

“The Last Act,” Fiction by Pat Lipsky

We had spoken the day before. It was a long phone conversation. He said he was tired after playing doubles in tennis that morning and that he'd gone to lunch with his son and stepson. The way he'd put it was that although it hadn't been fun, he'd "done his duty." Duty was a big thing with him; it probably came from his Chinese mother.

We were going on our first public outing the next day, i.e., going to an art world event where we would both know a lot of people. It was an opening at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford for Lee Lezano, an artist he'd handled in the '60s. She was long gone, but a group of her "important" Wave pictures had been ones he'd shown and they were now being exhibited at the museum. We arranged to meet at Port Authority at 8:30 the next morning.

Then he asked what I was doing that night (it was a Saturday). Playing hard to get, I said I had plans for the evening; really all I was going to do was clean up and buy some Cheerios (he liked Cheerios). When we got back from Connecticut the next night a. the apartment would be clean, and b. there would be something to eat for breakfast the following morning.

He said, "Why don't you call me when you're finished with your date [he assumed I had a date], and maybe you can take a cab out here?" He lived in an Archie Bunker-type house in Long Island City, which he referred to as either "Queens" or "one of the lesser boroughs."

I was surprised the first time he took me there that it wasn't in any way cool, the way that everything else connected with him was: just a little white box house with even a white-picket fence. He also lived part time in the Village with his companion of 30 years. I didn't like this arrangement, of course, but was so taken with him that I put up with it, one of the reasons for the strategy of not being available that evening.

Then I said, "What are you doing now?" "I'm in bed reading the Proust, and I'm close to finishing Book Three. I might finish it tonight." (It was partly because of me that he had begun reading "The Search." I had been into Proust since college and had read its six volumes twice.) The conversation was fun; once it was over, I continued more vigorously cleaning my apartment in the queen's-like fortress where I lived on West 77th Street.

It was the end of March (not the Ides) and when I awoke the next morning the weather had turned quite mild. You could hardly predict anymore what it would be like in any season, let alone from one day to the next (the week before there had been a major snowstorm). Looking out the window, I saw people in shirtsleeves and thought my green Tahari suit would be perfect. I'd bought it for one of my openings and now it was my outfit for important and/or "sexy" occasions. I dressed with great care: black stockings that I thought would be a turn-on, heels, my hair washed and blow-dried, makeup, and took the subway to 42nd Street. It was 8 a.m. I remember walking down the street to the terminal thinking about how happy I was to be meeting my lover, even at Port Authority.

I'd known him since I was 28 and married. That was almost 30 years before, but we'd only been having an affair for the last two years. He'd called it "the last act." There had been other times this might have happened, but I'd always botched it — too square somehow for his slightly flamboyant, and off-key style, his sometimes use of drugs, his prepared Wallace Stevens come-ons. I was the product of a deadly combination: an upscale Jewish ghetto in childhood, and an Ivy League university in late adolescence.

When I got to the ticket booth for Connecticut, he wasn't there. "What if he's not coming at all, what if he decided not to come?" I immediately thought (another factor of my Jewish background was that I always went



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for the worst possible outcome). Then again, I'd learned that in love affairs anything was possible, even more so when there was a "companion" involved. Once she had fallen on the ice and at the last minute he'd canceled a date to see a George de la Tour show at the Met. I stood there a little while longer, half expecting him to put his hands around my eyes, from behind (he even had a water gun in summer), but he simply did not appear. Finally, I asked the gate number for the bus to Hartford and ran down to where the departures were on the lower level. It was almost 9:10, the time for the bus's departure. Maybe I had missed him?

"He must be playing a trick on me, he'll be there sitting on the bus smiling — very funny," I thought, running down the stairs, but when I looked inside at the passengers arranged in their seats, he was not among them.

"Stood up at Port Authority, a first," I thought, locating a phone booth to call him from. "He'll answer in a sleepy voice and say something like, 'Oh, I forgot, I overslept.'" But he didn't pick up his phone at all. His son Steve, who sometimes stayed at the house and also worked with him, did. He was an obdurate, prickly sort of young man, with a faux-elegant swagger that he must have developed in a failed attempt to appear more like his father.

"Hi, this is Joan Freely. Where's your dad?" I said.

"My dad died," he informed me.

"What?" I said.

"He's dead," he repeated.

"How do you know?" I said, adding, "I'll be right out there," and rushed outside to get a taxi. "Twenty-third Street in Long Island City," I said to the driver, as I had many times before, mostly at night with an excitement now replaced by dread.

