

According to Chelsea

by Grant Tracey

According to Chelsea, if John Cassavetes were Swedish, he'd be regarded as one of America's greatest filmmakers. But critics like Pauline Kael didn't get his work—they called him self-indulgent. Self-indulgent? No one calls Ingmar Bergman self-indulgent, but if he were an American from New York they would.

Chelsea always says uninhibited things like that, and I love it. We get together three or four times a week, usually early afternoons to talk movies or watch movies or talk about the articles I'm writing. I'm a cultural critic, "Our Man in the Midwest," for *Beyond X*, a hip zine out of Toronto. From Iowa, I write about pop culture old and new and how it shapes our lives. I also wrote a controversial piece on Jews becoming white. "Jack Black is Jewish," the article begins, "but you wouldn't know it from the white-bread roles he plays."

I liked that opening sentence, the play on role and roll. Anyway, recently I also tackled *Snapped*, an Oxygen Network fave about women behaving badly who lose it and kill their partners. One chemist triggered a stun gun to immobilize her ex, then tossed him alive into a fifty-five gallon drum full of hydrochloric acid. "Bitches," I can hear sweat-stained men in NASCAR caps, yelling at the TV while sipping a cold one. "Shame on you," Chelsea said, as the afternoon sky turned a weird shade of green. She agreed that the secondary audience—angry men—may indeed be the main audience for that series, but I ought not make assumptions about the viewers' backgrounds. "Come on, Wally. It's like you reached into a bowl of stereotypes and came up with a cliché." Her green eyes creased with the color of the sky.

"True. You've got me there." I held up my arms and promised to rewrite it.

She leaned against the couch in my apartment, sipped orange juice, and nodded. We've known each other for four months and she's always flipping me much-deserved shit.

Today she wore a charcoal-gray sweater and scarf. She always dresses nice.

And after we watched Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, which she found wonderfully depressing, she wondered if I thought marriage didn't

work.

I'm divorced. My wife, a college professor, left me for a young hot shot Creative Writer: Pushcart Prize winner, book with Penguin, another forthcoming, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. Chelsea's divorced too. She's a part-time secretary in the Math department—twenty-hours a week, full benefits—and her husband, a Math Professor, left her for a student. Her most recent relationship with Tyler, director of *Get Gone Graffiti*, is up and down. I think this is one of the down periods. "What do you mean, I mean, about marriage?"

"Well—" She turned and looked at me with this incredible energy in her eyes that kind of scares me because it's so blinding—it's like she takes you in completely. She said she disagreed with what I had to say about *Get Smart*: Season Four. I had argued that Max's marriage to 99 dragged the show into domestic entanglements and took away from the comedy. Max was funnier when he was single. She said that she liked my article overall, how I contextualized things: the 1960s, the murders of RFK and MLK, and how a mood of uncertainty crept into the show as occasionally members of KAOS went unpunished, but one thing she was certain of was that marriage on the show worked and 99 was tops in her book.

"I like 99 too. Who doesn't like Barbara Feldon? But I just don't think marriage on the show worked."

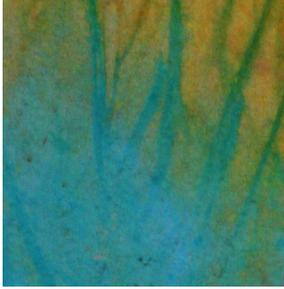
"I disagree," she said, and then looked through my shoulder, because she could sense my shyness. "Is it just the idea of marriage on the show or marriage in general that you object to?"

"I don't know."

According to Chelsea, it was the latter. I think she might be right.

Tyler showed up at my door a week or so after I first met Chelsea, saying he appreciated how I was helping her with the apartment, finding shit: a chintzy, particle-board desk for the computer, a red lamp, and a philodendron for the damn cat to chew on. I took it the pet wasn't his.

Tyler wanted to pay me for the gas, but I said I did it as a neighbor. He insisted, his eyes hard-edged stones, a corrugated five-spot in his left hand. Getting rid of graffiti in Cedar Falls had become a sprawling business, he said. Scrawls of blocky letters were everywhere: behind the coffee shop, under the overpass, and along the red bricks of our local utilities company. The cleanup made it hard for him to chauffeur her around—he didn't know why a woman in her forties still insisted on driving a 1979 Pinto. "Damn thing's always breaking down." He shook his head and gnawed at his upper



lip as if it were hardened chewing gum. “Take the money.” So, I did. Lincoln seemed unhappy.

