

Dennis McFadden

Grow Old With Me

a love story in three acts

Act I

An innocent enough beginning. His car at the garage, Michael needed a ride after work to pick it up, and Jonlyn lived in that direction. Could she drop him off? They were friends, nothing more, having worked together for over a year at the Department of Social Services in Albany, she a staffer, he a manager. They'd chatted a few times outside of work, at office lunches and happy hours. A little flirting, naturally, but only the typical garden-variety kind, nothing out of the ordinary. True, they were both married, but she was only 28, he 35; wasn't a little innocent flirting to be expected? Although who could say for certain that neither was wondering if, this time, maybe, there might be just a little bit more?

He was good-looking, but not dangerously so. Tall and solid, tending toward stocky, a hint of a double-chin. His sandy hair was short and unruly, dizzy with freedom after years of being held captive in a buzz cut. Long eyelashes were the sexiest thing about him. She had just lost the weight from her second baby and seemed nearly flat-chested — the first time he saw her she was wearing a light summer dress, blue, with an elastic top that made her seem even flatter. Her face was pretty enough. A glossy cover girl she was not. Her ears were slightly large, but he wouldn't notice that for years; her auburn hair that gleamed in the sunlight covered them most of the time.

A rainy, hot afternoon, mid-July, 1980. The rain had tapered off, the sun trying to break through, the wet pavement surrendering tendrils of steamy mist. Rush hour traffic. She started to change lanes — they were on I-787, heading toward the bridge over the Hudson to Rensselaer —when a sudden blast of car horn caused her to swerve back into her lane.

"Jeeze," she muttered, shaken, "he was right in my wet spot."

A moment of silence as he frowned at the wipers swiping the windshield before him. It could have gone either way. He could have pretended he hadn't heard it.

He didn't. He said, "You mean blind spot?"

A worried glance. "That's what I said."

"No, you didn't," Michael said, hardly trying to keep his grin from creeping out. "You said wet spot."

Jonlyn took her eyes off the road, glancing toward where his own greedy eyes waited in ambush. He'd never before seen a blush so beautiful. "I did not," she said.

But by then everything had changed.

Her husband's name was Keith Bonnet, and he was a star. Tall, handsome, quiet, a three-sport, four-year letterman at Watervliet High School. Jonlyn was a cheerleader. His soft brown eyes made her think of chocolate pudding. She loved chocolate pudding. She loved how the top of her head did not quite come up to his chin. His quietness suggested depths that needed probing.

Her heart clamped onto him early.

She was the youngest of four sisters. The two older were married, Marilyn to a fat plumber named Stanley, with bad knees and a bad back, and Phyllis to a knobby-kneed mailman named Lou. Keith was a prize in comparison. The sisters all feared that Rosanna, the next youngest — four years older than Jonlyn — who was a bit peculiar, would never marry. Of course, this was not the reason Jonlyn stayed with Keith on and off — mostly on — for the better part of the next five years, not the reason she married him just after her twenty-first birthday. But it certainly didn't hurt.

Michael Laskey had a big brother, Eddy, ten years older. He had a big sister too, two years older than Eddy. Eddy was on the outer fringe of Mikey's childhood, Teresa well beyond it. She became a corporate lawyer, rich and successful, while Eddy went on to sell insurance, and Mikey went to work for the State. Eddy was more interested in sports than in studying, a star in his own right at Mechanicville High School. Mikey worshiped him.

One day the unthinkable happened. Mikey, meaning to scare his big brother, crept up behind him on the swing in the backyard and, to his shock, caught Eddy crying. Mikey was only eight or nine; he didn't know big brothers cried. The knowledge came at a cost. Eddy gave him a brutal Dutch rub for sneaking up on him, and as he howled, as his own tears started, he saw on the ground the picture Eddy had dropped when he'd surprised him, the picture of a pretty, dark-haired girl, Eddy's girlfriend. A girl he never saw again.

A decade later Michael's college sweetheart dumped him. He'd fallen in love — *they'd* fallen in love, he'd thought — their freshman year, but she went home to Utica for the summer and returned in the fall with a newer, sportier model.

Michael's heart hurt. He remembered Eddy's tears then, and the picture in the grass by the swing set, the picture of the pretty girl who vanished.

