his work at the magazine intriguing. She knew he was infatuated with her, which she found both amusing and a relief after putting up with the man's squirminess for the six months they'd been seeing each other. She and Peter saw each other a second time, a third, always on weeknights. He showed up with an armful of roses the fourth time. She didn't bring up his girlfriend, and he didn't bring up the man.

She told a few girlfriends, all of whom were wary of Peter. But then Regine began to say she enjoyed seeing him. Everyone knew about her frustrations with the man, who could be so

charming one minute, unreachable the next. The story of what had happened on the promenade began to take on a romantic aura, whether it had been a ruse or not. One girlfriend said her first encounter with Peter was “one of the great how I met your father” stories. Regine scoffed, but she wasn’t completely indifferent to the idea of destiny reaching out, at 31.

She began to wonder if she was falling in love with him.

One evening about a month after they’d met, Peter took her hand, which he’d never done before, in Central Park, on a spring evening. She didn’t pull away. A thick quietness hovered between them, like there was no one else in the city at that moment. Then she said, though she had not intended to say anything of the kind, “Peter, I think I may be falling in love with you.”

He concealed the happiness that surged within him. “It’s about time,” he said.

She laughed, and she shoved him sideways, and that was when he reached around her, and he gathered her in his arms, and he and Regine kissed for the first time.

The next day, Peter told Allison, after work, in a quiet bar on Park Avenue South, that he’d fallen in love with someone else. She left in tears, but he felt nothing.

That same evening, in the man’s apartment, Regine also said she’d fallen in love with someone else.

She’d expected something close to a shrug. Instead, he flicked his head back, as if uncertain he’d heard her right.

“You met someone else?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Just – just in the past several weeks,” she exaggerated.

“But – Regine, can I ask you why?”

“Why? Because I – because we – because I love him,” she declared.

“Who is he?”

“Does that really matter?”

“Of course, it matters. It matters, yes.”

“Well, frankly I’d rather not –“

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Doing this to you?”

“Doing this to you, and to me.”

“You know, I’m amazed to hear you react like this. I thought you couldn’t care less whether I stayed in your life or not.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth, and you know it, don’t be asinine.”

He’d never come close to speaking to her with such vehemence. “Do you - love me?” she asked.

"It's always the words, isn't it?" he shot back, "What is it with women, and words?"

"What? Yes, words matter."

"I'll never say it like that. But sure, of course I love you."

"I've met a man who does say it."

"You've been going around my back?"

"Going around your back? Half the time you act like I'm not even here."

"I'm not here to perform for you, Regine, this is not a performance."

"You don't love me," she said, in a dismissive tone, as if merely stating the obvious.

"How do you know who I love!"

"What I know is I've met someone who is in love with me."

"Then fuck him, let him. But you'll never know, will you? You don't get it. You'll never get it. Just get out."

"I –"

"I thought you were someone else," he said, darkly.

She stumbled up West Broadway. That he'd use the same words as Peter on the promenade seemed of less significance than her amazement at how emotional he'd become.

For days, she wondered if he would call. But he never did.

A year later, she and Peter married.

Two years later, they had Ben. Then three years after that, Elizabeth was born.

Allison married a fund manager and moved to Connecticut.

As for the man in the lobby, Regine sometimes mused about him for a moment, if, say, she was downtown, near his apartment. She wished they could have finished more cleanly. She didn't know, and no one she knew did, what had become of him.

Peter did wonder a little about the man each time they told the story of how they'd met, which occasionally came up at dinner with new friends, or at a party. He found it a little strange that she'd never mentioned him, but he told himself the man was a part of her life, not their lives, like Allison had been a part of his life. She could bring it up if she felt like it. She never did.

Eventually, it had been years since they'd told their story when, one evening at dinner, out of the blue, thirteen-year-old Elizabeth asked them how they'd met.

After they told her, the girl looked thoughtful for a moment before she asked:

"So, who's Sarah, Dad?"

"Just someone I sort of knew."

"Someone you were in love with?"

"No! I barely knew her."

“That’s good,” said Elizabeth.

Later, when they were in bed, Regine suddenly asked Peter if there really was a Sarah.

