

LIBERTY PARK

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Note. *Liberty Park* is a novella in six episodes where the story is told in alternating voices, one Anne's and the other Paul's. I reproduce here the entire first episode and the part of the second that takes Paul's account up to the point where Anne's ended in the first.

1

A SONG FOR SUPPER

I met him when I was representing the government and he was the attorney for a landlord we'd sued. It should have been a routine case, but little about it turned out that way.

"I'm Anne Timlin," I said in our reception area.

"Paul Bollin."

He offered his hand, and I did a double-take. He was in his thirties, just short of six feet, clean-shaven, dark brown hair, strong features, an air of gravitas. He wore a blazer and blue tie, not the suit that is the Wall Street lawyer's uniform. He stood very straight. All that I'd anticipated, though usually people turn out to look the opposite of how I picture them. But it had never occurred to me that this lawyer, who had negotiated over the phone with such assurance, would be carrying a white cane.

Social training took over. My hand extended itself and shook his. Then my brain got into the act and I tightened my grip. I was saying, "Pleased to meet you." I had questions, such as did he see anything at all and how did he do his research, but, naturally, I couldn't ask.

"And this is Mr. Goodman, my client," he said. I shook the hand of the elderly landlord.

"And my assistant, Claire Proscia." Bollin waved the back of his hand to the college-age, petite blonde at his left. Right away I got a bad feeling from her. Maybe I was picking up her protective loyalty for her employer. I was, after all, the adversary.

I led the way to our conference room. When I looked back, I saw the blonde discreetly guiding him through the halls. The client, a balding man wearing a shabby, ill-fitting suit, followed. I suspected that had Bollin known about the suit, he would have said something to him. Then again, he knew how to dress, and his assistant had put on a light knit sweater and knee-length skirt. I'd have thought she'd have alerted him. Perhaps Bollin intended him to look nondescript and harmless.

We entered the confined conference room, with its mismatched chairs, worn table on metal legs and walls marred by torn-down posters, notices and Christmas decorations. Good thing he can't see this, I thought, before catching myself. Touching the backs of chairs, he sidled to the far end, chose a seat and put a clunky-looking metal thing he'd been carrying on the table.

I risked asking, "What does that thing do?"

"This thing here?" He pointed. "It's a braillewriter."

"Meaning it writes braille." Hastily I added, "Like a typewriter writes type."

"Don't worry, it won't bite." He grinned. "I have a device that speaks, but I prefer taking notes on this old warhorse." He ran a finger along the inch of paper protruding from the machine. "If I wanted to confirm what I'd written on my other thing, I'd have to stop and listen."

Mr. Goodman looked at each of us as we spoke. This meeting was the culmination of several weeks' negotiations to resolve his violations of the law that required landlords to put tenants' rent security payments in trust accounts and pay interest.

Time to get down to business. "Mr. Bollin, does your client understand he is under no obligation to say anything and that he can conclude this meeting at any time?"

"I didn't realize this was a criminal proceeding."

He was right; this was a civil case. I'd given the warnings to put the notion in the landlord's head that things could get worse. I said, "I'm under no obligation to alert him, but I want to ensure his rights have been protected in the event matters escalate."

"If there's any possibility your office plans to turn this into a criminal case, I will advise Mr. Goodman to make no further statements."

If he was calling my bluff, it worked. "I assume matters needn't go that far."

"I'm prepared to take your word for that, Ms. Timlin."

I'd given no such thing, but if I contradicted him, it looked as if he'd end the meeting. As a lawyer in private practice, he had the incentive of a ticking meter to drag things out. With a huge caseload, I needed closure.

I'd faxed Bollin a copy of the agreement I'd gotten approved by my boss, and he had his assistant compare his fax copy and my original. Then he produced documents showing Mr. Goodman had at last opened the required account for his tenant security deposits. He also had the certified check that was supposed to cover my office's legal costs which, sensing our priorities, he'd negotiated to a minuscule amount.

We wouldn't pursue rent security interest at all except for a scathing newspaper article complaining about government's lax enforcement that had caught the attention of the office's

politicos. The tenants would hardly profit; the interest due them was nominal. It wouldn't even make up for the time they'd taken to file their complaints and keep on top of me and the staff, much as we wished they wouldn't call so often. But if a tenant wasn't receiving interest, it was a sure sign the landlords hadn't safeguarded the rent security deposit by putting it in the required trust account.

"You understand, Mr. Goodman," I said, "that although this agreement will not be filed with the court, it can be the basis of a lawsuit if you stop paying interest again?"

"Don't worry, Miss. My lawyer has explained everything."

It was the first time I'd heard Goodman speak. His choice of words felt so artificially old-fashioned that I wondered if he were mocking me. But sitting upright against the back of his chair, he looked at me with timeworn sorrow. It almost broke my heart to have this old man in his rumpled suit in the palm of my hand. I reminded myself we'd been trying informally to get Goodman to do the right thing by his tenants for many months before giving up and assigning the case to a litigator, namely me. Goodman had retained a lawyer only when we made clear our willingness to sue.

Bollin had been making notes on his braillewriter, a muffled clatter that I'd already grown used to. Now he looked up, as if waiting for any other lame statement I felt like making.

I resumed, "Mr. Goodman, my office will calculate how much interest is owed the tenants. Assuming it's within the range in the agreement, you will issue a second certified check in that amount."

"I want my bookkeeper to check the figures," Goodman said.

"But you agree if we can't resolve any dispute over a tenant's claim, my office shall make the final decision."

He didn't answer.

"Mr. Goodman?" his lawyer prompted.

"Yes, yes. We must bring an end to this. It's taking up too much of my time."

What about my time?

Bollin turned to me. "Shall we?" His assistant produced an index card which she placed below the signature line. He ran a finger along the top edge to orient himself, then signed. Once Mr. Goodman had signed, Bollin asked, "All set?" The blonde murmured a reply, and he said, "Go ahead." She handed me the agreement.

"I'll get the Chief to execute this right away," I said. "I'll come back with copies."

When I returned, Goodman and the assistant were chatting and Bollin was reading. "Mr. Bollin, I've made copies for you and your client."

"Please show Ms. Proscia the original and all the copies," he said.

"All here," the assistant confirmed.

After another round of handshakes, they left.