Their first intimate moment took place in anything but an intimate setting. A steadfast core of coworkers from the office often gathered on Friday afternoons after work — although “after work” was subject to loose interpretation — at one of the downtown Albany bars to kick off the weekend. This particular happy hour, on a fine and sunny afternoon a month or so after she'd slipped on the wet spot, was more crowded and festive than usual. The gin-and-tonics were cold and plentiful, the chatter happy and lively, the juke box, loaded mostly with oldies, loud. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* played again and again.

It was crowded at the bar by the wide front window overlooking a bustling downtown sidewalk. At one point Jonlyn had to squeeze through to make her way to the ladies' room. As she passed behind Michael, he lifted his hand behind his back and she grasped it, squeezing his fingers. It was unpremeditated, spontaneous, almost like intuition.

Like the most natural thing she would ever do.

He ignored the warning signs. He gave in to the feeling of flying. He sensed he was heading for trouble, but could not help himself. Hours later he still felt her squeezing his hand. When he stretched out on the sofa that night — his wife in the kitchen, the Mets on TV — an image rose up in his mind, a wide-awake dream: As he reclined, Jonlyn was laying down beside him, somewhere else, an unknown room, soft yellow light from a bedside lamp, the sheet floating down over them as they came together warm and close and naked.

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The touch stayed with her too. Doing the dishes, scrubbing burnt grease from the pan in which she'd fried the pork chops, she tried to scrub away the feeling as well, the feeling that caused the tiny hot flicker inside her, like a pilot light, whenever the memory popped up, which was often. Keith was in the living room, watching a game. It was Friday night, and he was home — this

was reason enough to be thankful. Most Friday nights he was out, with or without her — he preferred without, with his drinking buddies. He'd liked his dinner — she made the pork chops the way his mother did — and he'd actually complimented her. What more did she want?

She was a married woman. This nonsense could not go on.

He found reasons to be with her. When she had to carry a box of print-outs from their office on State Street a block over to the main office on Pearl, he offered to carry the box, which was fairly heavy. She could handle it herself — she had many times before — but she didn't mind the company. No harm in that much, anyhow.

Down the elevator, out into the hot August sun, he joked about how heavy the box was; how the hell did she manage? Beads of sweat on his forehead. "Man, I'm going to need a drink after this."

She said, "You sound like my husband." It didn't hurt to remind him. Or herself.

"Yeah? He's a lush too?"

"Well, he does like to drink."

"A man after my own heart."

"I don't think so. He gets mean when he drinks — you don't."

Why would she say that? How would she know how he got when he drank? She'd never seen him drink all that much. "Do you?" she added.

"I don't beat my wife, if that's what you mean."

"That's big of you."

"I might slap her around a little bit maybe."

"That's not funny," she said. He smiled anyway. She could not imagine him ever raising a hand toward his wife — or toward her. Keith, on the other hand... Keith was another story.

She started up the sidewalk toward the corner, to cross State Street at the light. He bumped into her, nudging her with his shoulder straight on across the broad avenue, jaywalking. "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line," he said.

She had nothing to say to that. She rolled her eyes. She couldn't stop herself from wondering: If he's this way walking across the street, what's he like in bed?

Jonlyn was named by her father, John Richards, after he despaired of ever having a son to name after himself. By the fourth girl he was ready to quit trying. Tall, thin and wiry, with close-cropped gray hair, a quick smile and quicker frown, he'd done a twenty-year hitch in the army before becoming a Watervliet fireman. He was strict with his girls (including his wife), forever forbidding this, forbidding that, inspecting boyfriends, examining make-up, assessing the length and tightness of clothing. Insisting on potatoes at every meal, pasta or no pasta. The three older girls chafed a bit, but toed the line. Then along came Jonlyn. The baby. The favorite.

What would her father think now? His baby girl drinking till all hours, lingering with the heavy-hitters at the park after the office picnic, long after sunset, after the kegs had kicked, after someone had brought back more beer. She didn't even care for beer, but she nursed one for an excuse not to leave. After all the softball, volleyball, tennis, all the dust and heat and sweat of the hot September day, how had Michael ended up in her car anyway, in the front seat beside her? Simple: They hadn't finished talking yet. About everything, office gossip, their spouses, her kids, his lack of them (his wife could not conceive, he told her), his love of photography, their lives. Their conversation, hours worth, flowed as easy and natural as water down a mountain stream.