Later, Chelsea thought it was weird that Tyler was so possessive. She pointed between me and her. “There’s nothing here.”

I like Chelsea. But I would never jeopardize anything by encroaching upon her relationship with Tyler. And I knew him or of him. Waterloo West. The hair was thinner than I remembered, the body less wiry. He was a year ahead of me in high school, and in summers had a blacktop business, smoothing driveways in the suburbs. During his senior year, a white phosphorous of rumors filled Waterloo. Some customers alleged that Tyler was over charging them—as much as three times for supplies. Despite the haze of scandal floating about, Tyler wound up Valedictorian and specialized in biochemistry at college. I guess he came up with a chemical mix that attacks Hip Hop words and symbols without beleaguering the buildings.

I once joked, flirted even, with Chelsea that is, that I loved talking to her and sometimes found myself so attracted to what she says, especially when she’s quoting me and my work, that I have to look at her eyes, her hair, her face, in order to avoid looking any other places, “and I never ever read any T-shirts you’re wearing.”

“I don’t wear T-shirts,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “I’m just trying to make light of things. I’m a minimizer.”

“Why do you minimize all the time? You shouldn’t do that.”

Why, indeed. Maybe she likes me too. I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I’m still in seventh grade. I’m forty-three; she’s forty, and I fear that I do “like her like her.”

The first thing about Chelsea that scared me was how much she knew. She said that I had sad, sorrowful eyes, the kind that carried pain and fatigue and hurt. I was surprised by her insight because I thought she was the one who had been hurt, and that’s why I had left my door open.

The night she moved into the apartment across from mine didn’t go well. Tyler’s voice was on edge—he was frustrated and his words were buried under shuddering boxes, knocked about end tables, and bookcases hitting baseboards. I think he even threw some things. Glass popped like underwater firecrackers.

Anyway, her voice, through the walls, was a flash of an earring—brittle yet bright. By contrast, Tyler’s words were heavy and dank like the inside of a cave. He yelled at her again, and then a door violently closed.

The next morning I left my door open while washing dishes and she knocked, asking if I had any eggs, and I offered her some and said I had heard her crying. “I wasn’t meaning to pry. Well that’s not exactly true. I was standing by the door, your door, with a very large glass.”

That made her laugh, and then she sat down and offered to show me a tattoo—*Vidi*, “That’s Latin for I saw.” She didn’t care for the other part of the quote because she didn’t like Julius Caesar. “Fascist creep.” But she liked the idea of seeing things, and then told me she had another tattoo, on her left breast—that one I wasn’t going to see—and then she made that comment about my eyes. And before I knew it, I was telling her all about Ginger, my ex, and how she left me for a Creative Writer, someone with more ambition.

Sometimes I feel like I'm still in seventh grade. I'm forty-three; she's forty. And I fear that I do 'like her like her'.

I smiled, and as I talked about Ginger I wanted to tell Chelsea what I had really heard outside her door. Tyler felt that her love for him was always compromised, not fully there, and it hurt like hell. I wondered if he hurt her in return. Faint bruises shaped like Georgian Bay and Lake Huron marked Chelsea’s biceps. She noticed that I noticed and said it was nothing. Passion. “Some men scream your name. Tyler squeezes.” She forced a laugh. “I guess it’s his kind of personal tattoo.”

“I guess.”

Shit, when she was a kid Chelsea liked weaving her fingers through the metal webbing of her parent’s living room fan. As the twist of blades cut the heat she wondered how close she could come without nicking her hands. She held them up. “I still have my fingers.”

Weeks later, Chelsea said that I wrote beautifully and she couldn’t believe that Ginger would leave me for a writer because I’m a writer. And the topics I covered were “very ambitious.”

“Fiction is more sexy,” I said. I guess I’m just John Cassavetes to her new boyfriend’s Ingmar Bergman.

“Bullshit,” she said, her lower lip all pouty before a smile creased her eyes. “You’re both. Cassavetes and Bergman. But that’s beside the point. Divorce, separation, these things often come down to—,” she paused, “tension.”

“By tension, you mean sex?”

“Yeah. It’s always there among men and women.”

“No.”

“Sure. Why do you think so many straight women love hanging out with gay men? I’ll tell you why—tension isn’t hovering, that’s why.”

