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Plaisir d'Amour

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Their names came to her in a dream, Brauer and Elemi. They were a couple, around thirty. In the dream they walked holding hands along the southern edge of Central Park, stopping to admire the restless buggy-horses pawing the pavement. Then they had breakfast in the Plaza Hotel: a waiter who bowed discreetly from the waist served them Eggs Benedict and ambrosial coffee. Afterwards they walked in the Park, where the smell of cut grass rose keen and fragrant. As if by telepathy, they stopped walking at the same moment and sat down on a bench to talk. Vera’s first thought on awakening was that the dream had been so realistic; nothing happened in it that could not happen in real life.

She reached for an old plaid bathrobe — originally John’s, but it had lost its aura of identity by now and felt anonymous. Vera, who was slim, had to fold over the excess fabric and belt it securely. In the kitchen she found her daughter Jean, just sixteen, already finishing breakfast, peering through thick glasses at Madame Bovary. The pot of coffee was ready on the stove. Jean made it nearly every morning, using a filter, and it was excellent. When Vera praised it, as usual, Jean slowly closed the book, her eyes fixed on the vanishing page till the two halves snapped shut. All the years of inculcating good manners have worked, thought Vera.

“Thanks. Did you sleep all right? You didn’t take any of those pills, did you?”

She was touched by her daughter’s concern. Vera only occasionally took the sleeping pills prescribed when she left the hospital five months ago, but Jean was righteously wary of drugs. She also had strong feelings against cigarettes, abortion, and war. “No, I haven’t taken them in over a week. I slept fine. I had a funny dream, though.”

“Oh really? What?”

“This man and woman with very odd names who eat at the Plaza and walk in Central Park.”

Jean learned forward smiling, her face resting in her palms, some strands of loose blonde hair falling over her hands. “What were their names?” She was looking at her mother with almost the same eager attention she showed to her friends. Unprecedented and flattering
though this was, Vera became aware that she did not wish to reveal the names of Brauer and Elemi.

“Oh, I forget. Except for the names it was a very ordinary dream, only I can’t seem to shake it. Do you know that feeling?”

Her interest extinguished, Jean carried her plate and mug to the sink. Watching her, Vera received an abrupt flash of illumination: the name Brauer had something to do with the German word “Frau,” and “Elemi” was a word she had often written in crossword puzzles. It meant a soft resin used in making varnish. Also, it was an auditory inversion of “Emily,” the name of a beautiful girl she had known at college and since lost track of. She sensed at once that these connections were true and ingenious, but finally irrelevant.

Jean cast her mother a curious glance from the doorway. “You’re going to work today, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes. It doesn’t matter if I’m late. Howard is away this week and nobody else cares.” She had worked in the advertising agency for seven years. When she needed to take six week off because of illness after her husband’s death they had been very understanding. She noticed, though, that on her return Howard, the boss, had watched her closely for signs of instability, of which there were none. Vera was recovered; it would not happen again.

“I won’t be back till around seven,” Jean called from the hall. “I have the Dramatics Society.” Then she dashed back to the kitchen. “Do you think we’ll get a letter from Freddy today?”

“I hope so.” Vera smiled at her. “Any day now.” Jean’s older brother, away for his first year in college, had mentioned possibly bringing a friend home over Easter, someone Jeanie might like, Freddy wrote, since he refused to do the vivisection experiment in zoology. Although boys were Jean’s preoccupation, few met her ethical standards.