What would her father think now? What would her sisters think, her mother, now that everyone else was leaving, and she lingered in the parking lot by the tennis courts, talking on and on with Michael, and when he said he should go, he'd better get home, his wife would be wondering where he was, and he opened the door, and she snatched a handful of sweaty tee shirt and yanked him back in beside her?

What she didn't think was what would Keith think. Keith would be out getting drunk in his own right somewhere, somewhere where she didn't care to be.

Michael didn't hear the joke. All he heard was the punch line. He was at the far end of the computer room — this was before desktops or laptops, when much of their work was done on the CRTs all clustered in a single room — trying to concentrate. A few of the guys were fooling around, a little too loudly. He was deciding whether to tell them to hold it down, leave and go back to his desk, or join them. He heard, barely, the punch line of the

joke, something concerning a chastity belt.

Jonlyn was just behind them, searching for a print-out on the racks. The joker hadn't seen her. A couple of the other guys had, and there was a lull in the laughter as they looked to see if she'd heard, if she'd been offended — even though it was before the days when sexual harassment had become institutionalized. She had heard. She was offended.

“That’s not the part that matters,” she said, “This is the only part that matters,” and she tapped her fingers on her chest, over her heart. This Michael heard clearly.

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For years they would argue about who said it first. By then, *I love you*, invariably followed by *I love you more*, was their mantra, but they sparred over who'd been the first to put it on record. The precise memory of the exact order in which the words were spoken was clouded by the copious intake of alcohol just prior. They'd just left a send-off party for a colleague who was leaving the office, a colleague who'd only recently come out of the closet, leaving his wife and daughter for another man. The party was at a gay bar on Lark Street on a raw day in late fall that seemed somehow to encourage reckless consumption.

Michael clearly recalled how the words — *I love you, Michael* — blind-sided him, weakened his knees, actually made him sink back to the seat of his car. Bowled him over. They'd been standing by his car, the open door. And how the words continued to rattle around high in his mind, like a bird trying to break free of a cage, for days afterward. For years afterward. He responded in kind. He couldn't help it. He might love his wife, but he loved Jonlyn more. And he remembers what he said to her then, and many times after:

“No, you don't. You're infatuated. You'll get over it. It's called *puppy love*.”

Years passed before he gave up on that line. By then, she seemed to have proven him wrong.

Jonlyn remembered telling him she loved him that day, but she was certain it had only been in response to his declaration. Before that, she'd been unwilling to admit it to him. Unwilling to admit it to herself.

She remembered the night before, how Keith had come home drunker than usual. He'd been in a fight at a bar in Cohoes, mangled knuckles, a bruise on his cheek, a cut over his eye, and she was frightened. He'd become more threatening lately, meaner, almost as if he suspected something, though she didn't

think she'd given him reason to. He'd wanted to have sex, and though she was far from in the mood, she was a little scared. When he finished, when he grunted and said I love you in his customary, perfunctory manner, was when she usually responded in kind. This time, that night, she did not. She said nothing.

Of the many things that made her fall in love with Michael, drinking was one. With Michael she discovered that men could drink too much and somehow become happier, friendlier, more charming. Fun. Not meaner and madder, more vicious.

Sex was another. She hadn't known it could be so different. Making love with Michael was light-hearted, laugh-filled. With Keith it was serious business. With Michael there was never any sense of duty involved. Making love with Michael was the closest she could possibly be to him, and compensated, a little anyhow, for not being able to be beside him all night long. When they made love parked in their hidden spot in Albany Rural Cemetery they laughed about his bare bottom bobbing up and down above the window line. What would Retallick and Tinley—two names carved largely on headstones nearby—make of that? The first time he came in her mouth, she rose up giddy: “There better not be any calories in that!” she said.