There was a long pause, maybe too long as I wondered about Tyler—how much tension did he create when she didn’t want to have sex? The other night I think he was shattering plates in the sink. “I’m not gay,” I said.

We were sipping tomato soup at my kitchen table.

“I know.” She shrugged and adjusted the long braided scarf around her neck. My apartment was always a little cold. “I’m sure if I wore T-shirts, you would know what every one of them said.”

“Maybe so.”

“You haven’t given up on love have you? Because you shouldn’t,” she said, reaching across the table and lightly tapping a finger against the back of my hand. Her frizzy hair was frosted and her eyes the darkest green. She told me that I was a great listener, but the sadness of my eyes had to do with a celibate retreat from experience.

“Celibate?” I tried to deflect her insights with a “whatever,” but she saw through the mask.

“How did she hurt you?”

“My ex?” I shrugged and wiped at a crescent-shaped spot on the table. “I really don’t want to talk—”

“You know what I do when I’m hurt? I get a tattoo.”

She had three. Each scarred into her skin as comfort for a sad turning point. A dolphin on the ankle for the time she was turned down by New York’s Academy of Dramatic Arts; “Vidi” on the inside of her left wrist after a turbulent relationship with a high-school teacher ended—she was sixteen, his student; and on her left breast a Gaelic symbol for fertility. That was an act of humility. After spending a semester in Ireland she realized she would never create anything as beautiful as the prose of James Joyce.

Needles make me nervous, I told her.

Then she confessed to thinking about getting a fourth tattoo: a hammer and sickle for Tyler. “You know he wants me to straighten my hair? He doesn’t like how frizzy it is. And he wishes I dressed nicer. I dress nice. I’m a secretary.”

I nodded, and then talked some more about Ginger. For the past two years we had drifted apart: she into her world of academe and Carson McCullers scholarship, me into my cultural criticism. In the evenings we hardly spoke to each other and often she was going out with fellow faculty at UNI, networking, without inviting me. “And then she started reading this guy’s stuff—I saw the manuscripts lying around—instead of reading my

work—and—why does love have to be fleeting? Why can’t it last?”

“I don’t know.” Things with Tyler weren’t so good either. Everything she does is wrong. He wants time apart but still wants a relationship, only separate apartments. She bit the edge of a finger. “He also said I was too loud. I’m too loud when I sing along to the car radio; I’m too loud when I buy groceries; I’m too loud on the phone. Am I too loud?”

“Yeah, you are, but I find it endearing.”

“Thanks.”

I liked talking to Chelsea. In my past relationships I’ve always been a kind of Dean Martin conversationalist. “You ever notice how he sings? The shallow part of his chest? Light. Not serious?”

“Why would anyone not want to be serious?” she said.

“Do you really think Chaplin is narcissistic?”

I nodded and said, yeah, I do. We were walking away from the marquee lights of the Art Theatre. We go there once a week and had just



screened *City Lights*. “I mean, that ending, come on. The close-up, the flower, that smile. It screams love me, love me please.” Chaplin was totally oblivious to his audience—it was all about himself and his need for approval.

Outside, trees sparkled with a shimmer of snow, a light foggy haze, and the street was quiet—one or two cars. Chelsea wore a camel coat and a beret. She looked marvelous.

“What’s wrong with love?”

“Nothing. Love’s great, I guess,” I said. Across the street from us, in the snow-beaded window of a coffee shop, I thought I glimpsed Tyler sipping from a dark mug. His hair was heavily moussed, and he wore a sweater, the cuffs rolled past the elbows. His hand made lopsided circles, like a child’s, against the store’s frosted glass.

“You guess?”

“Yeah. But with Chaplin, his desire to be loved is all encompassing; it’s too self-absorbed. I prefer Keaton. He’s clever, inventive, and less—”

“Touchy-feely?”

“Well, yeah.”

According to Chelsea, I’m uncomfortable with intimacy. Real conversations. I often have to make jokes to lighten the mood. “You’re right, I’m always protecting myself,” I said one afternoon while we were watching *Cabaret*.

“Are you scared of me?”

“A little. Now stop asking such deep questions—I want to enjoy this pretentious film.”

“I don’t think it’s pretentious.”

Of course she wouldn’t—it was her choice. The second part of the double bill was my choice, a depressingly gritty masterpiece, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. We were on a 72-73 kick.

“Well, don’t be scared.” Her goal was to match me up with someone. She said there was a secretary in Philosophy and Religion, Nina, who was single. I said I wasn’t ready for any of that.

