Sandra Ives, Thomas Ives

by Robert Wechsler

Home Town

It suddenly comes into Mousy's mind that she ought to go home to Melville, the town that she grew up in (no, not "where she grew up"). It was reading the words "home town" in a somewhat trashy novel that did it. She realizes that the many times she was given the alternative identifying question "What is your home town?" she automatically typed in "Melville" without considering which town she truly considered her "home."

Is the town she has been living in for over twenty years her "home"? No, she could not honestly say it is. Is, then, Melville her "home"? No, she hasn't set foot in it since she went off to college, since she and her brother had their "falling out." That is always the term she uses, with herself and with others, when the subject of family arises. The term has no special meaning in and of itself. The term does not resonate at all. Unlike, suddenly, "home town."

Home is where one's family is but, not long after the falling out, Mousy's parents divorced each other and moved to different places — one to a large city, the other to a village in the mountains. So only her only sibling remained.

Mousy's parents died within ten years after their divorce, but even then she did not use the word "orphan." She feels that neither of them died of a broken

heart, but on occasion, especially when she's feeling down, this seems like the best explanation. Although, as Mousy recalls it, their divorce was as mutual a decision as such things can be, she sometimes wonders whether her mother was merely doing what she thought her husband wanted, and fooling herself into believing that it was what she wanted, too. This is what people do. They sacrifice themselves without even realizing it and, if it doesn't kill them, it may kill their life, and curtail it too.

But this is all supposition because, although she often talked with her father, he was out of touch with what he was thinking and feeling, and even moreso with what his ex-wife might have thought and felt. Mousy used to make fun of how clueless he was about himself. It was, she told him, as if someone had cut apart the two hemispheres of his brain, like they do with epileptics or, at least, used to do. Mousy visited her father occasionally, and her mother once or twice, but she did not attend family get-togethers. Just the word "get-together" was enough to give her a headache. But not a migraine. Mousy has never had a migraine in her life.

No one calls Mousy "Mousy" anymore. Her name is Sandra. Sandra was given the nickname by her brother when she was three and he was ten, and it stuck, with her family and with her schoolmates. As a toddler, she was tiny and she squeaked and squealed and, as her brother used to say, "squeamed" a lot as well. She sounded like a little mouse, and that's all he meant by the nickname. For those who knew her as a child, back in Melville, it also never

seemed to have a negative connotation. It was just what she was called. The nickname had a negative connotation only for Sandra, and only when she went off to college. No one thereafter knew her as anything but Sandra, said as if the first “a” were an “o.” But she has always thought of herself as Mousy.

No one in the real world asks Mousy what her “home town” is. They ask her where she is from. She answers that she is from Melville. Saying where she is from has never set anything going in her mind, nor has it caused anything to stir her emotions — “to echo” in them, she thought was more appropriate when, after reading the words “home town,” she started thinking about why the words had such an effect on her. “Echoing” means that she has kept thinking about those two words throughout the day, especially when she takes a mental break from whatever she is doing. It is as if she were back in her schooldays again, back in Melville, daydreaming in class about this and that.

This is the first time she has ever longed for Melville. Not for anything specific, certainly not for any*one* specific, but for the town, what it was when she lived there and even what it has become without her, if that can be called “longing.” Due to this curiosity about the present, it feels like something more than mere nostalgia. It feels more like the throbbing of an addiction after many years of being clean, but Mousy has never felt close to, not to mention addicted to, Melville, nor has she ever experienced any addiction, at least not her own. Not liquor, not drugs, not smoking, not even the Internet. Abstention she knows very well, but not addiction. And yet that is the way she explains her

feeling to herself.

She looks at herself in the mirror. Not a full-length mirror (she has none), nor a full-wall bathroom mirror (she prefers shelves and artwork). Just a mirror on the wall in the entryway of her condominium, a mirror she purchased for its colorfully patterned frame. It's not something she does very often, so it is a bit of a surprise to find that she does not look any different. Nor does she look the way she would like. But she does look acceptable. A smile and some may find her pretty.

Mousy knows that she will not have a good night's sleep until she packs her bags and visits Melville. She has no idea what she will do there or whom she will contact. She has no idea whether she will break the silence with her brother or put herself into a position to run into him. But she does allow herself to imagine running into him, not the conversation they would have, but rather the circumstances and the places they might encounter each other, even though, she realizes, she does not know which places remain intact or how she might get herself into the circumstances. Therefore, most of the scenes she imagines are static and without detail: a party, the lobby of his law firm's office building (which most likely did not exist when she left town), a hallway in City Hall (where he most likely has a second office and which cannot have been replaced), Longfellow Hall (her in the orchestra, him in the first mezzanine; if her imagination were more cinematic, she or her brother would be sitting in a box, and a curtain and, perhaps, opera glasses would be involved).

She spends too much of the energy that remains after bedtime trying to guess what play would be playing at the Longfellow (she has only a slight interest in opera, no interest in classical music, and no appreciation whatsoever for jazz: it gives her a headache). The energy is spent spinning her wheels, because she finds her mind blank of play titles, other than a few from Shakespeare. Her brother would likely be able to imagine a whole slew of names, but Mousy's mind is not up to the task. At least not at three in the morning.

At one point, even later in the night, she decides — actually decides — to give two weeks' notice at work, which decision will allow her to sleep, knowing exactly when she would be going to Melville and why it would not be tomorrow. But instead of falling asleep, she rescinds this decision and, the next morning, tells her boss that her brother has had a stroke, and that, as his only sibling, with both their parents deceased, she has to go home to take care of him. The date of her return would, therefore, have to be left indefinite. What can he say? She is the best worker he has. Not, she knows, the best employee, but the best worker. And that counts for a lot. She is finally cashing in some of the forehead stars she has earned, but not been awarded, over the years.

When she puts the phone down, she realizes how inauspicious it is that her trip back home to Melville has begun with two echoing words in a book, a sleepless night, a rescinded decision, and a lie. Fortunately, she does not believe in omens, auguries, or other kinds of superstition. But she does believe

in telling the truth, and the lie bothers her like an itch that, when you scratch it, travels all along your back, up and down, back and forth, until, at last, it runs out of back. In other words, she has forgiven herself for the lie before her head hits the pillow her first evening back in Melville.

On her long drive to her destination, she tries out some reasons why she is going home. People are going to ask her. She can't say it was just two words in a trashy novel. How about nostalgia? Curiosity? Coming to terms with the past? Catching up with old friends? Mourning her parents? Patching up her relationship with her brother? All of the above?

The last possibility is too personal and not, necessarily, true. Other than running into him, she has expended no thought on her brother at all. She long ago stopped mourning her parents. She has not thought of her old friends, not even to tell stories about them. Not one of them has kept in touch with her. Not one. She has come to peace with the past. She doesn't dream or daydream about it. From the first day she introduced herself as Sandra – although not all at once – she successfully moved on. She has accumulated more than enough of her own past.

It was the idea of "home" that kept her up last night. An idea without nostalgia. Or, as she has already recognized, not only with nostalgia. There was also curiosity. But is curiosity enough to drop everything, lie, and take a long drive to a town that she has thought about hardly more often than she has read its namesake author (which has not been since college, and even then

only “Bartleby the Scrivener” in that terrible class called The Roots and Fruits of Existentialism)?

Mousy gets off at the next exit, turns into the first road she comes to, and pulls off onto a patch of dirt. She cannot drive a mile further without a raison d’être for her visit to Melville. She sits there waiting for revelation, but her mind remains blank. She tells herself she needs some air in her lungs, opens the car door, gets out with a little groan, rubs her right hip, and starts walking.

“Home” is not enough. She doesn’t need to have a home, some ancestral demesne, like a member of an aristocracy. She certainly has no desire for a fatherland or a motherland. Melville is for her, if anything, a brotherland. Whole peoples have never gone home once they found a haven elsewhere. She may not have a home, but she certainly has a haven. And yet “home” is all she has to explain what she is doing, which is unlike anything she has ever done. She is the least spontaneous person she knows.

A shudder goes through her. An actual, not a metaphorical shudder. It starts at her shoulders and descends. It passes through her stomach, where it shakes her into a familiar feeling of light nausea. Then she feels it in her bladder and in a tightening of her hips, after which the shudder bypasses her groin and ends with a spasm in her right calf. Or perhaps that was caused by the hill she just climbed.

What Mousy realizes, what gave rise to her descending shudder, is that there is no raison d’être for her visit to Melville. None at all. All that is left is for

her to accept this fact. What happens will happen. That horrible thought, akin to spontaneity, has somehow become her guide. She looks into the woods, as if expecting to see a plaque with these words hanging from a tree.

There has not been a clear impetus. There does not need to be a reason. What she needs to do now is walk further into the woods and pee. For this there is both impetus and reason.

While squatting behind a tree, she realizes that her lack of any raison d'être for her visit is too personal a thing to tell people. They would find it strange. They would find her strange. It would be as if she had taken the plaque and hung it around her neck.

So she will tell people a different story, that is, a lie, a white lie, a tactical lie. She will tell them that, after years away, she longed to go home. No one will know that she has not kept in touch with anyone, or vice versa. To each individual she runs into, it will be an unexpected, propitious reunion. None will remember, after all these years, why they lost touch or, most likely, when. They will, at least in some cases, recognize each other, look each other over with a glance, hug, summarize their lives in terms of job, spouse, and children, and if the other has some hole to fill in her life, there might be an invitation for coffee or even lunch. Other old friends may be invited too.

No one will ask, "And how is your brother?" because her brother is a town celebrity. Everyone knows that he is fine and active. Everyone but Mousy, that is, who knows nothing about the state of his health, other than his mythical

stroke, which due to her disbelief in superstition she has no worries about becoming real because she lied about it. It's not as if she had wished it on him. And even if she had, her wishes do not come true. What a horrible idea this was, wishes coming true! We simply do not have that kind of control over others. Wish fulfillment is a selfish dream, not a potential reality.

Relieved, she walks down the hill to her car and gets back on to the highway. When she sees the first sign for Melville, it seems to wake her up out of a dreamless sleep. Her groggy mind must quickly decide which exit to take. She can't remember how many there are and, even if she did remember, there might be more than there were back when. There can't be fewer. Things don't work that way, even when towns become ghost towns. And Melville is not a ghost town, not according to its Wikipedia demographics anyway.

Her first thought is to guess at the total number of exits and pick the first whole number between that number and zero that comes into her mind. But as she begins to do this, it seems ridiculous to her. She is not a random number generator. She has to learn to make decisions, especially unimportant decisions that might perchance become important.

To decide which part of Melville to get off in, she should, she tells herself, decide where it would be best for her to stay. In a hotel downtown? In a motel near an exit? Near her old neighborhood, if they have a place to stay there now? Yes, they must have built a strip there by now, with big-box stores, chain restaurants, and a choice of different levels of motel. Near her old neighborhood

would appear the most natural choice.

Hawthorne Boulevard: the first Melville exit. Stowe Street: the second Melville exit. Tarkington Avenue: that's the one. She takes the exit right after watching an electronic billboard switch through two different ads, one for a local Mafia-themed restaurant, the second for loans from a local bank, which reads: Hope Springs Eternal at FirstMel. While sitting at the light at the end of the off-ramp, she selects a lodging from those shown on her map app. She does it by name. How can she resist the Magnificent Amberson?

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The first thing Mousy notices when she enters the lobby of what turns out to be a small inn or large bed-and-breakfast is a plaque behind the desk that reads: Prop. Laurel Annunziata. That can only be her classmate Laurel O'Hara, who had "a thing" for Steve Annunziata as far back as junior high. She had "scored": the husband she wanted and this refurbished mansion that might live up to its name. She will be Mousy's first encounter, if she happens to be in.

She is in. But Mousy does not recognize her, because she has put on a lot of pounds and her hair color has become a caricature of the strawberry blond that made her stand out from her peers. Laurel recognizes Mousy, however,

and Mousy hears that word for the first time in more years than she can imagine.

Laurel exclaims that Mousy didn't turn out to be mousy at all. Then she asks if Mousy has come to see her brother. Mousy has come to see everyone.

Laurel says how proud she must be of her brother. City Attorney, partner in the best firm in town, with a lovely wife who seems to be on the board of every nonprofit around. Mousy nods and gives Laurel a humble grin, as if she knew all about their accomplishments and was not the sort to benefit from them vicariously.

Mousy changes the subject by asking about Steve. The result is too much information about someone she never found the slightest bit interesting or likeable. And yet now she feels a touch of fondness for someone who had so much been himself and does not appear to have bothered changing. A man who "stuck to his guns," in Laurel's words.

Finally, Laurel says she has to go to a Chamber of Commerce meeting. As she gets her things together behind the desk, she asks Mousy if she has kept in touch with Frances. Mousy shakes her head. Laurel tells her that Frances is a librarian at the Melville University Library. Not surprising. And that she should go by the library and find out the latest in the world of books. There is a note of sarcasm in her voice. Laurel once liked books almost as much as she liked Steve. Does she think that Mousy looks bookish?

Original Sin

Mousy recognizes Frances Lamberton immediately. They share a hug, then a lookover and a smile at how much, and yet how little, they have changed. As a child, Frances was a bookworm in a town of bookworms, a town whose streets were named after American writers, at least up until the Second World War, when developers started naming streets after their children and their wives, or giving them names they felt would attract more purchasers. In a different town, Frances says, she probably would have ended up as a nurse or a social worker. There would be half the number of book clubs, and the public library would be half its size. The influence of one's environment, nurture over nature.

Frances emphasizes her bookishness by wearing Fifties retro glasses, "the defining librarian accessory," she calls them. Her humor and complete acceptance of Mousy put Mousy at ease for the first time since she read those two fateful words in a book. A book, of all things.

Frances puts a cherry on the sundae by asking whether people still call her "Mousy." Mousy says that they do in Melville, but nowhere else. Elsewhere they call her Sandra. Frances says she will call her Sandra hereafter, even in Melville and especially because, the way Mousy says it, the "a" is pronounced a much better way than in her own name.

And then Frances notes that that must be the name of Thomas's wife, too, even though she goes by Sandy, with an "a" that can only be pronounced the Frances way. Fortunately, Mousy isn't Sandy any more than Frances is Franny. The same but different.

Frances compliments Mousy by complimenting her brother, saying how he seems to be one of the few people in the city government about whom there are no rumors of using his office to benefit himself. How civil he is to everyone, both in and out of public meetings. How although most people think you can't expect anything better from our city officials, that it's just an ingrained habit, Frances does. Does Sandra?

Mousy smiles.