Act II

Some nights, too few, they were able to spend together. The State of New York sent him to conferences and meetings, and if they were near enough — New York City sometimes, Syracuse or Boston — she would join him, leaving her kids with their grandmother when they were still too young to be on their own, saying she was going shopping with the girls from work. Her mother was always more than happy to watch them, her little girl, Priscilla, and Ronnie, her son. By then, she and Keith were divorced. Sometimes Michael's wife, Andrea, would go to visit her family in New Jersey, and Michael and Jonlyn would find a place closer, Utica maybe, or Cooperstown, sometimes Oneonta. They would eat in nice restaurants, visit malls — Jonlyn loved to shop, and Michael didn't mind, at least not with her — and photo galleries, spend leisurely hours in their room, making love, cuddling, watching movies, games, *Jeopardy!*

When the conference was in Hartford, they took a ride down Route 2 toward Noank, having heard of a lobster shack by the ocean. It was only an hour away, and it was a beautiful late

spring afternoon for a ride through the Connecticut countryside. The place was as charming as advertised, on the water, and they picked a spot outside at a picnic table on the wharf that extended out over the water. She loved lobster. She loved being with him. He loved lobster too. He loved being with her. Normally they thought a couple sitting on the same side of a booth or table in a restaurant looked silly, but they sat on the same side of the table that evening, so they could both look out at the boats and the shore and the ocean. They were high, almost giddy, in the warm, sweet sunshine, the taste of warm, sweet lobster on their tongues.

They heard a high-pitched laugh. A familiar laugh.

Only one person laughed like that. They glanced back. Sure enough. Angela Gratton, another manager at the conference, was sitting at a table near the wharf, wiping her cheek with a napkin, having just cracked open a lobster claw that had spit in her face. She was sitting with Anton Bailey, a man from work. A man who was not attending the conference. A man who was not her husband.

Jonlyn and Michael quickly swiveled. “Oh my God,” Jonlyn said.

Michael took a breath. “I don’t believe it.”

“Do you suppose they saw us?”

“No. No way. They wouldn’t have stuck around.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Wait ‘em out, I guess. Hope they don’t see us.” They made themselves small, stared straight ahead at the boats, the far shore, the ocean, not seeing them. Trapped. If they walked in from the wharf, they’d have to pass within ten naked feet of them.

He finished his last morsel of lobster. She’d already finished — he always teased her about the size of the bites she took. They waited.

She sneaked another peek. “It looks like they just started,” she said.

A couple of minutes later she glanced again. “They’re not even *eating*.”

“This is not good,” he said, nodding at his empty beer bottles. “I have to go.”

“You might have to use one of those bottles,” she said.

He couldn’t wait much longer. It was not a problem for her. She hadn’t had three beers. She’d had one gin and tonic.

They considered escape plans. Swimming for it. Masking themselves with lobster bibs. He suggested he could take a picture

of Angela and Anton — he had his camera, he usually did — and threaten to blackmail them. They were just as much at risk. They couldn't afford to be seen either. And when Jonlyn suggested maybe they were innocent, maybe it's just dinner, nothing more, Michael said, yeah, right. Anton isn't at the conference, remember? Do you suppose he drove down here from Albany just to have dinner with her?

"Everybody's not like us," she said.

"If they knew, they'd wish they were," he said, squeezing her hand. She squeezed his; he could be such a romantic sometimes. "Christ, I have to piss like a race horse," he added.

A few minutes later, Anton walked inside and they went for it. They chanced sneaking behind Angela, who was sitting with her back to the wharf.

When they got back to their room a feeling of relief washed over them like a cool breeze. A haven. The motel rooms where they stayed on the rare occasions they could were always a refuge, clean, comfortable places behind locked doors where it was only the two of them — the only time in their years together it was only the two of them — no wife, no kids, no sisters or coworkers. No worries. No one else in the world.

They stretched out on the bed, holding hands, tension draining out of them.

"Anton and Angela," he said.

She said, "Do you believe it?" They stared at the clean, white ceiling.

"No," he said. "Not really."

"Nobody would believe us, either."

He looked over at her. "Sure they would," he said.

She looked at him. "Why would they believe we're having an affair, but not them?"

"For one thing, who could resist me? I'm sexy. He isn't."

"He isn't?" She wrinkled her forehead in deep consideration.

He rolled toward her. He raised his hands, poised to tickle.

She curled into her defensive position, giggling already, ready to do battle, ready to give as good as she got.

It wasn't all Godiva chocolates and Genny Cream Ale. There were bumps in the road.

On a Monday before Christmas he would tell his wife he

was shopping and stopped at a bar on his way home to watch Monday Night Football. It had become a tradition. He and Jonlyn would rendezvous at the Red Roof Inn, dine on take-out from the Dumpling House, drink champagne, exchange gifts and bodily fluids.