“Why not?”

“I’m not ready. Let’s watch this drivel—it’s so bad, it’s good.” Minnelli was singing.

It was hard to match Chelsea’s energy, but through movies and TV shows I could talk to her comfortably.

On one of our first afternoons together, eating cold pizza and watching Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby*, I told her all about the cozy con-

finer of the Art Theatre: the clanking seats that needed to be reupholstered, the lingering mildew smell of the aisles, reminiscent of wet woolen sweaters, and the people, characters, eccentrics in fedoras and bright lipstick huddled in the dark. You see, one night, I said, these two women in pea coats, bracelets on their wrists the size of anchors, and a puff of perfume, arrived late at the Art and asked me to move over so that they could sit together.

“Of course you didn’t, because you’re anal retentive,” Chelsea said.

“No, well, I am, but that’s beside the point.” I get to the theatre forty-five minutes early so I can have my ideal seat: row thirteen, seat ten, nine seats to my left and right. It’s the ideal vantage point to watch a film. “I’m not giving that up. I tried to explain this to the girls using geometric logic and advanced calculus, but they just nodded and then sat next to me, on either side of me. And all through the show, a revival of Sidney Lumet’s *Prince of the City*, I became so aware of their breaths and breasts that I couldn’t concentrate on the film.”

“That’s too bad,” Chelsea had said, laughing.

“Thanks. Your sympathy is overwhelming. Why can’t my life be like a Hollywood movie? One with a happy ending.”

“You know Tyler wants me to see a therapist?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“A week ago, Tyler said he thought our love should be a series of collisions, car wrecks, and I guess we aren’t colliding enough or something—”

I thought about the clink-clink-clink of a fan and fingers. “Who does he want you to see, Josef Mengele?”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry.”

We were quiet for a long while but I wouldn’t apologize further—I didn’t like Tyler. To me, he was a darkened sun. The logo for his business was three granite G’s in a hard uncompromising font like him.

Fuck it, Chelsea said. “Finish the story. Tell me about the girls in the pea coats.”

So I did. If my life were like a Hollywood movie, the girls would have been hanging out in the lobby after the show and I would have approached them, or them me, and struck up a conversation about the film—no, no, they wouldn’t want to talk about *Prince of the City* yet. Too soon. They needed to let the ideas of the film resonate. “Stillness has to set in,” one of them would say. So, we’d talk about the film from last week, Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler*, love and loneliness, and how the ending was all wrong. Ram shouldn’t die coming off the final turnbuckle. Instead, here’s how I would

end the film, if it were a Wally Bober production: the Ram should retire, go back home to the trailer court, and the final shot of the film would be a tableau: the Ram standing on his front porch holding two trash bags, looking in the direction of Tomei and her pickup truck parked out front. Tomei is pensive, looking in his direction, the driver side door open, but unable to move toward him. Fade to black.

"I love cheesecake. But with gloves on?"

"That's beautiful," she said. "You can still approach Nina."

"No. Look at me—I'm a neurotic nut. No."

"You are a nut."

"Thanks."

And then she kissed me on the cheek. "But lovable."

Following the story of the pea-coated girls, Chelsea asked me to take her to the Art, and we've been going ever since. Usually Wednesdays. Church night. Tyler cleans business buildings then.

Now, taking short, quick choppy steps to keep up with me, Chelsea smiled and read the Art's theater program, *In Focus*. "Hey, look, next week the Art's showing *All Through the Night*."

We had watched the Bogart film last week at the apartment, and she wanted to see it on the big screen. She loved that film because it was such a weird mix of genres: comedy, gangster, romance, and wartime melodrama.

"It's like my moods—never consistent."

I laughed.

"Tyler doesn't want me to see you anymore."

A sharp nudge pinched my shoulders and suddenly my stomach was full of glass. "It's up to you what you do," I said.

"He's watching us from the coffee shop."

I didn't turn to look. "I thought he had the local community center to do tonight."

"Maybe there was too much snow."

And without knowing why exactly, I reached for Chelsea's hand, squeezed it quickly and let go.

"Bogart and the cheesecake scene? With the Sgt. Bilko guy? That's funny." She just can't see anyone eating cheesecake with gloves. "I love cheesecake. But with gloves on?"

"I can't eat it anymore," I said. I have to watch my sugar.