She’d long ago gotten used to acting as if Sarah existed. It just didn’t seem to matter, amid their busy lives, and her contentment. She played piano with an amateur quartet sometimes, but mostly she taught the instrument to the sons and daughters of the city’s monied class. She was, happily, a mother, raising two children she adored.

But things had begun to go wrong. Four months before, Peter lost his job at the magazine. Now, he called himself a freelance writer and editor. He was ghostwriting a book for a wealthy guy obsessed with New England shipwrecks. They were short on cash. He’d been irritable, unlike the breezy, easygoing man she’d always known. She’d tried to be consistently sympathetic, but his gloom annoyed her. He’d snapped at her. The man he was ghostwriting the book for had been late with a payment. To balance their books for the month, they needed the check. Regine had asked him to call the guy, and he’d growled, “Get off my back, Regine, I’m handling it, OK?”

For so many years, it had just seemed irrelevant to bring up whether there really was a Sarah. It made no difference. To mention it, despite an odd, very occasional quiver of curiosity, could suggest she didn’t trust him. It was part of their story, a story she’d come to love, as had everyone they’d ever told it to, whether it was completely true or not.

But that night, ignited by Elizabeth’s question, it was as if Regine found herself mining for some larger understanding of her husband, amid the changes in him, who had somehow become.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?” Peter responded.

“Sarah. Was there really a Sarah? I’ve always kind of wondered about that.”

“Really? You have? That’s a strange thing to talk about.”

“OK, maybe. I think about it, a little bit, now and then.”

“Seriously? Why didn’t you ask about it before?”

“I don’t know. It seemed unimportant.”

“It’s important now?” he chuckled.

“It isn’t, really.”

“Sarah,” he said, “Was someone I knew, that’s all. I haven’t thought about her in years.”

“What was her last name?”

She had on a white nightgown. He flashed on the white cape-coat. He paused, a ruffle of panic shooting up in him. “Montclair,” he said. Someone had mentioned Montclair, New Jersey to him that day, and he just grabbed at the name. Chase, Sarah Chase. That was how he’d originally come up with the name. She’d moved away, many years ago, he remembered, took a job with a magazine in Los Angeles.

Regine twisted around a little, the nightgown pulling back to reveal her bare knee.

“It’s not a big deal,” she said.

“No, it shouldn’t be, but – there really was a Sarah, just for the record.”

“You weren’t just trying to pick me up?”

“What? No!” he protested, laughing with, she thought she heard, a certain tinniness in his tone. “Why are you suddenly asking this?”

“You *were* just trying to meet me, weren’t you?”

“No,” Peter repeated. “I mean I wanted to meet you as soon as I saw you, but no, I thought you were someone else, Sarah Chase.”

“You just said her last name was Montclair.”

“Oh, right, no, Sarah Chase, that was someone I worked with. She moved out to California. Sarah Montclair, if you need to know, that was her anem, the one I thought your were.”

He felt the lie suffuse the room, tangible. He was certain she could feel it.

And then, unaccountably, the man in the lobby was in her mind. Again. She’d remembered him, as they’d told their story to the children. Bradley. Bradley Croft. Who’d said the same words to her Peter had. *I thought you were someone else.*

After Bradley Croft had thrown her out, she’d eventually sat in an empty bar up by her apartment and pondered how bizarre it was that both men said the same thing. It was an unwelcome symmetry, linking Bradley and Peter in a way that bothered her. She’d decided, back then, that she would keep it to herself. Even telling a girlfriend, she’d concluded, would only further connect the two men, who had nothing to do with each other.

She'd been introduced to Brad at a party. There was nothing special about their story. They'd drifted into being a couple, almost as if they had nothing better to do. In his apartment with the high window facing south, filled with the filigreed Woolworth Building, the two of them could remain silent for hours. She recalled that about him, the silence, like being deep in the woods, at night. It unnerved her sometimes. She wasn't sure what to make of it. She wanted them to talk more. But she felt if she spoke, her voice would ring out, like an explosion, so she'd wait for him to say something. Amid the quiet, she'd drift, and, at its best, it could be a sensation like floating on her back, in the sea. Bradley would be at his computer, his brow tense, watching colorful numbers march and drizzle across the screen. They listened to music. He appreciated Bartok, he could tolerate Messiaen, took on some George Crumb, he loved Stravinsky. They read, together, in the quiet. They made love. There was a placid remove in his blue eyes. His size, his broad, hairy chest, so unlike her thin, smooth-chested husband, was unappealing, even at this remove, but unnerving, somehow, to think about again.