They took time off work and drove out to Crossgates Mall at lunchtime to do their Christmas shopping. They were going to shop for each other, as well as for family, so they agreed to go their separate ways and meet back at the shoeshine stand by Uno Pizzeria in an hour. He waited a minute or two and followed her. Saw her go into *Shutters*. He'd mentioned he was thinking about a new wide-angle lens. She was at the counter, the salesman showing her those very items. He crept up behind her. She picked up a lens and was trying to make sense of it. "I think he'd like that one," Michael said in her ear. She jumped, juggling the lens, and turned, her face scarlet, her frown angry. He was smiling, though his laugh may have faltered.

She didn't think it was as funny as he did.

Some mornings they came in early to have their coffee, sometimes breakfast, together. On a beautiful winter morning, a bright blue sky on a fresh coat of snow, sunshine slanted through the office windows, brightening the dreary place a bit. She peeked around the door of his office as bright as the sunshine, and when he looked up from his desk she said, "Think fast!" and tossed the snowball she'd smuggled in. He didn't think fast enough. She giggled as he wiped the snow from his face, his shoulder, the papers on his desk, a giggle that soon petered out.

He didn't think it was as funny as she did.

She hated when he did things with his wife. He hated telling her when he did things with her. *That sounds like fun*, she would say. Always. Going out to dinner, or a movie, was bad enough, vacations the worst. He had no choice but to tell her — otherwise she might hear it from Andrea, or from someone else. There'd been enough house parties, birthday celebrations and office get-togethers by then that she and Andrea knew each other.

"So how was Maine?" she said. They were having lunch at Maurice's, a little sandwich shop on Pearl.

He'd been waiting for it. "You know. Pretty much the same as it always is."

"Did you do anything?"

"Sure. Drove around mostly. Sight-seeing, the usual. Seen one ocean, you seen 'em all."

Dennis McFadden

“Did you go out to dinner?”

He nodded. “Can’t go up to Maine and not have lobster.”

“That sounds like fun.”

He tore off a bite of his roast beef sandwich, saying nothing, and watched the pedestrians ambling by on the other side of the wide front window. Did she expect him to never do a single thing, never go anywhere with his wife?

She clenched her jaw just a little and hacked at her salad. Did he expect her not to be jealous when he went away with her?

“I’d rather be with you,” he said after some silence.

She stabbed another forkful of lettuce.

Jonlyn began dating. She made it clear it was not out of jealousy. It would simply look better. People — her sisters, Keith’s sister, old friends, friends at work — were constantly wondering why she wasn’t dating yet, long after her divorce. She was still young, still pretty. What was she waiting for? Many of the questions were just fishing, she knew, to see what she would say; they long suspected she and Michael were what they were: in love.

Men asked her out. An old boyfriend from high school who’d divorced, a man she’d worked with before she had Priscilla, even a couple of Keith’s drinking buddies who were still single. Still single for good reason. She’d sooner date warthogs. How long could she put them off? How long could she use her kids as an excuse, saying they weren’t ready for another man in their lives (even though it was probably true)? It would simply look better if she were dating. Less suspicious.

She went out with a couple of guys. Tom Duffy was one. Soon it was him exclusively. Michael knew him. He liked him. He was a funny guy, fun to be with, a wacky sense of humor, a bartender at the club in Saratoga, a trendy place called the Rafters, where his wife Andrea kept the books. He’d become a family friend, which was how Jonlyn had gotten to know him. He was in his mid-thirties, heavy, with a notable beard, a careless mop of black curls and playful blue eyes he used to good effect.

It was ironic that Jonlyn should end up with him. She’d rid herself of Keith, but Michael couldn’t leave Andrea. She’d done nothing wrong. She loved him. It would destroy her, and Michael remembered what it was like to be destroyed, remembered the girl who’d dumped him in college. He and Jonlyn decided the only way they could be together was if

Andrea were to find someone else, leave him of her own volition. For a while there'd been hope; for a while it seemed Tom Duffy might be the someone else, the one Andrea might leave him for.

Andrea never mentioned him to Michael until well after their friendship — if that's all it was — had been set in concrete, and the first time he met him, with Andrea for drinks at the club one Friday evening, it was a revelation. Michael was struck by the chemistry between Duffy and his wife, drinking, joking, laughing, talking, finishing each other's sentences. Almost as if they'd known each other for years. Or known each other well, very well, for a shorter period of time.