Frances tells Mousy that she has been thinking of writing an origin story of misuse of office in Melville. As if misuse of office were a super hero, Mousy thinks. If Frances can't get it into one of the newspapers, she could always put it up on one of the city-oriented blogs. It's a story that will surely fascinate Sandra. Would she like to hear it? Does she have a choice? She is happy to let Frances get it off her chest.

Of course, the story involves books. What else? Frances reminds Mousy how she managed a lending library of Nancy Drew mysteries back in third grade, and Mousy nods, although her memory of this library is so faint, she thinks it may be due only to suggestion. She is all too open to suggestion. Mousy does remember Thomas's library of dinosaur books, but only because of

the stories their parents told about it. She herself was an infant then. Thomas never mentioned it later. He did not dwell on the past.

As Frances tells it, Melville's "original sin," its "fall from grace," was, in fact, bookish. Formerly an "edenic garden" of villages, Melville was incorporated as a town in 1919, right after the First World War had ended. The city's Founding Fathers are said to have had sufficient vision to see that the villages needed to be pulled together into a town for the soldiers coming home from the war and starting families.

But Frances says that this isn't at all what happened. It had nothing to do with houses, it had to do with books. And the person with the "bibliophagic vision" was not a Founding Father. In fact, she was a relatively poor woman who owned a tiny shop that sold books (old and new) as well as stationery, which she produced on a little hand press in a chicken shed out back.

This bookshop owner was Sandra's very own ancestor Barbara Ives Strand. She had a vision of literary tourists flocking to the most literary town in these United States and, of course, to her bookshop. She was what would now be called a "visionary entrepreneur."

Barbara needed a name for her town, a name that would be both appropriate and special. In 1918, the roster of great American writers included Twain and Emerson and Stowe and Longfellow and Hawthorne. But Barbara's favorite writer, Frances says as if it were a surprise, was Herman Melville. She had a special place in her heart for Queequeg. She was an unusual woman.

The problem was that Herman Melville was not generally considered the great writer we think he is today, although we certainly don't read him enough (fortunately, Frances was not the sort to put Mousy on the spot). And he had no ties whatsoever to any of the villages that came to be the city that would bear his name. But Barbara was a believer. And she believed that Melville's centennial — 1919 — would change everything. So she decided that her then imaginary town would be named after him and would grow with his reputation. And, more important, that every street in the town would be named after an American writer, the very writers whose books she sold in her bookstore.

If you go to Europe, Frances says with passion, you will find streets named after all sorts of writers and other artists. But in these United States, you won't find many streets named after writers who didn't live in that particular city. And often not even them. She asks Sandra whether the town she lives in has streets named after writers, and Mousy shakes her head, even though she hasn't really thought about Melville's street names, not to mention those in her or any other town. Names are names. You simply come to accept them.

Frances breathlessly asks questions that must, to her, have felt sparklingly poetic. Such as: How many Frost Roads have you taken through a woods on a snowy evening? How many Stein Streets have you seen yourself being seen in? How many cabins have you seen with the address Stowe Street?

Sandra's ancestor, says Frances (daring Sandra to say these two words together quickly ten times), wanted to live in and prosper from the most literary

town in America. And she was clever enough to realize how little likelihood there was that she could make her vision look desirable, or even profitable, to the men who would later be dubbed Melville's Founding Fathers, that is, the successful farmers and store owners in the area. So she turned to the Founding Mothers, because it was the Founders' wives who shopped in her store. And they simply loved the idea.

Frances could imagine Barbara Ives Strand saying something like, "You could ask your husbands to name the streets after you and your daughters, but that would look selfish. Naming them after famous writers, so that the city, with its excellent college, would become a literary mecca — this would make everyone prouder, richer, and happier. People would be so happy, they would let you (that is, your husbands) do pretty much anything you want with the town government."

And that is just what happened. Everyone jumped on board, Melville was named and incorporated in time for the centennial, and the next year, after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, Barbara Ives Strand was elected the town's first mayor and the first chair of a special planning committee that recommended a law requiring that all streets be named after famous American writers, all names to be approved by the owner of the renamed Melville Bookshop. It wasn't long before Kinaqua College was renamed Melville University.

The streets and country lanes were renamed or given the first formal

names they ever had, and every new road was given a name that seemed, to Barbara, appropriate. Melville Bookshop grew and grew, and Melville University, with its growing English department, exclusively used the store for its students' textbooks.

Frances can't stop. She talks about the wealth that Sandra's ancestor accumulated, how she invested it, and how the way she invested it (and how she bought everything with cash) saved her when the stockmarket crash came ten years later. The department store, a movie theater, and land, land, land.

And then there was the husband, whose life seemed to be a footnote not only in Frances' story, but also in Barbara's life. Frances speculates that he most likely died of loneliness, considering how rarely his wife must have been at home.

At last Frances reaches the moral of the story, and it's a three-part moral no less. First, that Melville's founding set the stage for its future: an act of self-interest that, while helping the community, was intended equally to help its founder's vocation and avocation, and to give her an ongoing naming project that, with Melville's rapid growth, was second only to Adam's. Second, that this story, like all stories in Melville, was hidden behind another, in this case grander story, which gave credit to those who took power over everything but the naming project, about which they didn't "care a farthing." Third, as the first mayor, Barbara Ives Strand set an example for all future mayors to be little more than the smiling figurehead of a government run mostly by people who

were never elected, or even chosen by the mayor.

With glowing eyes expressing what must feel like a victory to her, Frances concludes that Barbara Ives Strand's self-serving creation of the city of Melville was its original sin. The end.

But the glow suddenly vanishes as Frances apologizes for the "teachy" tone of her story. Her storytelling is so moralistic, she says, that she only lasted a year in the children's section of the public library before she was moved to Reference. The biggest problem was that her morals weren't always the parents' morals. Frances was too freethinking (and single and childless) for the parents' tastes. A lightning rod belongs out of sight. When they can't put you on the roof, they put you in Reference. When that isn't enough, you seek refuge at the university. And in marriage.

Despite its "teachy" tone, the story has made Mousy feel close to Frances, to want to see her again, she can't say why. When they share another hug, it feels more meaningful. Mousy says, with genuine warmth, that they have to have lunch or dinner while she's in town. Frances heartily agrees. She seems to do everything heartily. Still. Mousy doesn't have a hearty bone in her body. Some things never change.

As she drives back to the Amberson, Mousy recalls the other Barbara Ives, her own second cousin, the family's other black sheep, and this gives Mousy a soft feeling of satisfaction. Barbara the Gambler, Barbara the Wastrel, who took the money from selling the Melville Bookshop to Barnes & Noble and

dropped it in Las Vegas and Macau. Perhaps the two black sheep deserve each other. Perhaps she should look Barbara up. But what is the likelihood that Barbara returned to Melville after all that she did? She did not escape, as Mousy had. She was, effectively, banished, simply by not being able to hold her head up in Melville. Mousy could; she has already proved it. She did nothing wrong but vanish.

A part of her wants to take Barbara under her wing, perhaps even ready her for a return to Melville. But she doesn't know yet if she's ready herself. And yet here she is.

Duty

Back at the Magnificent Amberson, Mousy is shown up to her room by a prematurely wrinkled, impish woman who introduces herself, with a firm handshake and a look right in the eye, as Eliza. Eliza explains to Mousy that the shabbiness of the décor is due not to the failure of the proprietress to take care of the furnishings, but rather to the theme of the inn, which is that of the 1919 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel itself: the decline of a family and its home. Guests are supposed to experience this decline, while knowing in the back of their minds that everything is clean and in tip-top shape.

What can Mousy do but smile at this unusual canned speech?

Eliza looks Mousy in the eye again and tells her she must be Thomas's sister. Mousy acknowledges this fact with another smile. Perhaps when she leaves Melville, she will leave her smile behind, since it says just about all she needs to say. She can let it sit in for her.

Eliza tells Mousy that she spent years playing go-between between Thomas and her boss — no, her former boss — who is known to everyone as "the Duke," but is neither band leader nor Western actor, but the head of the city's Public Works department. She tries to make Mousy feel good by telling her that Thomas is OK, that he always treated her with respect, which is not something

she can say for the Duke. She slaved for the Duke more than twenty years out of nothing but a sense of duty, an unrecognized, taken-for-granted sense of duty.

Eliza, who has been doing this and that all over Mousy's room as she talks, comes to a sudden stop. She seems to freeze, as if they were playing Red Light, Green Light and Mousy were "it." It lasts only a few seconds, but when she starts moving again (without permission from "it"), she seems different. She looks Mousy in the eye again, but there is something a bit rabid rather than searching or beseeching in her eyes. She seems about to impose something on Mousy, to give herself a Green Light and touch "it" in a way that Mousy doesn't think she wants to be touched.

Eliza approaches Mousy, but stops a few feet away and tells Mousy to sit herself down. Eliza remains standing. Mousy waits while Eliza appears to emotionally prepare herself for something. It's not long before she begins to pour her heart out to Thomas's sister.

Duty, duty, duty is the one-note tune she sings, the one-note tune she says she's danced to all her life. It's a lot better, she insists (but not very convincingly), than running, hopping, crawling, or sleepwalking through life. Mousy smiles at the thought of skipping through life instead. That would be some way to live.

For Eliza, it's duty, duty, duty from the time she wakes up to the time she goes to sleep, when she cooks and eats, works and plays, wars and worships,

even when she does her duty, as they say. If sharks don't stop, why should Eliza? Even though she's not sharkish at all, she's swum with enough of them, albeit a fin's-length behind and without that nice little wriggle and that big smile of confidence sharks display. She has a smile of knowing things *they* don't know, that they couldn't know, but of course they don't even know the smile's there.

No one handed her an apple of duty. She says she was born with it stuck in her mouth, like a suckling pig. And we all know what happens to suckling pigs.

Eliza was a gofer. Still is, in fact. What she did at Public Works, essentially, was whatever she was told, and she kept it under her hat. Since she didn't wear a hat, she kept it in her pocket, and made sure never to take it out and leave it somewhere where somebody might see it. She felt like some sort of kangaroo whose pockets are for keeping secrets in, caring for them like the baby she never had.

Twenty years of this, without an office, without a computer, even without a desk (but with a cellphone, so they could call her anytime anywhere). All out of duty, she repeats. Duty.

Mousy never realized how boring other people's duties are. That must be why no one talks about them. When they talk about work, they talk about office politics, the people, not the actual duties. Mousy doesn't talk about work at all, and no one asks.

Eliza moves on to bars, how her colleagues (although she didn't use this word; she call them "the boys") turned up there together all the time, mostly because they had no choice. They had to be one of the gang, one of the boys. And then on to laughter, how everybody always laughed *with* the bosses, not *at* them. To her that says it all. It doesn't get worse than that. It was, of course, her duty to laugh along and to play along, to be a "good-time girl."

Is everyone just doing their duties? she asks Mousy. She doesn't wait for a response. That's gotta be how it is, she says, but who'd ever admit it. At least to her. She doesn't see a lot of admissions of any kind. Maybe if she were a priest, but then they'd be called "confessions."

Although Mousy is not a priest herself, Eliza decides to make a confession to her: she doesn't really like people. And she doesn't care whether people like her. That's why duty is so important to her, Mousy realizes. It's her duty to act as if she liked people, to do what they ask and party with them, not because she wants to please or be liked, not because they've impressed her or she wants to impress them, but purely out of duty. And because it's easier to say yes, Eliza says.

Mousy doesn't find it easier to say yes. Nor does she really like people either, or want to impress them, although sometimes she finds them impressive. She is sure she would find her brother impressive. She is impressed with Frances, too. Frances has become the self she was meant to be, and she is so wonderfully hearty and passionate. But she is exceptional. Most

people are unimpressive and not worth trying to impress.

Eliza's confession gives her a second wind. She talks about what she would do if she were a boss, how she'd never intimidate anyone, because she has too much pride to be a bully. Nor would she insist that everybody follow her around like sheep or keep their pockets full of secrets.

But what would her duty be? She'd have to find a different sort of duty to get her up in the morning and off to work. Her duty, she comes up with off the top of her head it seems, would be to run Public Works like a bank: have everyone speak softly instead of shouting (or whispering), drink tea instead of liquor, chew food until it's liquid, treat tax money like deposits, and be polite instead of political, so that everyone else could be polite, with empty pockets and hands free to put in them.

Her guess was that Thomas would be that sort of boss, if he could stop being a gofer in a pin-striped suit. A decent, respectful gofer, but a gofer nonetheless.

The performance is over, and Mousy is at a loss. The only thing she can think to do is go over to her purse in order to give Eliza a tip. Isn't that how one ends an encounter with a gofer in an inn?

But the outpouring of Eliza's heart requires Mousy to do or say something else first. It would too crude to simply tip her and show her the door. She probably should smile at Eliza in such a way as to show her understanding and support. But what sort of smile would that be? It would also be

appropriate to say something that would show that she too knew something about duty. But what does she know about duty? *Her* life isn't driven by it.

Or should she say something clever, such as "Maybe it's time for *me* to empty my pockets of their secrets," or something sympathetic, like "I hope doing your duty here is much more fulfilling"? But she doesn't want to hear about working at the Amberson, and she is pocketless. And if she had any, she would empty them only in order to shower and change for dinner. She can see no commonality between herself and this woman. So she gives Eliza the most sympathetic smile she can muster, and walks to her purse for a tip. Eliza accepts the tip with thanks, and leaves, as is her duty.

Mousy realizes that Eliza might see her performance as part of her duty to entertain guests. It's the best she can do. It's the ball she balances on her nose. And it does ensure herself a good tip, and provides something to be remembered for. So what Mousy did was fine. Mousy is fine. And that is fine with Mousy.

A Proverbial Duck

Mousy chooses a restaurant for dinner the same way she chose the inn: by name. The name of the restaurant she chooses is Miyazaki. She loves the animes of Hayao Miyazaki, and has never seen a restaurant named after him (assuming that it is not the name of the owner). She also feels comfortable sitting at sushi bars when she's alone. There is always an interesting show to watch, with no cover charge. And no one goes to sushi bars to pick up women. She has never been harassed. Not once.

Mousy tries to imagine whom she might run into at Miyazaki. She comes up with a few names, but cannot visualize the face of any of her old friends or acquaintances, no matter how hard she tries. She grows frustrated with herself and, worse, afraid she won't recognize anyone other than Frances, whom she sought out in her natural habitat. She considers picking up dinner at a chain restaurant and eating it in her room. But the idea of retreat annoys her. She changes and leaves for Miyazaki.