As the door finally clattered shut Vera realized that she had not even recalled Freddy’s existence this morning before Jean spoke of him. That had something to do with the dream about Brauer and Elemi, which hovered about her still like a pleasant, warm fog. All other mornings now, when she woke she mentally ticked off the names of her two children, like a miser whose hoard has been plundered counting over with melancholy the few coins remaining. She had begun it in the hospital, spurred by a chance remark of one of the nurses: “But you’re not all alone, Mrs. Leonard. Think of your children. You have a lot to live for.” Vera had smiled wanly as the nurse, round, Oriental, efficient, smoothed unruly wrinkles in the sheets with a firm hand. Trite as her counsel was, it had helped, Vera had to admit.
Naming over her connections was not the only new habit to take hold since the painful weeks of her illness. With John gone so many of her rooted personal customs had altered. (An “untimely” death, the minister had called it, and despite her suffering Vera almost grinned involuntarily: as a writer of copy she understood the lure of the ready-made phrase.) She no longer woke outrageously early on weekdays to start dinner simmering in the slow cooker; she could fix something simple for herself and Jean after work. She no longer tore the crossword puzzle out of the paper, or worried about underwear hanging in the bathroom for days or library books kept past their due date. She shopped in bits on the way home from work instead of massively on Saturdays. Magazines could be tossed out when she finished reading them, instead of accumulating in unsightly piles for John eventually to glance at. There was no need now to struggle with clothes packed tight in a narrow closet, or to feel hesitant about taking taxis home on rainy days, or talking at length to her older brother, long distance. All winter Vera had slept in flannel granny nightgowns, heedless of appearance, and let ashtrays overflow while she smoked in bed to her heart’s content. In fact, as she often noticed guiltily, daily life was freer and easier without him. Yet she was lonely at night, and though she had tried she could not change the twenty-year habit of sleeping on one side of the bed, the right. If ever again she found herself in bed with a man, she thought in her more light-hearted moments, he had better approach her from the left or not at all.

On the bus going to work Vera let her eyes close and lapsed into a waking daze. She saw Brauer and Elemi again, this time following a Spanish building superintendent up the stairs to see a vacant apartment. It was spacious, with five good-sized rooms and large windows overlooking Central Park. The walls were dingy, but the super promised they would be freshly painted for the new tenants. Brauer and Elemi were holding hands as before, their faces glowing with joy. When they looked at each other they knew immediately, without words, that they would take it. Brauer spoke to the super and gave him ten dollars. Outside they stopped at the corner to buy frankfurters and orange drinks at a stand. Walking across the Park, they passed the pond where miniature sailboats glided in the brilliant sunlight, then discovered a trio of students — violin, cello, and clarinet — playing ethereal chamber music under a grove of trees. Brauer tossed some coins into the hat and they walked on, holding hands, to the Frick Museum, where they sat down in the indoor sculpture garden. Vera was so enchanted that when she opened her eyes — some part of her mind attuned to the duration of the ride — she had to hurry through
the crowd to get off at her stop. Again she was struck by the realism of the dream. She would have been less surprised had the dreams been re-creations of her own experience: there had been a phase, just after John's "untimely" death, when she brooded over episodes from their past. But she and John had not done any of the things that Brauer and Elemi did.

There were meetings with clients all morning, then a festive staff lunch honoring one of the young copywriters whose wife had had a baby. Through it all Vera was suffused with a calm, happy glow which made her think of Eastern philosophies of acceptance, feeling beyond desire, the flow of being. These were things her son Freddy, home from college at Christmas, had talked about. Later, in the company library Will Pratt, one of the head accountants, approached her, slapping her warmly on the back so that she quivered. "Hey, Vera, you're certainly looking great today. I meant to tell you at lunch. What's up?"

"What do you mean? Nothing is up."

"Oh, come on. You don't get that glow just from martinis at lunch. You must be seeing somebody." He was gazing at her earnestly, with kindness beneath the brash grin, the nervous, swift dark eyes. She had known Will for years — he had been a help during the months of John's dying, letting her cry in his office, bringing her cups of coffee, even fixing her slipshod account sheets without complaint — so she shouldn't be alarmed by his bantering now. Nonetheless it made her eyelids twitch.

"No, really. No one."

"No one? Then you're a naturally beautiful woman. Lucky. Have a drink with me after work." Will had been divorced for some time and prided himself on his bachelorhood. She might have gone out with him now, as a friend — he asked her often — had he not also asked her often when John was alive and well.

"Thanks, Will, but I'm sorry. I've got to get home for Jean."

"Oh, Jean is no baby. What is it, Vera? Aren't we friends? Can't friends have a drink?" He came closer, frowning. She could feel his warm breath on her cheek, not unpleasant. When she kept silent his voice grew sharp and tight. "You've turned me down three times in a month. What the hell is suddenly wrong with me anyway, I'd like to know?"

Vera stepped back in fright, holding a large slick magazine before her as a shield. "Nothing is wrong with you, Will. Of course we're friends. It's just that evenings, you know, I'm tired. And I worry about
Jean — she’s lonely too. I’m sorry.” Not yet, she was screaming inside her head. Not yet. Not ever.

Will was lighting a cigarette, his hands cupped around the match so a small glow was visible between his thick fingers, like a distant bonfire. He didn’t answer.