Jonlyn was less hopeful. "She'll never leave you," she told him. "There's no way she would ever leave you." Maybe she was right. Nothing came of it. Andrea mentioned Duffy less and less. He didn't seem to be around as much.

He'd begun to date Jonlyn.

He brought her to the office Christmas party that year. Naturally, Michael and Andrea spent most of the evening with them, such good friends. Jonlyn was a good actress, Michael thought — if she was acting. She seemed to be having a wonderful time. She and Duffy danced. He and Andrea sat and drank. He watched Jonlyn on the dance floor in her white dress. She was a good dancer, graceful and fluid, as opposed to big sloppy Duffy who pretty much bobbed around in place. Duffy was at his entertaining best, joking, keeping them in stitches. At one point he pulled his white ski cap over his face and casually sipped a glass of red wine through it. Hilarious at the time, though looking back, Michael couldn't imagine why. The place had barely started to clear out when they left. Michael watched them walk away together, their arms resting around each other's back, looking at one another, her devoted laughter. His hammering heart. He remembers the song that happened to be playing at the moment. Elvis. *Blue Christmas*.

His stomach, full of beer and dinner, more beer, peanuts, chips, felt hollow.

Of course, it looked better. Everyone who might have been suspicious of them — including Andrea, his wife — must surely be convinced by now that they were wrong. He tried to think positive. He'd told himself before, and he told himself again, that there was one other way it could end, one other way besides Andrea leaving him for someone else. That was if Jonlyn left him for someone else herself.

He hoped she would. He thought he might really believe

that he really hoped she would. She could be happy then, as she could never be as long as she was in love with a married man, a coward of a married man who couldn't leave his wife.

She might have started seeing other men only to ward off suspicion, but if she happened to fall in love with someone else, what was the harm in that? Michael loved his wife, though he claimed he loved her, Jonlyn, more. He'd never lied to Jonlyn. But he would never leave his wife, and she would never leave him. They slept together every night. Every. Single. Night.

Every single night Jonlyn slept alone.

She had a rich and busy life. She loved her kids, loved watching them grow, never missed a game (Ronnie was athletic like his father, Priscilla a cheerleader like her mother) and there were dozens of school activities. Her parents were getting older, needing her attention, and with three sisters, two brothers-in-law, six nieces and nephews, there was always a birthday party, a christening, a family holiday gathering. She had a dog, an old husky named Spike who was blind, pooped on the floor and was a general nuisance. How she loved that dog. She was almost too busy to be lonely. Almost.

Duffy took her by surprise. He was deeper than the jolly jokester, the burly bartender. There was chemistry. They hit it off. They talked for hours, sometimes in his old Chevy in Washington Park under the streetlamps by the lake, sometimes quietly in her living room after the kids were asleep. His father had just died. Duffy was telling her about him, what a good man he'd been, a mason, an Irishman who despised everything English, and she heard the smile in his voice; she looked over and saw tears on his round cheeks, glistening down into his beard.

He took her home to meet his mom. He called her by her first name, Judy, and they teased each other like brother and sister. He was planning on leaving the bar racket and going back to school for his Master's. Maybe teach. Maybe get a job in entertainment. He was always getting something stuck in his teeth, always without a toothpick, and she began to carry them around for him in her purse.

He drank even more than Michael, and got even funnier than Michael when he did. Often her stomach hurt from laughing. When they had sex, he was every bit as caring and loving as Michael, but fresher, newer, more fun. She shivered his timbers, he told her. *Aaargh*. He was devoted to her. There was no reason she couldn't be happy with him, no earthly reason at all.

Someday you'll look back on this and laugh, he told himself. He had a habit of using clichés ironically, for the humor in it, though when he did so no one else ever seemed to get the joke. For a while after Jonlyn was gone, everything he did — driving to work, working at his desk, drinking beer, watching television — seemed to be done in a setting that was very much the same as it had always been, but once removed, not really the same at all. Something invisible had vanished, leaving behind a vacuum. Lunchtime especially was a lost, lonely hour.

He no longer saw her every day. Probably a good thing. They still worked for the same department, but were in different offices now. He spent hours daydreaming, remembering. He remembered when she brought her little girl, Priscilla, only a toddler at the time, into the office on a cold Sunday afternoon (they often went to work on Sundays, just to be together), how bewildered the little girl looked standing there in her tiny purple snowsuit. He tried to put her at ease, showing her a trick with a rubber band on his fingers. She looked to her mommy to see if it was okay to be amused. This was before she could talk, before she would remember, so they felt safe enough.