I thought about him for several days. How would I have felt being dependent on someone the way he must be on his assistant? I needed visual proof of every signature, every page number, every comma. That need was inculcated into lawyers. Did reliance on someone else add to his stress? He had to have ways of compensating that I didn't know about. Then again, every lawyer handled cases in their own way. I admired his rapport with the blonde. If someone responded to my needs the way she did to his, I'm not sure I'd feel anxious. Maybe it was she who took on the anxiety.

* * *

Members of the profession encounter each other all the time, and Paul's office was just a few blocks away, but it never crossed my mind that I'd see him again. When I did, it was in court during morning calendar, more than a hundred cases long. Lawyers, paralegals and the other minions of the law were all perched on the uncompromising wooden benches. Seeing him seated near the door and no one next to him, I went over. As I was about to say "Hi," it occurred to me that he might not recognize my voice. Would he even recall my name?

"Mr. Bollin, remember me? It's Anne Timlin."

He rose, grabbing with one hand the papers and devices on his lap. "Ms. Timlin, how could I forget. How are you?" Though half standing, he held out his free hand. Warming to his awkward courtesy, I pressed it.

"Mind if I sit here?" I had to get the words in fast because the judge looked up from a whispered consultation with his clerk and the gavel would follow.

His assistant appeared and, giving me that look, took a seat behind us. My case came up and I walked forward to make my pitch. By chance Paul's case was called two items later, while I was still gathering my things. He rose and shouted for an adjournment. He must have been worried the court might not grant it, because otherwise he'd have sent someone to answer for him. No one objected and the clerk moved on to the next matter. We left together.

As we put on our coats under the rotunda, he said, "Want to have lunch some time?"

I had my date book with me and he had a memory. His assistant stood by, looking vacant.

The day came and I got stuck with a project in the morning, while his afternoon was squeezed by a two o'clock appointment. We decided to pick up sandwiches and sit in nearby Liberty Park.

Arriving five minutes late at the corner where we'd agreed to meet, I found him standing like an island in a sea of rushing people, one hand stuffed in his blazer pocket and the other bouncing his cane. People stole glances at him, but he was impervious. So I assumed.

I clasped the arm poking out of his pocket. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting."

"I've only been here a minute."

"How do you want to do this?"

He turned to my right side, touched my arm and said, "Shall we?"

At the deli counter, I started telling him about the menu, but he interrupted. "Let's not waste time." He said he wanted a tuna sandwich, and I opted for turkey on rye. We found two seats together on a park bench. I was going to open the bag with his sandwich, but he insisted on doing so himself. "Pickle?" I said. "They gave us one each."

"I'll have mine for dessert."

Preliminaries over, he said, "So, Anne, what do you like to do besides law?"

"Well," I said, "before I was a lawyer, I did carpentry."

"Carpentry. How I wish I could make real things."

"That was it. I wanted to make things you can hold and that endure."

"Are you good at it?"

"Yes. Well, at the beginning I was awful. I couldn't saw straight, couldn't get pieces of wood to stay in a vise—everything was ridiculous. But I hung in with my apprenticeship for a year—the guy was a friend—and I began to get good at it."

"But carpentry wasn't enough?"

"No. But I'm not sure about the law, either. We need to find less confrontational ways."

"Beats dueling with pistols and swords."

I didn't want to get into it, so I said, "Your turn. What's your secret vice? No pun intended."

"A good one, though. Well, I can't tell you how close I keep this to myself, but writing songs. Not commercial. For myself."

"Why so private?"

"I'm not talented, so all it would do is stereotype me. Do you know John Callahan? He did a cartoon of a man holding a panhandler's cup and wearing a sign saying, 'Please help me. I'm black and blind but not musical'."

I laughed. "We all get stereotyped. Look at all the stereotypes of women."

"I think the difference is we all know lots of women. Too many people don't know anyone who's blind."

I considered not saying it, then plunged ahead. "To be honest, I didn't—not until you walked into our reception area."

He glanced away, a hint of amusement in his bowed face, and I felt stupid. I said, "You've heard this before, haven't you?"

His gaze returned to me. "It's hardly the kind of thing people talk about."

"Not when they're sitting across from each other at the negotiation table and you're making the government's lawyer look like a horse's ass."

My flippant remark called to mind how he'd taken charge at the meeting. Interesting, the notion of someone blind taking charge.

"I did no such thing."

"You hung me out to dry when I was giving your client the rights of a criminal defendant."

“You’d have done the same in my place.”

“I’m glad you recognize that.”

“Next time we negotiate, I’m sure you’ll make me look like an elephantine ass.”

I forgot about time until I noticed the fingers of his right hand at his left wrist. “Is that a watch?” I said.

Turning his wrist toward me, he confirmed my guess had been right. He pressed the wind button, and the crystal popped open.

Seeing dots superimposed on the numerals, I said, “A braille watch.”

“Technically not braille, but yes, dots.” Then he said, “I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said I could talk to you all afternoon, but I’m afraid I have that appointment.”

“Shit, I’ve made you late.” I jumped up from the bench, knocked our empty lunch bags to the ground and cursed myself for having let loose an expletive in front of this man who talked as if obscenity were a foreign language. “Just a moment.”

As I crouched to fumble around for our lunch’s remnants, I caught him grinning from the corner of my eye. I stood up and thrust everything into a nearby trash can. “Let’s go,” I said, brushing off my dress. “I don’t want a lost client on my conscience.”

At the risk of ruffling his sensitivities, I insisted on accompanying him to his office building and into the lobby.

“I can call you again?” he said as we shook hands. A security guard looked on with a kind expression, which I figured would have bothered Paul.

“Sure. I mean I hope you will.”

He headed for the elevators, and I turned and pushed back through the revolving door.

As the days passed, I sat at my hand-me-down desk in my narrow office, drafted papers, arranged meetings, called investigators, patched things up between our receptionists—I was the office peacemaker—and all the while waited for his call. That I was waiting became inescapable.

Why? I'd enjoyed his company, but I hardly knew him. Was it because I was intrigued by the differences in how we dealt with life, by his relationship with his assistant, by how he'd managed his client, by all my questions about how to act around him? But my focus on his ways of doing things must be the outward expression, the symptom, of a deeper curiosity.