Vera took another step back. A clasp had become unfastened; she felt the slow sliding of her hair down the back of her neck. In a moment it would be hanging loose. “Why don’t we have lunch tomorrow, Will? Or Monday?” Lunch seemed less perilous than drinks after work.

“I’m generally tied up with business at lunch.” Will moved to the door. “But I’ll give you a buzz next week, maybe. Take care.”

Vera breathed deeply, as though she had barely escaped annihilation by a massive natural phenomenon, an avalanche. Her hair tumbled to her shoulders and the clasp fell to the floor, but Will was gone by then.

On the bus that evening she closed her eyes as if in prayer and whispered, Brauer, Elemi. And they came. They were lying in bed under neatly-arranged blankets, side by side, Brauer on the right and Elemi on his left. Vera waited, but they did not stir. They lay flat on their backs, holding hands, smiling and at peace. The peace that passeth understanding, Vera murmured, and wondered what she meant by that.

They came often in the days and weeks that followed. Brauer and Elemi did not make love, but they were certainly in love. There was no mistaking their constant hand-holding, their long searching glances, the soft sensual haze that floated about them. They furnished their new apartment with colorful wall hangings, lush ferns, and big floor pillows, and lay on the shag rug listening to chamber music and jazz. Other evenings they danced the latest dances in discoteques or went to Charlie Chaplin movies where they shared bags of popcorn, laughed, and sometimes cried. They went ice-skating in Central Park, skimming along arm in arm through clusters of slower, more awkward skaters. Elemi, who was small and slight, wore a crimson velvet skating skirt with beige tights, a white turtleneck sweater, and a crimson beret. Tied to the laces of each skate were two red fur balls which bounced as she moved. She was a delicate sight. Vera, who did not skate, wondered if it was too late to learn. One day Brauer and Elemi rode into the country on their new Mopeds — red for her, blue for him — and picnicked in a field under an elm tree. They tore chunks off a long
French bread and drank red wine, then lay back to rest in the sun, with Brauer’s head in Elemi’s lap. She stroked his hair.

Vera was looking well, radiant, people told her, and she had stopped taking the sleeping pills altogether, which made Jean very happy. One of her women friends, less brash than Will, said Vera looked as though she were having a love affair. Vera shook her head and smiled, but inside she said, Yes, indeed I am.

Freddy brought Thomas, the boy who had refused to do the vivisection experiment, home for the Easter vacation. He was an amiable boy with a soft voice and long straight hair tied in a rubber band. Vera was glad to have him as a guest, and glad also to see Freddy thriving: his only complaints were about the dormitory food and the fact that he had no car. “I’d like at least to get a Moped, Mom.”

“Mopeds are about four hundred dollars.”

“I’ll get a part-time job and pay you back, I promise.”

“I’ll think about it.” She hated to refuse him — he was a good boy, hardworking, not greedy, and she still remembered with emotion how he had hated to leave her so soon after his father’s death. It had been poignant, his young grief mingled with his eagerness to start college. Naturally Vera had urged him to go. It was only after he left that she became ill. But deserving as he was, she had to be careful with money: there were still some hospital bills, Jeanie wanted contact lenses, and in a year and a half she too would be going off to college. Vera shuddered at the thought of her daughter gone. But she would have to release her, and when the time came would do so bravely and cheerfully.

Freddy was kinder to his sister since he had been away, and Jean, to impress Thomas, was agreeable and unselfish. Vera was thankful for the peace. If only John could see the children now. Enraged at their nasty quarrels, which had persisted for several years of shared adolescence, he often used to shout, “Don’t you two have any feeling for each other besides hate?” She had tried to placate him with assurances that it would pass. Had he lived, she could feel vindicated.

In the evenings the four of them would linger at the table over coffee and have long, animated discussions. Freddy was not so much “into” Eastern philosophy any more, he informed Vera. He was more into genetics, and he told of brilliant and daring experiments with DNA molecules. Thomas was into anarchy. After a while the young people would move to the living room and continue their talk sitting on the floor listening to records, while Vera finished cleaning up. They offered to help, but she said she didn’t mind, it relaxed her. Besides, she didn’t feel over-burdened. Thomas liked to cook, and several evenings she found an excellent dinner all prepared: eggplant casserole,
soybean ragout, salads with bean sprouts and alfalfa. When she inquired, he told her shyly that he was also into health foods. Vera was interested in those talks that continued in the living room, but she was hesitant about intruding, and so she went to her room. Often, sitting up in bed holding a forgotten book, she would lapse into visions of Brauer and Elemi traveling on foot through the jungles of South America. There were many dangers: disease, snakes, losing their way in the rough, unfamiliar terrain, but they were unafraid.