Though memory works in funny ways. Years later, when Priscilla was seven or so, she came running up to her mother and Michael who were standing chatting amid the hubbub of a colleague's backyard barbeque, looked at her mother, then at Michael, then back at her mother, a quizzical expression on her bony little face. "Are you two in love or something?" she said.

He remembered when he'd been assigned to the different office, and he and Jonlyn were no longer going to be in the same place every day. It was only a couple of miles away, in Menands, but she acted as though she'd never see him again. She insisted on making love in his car after his last day before the move. It was getting late. She told him, *we're not going till you come*.

Here he was, mooning like a forlorn lover, like a loser, leafing through the pages of a dusty photo album. Pathetic? Without a doubt. Something about his mature, macho manager self being pathetic pissed him off. Fine. She was gone. She was happier. He was better off. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

Act III

The first inkling came when Andrea mentioned that Duffy was going back to school in Boston to get his Master's. Michael's first thought was that Jonlyn would probably go with him — a thought that grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shook.

Then one day Duffy was gone. Jonlyn was still here.

He wasn't sure how he should feel. They'd been in love, she'd left him for someone else. Should he feel resentful, should he stay away? In the end what he felt was relief. No — joy.

For her part, Jonlyn had decided there was no reason at all she couldn't be happy with Tom Duffy, no reason at all except one: Michael.

Duffy had given up as well. He told her there was only one thing missing from their relationship: her.

Memory works in funny ways. Their revived relationship had arrived at a new place, one increasingly touched by nostalgia and hindsight, one where the now was becoming increasingly infused with the then.

They'd often taken long rides in the country, talking, listening to music. Driving up Route 9 one day they passed the Colonial Motel. "Oh, my God," she said, on the verge of a chuckle. "You remember the time we stayed there?"

"We never stayed there," he said.

"Yes we did — you don't remember?"

"We never stayed there. Maybe you stayed there with Anton."

She ignored the running joke. "I can't believe you don't remember it. Some guy in the next room was playing the harmonica — you don't remember the harmonica?"

"I think I'd remember a harmonica."

"I'd think you would too."

No amount of arguing or prompting could convince him to remember. She was certain. He began to wonder if she'd indeed stayed there with someone else — Duffy came to mind, again, as he so often did — but in the end decided that he'd simply forgotten. It was gone. Wiped from his memory. It stood to reason. All the years, all the millions of moments they'd spent together — exactly how many could he bring to his mind? All the rest were lost. They were still buried in his mind, but they were irretrievable. Gone for good. He grieved for them.

His first heart attack came when he was 59. It was mild — he felt the clenching in his chest, the numbness in his arm, and drove himself to Albany Med. He knew what to look for; he'd been looking for it for years. His father had died of a heart attack when he was 44, Eddy when he was only a year or two older. A motto Michael often flaunted in his younger years was *44, and out the door!* (He didn't want to die young, but if he did, at least he'd have the satisfaction of being able to say I told you so. He told Jonlyn he was considering that — *I told you so!* — for an epitaph. She was not amused.) After they'd realized that no one was leaving anyone for someone else, he'd decided that one of them dying — him, Jonlyn or Andrea — was the only likely solution to their eternal love triangle, but, now, he didn't want it to be him. Not yet. He came to realize, now that his mortality had opened the door, that no matter which of them was first, it would not be a solution at all. It would simply be an end.

He recovered. He took his new meds, plenty of them, adhered to his new diet. He gave up bacon and kielbasa and other glorious foods. How he loved bacon and kielbasa. He rationed his beer, cut back on his drinking. He missed the days of gleeful indulgence.

They took a room in Oneonta that was on the bank of creek. Andrea had gone to visit her mother, well into her 90's now, so she visited often. Sometimes Michael went with her, but not this time. It was January and the creek was icy, but not frozen over. Little round plateaus of ice had formed around tree trunks on the far bank, clinging there above the rushing water. Something they'd never seen before, it was beautiful, purple twilight glimmering off the ice at the edge of the creek, off the icy brambles on the bank. Michael took pictures. In his mind's eye he could see it already mounted and wrapped, a gift for Jonlyn. He liked to give her remembrances such as these, even though she couldn't display them. She kept them out of sight in her bedroom where she looked at them alone. One of the best he'd ever given her was an early-morning, backlit photo like a dream of Retallick's and Tinley's headstones under sprawling, leaf-heavy limbs. A *still-life*, he called it. Life didn't get any stiller.