Maybe it came from his welcome when I'd introduced myself in the courtroom. The warmth of his smile seemed to expose a sense of isolation in me. Strange. I hadn't felt lonely, and I didn't lack friends.

When he called, I flipped back the pages of my desk diary. Nine days. A short time between professional contacts.

He said, "What have you been up to lately? Oppressing more mom and pop landlords?"

That shook me out of my complacency. "Want me to give you chapter and verse on Goodman?"

"I'd really prefer you didn't."

"What about you? Written any more songs?"

"Give a woman an inch."

"Paul, are you by any chance calling to set up another lunch date?"

He chuckled, sounding embarrassed.

"Because I was thinking," I rushed on. "We're always going to be pressed for time. Can I ask you over to my house for dinner?"

Sometimes I amaze myself.

“Your house? Why sure.”

I blundered on. “On one condition.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“What if I told you it's a piano?”

“The rhetorical nature of that question tells me it isn't. What is it?”

“Guitar.” He sounded deflated.

“I'm not serious,” I lied.

“If you're going to show me your home, the least I can do is sing for my supper.”

* * *

I flitted back and forth to the living room window, at the front of the building, between preparing chicken and cutting the salad ingredients. I was standing there as his cab drew up. I watched him get out, three floors below, and close the cab door while the driver raced around to the trunk and pulled out a guitar case, black with silver latches that gleamed under the street lamps, their illumination still dim in the twilight. Paul took it by the handle and flexed his arm, as if assessing its balance. His “Keep the change” floated up. At his door the driver watched across the cab's roof as Paul turned to my building.

“Hi, Paul,” I yelled through the open window. The driver looked up and touched a hand to his forehead as if in salute.

Paul also looked up. “Anne. I'll be right there.”

On the phone he'd asked me how to get to my apartment. I'd told him about the four steps leading up to the building entrance, the buzzers at the door, and once inside, the three

flights of stairs. I'd had to check when he asked how many rows of buzzers there were – one – and how many buttons from the top mine was – the second.

It had all been for nought because I flew downstairs so fast that I was opening the inner door as he was pulling his finger away from the buzzer. “Well, hello,” I said, feigning surprise.

“Hello, yourself.”

I led the way upstairs, chattering the whole time so he'd know where I was turning. Opening my apartment door, I announced, “Here we are.” I noticed he was carrying a shoulder bag as well as the guitar and wondered how he'd squeeze through. He stepped inside without so much as grazing the doorjamb.

“May I take your guitar?” I said. I rested it against the corner of the living room, just around from the front door.

“And your shoulder bag?” I said.

“One moment.” Unzipping the bag, he produced a bottle of wine. “A Chardonnay I like. I hope it goes with what you're making.”

“Perfect. Smell the chicken?” I took the wine and he zipped up the bag. Then he dropped his shoulder and slung the strap over his arm toward me. “Where are you putting my things?”

“If you need anything, say the word.”

“I'd like to know, that's all.”

“Sorry. I'm putting your bag next to the guitar in this corner here, see.”

Idiot, of course he didn't see. But he looked there anyway. My voice or something must have conveyed it.

He reached to the top of the guitar case. “Great. Thanks.”

Rehearsing this moment, I'd wondered whether to show him the apartment first or have him sit down in the kitchen while I finished getting the meal ready. But preparations were at a critical point.

"Come, let me show you to the kitchen. The water for the rice is just about boiling. I've already got the chicken baking, but I'm still chopping the peppers and mushrooms."

I held my arm out, unsure if he'd take it. He did. In the kitchen I said, "There's a chair ahead of you, next to the table." He touched the chair I planned to sit in. "I was thinking you'd sit in the one next to the wall, but it doesn't matter."

"Which way?"

"On the right, but really—"

He followed the table around to the chair I'd meant for him.

"That's the window wall," I said. I always wanted to know about my surroundings and figured the information must be even more important to him.

Sitting down, he leaned an elbow on the table. "Is it wrong to call this homey?"

"I like that you feel at home. Just don't call me that."

"That would be 'homely'."

"Ha! Well, if you don't mind, I'll show you the rest of the apartment after dinner."

"Can I help?"

What would he be comfortable doing? "Do you like grated carrot in your salad?"

"Give me the grater and the carrots."

"Don't forget the knife and peeler."

"Give me the chain saw and ax. Mind handing me a paper towel while you're at it? But first show me where to wash my hands."

He knew where the kitchen sink was because he stood and headed right for it. No big mystery. He'd heard me running the water.

After laying a carrot on the paper towel, he cut off the ends. He did the same with all the carrots, then turned to grating and got into a rhythm. Meanwhile, the rice was almost done and the chicken smelled as though I should check inside the oven. For once everything would be ready at the same time.

“Do you like chicken?” I said. He frowned. “I mean,” I said, “I hope you do.”

The frown disappeared. “Chicken’s great.”

I saw he'd rolled up the paper towel, and I threw it out. “Do you cook for yourself?”

“Not often. It’s why I’m still alive.”

“You grate a mean carrot. Now, I'd better concentrate on getting everything out. I'll show you to the dining table in a moment.”

He stood up and started for the dining area. I was torn between abandoning the stove and saving both him and my apartment from catastrophe. Deciding I might only succeed in wrecking dinner, I turned back to the counter and offered something like a silent prayer as I mixed the salad. When I looked around, he was standing over the dining table, which I'd already set, and examining a knife.

“I grew up with that silverware,” I called through.

“Makes me think of country homes in Europe. I don't know why.”

“Other guests have said something like that.”

“Amazing table for a New York apartment.”

“It’s mahogany. A family heirloom, like the silverware. Coming through with the salad.” He stood aside. “Here,” I said, placing his hand on the back of a chair, “I thought we’d both sit near the head of the table. I’ll sit across from you.”

When we’d settled in, I served the salad and poured us each a glass of his wine. “Welcome.” I raised my glass.

Anticipating my gesture, he raised his to mine, saying, “To... To—I don’t know. Bottoms up!” I clinked glasses and we sipped.

“Such a lavish presentation,” he said.

“It’s a special occasion.”

He blushed, which was all I needed to see. “Anne, you’re a princess. You should have been born in another age.”

“Previous ages were lousy for women. Please, eat before it goes cold.”