Once she saw a man in a television commercial who looked remarkably like Brauer, with broad shoulders, sandy, lank hair, generous eyes, and a stubborn mouth that lost all stubbornness as soon as he smiled. Hot from tennis, the man was reaching for a glass of iced tea. Vera jumped out of bed to flick off the set before he could say a word. She clapped her hands over her ears, for sometimes a few dying words escaped after it was switched off.

Jean was delighted to have Thomas around. Vera could tell by the brightness in her eyes and by her clothing, only the newest jeans and sweaters. But after the first week the boys started to go out at night, leaving her at home. Jean sulked pathetically at the kitchen table, gnawing on a strand of hair.

Vera dried her soapy hands and sat down. “Listen, they’re in college — they feel there’s a great gap. In a year or two Thomas may think you’re the most exciting person around.”

“How can you be so idiotic as to think I care about that nerd,” Jean replied coldly. “It’s not him. It’s me.”

“What do you mean, it’s you?”

“There is not one single boy in the entire junior or senior class who interests me at the moment, or who is interested in me. It makes life extremely tedious. But you wouldn’t understand.”

“I certainly do understand about being lonely,” said Vera “Things will change.”

Jean leaped up and shrieked. “You always say that but they never do! No one will ever like me and I’ll die a virgin! I’m ugly, who would ever want me!” She burst into tears and ran into her room, slamming the door. Vera followed. She sat near her on the bed and tried to take her hand, but Jean yanked it away.

“A virgin, how absurd. At sixteen! You have your whole life ahead of you. Lots of men — boys — will want you. Anyway, you’re always telling me that women can have a full life without men, marriage is a trap, and so forth.”

“I don’t want to get married,” Jean wailed, “I just want somebody to like me. I mean, look at this hair.” She pulled at it wretchedly. “It’s
disgusting. Every girl in school has long blonde hair. If they don't have it they bleach it. I'm so ordinary.”

“You could cut it,” Vera suggested. “Then you’d look different.”

“Oh you, you’re impossible. You don’t understand a thing. Would you please leave me alone in my room? I know you probably mean well but I’d prefer to be alone.”

“All right,” said Vera, shrugging her shoulders. “But I don’t think you’re ordinary.” She understood perfectly the dynamics of these scenes: in the morning Jean would once more brew her fine coffee, having forgotten everything. Vera had pity for her daughter, as well as tolerance for the sputtering fireworks of a dying age. Still and all it was terribly wearing, terribly debilitating. When she finished in the kitchen she sat down at the table, cradled her head in her arms and closed her eyes. Brauer, Elemi, she murmured.

Suddenly, she didn’t know how much time had passed, in the deep stillness of the apartment she thought she heard her name from far off. She didn’t stir. The next moment someone was shaking her by the shoulder.

“Are you O.K., Mrs. Leonard? I’m sorry to wake you.”

Baffled, she looked up at the thin, freckled face. Ah, of course, it was Thomas, the boy staying with them for Easter. He was into anarchy and natural foods. “That’s all right, Thomas. I’m fine.”

Brauer and Elemi had been sailing to Europe, where they planned to go backpacking through France and Italy. They had just returned from a tour of the ship’s kitchen and were deciding whether they wanted to play shuffleboard or simply laze in the sun. Meanwhile they stretched out on deck chairs and drank bouillon. The shock of the intrusion made the blood pound behind Vera’s eyes.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you, but it’s so late. You’ll get a stiff neck sleeping like that.”

She rose and rubbed her eyes with a tight fist. “Where’s Freddy?”

“Freddy — uh — he gave me an extra set of keys.” He walked quickly away from her to the sink, turned on the water and filled a glass. “He was taking this girl home. She lived very far out, I don’t know how long . . .”

Vera could see his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he gulped the drink. “That’s quite all right, Thomas.” She smiled. “I don’t mean to pry. Turn out the lights, will you, when you’re finished? Good night.”

Climbing into bed, she thought to herself, You’d better watch it, Vera, with your Brauer and Elemi.