Poignant. According to Chelsea that's one of my favorite words, and I guess it is. I end a lot of articles with it. A zippy, one word sentence: "poignant," as if I'm resonating pithy truths for my readers, but the move in my essays has become stock, formulaic. *Poignant*. Corny is more like it.

Anyway, earlier in the day I had been stuck on an article on model Betty Furness and her 1950s TV spots for Westinghouse's *Studio One* anthology series. I did have some insights on a sexy woman in high heels and bright dresses belying a masculine, scientific discourse: Betty tells us, with great efficiency, that the fifteen vents on the Westinghouse iron make it more effective for dampening fabric; the removal of blades from the center of the Westinghouse washer and accompanying tilted basket get all of our clothes clean without wearing down the fabric. But beyond the initial paradox of the feminine sales rep and the masculine science behind her words I had nothing new to offer. Nothing about this was poignant or ever would be. Perhaps it wasn't an article after all.

Serendipity, however, is a weird thing. Here I was struggling with images of 1950s femininity and the construction of rational order through engineering technologies when who should come to the door but Tyler demanding that I return the China plates. Said China plates were loaned to me last week by Chelsea when I entertained some friends from the newspaper—where I also freelance—and we ate French cuisine—crepes—and watched three of Jean-Luc Godard's 1960s films including *Vivre Sa Vie*. Apparently the plates belonged to Tyler—his mother bought them as a housewarming gift—and he wanted them back.

"Plates? What does a guy want with plates," I said, somewhat incredulously, as I sipped orange juice by the kitchen sink.

"Look, Wally, I just want them—" He gnawed at his upper lip, a left hand on his hip. He was a lot bigger than he was twenty-five years ago. The sweater he wore crinkled his chest, his jeans were torn in the left knee, and his moussed hair was perpetually wet: a controlled look, exuding a faux-relaxed ease. Even Tyler's five o'clock shadow looked like it belonged in a catalogue for men's clothing.

I stacked the eight or nine plates from the cupboard and handed them to him. He said he thought that Chelsea was spending too much time with me. Everything was fine until I showed up with the car rides, and the talk, and the holding hands.

"That was just—"

"Affection?"

"Yeah, that's all." The words were dry, brittle crumbs. Chips of glass

returned to my stomach. For a second I felt that he was going to hit me with the plates, and then I just didn't care.

I didn't care that one time in high school he bloodied a kid in the gym lockers for stealing his lunch money; I didn't care that he was tired of me, tired of Chelsea's talk about the wonderful articles I was writing, like the one on Obama and 1968 and the intensity of actors like Clarence Williams III of *Mod Squad* and Otis Young of *The Outcasts*. "Yeah. That's one of my better ones actually. Those two actors brought dignity and a smoldering presence to the small screen. Where are these African-American role models today?"

In my irrational randomness, words were not quite fitting the moment; my internal censor was on vacation. Hovering on the brink of a whooping, lake-sized bruise were already forming under my eyes. Tyler shifted the plates to his left forearm.

"I'll tell you where those people are," I said. They aren't on TV. TV's for the rich. The new art's happening on buildings. Hip Hop. Graffiti. Don't you ever think about what you're erasing, Tyler?

"What? Art? Come on. It's just empty gang symbols—"

"Gang symbols? It's somebody's voice; it's a response to the systemic racism of our culture."

"'Systemic' what? Wally—they don't own the buildings—"

"I'm not talking about buildings!" He never did get it. In high school, his tastes ran from the middle of the road to the crude. Favorite actor: Sylvester Stallone. Best book: *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell. Band: Guns N' Roses. Idea of fun: inviting the football team over for a night of poker, cigars, and VHS porno. Business practices: buy supplies cheap, charge for services high. Damn it, Tyler, you're messing with a people's means of expression, silencing their presence. Goddamn Philistine.

I guess I was saying all that Philistine shit out loud, because the next thing I knew, my nose was pop-popping like a roll of Black Cat fire-crackers and my shirt gushed red. I didn't know blood could be that bright.

A couple of nights ago, Chelsea said that the swelling around my left eye had gone down and she was pretty sure my nose was broken. "That son of a bitch, Tyler." I absently shrugged and she softly kissed the hurt spots and wondered why I had never asked about her name. What's to wonder? I said.

"Okay—" Her single mom was real into soccer and during Junior year studied abroad in England and took in a Chelsea/Liverpool match and

decided to name a future daughter after the city and its blue-clothed football club.