The restaurant is small, and only one table is filled. No one is sitting at the sushi bar. The restaurant's walls are filled with posters of Miyazaki's films and what must be blown-up pages from what must be his manga. It's heaven for Mousy. She nods at the waitress's greeting, and sits herself down at the sushi

bar. But before looking at the fish in front of her, she turns and takes in each of the posters and manga pages. The posters bring back memories, and the manga pages make her decide to seek them out. She has never read a manga before. She needs to open herself to new experiences. Thinking this, however, is anything but a new experience.

The sushi chef greets Mousy with a big smile and a movement that feels like a bow, but isn't. Mousy looks over the selection of fish in front of her. Maguro, hamachi, sake, saba, tako, unagi, uni, ebi, tamago. The old standards. She is old-fashioned. She likes straight sushi and sashimi, none of those fancy rolls with spicy this and tempura that. It is all about texture for her. It is a sensual, nearly sensuous experience. What is most important to her is the freshness and quality of the fish, and the warmth of the rice. White rice. Brown does not belong under fish.

Pickled ginger has always been an issue for her. She loves the flavor of ginger, but at most restaurants it is doctored with artificial coloring and repulsive to her. But at her favorite place, and here, she notices, they use no coloring. She will not place the ginger on the fish, because it affects the texture of the bite and overwhelms the other senses. She eats the ginger all by itself, the way it was intended. And although she can't have enough of it, she limits herself to a thin slice each time she switches from one kind of fish to another. But she doesn't cheat by switching after each piece. She eats one kind of fish at a time, and then moves on. It's nice, in the midst of the partially unknown, to

have such a clear, comfortable plan.

Mousy waves away the menu offered to her by the sushi chef. She prefers to say the Japanese names for the fish while pointing. It makes her feel as if she were on vacation in Japan, a vacation she has not yet taken.

While placing her order, Mousy has the sense that someone is standing behind her. When she has completed her order, and the chef has made another non-bow, a middle-aged woman sits two seats away from her, not close enough to be intrusive, but not far enough to make conversation difficult.

Mousy does not recognize the woman. She feels sure that, although a similar age, she did not know her back when. Mousy senses that the woman is not seeking privacy, and decides to take the initiative in beginning a conversation. After all, she has not come to Melville to keep to herself. She can do that perfectly well where she lives.

They engage in a short conversation, but it is merely a prelude to the imposition of the woman, Jane Asaki, on the captive audience whom Jane has learned is the brother of Melville's City Attorney.

Jane tells Mousy that she has been dealing with Thomas a lot here in Melville. She deals with him because she and her husband own a property development firm called Tateru, which is Japanese for "to construct." Her husband is from Japan. They live about a hundred miles north of Melville.

Their specialty is "village-type developments," both urban and suburban, and she describes them in detail. She calls what they do "micro-town

planning." Her husband, Hideo, oversees design and construction. He likes to work with paper, engineers, and construction workers. She works with bankers, lawyers, politicians, and city employees and board members, but she can't say she *likes* working with any of them.

Jane says that her husband is a "neotraditionalist," which she defines as the embracing of the traditions of an area, in material and design. He adapts local traditions to a village situation in order to make better use of space, environment, and light, and better conserve energy, water, and open land. Her husband's ideal is the rabbit warren. Her ideal is a grand house on a cliff overlooking the ocean, but she is not the architect.

Since most non-architects are traditionalists, most people like Hideo's designs. But developments, even attractive villages like theirs, are seen as lowering property values and as increasing property taxes through an increase in the number of school-age residents. This is why there is often opposition to even their most well-appreciated projects. And this is where lawyers, like Mousy's brother, come in.

Even if lawyers like Mousy's brother can turn anything into what passes as rational argument, the process is not particularly rational. Emotion and politics usually override perceptions of how a development looks and how it will affect pocketbooks. With each new town, Jane walks into a different fairy tale with different kings and princesses, ogres and monsters, and tests of might and mind.

Without property development there would be little to argue about in local politics, other than the occasional "adult bookstore" or a shooting by a police officer. And there would also be little for politicians to take credit for or to get special personal benefits from. So, despite public opposition, politicians need developers as much as developers need them. Politicians are to Jane what parking lots are to Hideo: a necessary evil.

However, while it hurts Hideo to meet parking requirements (he dreams of a world with public transit and shared automobiles), Jane derives no pain from lawyers. The reason for this is that she has learned an art that she calls "composure." This art includes everything from equanimity and serenity to indifference and *sangfroid*. She feels that this art allows her to out-lawyer lawyers, because unlike the controlled and courteous Thomas, most lawyers let their emotions, and sometimes their clients', lead them around.

Although Jane made out as if she were going to talk about Mousy's brother, she doesn't seem to have much to say about him. He isn't colorful enough for her to tell stories about him. But he is an adequate lead-in to the local lawyer she was "forced to hire," she doesn't say by whom.

This lawyer told her, at their first meeting, about Melville's "pay-to-play" culture. Mousy is given the opportunity to cut Jane short when Jane acknowledges that Mousy may know more about it than she does. But Mousy chooses to let Jane talk. After all, it will be a while before the sushi is ready, and Mousy knows nothing about any aspect of Melville's culture. "Pay to play"

sounds fun, like one of those programs to get musicians to play free on the streets on summer evenings.

"Pay to play" turns out to mean that there is a charge for everything, for every step in the land use process, for nearly every individual with decision-making power or influence. The charge increases with the level of difficulty or opposition; it costs a lot to get anyone to go out on a limb. Pay-to-play culture means that everyone is in on it or afraid of the consequences of opposing or exposing it. As Jane puts it, it's one big cover-up.

What fascinates Jane about Melville's pay-to-play culture is its quirks. She can't say the word "quirk" enough. One quirk is that the payments developers have to make are called "insurance premiums," as if they were insuring officials against a fall from a high place. The higher the place, the higher the insurance premium. Mousy is delighted by this show of creativity.

Another quirk involves the town's not-for-profit sector, as Jane formally denominates it. Melville doesn't have the usual Mayor's Golf Tournament, which every developer has to contribute to, or else (without anyone having to be told). Melville has The Cereno Fund which fills the roles of umbrella charity, community foundation, arts council, social service agency, and slush fund for city officials, party officers, local state representatives, and behind-the-scenes power brokers. The Cereno Fund has been around for two generations — "it's our age," Jane declares as if this makes it very old indeed — and has an endowment of over $200 million. Jane's lawyer tells her that it is the only

community foundation where individuals' donor-advised funds give at least a third of their donations to where the foundation's officers tell them to give.

Her lawyer calls it an "all-terrain vehicle" for community support, pay to play, and money laundering. Jane's firm has itself contributed $250,000, in amounts that began small and kept increasing as more was invested in the project. No one outside the Fund itself has ever asked for a single penny, but the timing of the calls from the Fund's development officers is always impeccable. And they never call at dinner time.

Beyond the $250,000 in contributions to The Cereno Fund and $75,000 in campaign and PAC contributions, Jane and her husband, she says, agreed to hire the daughter of the Planning and Zoning Commission's chair as a lawyer for their house closings, to do what they could to help get the council president's son into her husband's American alma mater, to sponsor the youth soccer team of a son of the chair of the Zoning Board of Appeals, and even to retain the Duke's nephew (a Public Works employee himself) as their landscaper. These were only some of the tests, Jane says, that they were given in order to gain the princess's hand.

Jane manages to return to Mousy's brother. She says that he has always been a gentleman to her. He has efficiently and respectfully represented all the boards, their members, and those who appoint their members by delaying the process and putting up obstacles that vanish into thin air every time Jane makes a payment or agrees to a compromise or a contractor. Each time, he

takes Jane's lawyer into a corner of the room and whispers in his ear, and that is that. He makes the process feel like a game of well-mannered, but reasonably competitive croquet.

Jane suggests that Mousy ask her brother about the process. She thinks that, if Mousy were to show interest, and promise to keep mum, he would come clean about it. It would be a revelation, and there will likely be some very funny stories to be told.

Jane says that the story of their village development in Melville is not one of those funny stories, because she kept her "composure," connected the dots, and adapted to the city's culture like a proverbial duck to water (in fact, her husband wants to place a duck bas relief on the village community center as an inside joke). The result will be the best village her husband has ever designed, because few of his decisions were questioned. That's not the focus of Melville's land use process. It's a win-win process for everyone involved.

When the chef hands Mousy and Jane the first plates of sushi, Jane apologizes for such a long, detailed story, hoping that it was at least of some interest to Mousy. It was. She insists that Mousy's brother is not at fault, that he played his role in the process professionally, fairly, and respectfully. And then they dine.

Since Jane shows no interest in Mousy's story, both of them could focus on appreciating the texture and subtle flavors of their sushi and sashimi. Another win-win process. While Jane is indulging herself with a dessert of red bean

mochi balls, she receives a text from Hideo that he is ready to go home. The goodbyes are fond and physical, although they have not really established a connection.

Mousy assumes that Hideo went drinking with men while Jane ate alone or, as it turned out, with Mousy. Mousy knows who would be doing the driving.

Now that Mousy is alone, with a dessert she ordered only out of courtesy to Jane, she wonders whether, if she had stayed home, she would have used her position as brother to the City Attorney to get some goodies for herself or the family she would possibly have. She smiles, but it's not clear to her whether she finds some delight in the idea of having stayed home, or whether she finds the idea of her engaging in corruption absurd. More likely she smiled because she has no idea what she would have done, any more than she knows what she will do now that she is here. One smiles like this when one doesn't have a clue.

Mousy too is a proverbial duck, not a duck taking to water, but a duck out of water. Or is she an ugly duckling with no hope of being a swan? Well, she certainly has no desire to be something that pretty or that nasty. She is happy being a duck out of water. If she were in water, she'd worry that they would slowly turn up the heat. No, that's what they do to proverbial frogs.

Rewarding Smiles

Mousy has never managed to settle on a plan for how to deal with the pain she experiences spending nights alone away. She thinks about it when she's away, and has haphazardly tried some alternative approaches, but she never thinks about the issue in between trips and never compares alternative approaches in any organized manner.

On her short drive back to the Amberson, Mousy thinks of how lonely she will soon feel and what she can do about it. She could sit in the Amberson's "parlor" and read the newspaper, hoping for someone to come and engage with her in conversation. She could go up to her room, take out her tablet, and check in with some "friends" or text her real-life acquaintances, who don't even know she's away. What would she tell them?

She could focus her attention, right up to the threshold of sleep, on a movie or on the new book she is reading, having practically swallowed whole the trashy novel in which she encountered the words "home town." The new book she is reading is a memoir by a Filipina woman who escaped a life of virtual slavery in Abu Dhabi. One of her work friends recommended it to her.

Or she could stop at a bar, relax herself with a drink, and see what happens. Mousy smiles at this idea. She once actually tried this approach. She

saw it as an opportunity to do something contrary to her character: embracing fate, relaxing her oppressive need to make (or not make) decisions. She would be picked up or not. If not, she might find another woman to talk with. She would not reject anyone's advances, within reason, of course.

It was a total failure. She never felt more alone. It wasn't until she was back in her hotel room that Mousy realized she *had* made a fateful decision: she had decided to dress up fancy, as if going to the bar of an upmarket restaurant, but had chosen a local bar frequented by a younger, working-class and artistic crowd. She must have seemed too out of place for even the women to show interest in collegial conversation. She could not protect herself from her own decisions.

Mousy looks into the door of the Amberson "parlor," only to find some children playing a board game and what must be their parents reading books that look as if they were taken from the shelves of old clothbounds that line the walls of the room. She is curious to know whether the books are Tarkingtons, but dreads being caught watching. She hates to be seen watching almost as much as she likes to watch.

So instead she climbs the stairs to her room and her book, which Booth Tarkington could not have even contemplated. Or could he have? After all, he must have been born not long after the end of American slavery, and slavery persisted in many forms. Did he ever write about any of those forms?

The Amberson cat, Orson — dark gray with white markings — follows

Mousy up to her room, and she lets him in. He curls up with her and her book. She doesn't know what time it is when she hears Orson scratching at her door to be let out. She dutifully gets out of bed and lets him out.

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The first thought that pops into Mousy's mind when she wakes up is "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," a sentence she has always pushed away because she thinks she should have disdain for it. And yet today it seems apt. It seems apt because she feels that her first full day back in her home town is important, even if she has given no thought to what she will do.

She once again tries to imagine running into people in Melville, but she finds that she has such a hazy memory of each individual that comes into her sleepy mind — except for Frances and Laurel, of course — that she cannot picture a single one. It is as if she had blinders on that make her look straight forward, toward the future, with no access to the past and yet with no less hazy a picture of the future. As if she could only squint, and at nothing but the present moment.

She cannot even imagine her brother in any form other than the last time she saw him, at the age of twenty-five, in a three-piece suit, looking at a watch

on a chain that he had just pulled out of his vest, as if he were a White Rabbit without the ears. At least she can smile at the thought of her brother as a rabbit. That is a step forward, but in no particular direction.

She regrets having never searched online for images of her brother, or of the others she knew in Melville. Is there a term for such a search, like "refreshing" one's memory? "Upgrading" one's memory, perhaps? Creating a new memory that is artificial, but quickly becomes natural, replacing the old, hazy versions. It's like looking in people's photo albums, without having to visit them or their families, which is what so much of the Internet is about these days. But there is an element of refreshing, too, since you might come across old pictures, even childhood pictures, that dispel some of the haze.

It isn't too late. She brought her tablet. It's not cheating. She can't help it if her memory is so bad. She can't help it if she moved away. A lot of them will turn out to have moved away as well. She can have the wonderful Amberson breakfast she's been promised and then spend the next hour flipping through pictures of the people she knew in the past as they are in the present, the near past, and even back when.

She hum-sings "White Rabbit" in the shower. Does anyone remember the words? She might look them up to refresh her memory and to see the lyrics from the point of view of middle age. No, that would surely ruin them.

The breakfast spread looks just as good as promised. There is only one other guest at breakfast this early: Guthrie Jones, a young woman who

immediately introduces herself as a folk singer, an odd young woman who doesn't hold her head up straight, who doesn't look you in the eye, who has a crooked smile. As soon as Mousy introduces herself, simply as Sandra Ives, Guthrie begins a monologue. It's as if Eliza had told her what an easy mark this out-of-towner is.

Guthrie tells Mousy that she is on a "sustainable tour." She travels only by bus and train. She visits a place, shows them what she's made of, loves them all, and gets to know everybody. And they get to know her too.