She remembered the morning she met Peter. She'd spent a rare weeknight with Bradley. They'd gone to the theatre downtown. He'd urged her not to bother going all the way back uptown, but as if it was a matter of convenience for her, not because of any desire on his part to have her around.

But then, right after they woke up, they'd passionately made love. It was why he'd been so distant with her in the lobby, she concluded, as she walked so far downtown that cold, wet

day. They'd stepped out of the usual run of things. He'd revealed too much. He was running late

The Saturday before, he'd cooked her dinner in the apartment, which had never happened before, and he'd been in great form, joking, even, talking in his low rumble of a voice, pouring a very expensive wine, going on and on about it, like a kid with a new bike.

Then she'd met Peter. As she began to see him intermittently on weeknights, she tried to understand where she stood with Bradley, on the weekends. She left hints. She needed him to commit. One night she suggested they take a trip somewhere.

"Why?" he'd asked, in a low, edgy voice.

She'd dropped it, but that had been a turning point. A few days later was when Peter greeted her with his arms full of roses.

She'd desired Bradley Croft, physically, in a way she had never desired Peter. She knew that. It didn't matter, but it was that way. It was just different, with Bradley. There had been a frantic quality to her attraction to him. Their thing was unstable, uncertain. That had something to do with it. Maybe a little like, each time they made love, or simply had a good evening, or afternoon, she had won him over. It was a sickening thought, but it was something like that, and it had conferred a certain intensity to everything they did, arguably, at least when it wasn't just difficult, or, for that matter, just confusing, lonely, disorienting.

Peter, beside her in bed, was thinking about Bradley Croft too, though he knew him only, of course, as the man in the lobby. Regine hadn't told him everything either, he thought.

He remembered the man's eyes open as she kissed him; her eyes intent, with love, or some version of it. He caressed his wife's hair. He pulled her to him, kissed her. She lifted her hand to lightly touch his face, and he realized it almost the same gesture as in the lobby, when she'd touched the man's face, those years ago. She'd never touched him like that before. Was she touching *him*, the man? Had telling the story brought him back? He withdrew slightly, and said in a husky voice, "It's OK."

"What, Peter? What's OK?"

"No, how I mixed up those names. There really was a Sarah Montclair."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"It wouldn't matter if there wasn't. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"But do you believe me?"

"Of course, I do."

He pulled her toward him, without tenderness. She allowed it to happen, listless as he crushed her against him, his lie palpable in the graceless insistence of his touch.

"Sarah Montclair" never came up again. Neither did the man in the lobby. But their story had changed. They would never be able to tell it again, because now they both knew it wasn't true.

A little while later, Peter met a young assistant at the publishing house which had brought out his ghostwritten book, *Shipwreck! New England's Greatest Coastal Disasters*. He fell in love with her, at first sight. She said the same thing had happened to her. He and Jessica began to meet on the sly.

One evening, in their living room, with the children in their rooms down the hall, not looking at his wife as he spoke, Peter told Regine he'd met someone else, and that he'd decided to move into her apartment in Brooklyn Heights. It would be better, he said, if the children weren't exposed for even one more day to the tension between them. He said he believed they could find a whole new way of being together, and that what really mattered was being the best parents they could be.

Regine, who'd believed for weeks that he was involved with someone else, asked: "Was it love at first sight?"

"Fuck you, Regine," Peter said, and he stood up, and walked out.

After the divorce, a good two years after the night Peter lied to her about "Sarah Montclair," a girlfriend told Regine that she'd crossed paths with Bradley Croft, of all people, at a gallery opening on the Lower East Side. She told him jokingly that he looked like he'd gotten rich, which he took on quite seriously, admitting almost bashfully that he'd done well, "market's been up a lot, not hard to do." He'd never married. When her name came up, she said he'd kind of paused, nodded and asked if he could text her his phone number to pass on to Regine. He asked nothing else about her. Why don't you call her yourself or send her a note,

the girlfriend asked. "No email," he said, smiling, "I hate email. Ask her to call me. It would be good to hear her voice."

One night a little while after that, after a couple of glasses of wine, Regine the number.