He probed the plate with his fork, leaving me to wonder if I should have told him where things were. He picked up his knife and started to cut a slice of chicken. No wonder he’d sounded cool about the idea. Why hadn’t I cooked a filet—something not served on the bone? But the meat came away onto his fork.

“Delicious,” he said.

I erased panic from my voice. “It’s a light tarragon sauce, an old standby of mine. I never experiment on guests the first time.”

He chewed and paused. “I’m not sure I know what taragon tastes like.”

“Notice an anise flavor—like liquorice?”

“Ah.”

We chatted away until I noticed he was struggling with the remnants of the chicken. “I hope you don’t mind,” I said, “but I pick up the bones when I get to this stage.” I did when I ate alone.

Smiling across the table and putting down his knife and fork, he said, “Thanks.” He devoured every last bit of flesh.

He helped me carry back the dishes, stepping through the aisle of furniture to the kitchen and across the threshold. It didn’t make me nervous. Maybe the wine helped. While I soaked the plates and silverware, he leaned against the doorjamb.

I turned to ask, “Do I get to hear a song before or after dessert?”

“I did promise.”

“I’ll get your guitar. What kind of chair would you like?”

He chose an armchair, which surprised me until I realized its arms were low. He twisted sideways to the chair’s back and rested his knee against the upholstered arm. I sat on the carpet.

“Let me play around with some chords for a minute,” he said.

I jumped up. “There’s something I forgot in the kitchen.” I played at being housewife until sensing he was comfortable.

When I flopped back on the carpet, he focused sporadic chords into a tune, five notes down, five notes back up, then the same ten notes again. I studied the fingers of his left hand positioning themselves on the frets. I was nervous, worried I’d be crushed with embarrassment. When I watched someone perform for the first time, I always was. Here we were, a troubadour singing to a maiden, a man trying to impress a woman, a woman wanting to be impressed.

I'm a grinning clown
 I'm making do
 Without a you.

Paul's voice grew steady, his playing fluent. I, too, shed my nervousness. As I was asking myself what the song said about him, I missed several lines, though I heard the music. I picked up again at the end:

My smile is real
 'Cause now here's you.
 I'll make it through.

He stopped at the end of the sequence of five down notes, leaving me to hear the up half in my head, and I foolishly heard myself in his "you."

I came out of the spell. "So you found what you were looking for?"

"It's one of my more melodic songs, that's all, and you made me want to play it. You can see why I went to law school."

"I get to hear another?"

He started out with single notes, sometimes together but not strumming, and turned it into something between Spanish and classical. Like his first song, the tune stopped in the middle and kept going in my head.

"Did you compose that?"

"Made it up. 'Compose' is too grand for what I do." He rested the guitar on his lap.

After dessert at the table, we took our wine glasses back to the living room. He liked that armchair, and I sat at the same place on the carpet. I wished our positions didn't have a guru and disciple ring, but I was most comfortable sitting legs crossed on the floor.

"What do you call the one you sang?"

“I don’t know—‘Real-Life Clown’? It’s a fairy tale, don’t you think?—‘Once upon a time,’ and then, you know, the guy’s princess arrives.”

“So you believe in fairy tales.”

“I hope so. I hope I look at life like the weather and accept the fluctuations.”

“But as a lawyer, you try to control the fluctuations.”

“I’m paid to win.”

“I keep thinking neither the law nor life should be about winning.” I smiled up at him and tried to show it through my voice.

“You work for the government. You’re paid to tilt at windmills. At a private firm, I look to get paid at all. It’s a bonus when a client turns out to be Don Quixote to my Sancho Panza.”

He was saying that doing right was a self-indulgence most people couldn’t afford. I was annoyed, above all for letting myself get annoyed. “Paul, let’s not.”

“I do wonder what society gains when the government spends its resources squashing the Goodmans of this world.”

I stared at the carpet and balanced annoyance against other emotions. I said, “All the other Goodmans watching is what matters.”

Then I projected my brightest grin up to him and changed the subject. “I wish I could sing.” I realized when my fingers glanced against his knee that I was gesturing.

“Everyone sings when they forget themselves.”

“If you ever hear me sing, you’ll want to forget.”

He burst out with a howl of laughter, high-pitched for a baritone man. “Come here, Anne.” He extended his hand, and I worked forward.

Taking his hand I asked, “Have you ever been married?”

“That’s sudden.”

His performance had taken me back to a time when it had been possible to ask anything that came to mind. So innocent. Today I felt marked by the world, when once I’d thought I’d be putting my own mark on it.

I said, “I’m curious, that’s all.”

“Well, no. There was a woman I wanted to marry, another who talked about the idea. How about you?”

“Me, neither. I don’t think I was made for marrying.”

“Why so insecure?”

“Not insecure. Maybe it’s temperament. Or maybe I’ve been too damaged.”

“Damaged how?”

“Oh, daytime talk show stuff – drunk mother, remote father. I’ll tell you some time.”

“Sounds like we were both too wise to commit while too young to know how we’d turn out.”

“I like that.”

“I still wish you hadn’t had to go through whatever you went through.”

“How could I not?”

He took on a looking-through-walls expression. “Well,” he said, and let it go.

“How about your parents?” I said.

“They’ve always been devoted.”

“You sound sad.”

“When I was a teenager, we grew apart. That’s when I lost my vision. Illness, not some dramatic accident.”

I understood he wasn't ready to go into how he lost his sight and waited for him to resume.

"I changed direction, and they didn't, or couldn't, follow. I guess I didn't let them. No teenager wants his parents to go where he goes."

"Are you in touch?"

"We talk on the phone. Occasionally I take the train to New Rochelle, where I grew up. Anyway, tell me what you look like, Anne."

Talk about sudden. "Didn't your blonde tell you?"

"My blonde!"

"You know she's blonde, so you get your information somewhere."

"I'm going to the source."

"What do you want to know?"

"Start by telling me what you were wearing that day in the park."

"Let me think," I said, though I knew. "I believe—yes, I remember—I had on my blue dress. It has a lovely, soft texture."

"How long is it?"

"Just above the knee." Actually, it kept riding higher, and I'd worried he'd sense me tugging it down. I'd given the question of what to wear a lot of thought as I dressed that morning, all the while wondering why since he couldn't see. Now I knew it had mattered, because I could tell him. Tonight I'd also thought about putting on a dress, but decided it would feel wrong in the casual surroundings of my home. I was glad, since he had shown up in slacks and a flannel shirt. All the same I was wearing my favorite shirt, pale green with a slight ruffle.