This is the start of a week-long stay in Melville. She'll play at a big hall, the biggest stage she's ever been up on. She wonders aloud why they chose her. Maybe it was her name. She asks Mousy if she likes her name, and what can Mousy say, that she'd prefer Dylan Smith or Bessie Johnson? Everybody likes the name Guthrie Jones, she is told, and so does Mousy. How couldn't she?

It's become evident that Guthrie, whatever her real name may be, is — what is the proper term these days? — cognitively disabled, developmentally impaired? But aren't we all? Especially if one adds emotionally. But Guthrie doesn't seem emotionally impaired at all. She is positive and glowing as it gets.

Guthrie also has a gig at a coffee house. She loves coffee houses. And she'll be playing in a church basement, and for old people, and at a place for crazy people and, best of all, at the children's room at the library, which is her favorite place in the whole wide world.

Then Guthrie starts talking about Eliza. It was Eliza who encouraged her to

talk to Mousy. Eliza said that Mousy's brother is a "bigwig" here, but that he's a good guy, at least to her. She likes Eliza. Eliza says this is a bad city, but that people are nice. It's nice when people are nice, says Guthrie. But sometimes Guthrie likes to shout. Sometimes she shouts her songs out so loud, she doesn't need a microphone.

Layly's mother lives here. She doesn't say who Layly is, as if she's so important that everybody knows her. Layly's mother is going to take her round and show her round. Round and round she'll go. She demonstrates. She's so sweet and has such a wonderfully crooked smile, Mousy is glad that Eliza encouraged her. Maybe she did it less for Guthrie than for Mousy. Or maybe she recognized that both of them were equally needy.

Guthrie says that she's not a star yet, but she will be some day. Maybe today's the day. Maybe not. But she'll keep her head up and smile no matter what. Her job is to make people happy. Mousy says that she's made her day. Mousy is rewarded with the biggest smile of them all.

Back to Layly Guthrie goes. Layly came here on the bus with her. They laughed the whole way. Guthrie makes Layly very happy, and Layly makes her happy too. Layly doesn't think she's weird. She asks Sandra if she thinks she's weird, and Mousy says that she's no weirder than her. She lifts her fist to Weird Power, and Guthrie stands and lifts her fist as high as it can go.

The weirdest thing about her, Guthrie says, is that, from where she sits, she can see everything. Not everywhere, not like God, but whatever she sees.

She sees Sandra. She really *sees* her, through and through.

She wants to meet Sandra's brother, because she's never met a bigwig before. And if he's Sandra's brother, she says, he must be nice. She loves the way Sandra smiles, how she never frowns. There's never no reason to frown.

Layly tells her never to use the word "never." But she likes the word. She doesn't believe everything Layly says. But she knows Layly's trying to help her. Layly tries so hard to help her. Guthrie wishes she could help her back. Is there anyone you help? she asks, and Mousy tells her there isn't. But she doesn't frown when she says it. She smiles and adds that there will be soon. She doesn't know what this means, but it makes Guthrie feel good, and that's all that matters.

Guthrie says that Layly came with her so that Guthrie could meet her mother and play music for the people who live here. Did you know that I have a recording studio in my basement? she asks Sandra. A real one, with all the gadgets! And she can work them, all by herself. Her mother can't work them. Even Layly can't work them. Her father can work some of them, but he's a guy and he plays with gadgets all the time.

Guthrie has a recording studio and she plays the guitar and she sings songs that people write for her. Sometimes she writes a song herself, with Layly's help. Layly has the most beautiful voice Guthrie has ever heard. She sings on some of her records. Sometimes Guthrie lets her be the lead singer and Guthrie does backup. Sometimes they sing in harmony. But when they're

not recording, there's nothing better than listening to Layly sing. She's in the church choir. She sings in front of hundreds of people every week. Guthrie goes to church to hear her sing. It's like angels.

Layly says that Guthrie sings like an angel too. But Guthrie thinks she sings more like a frog. But frogs sing nicely too, all God's creatures do. She asks Sandra to come hear her sing. If she can.

And then she asks Sandra to go with her to the church, the church she's going to play at. Eliza says it's just down the street. When Mousy agrees — it's not as if she has plans of her own — Guthrie tells her how good she is at helping people. You're a wonderful person, Sandra, she says. A wonderful, wonderful person.

Mousy realizes that helping Guthrie would get her out of the Amberson and into Melville. She has already lost the desire to look online for images of her old friends. Not only does it feel like cheating, but it won't even work. Is it any different than listening to a few language tapes before visiting a foreign country? That doesn't prepare you for holding up your side of a conversation, so why would a few pictures prepare her for recognizing people she hasn't seen in decades? Would she end up scanning the streets for people who effectively do not exist, and miss the real people walking by her, unless they, with their superior visual memory, recognize her? Then again, perhaps dozens of people in Melville have searched for images of her, and could meld them together into what she looks like now. Are nostalgia and curiosity that addictive?

The hell with memory and images. It's better just to start the ball rolling — she has accumulated too much moss over the years — by accompanying Guthrie to church. Mousy thinks it's good that Guthrie chose Guthrie instead of Dylan. With two famous Dylans, the name has been used too much. There are too many Sandras too. But only one Mousy.

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Mousy and Guthrie take a left out of the Amberson. The Melville African Baptist Church turns out to be only two blocks away. According to the sign in front — below the presumably biblical quote, "To what purpose is this waste?" — Guthrie Jones is going to play at the Underground Café in three days, at 7:00 p.m. Mousy walks over to a flower garden to smell the lilies. Guthrie does the same.

Mousy hears a baritone voice behind her say something about "a sweet-smelling oblation to the Lord." Without turning, she agrees with the man's description of the lilies' scent. He stands next to them and, like them, bends to taste the sweetness.

Mousy tells the young minister that, when she was a child, there were bushes where the lilies and other flowers now stand, and she would wait in those bushes for her friend Jojo to skip out of Sunday School and go off with

her. The minister laughs the sort of laugh that makes people smile, and Mousy obliges. She also smiles because it was a happy memory for her, and she is happy she can share it with, of all people, the minister of this very church.

Two Masters

After asking Guthrie to go inside, where her Layly awaits her, the minister introduces himself to Mousy as Reverend Neville Pott, and Mousy introduces herself as Sandra Ives. The young minister is struck by the name — most likely the similarity of “Sandra” to “Sandy” — but he seems to quickly solves the riddle and, with an expulsion of breath that sounds very much like “Aha!”, he announces that Mousy must be Thomas’s sister, even though the two do not look very alike. He adds that she must live far away, since he has neither seen nor heard of her. She says that she does, even though in miles she does not live all that far. But what are miles.

Rev. Pott takes a long look into Mousy’s eyes, and Mousy cannot resist giving herself up to his scrutiny. When he has completed his scrutinization, he tells her that he is concerned about Thomas’s soul. The Reverend wastes neither words nor time, in accordance with the quotation on the sign in front of his church. Mousy can see his grandmother’s sampler hanging over his childhood bed, with the words “Waste Not Want Not” surrounded by a formal design of prettily embroidered flowers.

The concerned minister says that he cannot imagine even a man with the purest character, one much purer than his own, preserving his purity in the

filthy air that those in the city government breathe. The Reverend is not in a position to talk with Thomas directly (or with his wife) — at least not on so sensitive a topic — but he has been watching Thomas at public meetings and feels there is a likelihood he could be saved. He seems such an honorable man, and he is fortunate enough to have a caring sister who has not been corrupted by the environment in which Thomas toils.

The Reverend stops to take a breath. Mousy feels breathless herself. She is afraid of what the minister is going to say next, expecting him to ask for her help, for a man with such passionate beliefs is not going to be content with a mere warning. What is it about her that leads strangers to think they can tell her what she ought to do? If strangers do this, what can she expect from her own brother? Mousy could tell the Reverend, in all truthfulness, that she has no power over Thomas. But the moment to do this passes in the time it takes the Reverend to finish taking his breath.

He quotes from Matthew: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other." He informs Mousy that this passage refers to man's choice between God and Mammon, but that it might as well refer to the choice faced by a city attorney, between the people of Melville and those they elect to run their government.

The Reverend asks Sandra to put herself in her brother's position. When it comes to policy issues, he says, elected officials are there to make decisions

and the city attorney, like all appointees, is there to support and implement them. But when it comes to *other* decisions . . .

He apologizes for jumping from religion to a Civics lecture, especially considering that he is hardly a Civics teacher, nor is she a young student to be lectured to. He asks permission to take a different approach, an approach he refers to as "empathy," which he defines as considering the state of another's soul.

The Reverend says that the most powerful thing he feels in Thomas's soul is the stress, the stress of a rope being pulled taut, as in a tug-of-war contest. Thomas's soul is never at rest, although it scarcely budges. It is as if his soul were incapable of relaxation, of dropping into an armchair or enjoying a long hug with a loved one, of taking a deep breath and relieving itself of the pressures it has accumulated during the day. It is a soul that never truly sleeps — Thomas must have terrible anxiety dreams. It is a soul that is never massaged — there is no one who can get close enough to comfort it, to knead his soul's knots.

The Reverend says that the stress on Thomas is paralleled, in a different way, among the people of Melville. From what the young minister understands, long before Thomas became city attorney Melville's political leadership won a tug-of-war against its citizens, and the citizens thenceforth dropped the rope: they stopped voting, rarely protested, and enjoyed the fruits of their loss in the form of good garbage, recycling, and snow removal services, good water and

sewer connections, and the frequent fixing of their roads. Winning football and basketball teams have only made the leaders' job easier.

Dropping the rope, the Reverend says, is an act of relinquishment, abandonment, despondency, a loss of hope. Dropping the rope has discolored the souls of Melville's citizens. However, it is not something they notice more than occasionally, because being a citizen of Melville is only a small part of their lives. A winning sports team is a happier thing to center one's identity on. But what does that do for a soul?

The Reverend acknowledges that it doesn't matter what happened before Thomas came along. In each individual, he says, the struggle begins anew. Every individual must develop his own character, no matter how healthy or unhealthy his environment.

The young minister believes that Thomas's most serious problem was losing sight of the end of the rope that the citizens had dropped. In other words, Thomas never considered the public to be one of his masters in the passage from Matthew, one of the masters someone serving two masters comes to despise. That is why, unlike many of his colleagues, he is respectful to members of the public. He has always felt he serves only one master, not realizing that when you fail to serve a second master — in this case the public — you replace that master with yourself.

And so, the Reverend concludes, Thomas came to despise himself. Or, perhaps, as sometimes happens, he despises both masters, both the city

government's leaders and himself. If this is the case, despising is Thomas's default, it is his existential reality. This is Lucifer's plight.

The Reverend waits to catch Mousy's eye again before telling her that the eyes are indeed a window to a man's soul, and that Thomas's eyes are always alert, always watching and analyzing and making calculations. What they never do is turn inward. The Reverend expresses his fear that this would be too painful for Thomas, perhaps the only pain he could not bear. Mousy finds this a bit too melodramatic, and wonders how his alertness to others' souls affects his own?

The Reverend goes on about her brother's eyes, how impossible it is to imagine them looking vulnerable, overwhelmed, or tired, no matter how poorly he may have slept. He is someone who seeks out challenges, who loves a tug of war, who is driven by it, energized by the stress the way the Reverend is energized by reading a piece of Scripture and others are energized by meditation. Thomas's disability is his ability. He is both torn and integral. This, the Reverend believes, is the secret of his success, a success that arises out of failure.

The Reverend is in love with paradox. Mousy hates paradox. Feeling she has to find a reason for this, the word "facile" pops into her head. She embraces it. Paradox is facile. It is dressed in profundity, but naked underneath. Or is this a paradox too?

The Reverend finally looks beyond Thomas, at the world around him, at

how Thomas enables the city government's leaders to do whatever they please, how he gives them the advice and the confidence they need to rule. Without him, the Reverend insists, they would be lost.

He considers her brother the most important individual in the city, at least in political terms. The mayor is a strong, wonderful woman, and a member of the Reverend's congregation. But she too would be lost without Thomas, at least as mayor. As a woman rather than as a mayor, firing Thomas would free her. But she lacks the strength to do this. She is too afraid of acting without his advice and approval. It is this fear, this lack of self-confidence, that imprisons her. Thomas, on the other hand, is a prisoner of his self-confidence.

Another paradox. We are all prisoners, of ourselves and of each other. Right now, Mousy is a prisoner of her good manners and the Reverend is a prisoner of his belief that he has an obligation to save people's souls, to free them from the prisons in which they feel as comfortable as a dog in his den-like crate.

The Reverend returns to the topic of Thomas's fear of dealing with himself, his fear of what he might find there. This is where he feels that Sandra could help him, because she is both outside and inside. She could help him connect with himself and overcome his fear. She might present this to him as a challenge, and herself as one of his guides. By "one" he means that she will need the help of a member of the clergy or of a psychotherapist.

She must take the initiative, because his wife does not appear capable or

interested. The Reverend has not seen anything in her eyes but the opaqueness of a role well played. A focus like Thomas's, but without the fear or the stress. However, he admits he may be wrong. She is a mystery to him.

This admission makes Mousy feel much better about the Reverend. He recognizes that there are limits to his ability to see into others' souls. This makes her think that there might be something to what he has said about Thomas. Perhaps he *can* be saved from himself. But if Mousy is his only hope, she does not like the odds of its ever happening.

It seems like a shadow passes over the Reverend as he expresses his doubt that her brother would turn to a member of the clergy. There is, he says, something of the vampire to Thomas, an unusual coldness and what appears to be a fear of contact with the clergy, as if they were walking crosses that could harm him with a consoling hand on the shoulder. The Reverend says that he can almost feel the hairs on Thomas's arms stand on end when they are near to one another.

But perhaps this is not the result of fear, or not *only* fear, he says. It may also be a matter of respect or, more accurately, of disrespect. He does not think that Thomas respects the clergy. Perhaps he does not respect anyone. Even Sandra. Perhaps Sandra above all others, since she is just his little sister. Mousy feels as if he is saying this to judge her reaction. She does her best not to react, but she is uncertain, as always, about her ability to hide her feelings. And she certainly has feelings when it comes to respect.

Respect may not be the only way of getting Thomas to open up, the Reverend speculates. Vulnerability may be another path to the same goal. Sandra is the only one to whom the Reverend can imagine Thomas being vulnerable. That is why he has turned to her so quickly, even though he knows nothing about her beyond the gracious manner in which she listens to him. He can see doubt in her eyes about her ability to make a difference, but he also sees that she has doubt about this doubt. She feels that it is a good deed she might be able to accomplish. He feels that she longs to do good deeds. This is her chance, he says, and then lets there be silence.