"Hello?" came a version of his voice, but with a pebbly quality in it, and she realized that he, like she, was so much older.

"Brad – Brad, this is Regine Marchant," she said, using her maiden name.

When he didn't respond right away, she had a feeling he might hang up on her.

"You'll say I'm making this up," he finally said, "But just this morning, I thought of you."

"I – I will say you're making that up. Anyway, you ran into my friend Carol Snyder - "

"I always think of you when I see pianos."

"Pianos?"

"Steinway, on 57th Street."

They spoke for an hour. She told him about the divorce, the children, teaching piano. When he said he'd never married, she wondered if he was attached, but didn't ask. He talked about a trip he'd made to China. He asked her to dinner. She said she wasn't sure, she just wanted to call and catch up, but he named a restaurant. He said he hoped she'd be there at 8:00 Friday night.

As soon as she saw him in the foyer of the restaurant, she felt a shock, a strong, poignant, oddly maternal sensation, because his hair had grayed, and he'd put on a lot of

weight. He had furrows in his face, webs of wrinkles in his cheeks, lines in his forehead, bags under his eyes, and he moved more slowly than before, though he'd always had a kind of ponderous gravity in his step. They embraced, lightly, awkwardly. As they walked to their table, her breath caught, her pulse quickened. She hadn't realized how lonely she'd been, evidently. The first man to take her out in two years, and it was almost as if she'd fallen, immediately, embarrassingly, in love.

They sat down. She felt dazed. They reviewed what they'd already talked about, though she didn't mention the divorce again. A few things her children had done that week. An interest he had in going to South America. At one point the conversation flagged, though not uncomfortably. It was like one of the silences that had always settled between them. In that space, she thought of what both he and Peter had said. After a while, she spoke: "Brad, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"That last night we saw each other. What did you mean when you said you thought I was someone else?"

Looking down at his food, he tilted his head, indicating surprise that she'd brought that up. He nodded, still without looking at her, to acknowledge that he remembered. "Regine, I acted like an ass that night."

“It’s not that, really. I’m not looking for an apology, or something, if that’s what you’re thinking. I could have handled it better too, or at least differently. It was a long time ago.”

“Well –“

“It’s those words. Why did you say that you thought I was someone else?”

“Why? Anger, I guess. I was hurt.” He dropped his eyes to his plate, sawed off some salmon.

“I was so – surprised,” she said.

“Surprised about what?” He ate the morsel. He looked up, into her eyes. “I didn’t want to lose you, Regine.”

Tears shot into her eyes, which she didn’t want. Now she looked away. “I had no idea about that. No idea.” She looked back at him. “Do you realize that? How I felt?”

“I have no idea how you felt. And I had no idea. You were always a mystery to me, Regine but...” He trailed off.

“Don’t stop,” she said. “But what?”

“You said you were with someone else, Regine.”

“I – I honestly didn’t think you cared one way or another.”

“I did care.”

“What did you mean – I was someone else?”

“I don’t know – that – that you were, I think – I don’t know.”

“Who did you think I was?”

“I thought – I thought you were someone - unusual. Someone very different from other people I had known, other women. And very different from who I was. I believed you were someone – someone who wanted to love as much as you wanted to be loved. Maybe,” he said, gently, “I could say it that way. Something like that, anyway. You know, it’s usually the other way around.”

It seemed so unlikely to hear him talk about love. Who, back then, so often barely talked, period.

It was like he was someone else.

She thought about what he said about her. He was wrong. She wasn’t like that. He’d idealized her, that wasn’t her. She had, if anything, very much wanted to be loved more than to love.

It was why she’d married Peter.

“You give me too much credit,” she said.

“Maybe.”

“You do.”

If he had called, after that night. If.

Her two children were at home with a babysitter because Peter had begged off at the last minute. Jessica had a work-related thing she had unexpectedly demanded Peter also attend.

A phone call.

I would have gone back with you, she thought. But she couldn't say it.

They ate, once again in that deep silence they could always conjure between them, which had contributed to her confusion about them back then, but which now seemed comfortable, easy, natural. After a while, she said: "It was something I'd heard before."

"What was?"

"The first thing my ex-husband Peter ever said to me was 'I thought you were someone else.'"

"Really? And why would he say that?"

"He was pretending he thought I was someone else so he could meet me."