"Were you wearing any jewelry?"

“A simple silver necklace and tiny silver earrings. I have them on again tonight—see.” I turned my head and guided his hand to my earlobe.

He examined my earring and fingered the hair around my ear. “What color is your hair?”

“Brown. Neither this nor that. Lighter than yours.”

I ran the back of his hand along my cheek, and he smiled, a real Mona Lisa smile.

“What else do you want to know?” I said.

“Everything.”

I did what I couldn't have imagined doing before. I told him about my gray eyes, the features that others called fine, my skinny arms and legs, my small but firm breasts. I was glad I could. He touched my face, and I wondered what he saw and if he divined secrets that no one else had. He eased me closer and I rested my head on his thigh.

After stroking my hair for a while, he said, “Let me take off your shirt.”

I took it off for him. When I'd settled against him again, he ran his hands down my back and along my arms. Then he eased me away from his lap. I wasn't wearing a bra. I burned.

I reached up and touched his face. Even with a little stubble, it was the smoothest face I'd felt on a man.

He said, “Will you take off your jeans?”

How did he know about the jeans? He must have checked me out without my knowing.

“No.” I spoke softly.

He thought about that. “Why not, Anne?”

“I'm not ready. I think you should go home soon.”

I saw a flicker of the anger I'd hoped not to see in this man. He returned to stroking my back and then my chest, teasing my nipples, trying to change my mind. We didn't talk.

“Anne,” he said at last, “before I go, let me use your bathroom.”

I was in such arousal that I realized I, too, needed to use the bathroom. If a man's sexuality is anything like a woman's, at least like mine, he must be bursting with an incredible density of energy.

I stood up and guided him to the bathroom. I fussed in the bedroom with the pillows and straightened the cover. I heard the flush, the running faucet, the opening door. “I'm in here,” I called. When he walked in, I said, “I'll be right back.” There wasn't room for a chair, so I directed him to the foot of the bed.

Returning, I showed him the ornaments and fragrances on my bureau. “Nice,” he said, but didn't ask any questions about them. We sat down together. I hadn't put my shirt back on. I didn't think he could know that, but I'd learned he knew more than I realized.

“How do I get a cab in Brooklyn?” he asked.

“I call one for you.” But I didn't reach for the telephone. Instead, placing my hand on his chest, I eased him back onto the bed. I unbuttoned his shirt and ran my hand over him. “Move up further,” I said. He took off his shoes, then pushed back toward the headboard. I kept running my hands over him, working down his sides to the front of his thighs. I undid his belt.

* * *

“Paul, I'm calling about Goodman.” I'd been hearing, “I'm a real-life clown,” all the way in on the subway.

“Good morning to you, too,” he said.

“Good morning, Paul. But we have to switch gears. Goodman's stopped singing the tune we made up for him.” I saw I was flirting, recalling Paul's distinction between composing and

making things up. In reality we hadn't made up any tune for Goodman. Paul had negotiated nothing without his approval.

“What happened?”

“His check bounced.” And I'd imagined I heard birds singing through my closed window.

We'd worked out the amount the tenants were owed in rent security interest and Goodman had assured us the check was in the mail. It was. We'd also agreed it would be certified. It wasn't. Even so, believing he'd sincerely wanted to get the matter behind him, I'd instructed our Finance Office to deposit it. So I was doubly upset when a humorless Finance Office woman called to say his bank reported the account had insufficient funds. I'd been right to rattle him with that self-incrimination warning. He was a crook.

Paul said, “Can you send me a copy of both sides of the check?”

This was the jolt I needed. “Are you doubting my word?”

“No, Anne, but Goodman will tell me he knows nothing about it. He'll also want to show his bookkeeper. Send me the copy and I'll call him. I don't think he meant to do this.”

I held my tongue. Of course he had. “You're just around the corner, so I'll deliver it myself.”

“Don't do that,” he said, I admit gently.

I'd realized the same thing as soon as the words were out of my mouth. We had to keep a professional distance. “I'll give it to one of our paralegals. It can be done on lunch-hour.”

“The mail will do.”

Now he was stalling. “Mr. Bollin, you will have a photocopy of the back and front of this check in your receptionist's hand by one o'clock this afternoon.”

“I hear you.”

“And I expect the check to be funded by tomorrow.”

“I can’t promise anything until I speak to the client.”

“Then I expect to hear by tomorrow how your client will proceed.”

“You have my word.”

“Paul, you realize we shouldn’t see each other socially until this is over.”

There was a pause before he acknowledged, “I guess so.”

“Well, I’ll be speaking to you tomorrow.” I hung up.

Bookkeepers were so convenient for landlords. The books weren’t ready, the bookkeeper was on vacation, then the landlord was, then the bookkeeper’s wife fell deathly ill. In the next two months, all the old excuses rolled out. I came to distrust Paul even as I told myself he was doing what a lawyer must.

Finally I dusted off the papers I’d drafted before Goodman pretended to settle. It took three whole weeks to get them approved by my superiors, as if the added effort expended on a simple lawsuit justified the time taken away from important cases.

“This is strictly a courtesy call, Paul. I’m going to file suit against your client tomorrow. I hope he won’t try to evade service. We’ll make it stick if he does.”

“I’ll advise him to cooperate.”

Like he listened to your other advice, I thought.

Goodman did accept the papers from our service processor. That afternoon Paul called to say his client had gotten a certified check. Not long after, reception called through to announce Claire Proscia, and I went out to greet her. No matching skirt and sweater today. It was an

outdoor jacket and slacks. Then I noticed a scarf of subdued reds bordering the collar of her jacket. Her hair was neatly trimmed and waved at the shoulder.

“Hi.” I offered my hand, but couldn’t bring myself to call her “Ms. Proscia. “Let’s sit here.” I gestured at a desk we kept in reception. Luckily, she was our only visitor. I was too embarrassed to show her into my dingy office, and the conference room was in use.

She dropped her backpack on the floor and produced a slim folder. “Paul asked me to give you this stipulation. It states that in exchange for the check, you’ll withdraw the suit. He wants you to sign before he sends over the check.”

I noted the first-name basis. But why not? I also noticed she was negotiating on Paul’s behalf. But this was no time to stand on ceremony.