After softening her with both words and silence, the Reverend goes in for what, to Mousy, feels like the kill. Thomas needs to be jarred. To paraphrase Franz Kafka (and to show that he does not only quote from the Bible), he tells Mousy that she could be the axe that breaks the frozen sea within her brother. Thomas needs a reason to look at himself in the mirror, to look at himself through those eyes of his, to acknowledge the taut rope within him and to give it slack, to stop despising himself and to save his soul. And Melville with it.

Both of them take a deep breath. This has been exhausting. Mousy is relieved that it is over. For several moments, she cannot look at the Reverend, and she suspects that he is afraid to look at her, to see that she will not want to do what he requests of her. There is an awkwardness akin to that at the door after a first date.

The Reverend has touched something in Mousy, as he intended, but not,

she thinks, *what* he intended. The result is that she feels that she must stand strong, that she must defend herself. Since she is with the Reverend rather than with her brother, she can only stand strong against the Reverend and his way of trying to impose on her his vision and his goal. So she tells the Reverend that she did not come to Melville to save the town or to save her brother, not his soul, not his job, not his marriage, not anything.

But she is not so sure. Perhaps she did come, in some way, for her brother, rather than for herself. Since she has only that two-word clue – "home town" – to the mystery of why she came here, this very well could be the reason: to do something for her brother, who remained behind when she went away. Maybe it wasn't her brother, but her town, her "home town," that she came for.

Whatever she came to Melville for, however, it was not about souls or saving. No one can tell her what she is there for or what she ought to do. So she does not show the Reverend a stitch of the doubt he purported to see. She looks at him with all the certainty her brother used to display, and apparently still does. She feels her brother's presence is in her, in how she thinks, in how she feels, in what she says. She has never felt so powerfully how present he is in her. How can someone save someone who inhabits her? She would have to free herself first, and then where would she be?

She sees the sign advertising the upcoming Guthrie Jones concert. This is an excellent way to change the subject. She tells Rev. Pott that she is looking forward to seeing at least one of Guthrie's concerts. From the look on his face,

however, he does not want there to be any distraction, any escape from his statement of her mission in Melville.

But distraction there will be. Mousy won't let it go. She grabs hold of it like a terrier, and she wins the tussle against a stronger challenger, because his manners are better than his power of influence. She succeeds in turning the conversation to Guthrie, Layly, and Layly's mother, who has been a member of the congregation since long before Rev. Pott came to Melville, in fact, since long before the town's African-American community was able to afford this beautiful church.

She makes the Reverend tell her Guthrie's story. She finds out how incredibly spoiled Guthrie was by her rich parents and her loving Layly, how she was able to go beyond her limitations by singing and playing music, and how she managed to, occasionally, tour. The way the Reverend tells it, it is an inspirational tale that brings tears even to Mousy's eyes.

Rev. Pott surreptitiously looks at his watch. Acutely sensitive to motion — like a predator, Thomas used to say — Mousy sees the action and feels a little hurt, more for Guthrie than for herself, since it is Guthrie's story that he is apparently about to bring to an untimely end.

The Reverend says that he is obligated to attend the dedication of a new office building for certain city departments, including the Controller's office, Public Works, and Parks and Recreation. He has been asked by the mayor to give the invocatory prayer, and the mayor herself will be speaking. He invites

Sandra, and says that he is sorry her brother will be very unlikely to attend. He never attends anything that falls under what is popularly known as “ribbon cutting.” Thomas seems to have disdain for rituals, other than legal rituals, of course. Today, when personal independence is given religious status, one’s personal and professional rituals dominate the lives of most people. A life without shared public rituals is an empty life, the Reverend says.

Mousy does not feel strongly one way or another about public rituals. She must be indifferent to them, she decides. But she does love her private rituals. She can’t live without them. And she has no desire to share them. That is what being single and middle-aged is all about.

Mousy realizes that a ribbon cutting would be a good opportunity to see — and perhaps meet — some of the people Thomas works with. Or for? She wonders how he thinks of them: as colleagues or as clients? Probably clients. Does Thomas think of everyone as a client? Even his wife? Possibly. But Mousy predates Thomas’s role as a lawyer. He can never see her as a client.

Rev. Pott drives Mousy to the parking lot next to the new building, where they are shown to an area saved for VIPs. The Reverend parts with a soft, two-handed taking of her hands and a final request to help jar Thomas out of where he is.

A Spray of Water

Because Mousy does not want to appear to tag behind the Reverend like a baby duck, she stops to look at the architecture of the government buildings around her. She sees them as if for the first time, since she had no interest in architecture when she was in high school. Public buildings were public buildings, and she only entered them when she had to, ducked into them quickly and left as soon as she had obtained the form or card she was asked by her mother or a teacher to get.

She finds the buildings old and lacking in any distinction. All of them are made out of red bricks, with concrete design elements. They calmly announce that they are solid and somewhat grand, but not too grand, and not at all extravagant. Both public and puritanic. She wishes she knew the name of the school of architecture they represent. Since she does not, she gives it a name: Grandish. Or, more to the point, Sufficient.

When she has completed her architectural analysis, she follows a group of people who must be headed toward the new building, which must be behind one of the other buildings, since there is nothing new that she can see. Even the clothes people are wearing look timeless. Ceremonies, even the most minor and meaningless, bring out the conservative in everyone.

As the new building comes into view, Mousy smiles. It is a contemporary example of the same school of architecture: red brick with concrete details, grandish and sufficient. Melville somehow skipped the era of poured-concrete ugliness the way that Africa skipped the era of the telephone. The biggest difference is that the new building merely hints at design elements that are explicit — that is, three-dimensional — in the earlier buildings. It pays homage to the past at a reasonable price.

Mousy makes no attempt to get close to the podium. She prefers to watch from a distance, at a good angle so that her view is not blocked, so that she feels neither blocked out nor blocked in. Some people like to be close to the action so they feel more involved, or so they tell themselves. But what they really want is the most for their money, the best seat available or, in this case, the best place to stand for free. Mousy finds it preferable not to be too involved, and considers the best seat to be the one that provides her an odd, unobstructed view of the action as well as an easy exit.

Mousy is gladdened to see the woman who appears to be the mayor as she climbs up the bouncy stairs onto the makeshift stage. Mousy has a theory that people tend to elect uncle figures, individuals to whom they relate not as parent to child, but rather as indulgent uncle to child, the sort of uncle that brings interesting presents back from trips to places one's parents would never go, even if only in the next state or county over. Mousy never had such an uncle, but neither, she believes, do most voters. In fact, having one would make a

voter realize that the candidate they favor is not really like that. We want what we desire, not what we have, she thinks. America must have a terrible paucity of the right sort of indulgent uncles.

Melville's mayor is motherly. Neither aunt-like nor old enough to be grandmotherly. We also have wonderful fantasies of the perfect grandmother, but we feel that grandmothers should not hold public office. Not only are they too old, but they are private treasures, even when they are no more real than pirate treasures.

Mousy has no theory about women politicians, so she tries to manufacture one on the fly. Aunt figures make fine politicians, she acknowledges to herself, but big sisters are preferable, big sisters who take care of things (and us) and who boss us around, but it's okay, because they have the right to, a right based on the eternal law of birth order. Mothers are more shareable than grandmothers, but they are too much of a pain. They nag too much and push too many buttons. It's better to be bossed around than to be nagged at.

Mousy feels herself flush with anticipation for what the motherly mayor will say and how she will say it. She longs for motherly warmth in a politician's voice. But she is disconcerted by the warmth she feels suffusing her face, for Mousy feels that she becomes flushed too easily and too often. It's an especially annoying habit because it gives away a feeling she is not usually experiencing. She is rarely embarrassed, which is what most people interpret a flushed face to mean. When her face (and, worse, her chest) turn red, it usually means she

is excited, which is much better than being embarrassed, or that she's pushed herself physically, which is also fine with her. Although not an athlete, Mousy likes to do a little more than she did the last time or than she thinks is her natural limit. Limits are there to be pushed. She likes to think she's tough.

She can tell she is flushed not only from the warmth she feels in her face (something she only feels when she's alone), but also from reading the expressions of others. When she sees someone's eyes grow at the sight of her flushing, she flushes even more, but this is because she is truly embarrassed at being caught feeling something she hasn't been feeling.

Mousy's worthless musings are terminated when the mayor stops whispering in the ears of some people on the stage and giving others a big motherly hug, and finally begins her speech. Mousy is greatly disappointed to find that, after she gets the personal thanks and other formalities out of the way, the mayor does not act motherly at all. She personalizes her speech along the lines of a television talk show host, mixing memoir and memorial into a touching, but inappropriate concoction. Perhaps Mousy's theories of familial relations with politicians are historical at best. Perhaps people are seeking for something different, a compassionate psychotherapist, a hero, or someone who is otherwise special. Or someone just like them.

The mayor tells a story from her life that has only a slight relationship to the new building: a secretary is not able to enjoy it in her declining years because she died in a car accident last year. The mayor takes full responsibility

for this, although she was not actually involved in the accident. What she did was fail to get the secretary a ride home when she drank too much at a holiday party. She should have been the one to give the secretary a ride home. Instead, the mayor told herself that the secretary did not have far to drive, that the roads were clear of snow, and that there weren't many people on the road right then, although she says she should have realized that many of those people would also be "under the influence."

The mayor peppers her speech with details, such as the make and color of the secretary's car, that do nothing but add authenticity, as if authenticity were a value equal to love or regret. And what is regret itself but a display of one's goodness at feeling bad instead of acting good?

Confession easily turns maudlin. Without a written text, the mayor goes beyond maudlin to mythmaking. She talks of how everyone is suffering without this woman, "the spark of Melville," who knew everything, handled everything, and was trusted and loved by everyone. The mayor descends from talk of being lost without "our community's glue, its mortar, what held it together," to depressive talk of how, without this woman, the city government has slowly started to fall apart. When she reaches this point, she doesn't know what else to say, so she forces a smile and, with a pronounced sigh, returns to more thanks and other formalities.

As the audience members whip each other up with endless applause, Mousy feels enervated by her disappointment. "Enervate" is an important word

to her. She doesn't understand why the word is so rarely used. Perhaps people keep the word to themselves. Perhaps they are ashamed of the feeling it describes and, therefore, do not even acknowledge it. It is certainly shameful to Mousy, a sign of her weakness, her inability to protect herself not only from the vicissitudes of life, but from herself.

Not that she is often enervated, but it is terrible how the feeling sometimes comes over her, its overwhelming suddenness, like hitting a wall in exercise. You can stop exercising and feel your strength quickly coming back, but it is hard to stop feeling enervated, your arms heavy, your head full of fluff. It's impossible to think, and even more difficult to act. So Mousy just stands there, no longer watching anyone, blocked in her thinking, a vegetable in need of a good cold spray of water.

A spray soon comes, in the form of a short man with uncombed hair and a smile that seems to overflow his slender face. His sights are clearly set on Mousy, but he stops a few feet from her and just smiles. He clearly is uncertain whether to approach her, or how, nor does he realize how Cheshirey he appears. Perhaps he is waiting for Mousy to make the next move. But she is enervated and cannot move a muscle. Nor can she find the energy to place this man, whom she must have known as a child. He still looks so childlike, he could not have changed too much.

He ends the impasse by taking a step toward her and identifying himself as Bert. Bert Maquimo. And then he identifies her as Mousy. Mousy and Bert, two

names that, she is certain, never went together. It is the shame of her ignorance of who he is that acts as a spray of water, but a spray of lukewarm water, some of which gets into her open mouth and makes her cough. Before she can excuse herself, he asks God to bless her, as if she sneezed instead of coughed.

Mousy nods to him, with a little grin, but says nothing. Pumped up by encountering Mousy or by the municipal ritual, or simply in order to fill the silence, which is suddenly louder with the end of the applause, Bert tells Mousy about the work he does for the City of Melville. He is a procurement officer, and he loves the process that leads to contracts for work that improves the community. Procurement is a dramatic story that begins with a need, he says, like a newborn infant's need for its mother's milk. It is a story that involves information, the most important ingredient in our society, and trust, the most important ingredient in every community, the life-blood whose circulation guarantees its survival.

This combination of information and trust lies at the heart of what he enjoys most: the ongoing relationships he has with contractors' executives and employees. These relationships grow over the years. They are professional and personal, friendships that are "more satisfying than most friendships."

Mousy senses an ellipsis hanging at the end of these words. Bert seems to have decided not to say something that Mousy feels must have been about love, perhaps something about these relationships being even more satisfying than

his love relationships too. But that would have meant a confession of his failure in order to emphasize his success. A glance at his ring finger shows that he is not married. Unlucky in love, lucky in career. Nothing to be ashamed of.

Perhaps to hide his discomfort with his feelings, Bert waxes even more poetic. The contract process, he says, is like giving birth. It starts with the conception of a need and continues through the formation of the idea of a contract to fulfill this need, into the preparation of contract specifications, which especially for new, dynamic ideas must be constructed out of almost nothing over a period that has characteristics equivalent to gestation. He speaks of contractors' reps as "the midwives of needs."

Once the bidding of the contract has been accomplished, there is a change of personnel (except for contractor executives, who oversee the entire process), from midwife to pediatrician, until the project has matured and needs only occasional supervision.

But not every contract goes perfectly. Some winning contractors do not work well with him and his colleagues, and end up in hot water. That's when Mousy's brother is brought in to "clean things up" and, on the few occasions where his "fine mediation skills" are insufficient to end the dispute, he brings a suit. Bert says that Thomas is a wonder. He never steps on anyone's toes and, on his side, Bert gives Thomas a wide berth to do what he needs to do. Their relationship is based on giving each other space. Mousy wonders what space Thomas gives Bert.

The relationship Bert had with Mousy must have been similar to the one he now has with her brother. In their youth, Bert gave Mousy so much space, she didn't even know he existed. No, she probably knew who he was back then, but he did not insert himself into her world sufficiently for her to remember him all these years later. Or did something happen that she chose to forget? A funny expression, she thinks, because who ever actually chooses to forget? It simply happens. Better to forget, in any event, than to distort for one's own purposes.

They have reached another impasse. Bert must have noticed that Mousy's mind was elsewhere, but he is too close to her to give her sufficient space in any way other than ceasing his monologue. He can't simply walk away. This thought returns Mousy's attention back to Bert just at the point when he finds an easy way to end the impasse: an appointment with a contractor's representative, a woman he describes in unnecessary detail, including how many years they have been what he probably considers "going together" in a professional and, possibly, a somewhat personal sense.