When the holidays were over and Freddy and Thomas returned to
school, Jean acquired a boyfriend, a curly-haired, wildly energetic boy named Donald, who wore thick glasses too and was reputedly a mathematical genius. They spent long hours in her bedroom discussing intellectual and moral issues with the door open. Vera liked Donald, who often accosted her while waiting for Jean and elaborated complex mathematical theories.

"Mrs. Leonard, did you know that if the fastest rocket ship devised by man were to race the earth in one complete orbit around the sun it would arrive two years later?"

"It that so?"

She was lost in his fevered explanation of objects hurtling through space at frenetic rates of speed — he paced rapidly as he spoke, occasionally bumping into furniture — but impressed by his mental stamina. When he left she felt as though a whirlwind had passed through the apartment, and she sank down in a chair, murmuring, Brauer, Elemi. For they were her constant companions. More alone now that Jean had Donald, Vera took to strolling through Central Park. The days were growing longer and balmy. It stayed light till after seven. She would rush from the elevator after work, deliberately not looking around in case Will might be there, and walk the four blocks to the park, to find Brauer and Elemi waiting for her at their favorite entrance, East 64th Street, near the Zoo. Of course they didn’t look at her directly or speak to her — they stayed slightly off to her left — but they knew she was there and didn’t mind her walking near them. Sometimes they visited the animals. Brauer would call to the elephants, imitating their heavy stamping and the sullen arching of their trunks, while Elemi laughed and fed them peanuts. Vera watched from a few yards off. Later, if she stopped to buy an ice-cream or a soft drink they paused and waited for her. They talked incessantly in soft whispers — what they said was not important, only the glow that enveloped them and that they were generous enough to share.

One evening when Vera came in at dusk, Jean, who was flipping hamburgers expertly, asked with an amused smile, "Come on, tell me, Mom, are you seeing somebody?"

"Of course not," Vera said sharply. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, you’re out a lot, you come home all sort of rosy, and, like, your mind is elsewhere. I think it’s great. You don’t have to keep it a secret from me. We’re both women."

"Don’t be silly." Vera quickly laid the plates on the table "There’s nothing of the kind. I walked home through the park, that’s all."

Late one afternoon at work Will buzzed her on the intercom. "Vera." It sounded like a command.

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“Yes?” She should have sounded more confident, she thought immediately. After all, his was the question, hers the answer.

“How about a drink tonight? It’s warm, we can sit outside at The Blue Door. I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Thanks, Will, it’s a nice idea. But I’m sorry. I’ve —” She took a deep breath for courage. “I’ve got a date.”

“You’ve got a date.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I see.” He hung up.

In a moment he was in her doorway, glaring. “I’d like to say a few words to you.” He shut the door firmly behind him. His shirtsleeves were rolled up above his elbows and his loosened tie hung diagonally across his chest. “It’s not like I’m some stranger trying to pick you up on the street, you know. It’s not like I’m out to make you and then laugh it off.” He was trying with strain to keep his voice down. His thick hair hung crazily over his forehead, and as he spoke, enraged, he wagged a finger at her. She noticed the dark hairs on his hands and felt an odd flicker of desire. He was much larger than she. Vera was afraid. “You know who I am, Vera. Aren’t I good enough to pass an hour with, goddammit? I was good enough last year, when you needed a shoulder to cry on. Sure, that was fine. That was all for you, all taking and no giving. But when I ask for something, your company for an hour, that’s all, oh no, that’s asking too much. And you won’t come straight out and say you don’t want to, no, you give these phony excuses. You know what you are?” He wagged the hairy finger close to her face and she blinked in terror. “You are one helluva selfish, stuck-up bitch.”

She didn’t know what she could possibly say in reply. But she didn’t need to say anything, for as soon as he finished speaking he stalked out of her office and slammed the door loudly behind him. The sound seemed to invade her body and made her shrink in her chair. She folded her arms on her desk and laid her head down. I can’t, she thought. She was sorry about Will, but it was impossible, she was too afraid.