“I want to see that check,” I said.

“Here’s a photocopy.”

“Wait here,” I said.

For once the Chief hadn’t been summoned upstairs for another high-level meeting. We decided not to go forward with the lawsuit. The case just wasn’t important enough. But I told the blonde she’d have to wait while a typist cranked out a more acceptable stipulation. She shrugged.

“Okay,” I said, marching out to reception again, this time with the typed document.

“Have Mr. Bollin sign this. Then we’ll sign for the state and file it with the court.”

She was back within the hour. Paul had signed without making any changes. When I returned from the copying machine, I asked, “What’s he like to work for?” Amazing how much thought I’d put into this question and whether to ask it at all.

“Paul?” she said distractedly as she compared the original of the stip against the copy I’d made. Then she looked at me with that earnestness that in a young woman covers for so many feelings. “Great. I’m learning a lot.”

I couldn’t ask my real questions. Was it different doing paralegal tasks for Paul than for a lawyer with sight? Surely yes, but in what ways? How did the dependencies that exist in all working relationships play out in theirs? Could they get too close? Beyond her blonde hair, what did he know about her appearance? What, if anything, did he know about it from her?

All that aside, how could anyone explain that look of half concealed satisfaction on her face just now?

I sighed. “May I have the check?”

She reached into her backpack and produced it.

“Thanks. And say thanks to Mr. Bollin.”

“Sure.”

“And really, thank you for your help.” We shook hands.

“This has been one big headache for Paul.” She gave me a knowing look, though I couldn’t tell what that look knew.

Next day, while a paralegal filed the papers discontinuing the lawsuit, I sat at my desk and tapped the blotter with a pen. I couldn’t concentrate, despite a room littered with files requiring a whole lot of work.

The phone rang. “Well, that’s finally done,” Paul said without fanfare.

“Did you have to work through your assistant to the end?”

“I had to be sure I was doing the right thing by my client.”

“Are you lecturing me about ethics?”

“Just stating our problem. It’s like that time we talked in the park. This isn’t nice, but it beats pistols.”

“Maybe it does just as much damage, even if it’s invisible to a certain person.”

“Anne, you aren’t suggesting I enjoy this?”

“You seem happy enough.”

“Is that why I called you as soon as I could?”

“You didn’t have to wait all this time to say more than, ‘I’ll send over my assistant’.”

“We were negotiating a difficult situation.”

“Than all I can say is you’d better improve your negotiation techniques.” I slammed down the phone. I hadn’t realized how angry I was.

* * *

The days and weeks went by. At the beginning I tormented myself by looking for him in the streets around the office. But I hadn’t seen him there before, except when we’d planned. I still had so many questions. How did he get to work? What did he do for lunch when he wasn’t having it with me? Most of all, why hadn’t he gotten in touch?

Though I’d hung up on him, he should have called me back. I hadn’t been the one to insist we deal with each other through our clerical staff. In fact, I’d dealt directly with his. That thought angered me every time. If he called, I’d slam the phone down again.

No, I wouldn’t. I’d get over it. How I hated this system of vigorous advocacy. Vigorous anything led to rough results. If a result came out right, it was an accident.

I dove into one of those states of mind where I hate the law and fantasize about carpentry again, or maybe teaching middle school, or even getting a psych degree. I needed to do something I could point to and say, “That helped. Only a little, maybe, but it helped.”

I should have known better. I hadn’t trusted love when my mother, lounging on the couch in front of the television, paused between sips of Merlot to talk of her love for her dear children. Love—or whatever passed for love—had already been problematic when my father was alive, before Mom’s long slide. I thought I’d gotten past that after years of therapy. But it was still there. Until Paul dealt with me through his blonde, I’d imagined how I’d talk to him about such things. I’d actually been thinking about trust. How naive.

I stopped looking for him and drifted back into my old routine. My dresses and pantyhose reverted to a lawyer’s constricting uniform. Halos of expectancy disappeared from around the telephone and the lights outside my living room window. I resumed eating meals at the kitchen table, in the seat he’d occupied while peeling the carrots. Life became manageable again.

I decided I’d been attracted to him like a studious high school girl who dates quarterbacks and Hell’s Angels. It was the differentness between us. He coped without sight. I barely coped with it. Or maybe it was more basic. He’d been charming. He listened well, at least until the blowup over that miserable case. But I knew other men about whom that could be said.

Then I recognized him, even from behind, on Broadway. I’d left work early to put the finishing touches on my mother’s birthday party. He was alone. No blonde. I walked faster.

I’d wondered what I’d do if I saw him. I might decide to do nothing. He’d have been none the wiser. If I announced myself, would I be doing so just to be fair? But for all I knew, he was beyond feeling for me. Otherwise, he’d have done something after that last call. He could, for example, have sent flowers.

I smiled at my vanity. I hadn't thought of myself as vain before.

Catching up, I followed him. Would he recognize my step? My scent? My breathing? He kept walking.

I'm a real-life clown

I got that frown.

I hummed to the words as they played in my mind. His head angled toward my voice, but he kept going. Then he stopped and turned. "Anne?"

"Hi, Paul." I watched him search for some clever phrase.

At last he said, "I've missed you."

2

HOMO DOMESTICUS

A man who is blind can never know for sure why a woman isn't attracted to him. It may be she needs to distance herself from his otherness, his sometimes different ways of doing things. He may not always look in the right direction and his facial expressions might be off, although having seen for fifteen years, I believe I appear pretty normal. It may be she's put off by the fear other people have of him. Or it may, instead, be the old, everyday reasons. Maybe she isn't taken with his looks. Maybe he isn't funny enough, suave enough, rich enough, polished enough, eccentric enough.

This array of possibilities creates in me a tension between the depression of alienation and an off-and-on conviction that a dose of me will change attitudes.

Often it does. Curious classmates have turned into friends, office workers into colleagues. I never take these transitions for granted because for all the stories I have of people changing, I could tell as many of people avoiding me. Always there's the question: Why? It's a self-indulgent question. Few people, disabled or otherwise, have lots of friends, never mind lots of lovers. But I don't compare myself to the aloof genius or the man on the bus watching the world slide by. I seek out contact, clinging to the notion that somewhere there's a woman who can love me for who I am.