Bert tells Mousy how nice it has been to have "bumped into her," wishes her a nice visit in Melville, and asks her to give her brother his best wishes. But before he can go, she touches his elbow and asks him to identify the top city officials up on the stage, and he does what she asks.

When, after shaking her hand with smiling vigor, he turns and walks away, Mousy actually feels a sense of loss. Loss of something she never had and never wanted to have. How easy loss is to feel! If she can feel the loss of Bert,

how will she be able to bear the loss of those she liked or loved?

But it turns out to be just a momentary feeling. It doesn't last any longer than an itch. Nothing close to a mosquito bite. She no longer misses Bert at all. It was just his walking away. From now on, she will not watch anyone walk away from her. That will do it.

Efficient Transcendence

Mousy is so caught up in her thoughts, she is surprised to find that a tall man with a long, unkempt beard and what people refer to as “wild eyes” is standing right next to her. In fact, looking her over, head to toe, with those eyes of his. The only thing he does not look at is her eyes.

He tells her that, all in all, she looks like an Ives, without seeking confirmation of his induction. Then he introduces himself as the gadfly who, with his questions and comments, best stings the slow, dimwitted mule known as the City of Melville. A confused expression takes over his expressive face, and he apologizes by assuring Mousy that although her brother may be slow, he is not dimwitted. And that her brother’s slowness is a tactic, not a condition.

He smiles. Mousy hopes that this is due to the fact that she has not shown him any disgust or fear or even confusion. He must be thinking how like her brother she is in keeping a poker face in such situations. But it is much harder for her. A tactic, not a condition.

The man’s smile lights up his face. It brings out a youthfulness underneath the thick layer of aging anger and pain. Mousy feels that she could like this man, and so she introduces herself as yes, Thomas’s sister, Sandra.

He corrects her: Mousy. She is known in Melville, even to its gadfly, only as Mousy. Mousy can't help but express her astonishment that she is "known" at all. His name is Saac. Saac Rosen. Short for I-saac. Known to Melville's literati as "Isaac Babel" for his propensity to talk, not for his prose style. The bloggers call him "Babble." He prefers "Saac," as in a sack of potatoes.

He has a question for Mousy: Is there any logic to what they are up to? Since Mousy has no idea who is up to what, she simply stares at him. But since Saac is not a proponent of eye contact, he does not react to her staring. She pegs him as an Asperger's, then feels bad that she's pegged him at all, and then worries that he will turn out to be schizophrenic and that she won't know how to get away from him. Her embarrassing experiences with street people come back to her with a tightening of her shoulders and neck, as if she were trying to fold into herself.

He quotes the narrator of a Serbian novel: "Some things are logical precisely because they cannot be explained by any other logic, right?" And then he asks a rhetorical question of his own question: "Or is that just copping out?"

He tells Mousy that no one does anything for money. Saying they do is also copping out. Maybe they do things for what money buys, but that's when it gets "personal rather than fungible." And when it gets personal, "the gates start falling to keep everybody out." Even ourselves. He's been to a shrink. He knows.

There are things money can buy, and things money can't buy, he insists passionately, as if such dualisms did not apply to everything. Every earthly purpose is to become heavenly, he says, to rise above ourselves, to be something more than we are. He knows. He's tried a million ways. But the logic of Melville's leadership has no place or need for TM or the Tao. They wouldn't know a koan from a coin. For what they're looking for, all they need is a mirror. That is efficient transcendence.

And Mousy's brother, he declares, is the most efficient of all. He doesn't even have to take a mirror out of his purse, like the mayor, or go into the bathroom for a full-length burst of transcendence, like the rest of them. There's a mirror in one of the lenses in the glasses he wears. Maybe even in both, for a stereoscopic effect.

Was it simply there? asks Saac, once again dispensing with any antecedent to his preposition. Was it just inertia? Or do they give themselves new challenges, accelerate to a higher velocity? Is there a light at the end of a tunnel that they're digging further and further? Or are they lost in the dark of a tunnel that was dug for them, but which they have no capacity to extend, able to see nothing at all, able to feel only the dampness, no longer even able to smell the guano? When your bed's been made for you, do you find a way to sleep in it, no matter the state of the mattress?

Or does the darkness come from wearing blinders? Did they go out and buy them or were they heirlooms they felt obliged to wear? Do they even realize

they're wearing them? And do the blinders prevent them from seeing themselves when they look in the mirror? Is there, therefore, no transcendence at all?

Saac stops as if to contemplate this thought, which must have arisen spontaneously. This isn't a speech he gives to every willing ear, Mousy decides. It's spontaneous, impromptu, extemporary. Outside of time, transcendent.

The next thing Saac does is look in his own mirror and ask whether he is imposing this darkness on these people because that's what he thinks they deserve. Maybe he's wrong about them. Maybe they live in a bright countryside full of orchards of all kinds of fruit, there for the picking, full of nice smells and warm breezes, and it just never occurred to them that the apples and cherries aren't theirs. Hadn't they been their predecessors'? What would suddenly change the way things were? Were they in any way less deserving?

How could they feel other than *more* deserving? Which of us doesn't? This allows them to effectively be gurus: looked up to, sought after, lauded, followed, desired, feared. Don't we all want to be gurus? In the end, money or no money, eyes wide open or closed, tunnel or orchard, isn't this the logic that can't be explained by any other logic?

Mousy looks down at her hands and finds that she is shaking. Noticing doesn't make it stop. She feels extra flushed, altogether overexcited, like her mind is going to blow. She has to take control of herself. No, of the situation she is in. She has to intervene. She has to be spontaneous herself. She finds

herself insisting that she does not want to be a guru. In case he hadn't noticed, she says, gurus are always men. Women don't have this need to be feared and followed.

It works: Saac looks crestfallen. People must have either tried to shut him up or just let him babble on without opposition for so long that Saac does not know what to do with a reasonable, critical response to what he says. Mousy's response is like water to a wicked witch. He seems to shrink before her, and his expression keeps getting more pitiful.

He stutters out an "I'm sorry" and walks away. Mousy is in shock herself. She can't believe the power of her words, even if only on a man who is clearly on the edge. She does not watch him walk away, but she feels just as terrible as if she had.

Everyone is gone but the men who are taking down the makeshift stage. Mousy is alone in the middle of Melville. She needs something to grab on to, and that something, she realizes, is Saac's monologue. She needs to think about it, determine whether it is valuable to her or just a bunch of hooey.

She wanders through the government buildings toward Stowe Street, where she finds a café to sit down in, have a cup of tea, and ponder the gadfly's wisdom or lunacy. She decides to have an oolong, for the simple reason that it seems somehow appropriate. She has enough on her saucer; she does not want to ponder why.

She thinks of the way Saac talked and acted, and is thankful that her

brother is not alone like that. It must be terrible to be so isolated and yet so concerned about one's community. Or is Saac a member of a circle of gadflies, who sit buzzing away in each other's living rooms, or in a chatroom online, whatever those are? Or perhaps there are teenagers who sit at his feet — guru that he wants to be — and treat every word like a message from God.

She smiles at the image of herself, not much more than a teenager, sitting at the feet of a circle of gurus, treating every word of theirs as a message not from God, but from a secular equivalent: The Law. That is what law school was, at least the first year, which is all she felt she needed, since she did not want to practice law, only appreciate it. What is an inheritance for but to indulge oneself like that?

And isn't that the way things work in business and government? Don't all those grown men and women become youngsters sitting at the feet of an attorney, waiting to hear a message from The Law? Doesn't the lawyer's rush at being treated like this make the grueling parts — all that research and document preparation and those meetings and CLE classes — not nearly so grueling? All in the service of The Law? No, in the service of being a guru, guiding the minions through the proper Way to take the positions, dispensing one's advice on every aspect of commerce, government, and life. Always being sought out and, when not sought out, able to lecture the miscreant about what goes wrong when a lawyer is not consulted. No, when the right lawyer is not consulted.

Is this what Saac was trying to say? But what about the tunnel and the orchard? Which is Thomas living in? Is he lost in a hole of someone else's making? Is he dining on other people's fruit? Or is the latter the former?

If in a hole, is he helping to dig the tunnel further or deeper, to get through the mountain or simply to keep going? If in an orchard, is he grafting new trees or just keeping the old ones alive? But even then, it's the same tunnel and the same trees.

And if he were a woman, if I were in his shoes, would I do any different? Would I be so taken with my role that I wouldn't know tunnel from orchard? Does one have to be as on the edge of things as Saac to know the difference, or that there really isn't any?

Mousy massages her temples and then that soft area just below the skull. She can't go anywhere with what Saac said. She can't tell if it's wisdom or hooey, or if there's really any difference between them. She has to stop thinking and start doing. But what? Where? Couldn't someone she used to know walk in the door and shake things up? No, no shaking. What she needs is small talk. This she can get from the young woman who brought her tea.

In a Name

Her name tag says “Zenny.” That is enough for Mousy to start a conversation with. She asks if it’s a nickname and, if so, for what? For Zenobia. The young woman goes into a speech that she has down pat. No impromptu for Zenny.

Her parents carried on a family tradition of Z-names, because their last name is Zastra — logical, Mousy thinks, but the tradition should have been questioned long ago. Her grandfather’s name is Zbigniew. He immigrated to the U.S. from Wroclaw, which is in Poland, at a young age. Her father’s name is Zane, and her uncle’s name is Zacharias, but he rebelled in college and changed it to Andrew. When his rebellion ended, somewhere around the point he couldn’t find a steady job and was closing in on thirty, he came back to Melville, took over her grandfather’s position as city fixer, and was given the nickname “A to Z.” Whereupon he changed his name again by adding a middle initial, T, which stands for nothing but “to.”

She says that the Z-story embarrasses her, but she seems to enjoy talking about it. Perhaps it’s the most interesting thing about her. Or perhaps the real point of the story is that she’s not a waitress, but rather the city fixer-in-waiting, the city fixer for a new era. She’s probably a lesbian, but Mousy isn’t sure. She is frustrated by her inability to feel confident reading the signs

provided by hairstyles, piercings, and visible tattoos. She likes to be able to read signs.

Mousy would never tell anyone a story about herself or her family that she found embarrassing. But, she thinks, isn't it embarrassing to be here in Melville alone, talking to a young waitress in a café? No, not if no one she knows walks in, as she hoped for only moments ago.

And even then, why not? Why not be on your own? When you are, why not small talk with a young waitress, or a fellow patron (or matron)? Why not be named Zenobia, Zacharias, A to Z, or even Mousy? What skin is it off anyone's teeth? Names are curiosities to talk about, conversation pieces, that's all. Some of the stories are of little interest to anyone, like the one behind "Sandra." Most of the others, like the one behind "Mousy," aren't all that interesting either, mainly because, unlike Zenny's story, they're not part of a larger story. But it's more fun to listen to naming stories than to talk about the weather or a TV show.

Excited about the idea of naming stories, Mousy finds herself telling the story of her nickname, a story she can't remember ever having told, although she must have told it as a teenager to new people she met. She can't help embellishing the story by tying it to something bigger than Thomas. In fact, she finds herself leaving Thomas out of it altogether. She credits an older neighbor, who was also her first cousin. She herself is an only child, she tells Zenny. Still only, and sometimes still a child. Zenny is an only child, too, she learns. She

says a single word in explanation, “divorce.”

In the embellished version of the story, everyone in her family has an animal nickname. Her mother is Doe and her father is Bear. They gave these names to each other, but it was her mother’s idea, because her parents had animal nicknames, too: Hen and Chick, like the succulent. Her neighbor-cousin is called The Hamster, which is probably why he came up with a rodent name for her. Thank goodness she isn’t called “The Mouse,” although maybe at first she was. But more likely, her cousin wanted the “The” all to himself. Like The Duke, she adds, figuring that he is a public figure.

Zenny smiles and informs Mousy that he is Uncle Duke to her, because her uncle and him are “like this.” Mousy suddenly sees this expression in a new light. When people are close, they are “like this,” but when they are not, they are never “like that,” even though that is the more common state. This state needs an equivalent to “like this,” one that people can smile at, because it’s not only good to be “like this.” It can be just as good to be “like that.” She wishes she had sufficient power in the social media to able to turn “like that” into the next expression to go viral. Then she would be “like that” with millions of people.

Zenny announces her preference for animal names over Z-names, and tells Mousy that she’ll have to think of one that’s right for her when she fantasizes about the name she might take some day to replace Zenny. After all, her uncle changed his name, and everyone accepted it. In fact, A to Z is the probably the

most popular nickname in town. But Andrew is the name he originally chose, so she knows that whatever choice she may make isn't the end of the line. Names are malleable as we are. Although sometimes, as in everything, we aren't in control: her current lover won't call her anything but Zen. Or sometimes even Zen Buddhist. Franny thinks she's being so funny.

Mousy suggests calling Franny "Ces," pronounced like "Sis," the second half of what is likely her formal name. Zenny can't believe she's never thought of that. She'll try it out tonight.

Mousy's had enough with names. And with small talk. She recalls what Eliza said about the Duke, who had no appreciation for Eliza's twenty years of unquestioned service to him. There must be a story there, too, and Zenny probably knows the whole thing. Kids listen to what adults say about each other. So she asks an open-ended question about the Duke, which elicits a snicker from the young waitress.

The Duke is a "real piece of work," Mousy is told. Zenny says that she was raised to believe that her grandfather ran Melville from behind the scenes, but from the earliest point she can recall, she believed that it was Uncle Duke who called the shots. With her grandfather semi-retired from his role as party chair, there's no doubt who's in charge now. The only other contender, she says, is the city attorney, who appears to be absolutely loyal, but actually makes a lot more decisions than he lets on. He has a way of making others think the decisions were theirs, not his. He's nothing like Duke, who hogs credit as if it

were stash.

Zenny goes wild over that one. She tells Mousy that the city attorney has a daughter that's just like him. Ange (short for Angela) is a few years older than Zenny. When Zenny was a junior in high school, Ange seduced her by making Zenny think that she was the first woman in Ange's life, the one who made her realize what her true preference was. Back then, she could count on her past and present lovers being discreet, but when one of them — a real butch named Al (short for Alicia, of course) — pushed Zenny up against a brick wall and told her that Ange was hers, all Zenny could do was laugh at how she'd been fooled. She took a punch in the stomach for that laugh. But it was worth the enlightenment.

It came as no surprise when, a few months later, Ange told her that she was seeing a man, who is now her husband. In fact, it came as something of a relief. Zenny does not like being manipulated.