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"I got a niece, Rebecca, who's crazy about English soccer. Hopefully she won't decide to name a daughter Liverpool."

Chelsea laughed.

"Actually, I'm joking. She likes Chelsea."

"The team or me?"

"The team. She's never met you."

"Why is that?"

"Why? I don't know. We're not a couple. I hardly ever see my brother Manny as it is—"

She wondered if I could drive her to Wal-Mart. The Pinto was in the shop: master cylinder, water pump, something, and she needed to get a few things for her apartment: plants, a tea cozy, and some plates.

Last night Chelsea was standing at my door, holding up two trash bags.

"What's this?"

"Guess."

"Uh, you need help with your trash? What?"

"No. Remember *The Wrestler*?"

"Aronofsky's film?"

"The girls who sat on either side of you?"

Oh, yeah. The twins in their pea coats and my re-written ending with a pickup truck. "You're Mickey Rourke?"

"Yeah." She held the bags higher.

"I'm not Marisa Tomei," I said emphatically.

She refused to lower the bags and laughed. For weeks we had been talking about popular culture and she felt for half that time she had been really talking about us, about love, without saying it, but now she felt I needed a visual clue, because I was kind of dense on the love front, and this was her way of saying my life could be a Hollywood romance. "What do you think *this* has been about?"

"What?"

"This. Us."

"Us? Uh, friends getting together to talk and watch films and—"

"I wouldn't be here just to watch films. I spend a lot of time here—"

“You like me?”

“I told you the tension was hovering. I was tense around you—I mean, in a good way. Weren’t you tense around me?”

“Please lower the bags. Look, if I were to get a tattoo, it would be of a soccer ball. Right here.” I pointed over my heart.

“Don’t say that.” She thought it was sweet but also distant because she knew I’d never get a tattoo, what with my whole needles thing. So, according to Chelsea, I was Dean Martinizing it, minimizing again.

“I’m sorry.”

“I left Tyler. For good this time.” She wasn’t interested in seeing a damn therapist—there was nothing to mend. Even though he didn’t break the China plates, everything else was broken.

“Wow.” I didn’t know what else to say so I resorted to Brando-esque incredulity. Remember the scene with Rod Steiger in the car—*On the Waterfront*? Steiger pulls a gun on Brando, threatens his brother, and Brando utters a soft, wistful, “Wow.” Why can’t I be authentic and let real feeling come through? Instead, I resort to modes of being, actions and mannerisms from film and TV. Maybe I should write a book: *All I Ever Learned I Learned at the Movies*. It would be a depressing book.

Her eyes watered. She no longer loved Tyler, the passionate aggression, the white bursts of violence. So she gave back the China plates and the power tools. “Actually the power tools were mine, but I didn’t want to argue about it.”

According to Chelsea, I guess, I *am* Marisa Tomei, the stable one. Oh, well. I reached for her trash bags, plunked them by the kitchen, and directed her to the living room sofa. She cried into my shoulder and I held her and we sat there for a while, and for the first time I noticed her perfume: bright and fresh like the frost of fog on tree limbs outside. I told her I hadn’t been honest. “I do like you. Like really like you.”

“So we *are* in seventh grade.”

That made me laugh. And then I had one of those moments, like in a John Cassavetes movie where the lead characters let their masks fall, stop pretending, drop the role playing, and become authentic people through an epiphany. *Shadows* ends with three of them. Anyway, I held her hands and told her about Ginger, really told her, how not only had we drifted apart but I had fallen out of love with her—the last two years of our marriage we were just absent friends, nodding at each other, now and then, and I just wanted to be able to feel again, without worrying about falling out of love, because that’s the worst feeling in the world, that fleetingness, that inability to find

constancy, and I never want to experience that again.

“But isn’t it better to try to love again, to—”

“Maybe.”

“I wasn’t being honest either. I love you—”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess the moviegoer gets the girl after all, huh?”

“I guess.”

“I think I love you too, but I’m still not going to get that tattoo to prove it.”

She punched me in the shoulder. “Will you stop with the minimizing?”

“Okay. Okay.”

And then she suggested that we do something totally different tonight. Instead of going to the movies, let’s drive to New York City. No popular culture. No TV, no radio, no nothing. Just us.

“New York?”

“I’m packed.” The two trash bags were full of her clothes. She wanted to take to the open road, maybe find an Art-Deco nightclub in the big city and eat cheesecake.

“I can’t eat cheesecake,” I said.

“Live a little,” she said.