The very first time, she remembered, John had whispered, “Are you afraid?” And when she nodded he stroked her cheek and said, “It will be all right. I’ll take care of you.” She had grown used to him, so that the fear had shrunk very small, to the size of a shriveled pea, and then he died. He promised to take care of her but he broke his promise. She could not do it again with another, who might not take care. Even with John, twenty years, the small fear remained, each time he touched her. Sometimes it was so small, a speck at the bottom of a canyon, that
she could pretend it wasn’t there. But it always was, and she came to understand that she needed it; she was grateful for it. It was the small fear that held her body together and kept her from flying completely wild and perhaps shattering. She was more afraid of what she might do, how she might be, without her small fear, her amulet, the pea under the mattress.

Vera raised her head. There was still some work to finish before she could leave. Would they wait? They were accustomed to her arriving promptly at five-fifteen. She hurried through her papers, especially careful with the account sheets, though, with Will so angry. It would be disastrous if she messed them up, and Will told Howard, and Howard began watching. There were still the hospital bills, Jean’s contact lenses, Freddy’s Moped. . . . At last she was finished and dashed out, not even bothering to wash her face or fix her hair, which had fallen again and hung loose down her back. Let it. It didn’t matter, with Brauer and Elemi.

It was nearly five forty-five when she reached the park entrance. They were still there, thank heaven, sitting on a bench in the shade. Elemi preferred the shade. Vera stopped in relief, panting. She had run all the way. When Brauer and Elemi saw her they rose instantly, joining hands, and began their evening stroll. Of course they had to wait, Vera realized as the slow walking calmed her senses. They are not real, they are mine. They can only do what I make them do. She laughed to herself, thinking of how foolish she had been to worry. They could not go off alone. They would always be there for her, and would do only what she wished and permitted, for they were her own invention.

Brauer was especially gentle towards Elemi this evening. He stroked her hand and picked out the softest, greenest patch of grass for her to sit on. When she twisted her ankle scrambling up a rock he rubbed it tenderly between his palms to ease the pain. Elemi tossed her head back, her long fair hair streaming out on the breeze, and looked up at Brauer with a gaze full of trust and gratitude. Tears came to Vera’s eyes at the sight of them together.

Jean got her first real job, as a junior counselor at a summer camp in Maine. “What are you going to do on your vacation, Mom? Freddy will be working on the Cape, and you’ll be all alone.” They were drinking coffee together after dinner. Vera lit a cigarette and waved the smoke away from Jean, toward the open window.

“I don’t know. Probably stay home and take it easy.”

“You really ought to do something, Mom. You never go anywhere.
You could visit Uncle Matt on Fire Island. They always ask you. Or take a trip. San Francisco? You've never been out west."

"Maybe. I'll see."

The apartment was lonesome when Jean left, but once Vera was on vacation everything would be different. She had known for weeks what she wanted to do. The last evening after work, rather than leaving them on a park bench while she went dutifully home, she brought them right along with her: out the West Side entrance, down the street, into the lobby, up in the elevator. Brauer and Elemi, as usual, were serene, undisturbed by the change. They had been so many places that new adventures did not intimidate them. Vera's hand trembled as she fit the key in the lock. She was overcome with shyness. Should she speak? Welcome them with some joking remark? She decided definitely not. That would be going too far.

"Well, here we are," she muttered to herself. She kicked off her shoes, turned on the air conditioner, fixed a gin and tonic, and flopped down in an armchair in an ecstasy of relaxation, solitude, and freedom.

Brauer and Elemi passed a quiet evening browsing through the books on the shelves, playing Mozart on the stereo, childishly exploring the bedrooms, Jean's, Freddy's, Vera's. As for Vera, it was the most beautiful evening she had spent in years, with nothing to be done, alone and yet not alone. She lay back in her chair listening to the music while they wandered about the apartment hand in hand, and she thought of all the things the three of them would do on her month off. They would go camping in Newfoundland, surfing on the beaches of Hawaii, ambling down the stone streets of Florence in the shadow of the great Cathedral, strolling in tranquility through the rock gardens of Kyoto. It was a summer of endless possibility.

At last Vera decided to go to bed: she was very tired. Brauer and Elemi could settle down anywhere they pleased — there was plenty of room. It was warm and the air conditioner was not working well; she stripped off all her clothes and went to bed without a nightgown. She smoked a last cigarette as she did the daily crossword puzzle, then turned off the bedside lamp. The dark seemed to make the room warmer and almost fragrant, as if there were flowers not far off. Her body felt light and smooth under the cool sheet. She remembered John and ran her hand over the sheet on his side of the double bed. It was odd how little she dwelt on John. She had thought about him so much when she was sick in the hospital that now there seemed nothing left to think about. She didn't even miss him particularly any more, though it had been better to sleep with someone than alone. She had missed
him so much during the months of his dying that now there was no missing left in her. She missed only the feeling of missing him.