Mousy wonders. She works with a woman who gets all worked up on the topic of manipulation. We all think we don't like to be manipulated, she says, and yet we keep putting ourselves in positions where we ought to know we will be. If this weren't true, who would watch movies or read novels? How would Spielberg be so popular? There are those who eschew manipulation by watching movies and reading novels that either are unaltered slices of life (and very dull, Mousy feels from having tried a couple) or that put all their cards on the table from the start (and keep putting them there again and again, Mousy

learned quickly from trying one). But only a small minority of people truly do what they can to prevent being manipulated.

Did that word “eschew” come from Mousy’s workmate? Only in saying it to herself did Mousy realize she even knew what it meant. Had Zenny used it? Or someone else in Melville? Not likely. No, it’s the sort of word that Thomas would use. “Would employ” is what he would probably say. Yes, “eschew” is a word he would not sneeze at. Does Thomas still pun? Or has he grown out of it?

Mousy awakes to stories about Uncle Duke that mean nothing to her. His foul language, his triumphant coaching, his drinking bouts, his charitable events, his womanizing, his devotion to the city of Melville. Lots of this and that, not much of the other. And what Mousy realizes she longs for is the other. After all, she didn’t travel to Melville for more of the same. This won’t make it, and who really cares about that? It’s the elusive other, not the Other, but something else, as in the expression, “That’s something else.” She has a hankering for the other that feels a bit like the hankering she has after she’s sated her hankering for tea at breakfast.

Could “the other” she’s hankering for at this moment be nothing more than her manipulative niece? It dawns on her — slow as she is — that this is her chance to learn, incognito, about her own family. This excites her, and makes her interrupt the latest story about Uncle Duke, which seems to involve his third wife (or latest mistress?), who is a member of a family that has run the state for generations. Mousy asks Zenny whether she has had the good fortune

of a supportive family, as preparation for the same question regarding Ange.

Zenny slowly shakes her head, seriously considering the question as if she's never had to answer it before. Yes and no, she says. Better than most, but hardly what one would call "good fortune." Better than her current lover, but worse than the one before.

And Ange? A lot better than Ange, whose mother was horrified that such a thing could happen to her, and whose father employed several damage control methods, including an attempt to bribe Al the butch into denying they'd ever been more than doubles partners.

Mousy expresses her surprise that a city attorney would actually offer a woman an envelope of cash. But no, it wasn't cash, it was a job with the city. Or at least that's what Al said he did, and that she turned Thomas down. In any event, Al told Ange the story and stopped playing doubles with her. Ange was devastated, and Zenny says that Ange didn't talk to her father for two years, even though he denied having even contacted Al at all. By that time, her gender preference was common knowledge, and even Thomas couldn't "put it back into the box."

Mousy asks Zenny whether the city attorney approached her in any way. Only indirectly: the word came through the grapevine that it would be best for everyone if people were mum about any relations they had had with Ange. Everyone ignored the veiled threat. A few years earlier, it might have been effective.

Two women come into the café, and Zenny's face lights up. Friends? Or regular customers? Mousy is happy for her. Zenny is clearly a social animal. She wonders whether the café is hers — a gift from her uncle perhaps, a social waystation on the road to power. But it is time for Mousy to move on. No more questions and no more stories.

A Broken Heart

Mousy makes a right out of the café because she made a left out of the Amberson. She slowly window shops her way along the downtown stores of Stowe Street. She wills herself not to recall which stores were there when she was a child. It doesn't matter, and she has no memory for such things, and she did not come here for the sake of nostalgia. Nor is there anything she wants to buy, certainly not as a souvenir either of Melville or of this visit. She is not an acquirer. She borrows books, streams music, collects nothing, and has neither married nor owned a pet. She rents her condo, and her car is a company car. She wears almost no jewelry, and she makes most of her clothes herself. A few years ago, she even started designing some.

What she likes to do is window shop, not to dream about owning what she sees, like in the old movies, but to look and watch. It is a voyeuristic pleasure, without the intimacy of walking into a store and handling fabric, feeling the heft of a plate or a fork, or trying something on one's own flesh. There's no better time to window shop than after hours, when everything is nicely lit and there's no one milling around in the background.

It's not that people have no place in Mousy's window shopping. She sometimes focuses on a particular individual, man or woman, who is touching

fabric, flirting with a salesperson, looking into a mirror, or trying to make a big decision. She weaves a story around them, speculating about the moment they are living through.

Before a stationer's, she watches what is clearly a bride-to-be overwhelmed by both her mother and the store owner, both of whom clearly know what *they* want. She is on the verge of tears. She turns away from them and looks desperately out into the street, right into Mousy's eyes. A look of horror comes over the bride-to-be's face, and she turns back to the matter at hand, which is easier for her to deal with than a stranger's gaze. Mousy feels a bit of cruel satisfaction. And she relishes the fact that she has never and will never be in that young woman's position. Even if she were, she knows what she wants, doesn't she.

Standing before an outdoors shop, Mousy watches a man about her age trying on vests and jackets, preparing for the winter like a good ant. He shows no interest in the feel of the fabrics or in how they or he looks in a mirror. Perhaps the closest mirror isn't close enough. Efficiency is all. He shows no interest in the attractive young woman who is waiting on him, nor does she encourage his interest, busy as she is finding and bringing him new vests and jackets to try on. But while she explains to him the qualities of each one — listed as they are on the numerous tags that suggest the ski tickets that will presumably replace them — this is the time to catch her eye, elicit a smile from her, induce her help in removing a jacket that feels too tight. Why would a man

his age not want to feel the touch of this young woman's hands? Or the warmth of her smile? Does the metal in her lips or the rings on her hands suggest coldness to him? Or is it the metal in his heart and the rings in his trunk?

It looks like it's decision time. Instead of searching for another jacket or vest, the young woman looks expectantly into the man's face. His look away from her look encounters Mousy's gaze in the window. His jaw drops. It really drops, as if it were about to fall on the floor, and the young woman would have to pick it up and help him put it back on, even if it is not for sale. He drops the jacket he is holding, and without removing the forest green vest he walks straight toward the door, through it, and up to Mousy, who fears that her voyeurism has finally landed her in hot water. Two looks of horror in a row. Perhaps she ought to look in a mirror herself!

The man starts shouting at her, right into her face, as their heights are nearly the same. At first, Mousy can't tell what it is all about. It's just noise, noise directed not out into the environment, but directly at her. Because it is out of all proportion to what she has been doing, it emotionally overwhelms her. Somehow, she manages to clear the rush of blood from her ears and grab on to separate words and phrases. College. Spurned. Brother. Knew it all along. My entire life. Never again. Sandra.

The shouting suddenly ends, and Mousy looks at the man for the first time up close. She has no idea who he may be. She only knows that he must not be

a Melville native, because he called her Sandra. Then what is he doing here? And what would her brother have to do with it? There is no connection between Thomas and Sandra. They have never even met.

Did she really spurn him? If this middle-aged man's "entire life" has been ruined by her spurning, how long has he been holding this grudge against her? If it's been spinning around in his brain for so many years, is he going to pull out a gun and end it all for both of them? This is how it happens. And maybe she deserves it. Maybe it's the reason she returned to Melville. To give him this opportunity. Where else more appropriate to die?

The silence as well as her reverie are broken by the man's apology for shouting at her. It is a barebones apology, with no explanation. She sees that he is crying, and this sets off a memory of a college boyfriend who cried when she told him at the end of the school year, when he raised the question of their future, that she did not want to see him over the summer, that their relationship hadn't worked out. This was that college boyfriend, from three states away, here in downtown Melville. She ruined that boy's life by interpreting what had happened between them in a different manner than he had. He did not affect her life in any way. That is worth a good cry. She joins him in it. She takes him in her arms. He keeps his arms by his sides.

After a while she can feel his body quiet down. Perhaps he is ready to tell her what he is doing in Melville. Or perhaps he is wondering what *she* is doing here. Perhaps he moved to Melville because it was the last place he thought she

would come. But how would he know this? It is more likely that he moved to Melville expecting her to come home, but she never did, and years ago he had stopped imagining their encounter. He took a job and started a family and stayed.

She looks for the telltale ring and finds only a finger that looks like it had been broken and not well repaired. A broken heart, a broken finger. Did he break it out of anger? Does he have a gun in that bag he's carrying?

Mousy feels a sudden urge to speak. She lacks the strength to even consider whether to give in to it or not. She tells him that this is the first time she has come home to Melville since she went off to college, and that he is the last person she expected to run into. He says nothing. She tells him that she hasn't even seen her brother yet. She feels him stiffen. He does not want to hear about her brother. He is the only person in Melville who does not want to talk about her brother. Does he know him? Has her brother spurned him too?

If only she could ask him his name. She can't dredge it out of her silted mind. And she can't confess to the very human weakness of her recall mechanism, or whatever it's called. It would be crushing to him, even though it's not personal, not to her. If it had been an entire school year, she would recall his name. But it couldn't have been more than two months, could it? They weren't even lovers, although they'd spent some nights together. She had never let him into her life, and yet she had devastated his. How many other victims of hers were there strewn around the country? Or had they all moved to

Melville? Had they formed a club? She fought a smile. That could be dangerous.

She wins the battle against her smile by speaking again. She asks her nameless ex-boyfriend what work he does. He reminds her that he was an engineering student and says that he is, unsurprisingly, an engineer. An electrical engineer. What people call “a computer geek.” He has been a very successful computer geek, like so many of his classmates, and it is sad that he has no wife or children to spend all his money on. If they had married and had children together, the children would be in college now, he says. It’s as if Mousy had killed these children in their cribs.

Does this man want her to feel like a murderer? If so, he has succeeded. Mousy is crushed. She walks over to a bench in a pocket park between two buildings. Is this where the hardware store used to be? she wonders to herself. A murderer has no willpower. The man follows and sits next to her, placing his bag between them. If there is a gun in the bag, this would be a threat. If there is no gun, it gives them a bit of protective separation. That is, there is protection for each of them in the space that lies between. Protection is needed because they both may be dangerous now. Mousy wonders what she is capable of. She feels energized by this thought, but thinks it’s creepy that she feels this way. Does she really knows herself?

She certainly doesn’t know this man. She never knew him. He said little and did less. He was a companion. At the time, she must have needed someone

around who adored her. Puppy love. That's all it was. And now they're lone wolves.

Now that his crying has stopped, now that he has successfully communicated to her what she did to him and his children, he gazes at her without shame, as if she were the one who should feel ashamed. But she doesn't. She feels like she has committed a crime, but without knowledge or intent, without *mens rea*, a term she hadn't thought of for ages. That means she's not a murderer. What is someone called who commits accidental homicide? A manslaughterer? A childslaughterer? Why a word that is otherwise used only with butchery?

Mousy decides that someone who commits accidental homicide is unlucky. Mousy certainly feels unlucky, but it has little to do with the children she prevented from coming into the world. She realizes that she feels unlucky because this oaf has emotionally kidnapped her. She feels unlucky and disgruntled. She wants to strike back.

It dawns on her that this is the best gift she can give this man. She can show him what he missed by her having spurned him way back when. She can show him what a harridan she is. The woman who spurned him was a young witch, and now she's an aging witch. What would he want with a witch? Why would he want a witch to be the mother of his children? He could have done much better. He still can.

And so Mousy lets him have it. She doesn't hold anything back. She

relishes the experience, how strong, how forceful, she is. She rises to her feet and stands over him, shouting imprecations down. She watches him fall apart. She watches him cry in a completely different way than before. These are the tears of a child. She is pushing the buttons his mother pushed. Mousy thinks that this must be a form of psychotherapy, breaking him down so that he can build himself up anew, start a new life without what he experienced as a trauma. She is curing him. She is granting him a new life.

When Mousy stops, she feels exhausted. She turns and walks slowly away. The man says only that he knew about her and her brother all along, that that explains everything. She can hear his weeping as she turns the corner. She has done more for this man than she ever did against him. She has never been able to make amends before. This is a major event in her life. She wants to celebrate. She wants to brag to the world about what she has done. She wants to tell Thomas.

The Laundry List

Mousy walks for twenty minutes or so without any destination in mind. She doesn't glance into one shop window. She may never window shop again. She extinguishes her desire to tell someone about the service she did for her ex-boyfriend by imagining a monologue and finding no satisfaction in it at all. She will have to keep her accomplishment to herself and celebrate it alone.

She ends her walk because she is tired of being out of breath. She started the walk that way and now she is worried that she'll start gasping for air like a fish out of water. Like a fish without a bicycle. That takes her back. She sits on a low wall along the sidewalk outside an elementary school. Fortunately, there is no recess. It is quiet. She is alone. She does a breathing exercise, to bring down her heart rate, purge her anxiety, and start breathing like a human again.

As she nears the end of her breathing exercise, she feels a presence. Another man. She cannot bear the thought of communication with another man. She focuses even more deeply on her breathing so that she might send him away out of sheer willpower. Someone told her once that witches concentrate their energy by masturbating. Concentrated breathing should do just as well, or better.

But when she is done, he is still there, standing off at a respectful distance. Fortunately, he is an older man, not another of her contemporaries. He asks about what she has been doing, whether it's "meditation" or some such thing. He says that he needs to do something about his heart and his stress, and he's read stuff in magazines, but never actually seen it in action. It looks wonderful, at least on her. As if it were a dress.

He too wants her help. What is she here for but to help? She explains about her breathing exercise, using some of the language she hates to hear in yoga class. Mindfulness. Acceptance. Mode of being. For her it is simply something to do, an exercise that works. Activities do not require explanation. But people desire explanation. They need to be able to explain what they are doing and why, especially to themselves. As one of her yoga buddies always says, "Everything has a narrative." Mousy disagrees. Some things simply exist. Perhaps she is an existentialist.

When she is done with her explanation, the man introduces himself: Jørgen Hanover. Sandra Ives. Again a bug-eyed, quizzical echo of her name. There must be a hundred Sandra Iveses, it's no big deal. He says that she must be Thomas's younger sister. Yes, of course. One of the many other Sandra Ives couldn't have just been passing through town doing a breathing exercise on a wall outside an elementary school. Only the sister of the celebrated city attorney whose wife happens to have taken her name.

Of course, this taking of her name was not a crime, because the other

Sandra lacked *mens rea*. She was just getting married. Mousy's name was Mousy, not Sandra, and Sandra was clueless. She's probably still clueless.

What does Sandra think of Mousy? She probably doesn't think of her at all. Why should she. Mousy's never been a problem, just a blank space on the family tree, a blank space that happens to share her name, in name only. Mousy never thinks of Sandra either.