The first thing I saw getting out of the taxi — never a good sign — were two police cars parked at the end of the block. I walked into the house with its rooster posters and little rooster sculptures, and big wooden bed, and there he was, dead, sitting up on it, with the Proust book clutched in his hands and a pencil nearby, as if he'd been trying to

write something. His glasses were on, and his teeth were out. I'd gotten to see him without them after all. It had been a running joke of ours; he'd say, "I'm going to let you see me with my teeth out," and I'd always answer, "Oh no, please don't, spare me."

I had never seen anyone dead before (my mother in a coma, and my father being carried out of the house in a plastic bag, but no one I'd known just out in the open as a corpse). After the shock I looked over at Steve. "How did this happen?" I asked him.

Steve said he'd come back to the house late the night before, and, thinking his father had fallen asleep with the light on, didn't look in. In the morning he'd gone into the room and found George like that. (I couldn't help speculating that if I'd come out the night before, as he'd asked, this might not have happened.)

I checked the book and noted the page he was on — I could start reading from where he'd left off and finish it for him. Somehow, as time passed, looking at him became easier than I would have imagined, although it was painful to realize that one-half of everything we'd experienced together, one-half of all our jokes, memories, and repertoire were gone, and that everything remained simply with me. This was how our date to the museum in Connecticut had ended.

Maybe he'd intended to grab the pencil nearby and write a note, something like, "Tell Joan I'm sorry I couldn't make it to Port Authority," and then the heart spasms had taken over. On the phone the doctor called it "rapid arrhythmia." From the way I described him still clutching the book, the doctor said it had happened very quickly, too quickly even to call 911. You could still feel and see the tension in his hands from the struggle he'd been through, and lost, with death.

The reports finished, other men were ready to end the scene, i.e., the life, ready to carry George's body, "dead weight" away. Already in the few hours that had passed, the brothers had arranged that it would be cremated somewhere nearby (the convenience made me think of a neigh-

borhood pizza parlor for the dead). They lifted what had been George off his bed (the bed he'd designed, a large wooden structure covered with a futon and slanted at one end for long reading sessions), and I realized that it was being removed to be pulverized into ash. Instinctively I rushed to where they were carrying him across the room (had his soul departed?) and kissed him. I also grabbed the glasses he was still wearing that had stayed on his face from the evening before when he'd been reading, and tried to take the book, too, but Steve pulled it away (we were like Greek relatives fighting over the effects of the newly deceased).

When I'd first met him in 1969, he'd come to see my paintings in a sooty basement studio rented in the same building where I then lived on the Upper East Side. I was "hot" at the time, having recently begun showing my work all around town, and he was visiting to possibly "acquire" a painting of mine for a new collection he'd been hired to put together. His straight black Chinese hair kept falling across his forehead as we spoke, and periodically, with a toss of his head or a movement of his hand, he would push it away. When he started changing glasses he reminded me of my father, who also had several pair that were alternated during conversation.

The body gone, the bed empty, I looked at the old jeans he'd worn less than 24 hours before. They were hanging casually from the side of a rocking chair where he'd left them, never to be worn again. They still retained his body shape.

We had relocated to the pier and I sat down quietly near the rippling water, with my hand submerged, and fantasized about falling in. I thought how nice that would be on this suddenly warm day in late March, the same month my grandmother had died exactly 40 years before. I wanted to be near George, possibly to accompany him on his long journey (as the Egyptians had pictured it). If I fell in now, might I not find him? After all, it was going to be arduous, instead of ardent (he'd often called himself my "ardent admirer"). Just the thought of not hearing his voice ever again made me lean closer to the water. All I'd have to do was move a few inches down to be in the East River, where my father had swum in summer as a boy.

I thought of the last time I'd seen George alive the week before. There'd been an early snowstorm, I'd spent what became the last night with him, and in the morning I'd done an ink drawing of his backyard in snow on a sheet of rice paper he'd provided. "Always use good paper," he said. I'd left the drawing behind, and later when we spoke he told me that he liked it. The drawing was the culmination of an intimate evening. In the warmth of the dark and the bed we'd said for the first time that we loved each other.

When we got up on that last morning he had made the usual elaborate breakfast of bacon and eggs, all meticulously chopped with tomatoes and onions (like an Oldenburg in progress). At around 12 I thought it was time to go. It was always horrible to leave him; I didn't know when I'd hear from him again, or what he'd be doing. He came with me, walking the few blocks between his house and the subway. We moved slowly through the low-building streets of Long Island City. Then, as I went down the subway-stairs towards the grimy platform below, he stayed above, standing in the daylight watching me. We were facing each other as I descended, until I got to a point on the stairs where we could no longer see each other. Continuing down onto the platform I stood alone waiting for the train.

Pat Lipsky is a writer and painter who lives in New York City.

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