When I placed a personal ad in the *Village Voice*, before the days of online dating, I listed my interests, but said nothing about my appearance or what I wanted in a woman. I'd never discerned a pattern in the women who attracted me. Even before I'd lost my sight as a teenager, I'd been drawn to dark-haired and blonde women, tall and short, serious and smiling, slim and cozy. She had to have a brain, but my list of interests signaled that. The dilemma was whether to say I was blind. How to say it without sounding defensive? I wanted to weed out the women who'd reject me for it. On the other hand, it would be good for a woman to have a sense of me before factoring blindness into the equation. Belated discovery would create an awkward moment, but by then she'd have other impressions to balance against it. I omitted any mention in the ad.

The *Village Voice* mailbox I rented received fewer than twenty responses, forwarded in dribs and drabs during the ten days following the ad's appearance. One promoted a dating agency. Another was from a woman with a PO box who wrote such a steamy letter, I figured she'd expect me to pay for her affections. Some letters were full of grammatical and spelling

errors, though one of those writers made a convincing case that she was gorgeous. Some of the more articulate responses were too cool—pseudo-sophisticated and habitually ironic.

That left three. The first two I met prattled on about their friends, work, TV shows. They asked few questions, and when I volunteered anything, changed the subject. I should have called the “cool” women instead. They’d have reacted and asked provocative questions. They’d have taken risks. But the risks would have been strictly intellectual.

I’d saved Lydia till last because her letter sounded literary, and I was intimidated. I’d been so focused on my career that I felt woefully ignorant about the arts. But when I called, it turned out she loved mysteries, and we got into a discussion about the *noir* writers of the middle twentieth century.

“I doubt the L.A. of Philip Marlowe ever existed,” I heard myself saying.

“It has a place in our minds, though,” she said.

“True. It resonates.” I actually said that.

“I take it,” she said, “the purpose of this call is to feel out if we should meet.”

“Yes.”

“Because I’m willing to.”

Willing to. This was “cool” talk. If she’d written that way, I wouldn’t have called.

“Now we’ve talked, I’m more than willing,” I said, countering with enthusiasm. Then I said, “Lydia, there’s one thing you should know.”

I all but heard her think, there’s a reason he had to advertise. What’s it going to be?

I said, “I can’t see.”

“You can’t see,” she said, as if this statement had so many meanings it meant nothing.

“I’m blind.”

“Ah. So how would we meet?”

“Not a problem. I get around.”

“With a dog?”

“Actually, a cane.”

“I suppose you read braille.”

“Tapes mostly. Braille books are bulky.”

“It must be hard.”

“Not really.” What was I supposed to say?

“I don’t know what I’d do if I were told my vision was at risk.”

“You’d adapt.”

“I guess so.” Then she said, “I’m sorry, Paul, I can’t handle a blind man. I’ve got too many issues in my life.”

I’d have asked about these issues, but she hadn’t said it to help me draw her out. She was defending her refusal to treat me as a fellow human being.

So much for me and personal ads. The only way I might attract a woman was if she knew me in context, outside statistics and labels. Ever since I’d left law school, that mostly meant at the job, which was too risky. I saw the single life stretching before me.

But whenever that thought insinuated itself, I resisted. One day my princess would kiss me into ordinariness. One day I’d become a fully participating member in this bigoted, agenda-driven, Jones’s-next-door world to which I wholeheartedly aspired.

* * *

One morning, as I sat in a courtroom with half a bench to myself, a woman touched my shoulder and asked if the space beside me was free. She was Anne Timlin. We'd met some weeks before when I represented a landlord whom her client, the state of New York, had sued. After both our cases had been called, I suggested a lunch date.

A few days later we ate sandwiches in Liberty Park, near both our offices. Spring breezes darted about in the sunshine. I was intrigued to learn she'd been a carpenter before going into law, and in return I owned up to guitar playing.

Beforehand, walking to the park with my hand on her arm at her waist, I'd closed my mind to her body, my way of not taking advantage. Now I asked myself the usual questions about a woman who attracted me. How did her lips shape themselves when she talked? What gestures did she make? Did her hair cover her ears, or did she tuck it behind them? How long was it? While walking, despite my best intentions, I noticed she was slim and that she had no shirt fitting into a waistband or sweater over a waistband, which suggested she was wearing a dress. On the bench, I imagined her legs crossed. Did she keep her foot still or wave it up and down to her speech rhythms? What were the contours of her legs? As we walked back to Broadway, her shoulder bag slipped and she inadvertently brought my hand across her chest to pull it back. The maneuver told me she had small breasts. I realized that was how I'd envisioned her.

The next time I called she invited me over for dinner. It was a shock. But if practicing law does anything, it trains you to master emotions. I think I managed to sound suavely blasé about it. She attached the condition that I sing a song for her. It meant I'd embarrass myself, but now that I'd owned up to the music, I might as well disabuse her of any assumption she'd made of my talent.

After my initial blur of speculation, I settled on looking forward to our dinner as an occasion for two lawyers who respected each other to become better acquainted. Had I told my friends about Anne's invitation, they'd have given me the old nudge and wink. They either didn't realize or kept to themselves that women's gestures toward disabled guys don't always mean what they do with other men.

Because I was carrying my guitar, I took a cab over. Anne had gone to some trouble to give me directions from her front door to her apartment, no simple task for someone who had never given it any thought before, but now she raced down to show the way. How touching that she recognized my desire for independence and yet wanted to alleviate what she thought might be its burdens. Lydia would have seen only the burdens.

I felt at ease wandering around her living room, checking out the furniture, testing the silverware. Usually I don't call attention to myself by exploring people's homes.

Our first misstep was chicken: hers for making it, mine for how poorly I hid my dismay. Picking apart chicken on the bone with a knife and fork is hard when you can't see. You risk missing a lot of meat and, in the process of finding it, sending the rest of the food on the plate flying. Halfway through the meal, she said she preferred to eat chicken with her fingers. I know now, as I suspected then, that she never did in company.

Once I settled in with my guitar, I played well, if I do say so myself. After that, conversation became easy and open. From time to time, her gesturing hands touched my knees. I urged her to move closer. When she did, the entire universe consisted of that place and moment.

One thing led to another, but just when I was sure she was ready, she refused to take off her jeans. She said I should leave. But then she insisted on showing me the rest of her apartment.