"What?" Bradley laughed, lightly. "That's anyway a bit romantic, I guess."

"Is it? It's so strange that you said it too."

"It is, yes."

"Only he was making it up."

"What do you mean making it up?"

"He was trying to pick me up."

"Oh, OK, a pick-up line." He tilted his head skeptically, lifted his brow. "You sure about that?"

"Yes, Brad, absolutely I am."

He smiled to himself, and after a moment asked, "Can I – tell you a story?"

She felt a jolt of apprehension. She didn't want him to say something that would disillusion her, show him to be as out of touch with her, as unreliable, as he'd been years before. Something that would change the feelings that had come up in her, seeing him again.

"I once went out with a girl, in my twenties," he began, "For what turned out to be a good month and a half, I'd say. Beautiful girl. I guess we really shouldn't qualify people like that anymore, but, there it is, she just was. And, for that little time, we actually were quite crazy about each other, I think. But then, I finally had to admit to her I hadn't been raised on a cattle ranch in Montana."

"A - *what?*" Regine laughed.

"Yeah. A cattle ranch, in Montana. I met her in a bar, I was in my cups, and I could hear that she had some kind of accent, a southern accent, which turned out to be a Texas accent. But I got this idea in my head that I could impress her if I said I was from some way-out place. So, I did, I told her that, and, sure enough, she was, you know, really interested. She bought it, I thin you could say. Suitably impressed. I'm talking about working under the big sky, driving the herds across the plateau, I mean, I laid it on thick. Being, as you may remember, actually from near Pittsfield, which is in western Massachusetts."

"You've got to be kidding."

"True story. So then, she liked me, and we agreed to meet again, but then, of course, I was stuck with the story."

“So, you told her.”

“No, I didn’t tell her. I didn’t know how, and I just kept digging the hole deeper and deeper. She was introducing me to her friends, we’d gotten to that stage, and I’m this guy from Montana. But then one night, eventually, I’m not sure why, she picked up something, because I stupidly mentioned playing against a football team from Connecticut in high school, because someone we were with was from there, and she started, you know, pressing me on it, and she wouldn’t let up. I think she guessed for a while that I was not telling the truth about my origins. So that night after we went back to my apartment, I told her the truth. And, well, that was it. She was really, really mad, just furious, and I guess she had a right to be. I remember she said something like, ‘is there a single man in New York who isn’t an absolute lying asshole.’” He chuckled, and murmured, “Her exact words, I think. She threw a pillow from the sofa at me, and she just got up and walked out and I never saw her again. I tried, but I never did see her again.”

“That was it?”

“I never saw her again.”

Regine wondered who he really was. The man she’d known was hard to imagine picking up girls in bars. He’d been someone else when she knew him, as she’d been someone else then, too, as they were new people now, in so many ways, all over again.

They looked at each other. He thrust out his chin slightly, a funny gesture, a tick, really, the sort of thing people who live alone start doing because there’s no one around to point it out. It made him seem vulnerable, maybe lonely, and she experienced a wave of feeling for him which gathered in her stomach, a yearning, plaintive, troubled, but thick with desire for him.

“You tried to make yourself someone else for her,” she said, “Keeping with our theme.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said, delicately. “It’s why I told you. We do – crazy things, you know?”

She looked at him with the face of a woman in love. Not like she’d looked at him that morning in the lobby, with such intensity, that brimming, almost giddy pleasure, and uncertainty, and confusion. Let alone the toughness that had been in her look too, the determination to get them straight. There was a serenity in her expression now, as if she were watching an infant sleep. Her mature face was no longer as sharp, as taut on her bones. And there was something withheld, too, now, in how she looked at him, an inwardness, an expression with no anticipation in it, almost a modesty, which was both simple satisfaction with the moment and an acknowledgment of what she knew of impermanence, and what she knew of loss.

After a while, when they had sat long enough in silence, just looking at each other, and when the check had come and gone, he asked: “Can I get you home, drop you off?”

“The children are there, Brad.”

He hadn’t meant it that way. “Regine, I’m not suggesting that, not at all.”

“We lost a lot of time. It seems so long ago.”

“Does it?”

She didn’t answer.

“Maybe we can make up for it now,” he said.

"You can't."

"No, I know."

"But I'd like to see you."

"Here I am."