Sometimes, from her great distance, she wondered if she had ever loved him. What was love? What did it feel like to love? Could real, flesh and blood people walk around forever holding hands, with stars in their eyes, like Brauer and Elemi? Of course not. They had to work, shop, prepare dinner, raise children. Her marriage, she judged, regarding it from her great distance, had been neither very unhappy nor very happy. It had been dull. Naturally there was a first flush of enchantment, but when that paled, it was dull, there was no use pretending otherwise. And even in that first flush of enchantment it had not been as beautiful as Brauer and Elemi. They never went places or did exciting things. Vera had dreams but John was practical, and she was afraid to burden him further with her dreams. She was even a little embarrassed by them, next to his practical ways. Probably she had loved him, she decided. She had always behaved like a loving wife. Perhaps real love was dull.

She was just falling asleep when she sensed that Brauer and Elemi were in the room. Strange, she had not noticed them enter. Brauer had his hands on Elemi’s shoulders. He pulled her toward him, clasped her tightly and kissed her long on the mouth. Vera was surprised, and a trifle amused. Aha, she thought. So they are not such innocents. Elemi’s arms closed around Brauer and she began caressing his back. Brauer bent and buried his face in her neck, roughly, and Elemi, her eyes closed, leaned her head back and gasped. Her fingers were taut and clutching at him. Vera’s eyes began to pound. No, she thought in panic. Not yet. But they didn’t stop. They sank down to the floor, where Brauer helped Elemi pull off her shirt, then put his lips to her breast. Elemi had her small white hand on the inside of his thigh. Vera shut her eyes tight but the vision remained. There was no way to get rid of them. Not yet, she tried to scream, but no sound would come. She felt herself grow inflamed, blood pounding and rushing to every surface. You want to see it, she whispered angrily. You know you want to see it. Yes, all along she had secretly wondered why, if they were so in love, they never made love. They must have done it behind her back, like naughty children. Why were they showing her now? Why now, she wanted to scream at them. But of course they would not hear. The pounding of her blood was unbearable. Her eyes were hot and every inch of her skin ached as she watched, for now they were intertwined in another long kiss, arms and legs groping, seizing. Vera placed a hand beneath her heart to calm herself, but the warm touch
only made the throbbing worse. If it kept on she would soon burst from her skin.

Furious at herself, she snarled, If you want to see it so badly then take a good look. They were completely naked now. Vera cried out in fright — Brauer was so strong and hard, Elemi so white and frail. His fingers disappeared between her legs; Vera’s spine jerked in a spasm of terror. Elemi seemed nearly faint in her abandon. In the park so pretty and childlike, now she had her legs spread apart, with her arms clinging around Brauer’s neck and her open lips reaching for his. Then he was on top of her. Vera stiffened. Don’t hurt Elemi, she whispered. Don’t. Don’t hurt. He began to push. She could see Elemi’s face very clearly, the tight tendons of her arched neck, the trembling bluish-white of her eyelids, her mouth open as if in shock. Sweat glistened on Elemi’s forehead. Brauer kept pushing, merciless, rhythmic. Elemi’s face was so strained and twisted, Vera could not tell if it was misery or joy. Her own body began moving up and down in rhythm with Brauer’s pushing and she could not stop it. No, not yet, she cried, but she was powerless to stop herself or them. They had escaped her. She had escaped herself.

On and on Brauer pushed — would he never stop? Vera ached to know what Elemi was feeling, poor Elemi, straining with him, pounding up and down on the floor so hard her frail body made a soft thudding sound. Was that wild face twisted in misery or joy? Somewhere within her she remembered that Elemi could feel only what she wished her to feel, yet Vera was powerless, trapped in their eternal rhythm, for she could not choose between misery or joy. Brauer kept pushing, and Elemi’s face kept the terrible riddle, till Vera herself finally erupted from the inside out, shattering the bed, the room, the building, with her innards.

When it was finished she leaned back weakly and wiped her streaming brow with the back of her hand, amazed to have survived. Her body was utterly limp and exhausted, but when she focused her eyes she saw that they, the dream, strained on. Still he pushed without respite and still she thudded beneath him. They would never stop.