In her bedroom she made me lie down and undressed us both. Some mysteries are best left unsolved.

A day or two later she called me at the office to say my client, Mr. Goodman, had weaseled out of the agreement we'd negotiated. I'd never represented anyone against her office before. She had a feel for these cases and had rightly predicted Goodman would make one excuse after the next. I could have killed him.

"Mr. Goodman," I said, putting on my calm-before-the-storm voice into the phone, "Ms. Timlin just informed me the check wasn't certified."

"I sent it to her two weeks ago. Why's she bringing that up now?"

I thought to myself, and you're always complaining about your tenants acting like victims. Now who's a victim? "She says she tried to deposit it anyway. It didn't clear."

"How could that be?"

"That's why I'm calling. To find out."

"I have no idea."

"If you don't, who does?"

"I have to ask my bookkeeper. Someone fucked up."

I kept a tickler system and called him every few days so he couldn't drag things out forever. If Anne sued him, she'd tie up his accounts and slap liens on his buildings. The damage to his reputation would be even worse. No bank or potential business partner would touch him.

Anne and I couldn't be friends while this was going on. If we'd been married or in a long-term relationship, one of us would have had to get off the case. I told myself what we'd had was so brief, it amounted to nothing. Still, if Goodman found out about us, he could cause all

kinds of mischief. The Disciplinary Committee had a rule about lawyers exercising independent judgment for their clients. I couldn't deny I had private motives for getting the case resolved.

Beyond the necessary formality, Anne acted downright unfriendly. I blamed it on my need to work through my assistant, Claire, while her office's staffing shortage meant Anne did all the work on her side. At her apartment she'd gotten in a dig about my knowing Claire was blonde, as if guys in an office weren't bound to say, "Who's that blonde you've got working for you?" I felt like a prick sending her over to handle the logistics, but I'd had no choice. We had to keep a distance. Anne escalated the pressure and Goodman saw the light. But for Anne and me, the problems had just begun.

I called the day after I resolved the case by sending over his certified check, and she flew into a rage, accusing me of taking the high road even though she was the one who had set the tone when Goodman bounced the first check. That was unfair to both of us. When professionalism had said our hearts' needs had to be put on hold, we'd obeyed. But she wasn't having any of it. She hung up on me. That made me just as angry, so we were even.

I felt relieved. Contemplating a relationship, I'd become afraid it would expose the Scotch-taped fixes I'd made for myself. Law was my life, and I'd put everything else on hold. For instance, I'd long ago given up the simplest culinary experiments. Through decades of schooling, I'd justified home-making neglect by the extra time and energy I needed to put into studying. I wasn't wrong. No doubt someone else could have carried it off, but I wouldn't have gotten through law school if I'd let myself be distracted. Still, I paid a high price. I couldn't remake myself into *homo domesticus*.

Anne had been understanding when I hinted at all this, but how about down the line when she saw me as the typical male who worked no harder at the office than she, only to come home

to have her wait on him? In optimistic moments I told myself I'd learn to enjoy cooking and vacuuming. But then I'd decide my habits were ingrained. By hanging up on me, Anne had saved me from more self-flagellation.

But she stayed in my thoughts. I'd drum my fingers on my polished desk and remember her dining room table. Then the grimy surface of her office's conference room table would come to mind and how I hadn't wanted to taint my fingers in its scratches. Even the airy acoustics of my office saddened me when I remembered her claustrophobic conference room. Anne worked purely out of principle. There was no money in it and, from what she'd said about the office's hierarchy, a ton of frustration.

Did such thoughts mean I loved her? It made no difference what name to give my emotions. Anne was better off without me. I was better off out of a relationship.

* * *

On my way to a doctor's appointment, I waited for the light to change to cross Lexington. When stuck waiting, I have a habit of bouncing my cane between my fingers onto the sidewalk. This time, without realizing it, I was standing next to a grate. Instead of bouncing back into my grip, the cane fell to the subway tunnel below.

"Your cane just fell through a grate," a man standing beside me observed.

"I noticed."

"I don't think there's any way to retrieve it. Can I help you get where you're going?"

"Thanks. It's just across the street, four doors down to the right."

I took his arm and we walked to my doctor's building, where I knew my way inside. When I was ready to leave, the receptionist hailed a cab for me.

That night Lydia, my personal ad's last hope, called. "I have a question. Were you the guy standing on Lex today who lost his cane?"

The chances of that guy being me were remote. I figured she'd had a change of heart and was using the incident as a pretext to renew contact.

"As a matter of fact, yes. So, ready to meet?"

"Oh no. Nothing's changed. I was just curious."

Of course she hadn't changed her mind. After my cane fell through the grate, had she gotten out of her car to help? No. She'd sat there in comfort and wondered if this was the mental picture she could pin onto her anecdote about that guy in the personal ad.

Bitch, I thought, but kept my reaction to myself. It would only feed her fascination when she gazed in narcissistic awe on her jagged psyche from a therapist's couch.

She said, "After we talked the last time, I realized I couldn't have a relationship with a man who can't appreciate me visually."

That stung. I knew how much weight the visual carried in attraction. I was Exhibit A; I always wanted to know what women looked like. But I was tempted to argue. Maybe I wouldn't detect all the nuances Lydia saw in a mirror, but she'd have found my learning about her pleasurable. I'd have made sure of it.

But so what? I sensed I intrigued her, but she was too scared. She'd made up her mind, and it was a mind that no longer interested me.

Lydia couldn't get past blindness. The more serious problem was that the relief I felt at parting from Anne said I couldn't, either.

* * *

The song I'd played for Anne came to me as I was walking up Broadway one afternoon. It recalled the mingling of regret that I'd lost her and relief that I'd kept my peace of mind. Then I realized the tune was coming from outside me through the mild spring air.

In retrospect I'm struck by her tact. She was humming, letting me know she was there but allowing me to pretend I didn't hear. I turned. One truth intruded through my emotional stalemate and, blocking out all others, found voice. "I've missed you."

She seized my arm, and I sensed her chest rise and fall even through her hand. How much feeling revealed itself there.

She was on her way to a birthday party she'd arranged for her mother, and I accompanied her down into the Fulton Street subway station where she turned for the A Train and I for the Lex. A brief encounter. But had it stretched out, it wouldn't be the crystalline memory it has become.