They sipped hot chocolate and sat by the window watching the creek flow by until it was dark. They still drank champagne, gin and beer, but less frequently since his first heart attack, even less since his second. When they went to bed with every intention of making love, things didn't go as well as they'd

hoped. There'd been occasional disappointments before, but they were becoming more frequent.

"I'm getting too old," he said.

"I'll tell you when you're too old," she said.

A sigh. "Will you come and visit me in the nursing home?"

She rose up on her elbow to glower into his eyes. His long eyelashes blinked and she could almost feel the breeze.

"You'll never be in a nursing home."

"How can you be so cock-sure? Pardon my French."

"Because I won't let you be," she said.

Aging was bad enough, but that they could live with. What came after aging had become moot. It was on a shelf where Michael refused to look, where Jonlyn was too busy to look.

The worst thing that could happen was retirement. Bearing down on them like a freight train hurtling down the tracks, tracks to which they were tied. He'd just turned 68. Andrea had been urging him to retire for years, but he'd resisted, using Social Security as an excuse. They would need the extra income. That excuse was gone now. Andrea nagged and harped on it. *I'll have to pick him up at work and drive him straight to the funeral home*, she joked to anyone, everyone. But she didn't think it was funny.

Friends, colleagues, all said he was crazy to keep working — he'd be better off with his pension and Social Security. He was losing money by not retiring. The lack of stress would benefit his health. This they insisted on bringing up with infuriating frequency.

Retirement. Separation. A living death. He couldn't imagine not seeing her every day. He couldn't imagine the sun not coming up every morning. He held out as long as he could.

Finally it was his heart, ironically enough, that made him quit.

*

Andrea's mother died, and Andrea stayed on after the funeral to see to her affairs. Michael came home. He and Jonlyn took a room at the Red Roof in Albany. They chose the Red Roof mostly for sentimental reasons, for all its memories. Nostalgia reigned.

The then had consumed the now. They never knew when a night together would be their last.

They lit candles. They'd burned candles during all their Christmases there years before. The smell of smoke and melting

wax was still in the air when they turned off the lights to sleep. He fell asleep first, as he usually did.

In the ambient glow from the parking lot, she looked at him there beside her. There was less to see. The big, athletic man had shrunk. There'd been by-pass surgery, recovery, the holding of breath, the waiting. The white scar on his chest. The weight had melted off him, leaving flesh hanging loose. Bat wings on his arms, age spots on his face, hair more white than sandy. She watched him now, his head beside her, his mouth open, drool leaking onto the pillow.

God, he was handsome.

Later, as she slept, he got up to go to the bathroom. The middle of the night, but he had no trouble finding his way; there was always too much light in motel rooms. He eased back into bed not wanting to wake her. Her little grumbling snore — he'd often teased her about it. For a long time she refused to believe she snored, but she finally came around to admitting it. He wondered if perhaps someone else had confirmed it for her, someone like, say, Tom Duffy, but he wondered only idly, only in passing. So much had been swept away.

One good thing about too much light: He could see her. Take her in. There was more now to see. It was almost as if the moment she'd turned 40, her metabolism said the hell with it, I quit. Her sweet tooth, however, stayed on the job. She could gain weight merely sniffing a Chunky bar.

Her hair had begun to turn gray right on schedule, just as her sisters' had, and their mother's before them. She was constantly complaining that she needed to get her hair done — but who had the time to sit in a salon for two hours, who had seventy bucks to spare? Her skin was rougher than ever. She'd always been jealous of his baby-smooth skin, so much softer than hers. She'd gained a double chin. She'd gained wrinkles too— particularly laugh lines, for she'd never lost her love of laughing. Just as she'd never lost the art of loving.

Overweight, wrinkled, her hair half-gray and a mess on the pillow beside him. To him, she was what she'd always been: the most beautiful woman in the world. He lay back on his pillow, resting his little finger on hers, lightly, so as not to wake her, and he closed his eyes and tried to slip into sleep, to be with her.