Jørgen can't help but tell Thomas's sister how much he respects her brother, how long they've worked together, how dependent he, as chairman of the Water & Sewer Authority board, is on Thomas's advice. But, he also can't help but add, with a bit of a twinkle in his otherwise small, shineless eyes, Thomas does get too much credit. People think he came up with everything in the city that works. However, before Thomas put on long pants, Jørgen was setting the stage for the way things work in Melville.

Jørgen looks at Mousy as if he were trying to determine whether she wants to hear his story, whether she bristles at the thought of anything faintly critical of her brother, or whether she is a woman who only cares to hear about cooking, clothing, and raising children. As it is, Mousy is none of the above. She is happy that this encounter will have nothing to do with her, that she is back to being nothing but Thomas's little sister, and that she may learn something more about her brother, but probably nothing compared to what she'll learn about Chairman Jørgen. To communicate her interest, she looks at him with open eyes and a smile. He looks at her in the way men do when they

suddenly find a woman attractive because she shows interest in what he has to say or she laughs at one of his witticisms.

Jørgen's story begins back in the sixties, the time when, he says, development in Melville "took off," when farms were turned into curving roads of ranches and splits. What this meant to the city government was that there was so much money coming in from the permit process and all the new properties, not to mention going out in contracts for roads, bridges, a new school, and a huge increase in the city's sewer system, "the Home Team" who ran the city didn't know what to do with it all. Jørgen was given the job of figuring out the best way to filter and launder the money, so that the Team could benefit from all the work they were doing. It was a tough time to work in government, and many members of the Team — including Jørgen — didn't get any salary at all.

Jørgen had just graduated from high school, with the help of his best buddy, he admits, and he had no desire to go to college. He chose marriage and parenthood over college in order to get out of the draft. And he had his father's construction business to go into.

But it wasn't long before his father told him that his "party boy" mentality would help him a lot more in politics than in construction. Dad set up a meeting with Zbiggy Zastra, who was the Home Team's "keeper of the gate." It's amazing how much fancier that sounds than "gatekeeper." Zenny didn't tell Mousy about her grandpa's nickname. It's one thing to keep the Z-name

tradition going in her family, but it would be tragic to have a son of hers nicknamed Little Zbiggy.

He and Zbiggy hit it off "zbigtime." Jørgen shows Mousy how he laughs. She rates it a 3 out of 10, on the basis of its length and its likeness to gagging on a fishbone. She has never rated a laugh before, but she thinks she will again. Only not her own.

So Zbiggy asked Jørgen to try and solve the laundering problem, to come up with what Zbiggy called "a laundry list." Jørgen's first step was the only one he knew: calling around to get the kind of help that got him through high school. Jørgen's philosophy is that people are tribal. We all work together. Anyone who goes it alone is a moron. Mousy is fine with her life choices, but she doesn't like to hear them described so bluntly.

The problem for Jørgen was who to ask for help. There aren't consultants for this sort of thing, at least not in the Yellow Pages, and this was decades before you could find anything on the Internet, which has "done a number" on the advantages of having personal connections. Mousy is delighted when Jørgen passes on the usual eldster's anti-Internet diatribe.

Jørgen decided that if they didn't know what to do with money in Chicago, they wouldn't know anywhere. So he networked his way to a conversation with a ward leader via a schoolmate of Jørgen's who had "gone out" with the ward leader when she moved to the Windy City to meet someone rich and powerful who was not a member of the Melville Country Club.

The first thing the ward leader told Jørgen about was “aldermanic privilege,” which means that no land use matter can be put on the city council agenda without the approval of the district alderman (Chicago’s way of saying “council member”). This allows each alderman to, as D.A.’s say, “extort” each developer in his district into handing over lots of money.

They were already shaking developers down in Melville, but there was no organization, no clear boundaries. This meant lots of fights over the loot, which led to what the military calls “dissension in the ranks,” deals on the side, a few fistfights, and even the burning down of a summer home that had been purchased with loot that had been hidden from everyone else, but not for long.

So Jørgen gave the Home Team “an organizational scheme.” Thomas’s boss took the idea and had it inserted into the town’s charter. Melville became the first city in the county with district council members. This led to an increase in the real estate boom and a couple of serious council contests, as council members moved to and fought over the districts they felt would be most lucrative.

Considering that this brought in more money to be laundered, it was fortunate that the ward leader’s advice didn’t stop there. He also told Jørgen about “pet charities,” a term Mousy tries to give a cat-or-dog image to, but fails. The ward leader said that the two best places to launder money through are charities and law firms. Why? Because no one asks any questions of either of them, for completely different reasons. Lawyers are protected by that great

invention known as “confidentiality.” No one knows what lawyers do to earn the money they’re paid, so you can pay them anything you want and it can go pretty much anywhere you want. No one knows and no one cares and, if they did care, they would be shooed away with the words “confidential” and “it’s out of my hands.” The then city attorney knew this very well, and his firm had already been carrying most of the burden of laundering money until Jørgen introduced the city to the charity alternative.

Charities are even better than law firms, because the money doesn’t have to come from clients. After all, a law firm can’t represent everyone. But everyone can give to a charity. Contractors and developers, all participants in a suit or contract competition, and those who own them and work for them and do subcontracting for them, etc., etc., etc.

It’s easy to get money *into* a charity. The trick is in getting the money *out,* to where you want it to go. The first trick is that you don’t necessarily need to get the money out. If the government has a cosy relationship with the charity, then everything the charity does, the government can take credit for. It’s also money that the government doesn’t have to spend on things like homelessness and public schools and hospitals. That means it’s money that doesn’t come from taxes, so you can keep taxes down, which is the surest way of staying in power, short of buying votes, which went out of style a century ago.

When you do want to get money out, you don’t have to give it only to the poor or sick or those eligible for a scholarship. Charities contract with all sorts

of businesses: construction companies, social service providers, professional firms, you name it. No one asks what anyone actually does for the charity. Set up a company, give it a name, and you've got it, simple as that. The ward leader told Jørgen that Americans have been doing it since they started taking land from the Indians.

So, despite the fact that everyone takes credit for and benefits from The Cereno Fund, it was Jørgen's idea, even the name (Jørgen likes sea stories, but never had the patience for *Moby Dick*).

Jørgen gives himself sole credit for a third idea, which even the ward leader said was "real smart." The idea came from the fact that a lot of the Home Team members were crazy about hunting. The idea was for a private hunting club, to be funded by everyone seeking a contract, a permit, a grant, a license, or whatever from Melville's government. "Pay to hunt" is Jørgen's clever name for this variation on "pay to play." Of course, the members would give open invitations to high-level Melville officials and their families. In fact, after the buildings were built, high-level officials were given free weeks at the hunting lodge, and eventually their own cabins on a pristine mountain lake. There's nothing like a free three-season getaway with your pals to make public service worthwhile, to make the government one big happy family, barring hunting accidents. And there haven't been any.

But Jørgen says that he does have to credit Thomas for his current position, which he's held for over a decade. When Thomas first mentioned the

Water & Sewer Authority, Jørgen thought he was being funny. But as Thomas told him, as long as everyone gets city water and their sewers don't back up, no one will spend a second thinking about the Authority, not to mention argue about it in the blogs and op-ed pages. The Authority is independent, has a AAA bond rating, and therefore Jørgen has always been able to do whatever he wants with it. It's the toy you never get tired of, he says.

Mousy is tired of it. She is especially tired of how it is assumed that, just because she is the city attorney's sister, she is interested in what goes on and accepts it unquestioningly. How does Jørgen know she won't go the police with what he's told her? Probably because "the Home Team," as he calls it, controls the police. Mousy could go to the feds, but what do they care about a small city like Melville? They're not looking to bust charities, hunting lodges, law firms, or water and sewer authorities. They'd probably say that having council members represent districts is not only legal, but desirable. They'd probably say that when you deliver the goods, it's okay to take a percentage. That's the way the world works. They'd probably say that Melville is the best-run city in the state. It's probably won national awards. And Jørgen gets none of the credit. Oh well, cookies crumble.

Jørgen doesn't seem to have anywhere to go. Is he going to ask Mousy up to the hunting lodge for the weekend? Or does he assume she's already been invited by her brother? What really matters is that she's suddenly famished. It's been a very long morning, and Mousy needs to be alone in the back corner

of a restaurant, quietly celebrating the service she did for her ex-boyfriend and for herself. She wants to imagine, for a moment, that she isn't here in Melville. In the back corner of a restaurant she could be anywhere.

She tells Jørgen she has "a luncheon engagement." He smiles, as if he were happy that someone wants to dine with her. He looks at his watch and says that he has one too, all the way across town. Can he give her a lift? No, he cannot.

Mary, Joan, Othello

Mousy takes a cab back to the Magnificent Amberson. She asks Laurel, its proprietress, for a restaurant recommendation, a place she can go alone, sit in a back corner, and spend a little time by herself. Laurel's eyes open wide, most likely trying to guess what drove Mousy away from human contact. Let her guess. It's not as if her guesses could be educated ones.

She offers to make Mousy an omelet and bring it up to her room, but Mousy is adamant. Only the back corner of a restaurant will do. She enjoys being alone in a crowd more than in a hotel room. And yet part of her wishes that Laurel would offer to go with her and talk about old times that didn't matter, that were not better forgotten because there was nothing to forget.

When Mousy leaves the dark, worn-looking interior of the Amberson, she finds herself in a bright cheery world that has nothing to do with the past, her past or anyone else's. Nothing is as it was in her childhood. There is nothing here that reminds her of anything. It's more like where she lives now. It's just that she drives by such places without noticing them.

The luncheonette that Laurel recommended must have been here in her day, but it's the sort of place old people go to, not children, not even children with their grandparents. Throughout her childhood, Mousy's grandparents

lived, respectively, far away or not at all. One of each pair had died before she reached the age of awareness. She dreamed of getting the leftovers together and having them move to Melville to take care of her. But she rarely saw them, and they never met each other after their children's wedding. Mousy doesn't even know whether they were happy or not. They died years ago, and in both cases Mousy hadn't even known they were ill. Did they eat at places like this?

Mousy no longer wants to sit in the back corner of a restaurant. She gets up and walks back out into the bright afternoon. But it doesn't cheer her up. It feels falsely gaudy. She's angry. She wants to hit something, no, kick something. What an odd feeling to have. She is not violent. She has no desire to hurt herself or anyone else. Not even objects. What she wants is sunglasses, because the glare is giving her a headache. She reaches into an outside pocket of her purse and is happy to find that she hasn't lost her senses altogether, because her sunglasses are in their trusty place. Order is important to Mousy. She cannot understand people who embrace chaos. And yet she welcomes the temptations the unexpected places before her. She enjoys the thrill she feels when it tries to embrace her, and she is forced to respond.

She walks down Tarkington Avenue with her attention focused on the restaurants that stretch before her. They are all chains. She goes in the first one, scans the menu from just inside the doorway (proud of how good her eyesight remains), walks up to the counter, and places her order. She wonders how many people place orders on their apps while driving, even though it won't

save more than a minute or two. She wonders how many people order all the toppings, to get the most for their money. She wonders why she cares. Is there so little to think about? Is it impossible to think important thoughts in a place as plasticky as this? Of course not. No one has to give into her environment. Plastic seats do not require plastic thoughts. One has to be more plastic (ha ha), to rise above the occasion.

But then again, occasions are for giving in to. If not, they wouldn't exist. And chain restaurants are an occasion for small talk, or no talk at all. An argument in a chain restaurant would be petty and ludicrous. You can't argue about politics here, or race or religion. You can only argue about how to handle your children running wild. Or, better, talk about other people's children.

To be true to her earlier thought, Mousy sits in the closest thing to a back corner: the table closest to the restrooms. There is no odor, she is glad to discover. But there is a parade of parents with their children, and the occasional homeless person. She wonders whether it is a corporate policy to allow the homeless to use the restrooms, or whether it is the franchisee's policy, or the manager's, or simply that nobody really cares, because the restrooms are cleaned regularly by a contractor whose employee just pops in and out, so that no one even gets to know her.

See, Mousy tells herself, you *can* think important thoughts in a chain restaurant. Or at least interesting thoughts. She considers asking the woman who is cleaning off tables about the restroom policy, but she is afraid that, if

the reason for allowing anyone to use the restrooms is indifference, she may wake the staff up and do harm to the homeless.

Fascinated with the expressions of the woman doing her work — a range that stretches from ruminant (Mousy's word for those who chew gum and look vacant) to disappointed to annoyed to disgusted to downright angry — Mousy does not notice another young woman approaching her table and putting a hand on the seat across from her.

The young woman waits until Mousy has seen her. She is smiling. She is pretty. She is young. And she seems to be about to try to sell something to Mousy, but Mousy doesn't want to guess what. She wants the young woman to surprise her. But the young woman appears to be steeling herself to speak. She must be new at what she does.

The young woman tells Mousy that she saw her at the dedication of the new building and was told that she is Thomas's sister. She says Thomas's name with a hard edge to her voice. It appears that she does not like Thomas. Does she too resent him getting more credit than her? Or being more respected than her? She must not be a salesperson, but a government official, a young, ambitious government official who resents the older generation, who wants power *now*.

What's the rush? The thrill will wear off before you know it. Or don't people ever tire of it? The little power Mousy has experienced — over one subordinate at a time — has not been all that thrilling. She often would prefer doing the

work herself. It all depends on the particular subordinate, of course. It has nothing to do with power itself. She has never experienced power as something concrete, something you feel in your gut, like love, or in your head, like liquor. It's something others have. And others long for. Something totally abstract.

Mousy wonders whether she should ask the young woman to sit down, but it's hard to be gracious to someone who is all but glaring down at you. The young woman tells her that Thomas and his friends have used her mother for their own purposes. That is "the sad truth." It's because of all the respect the community gives her mother, due to her undeniable integrity and her inspirational speaking skills. Through the flattery of Thomas Ives and his friends, and their offer to allow her to serve her beloved community by leading its government, the Devil broke through her natural defenses and took hold of her soul. Then Thomas and his friends kept her in the dark and, as one, denied any rumors or accusations that came to her attention.

Who could expect a woman such as this to accuse someone without clear evidence of their guilt? She, the daughter can do this, because she has nothing to lose and, unlike her mother, nothing much to offer to the community. What is important is that her mother, whom she now identifies as the mayor, has done nothing for her own benefit and is not responsible for what the others have done and continue to do, or even for not making their misconduct public. She can only do what she can do, within the limitations that God has placed on her, as on all of us. Not only is her mother innocent, but she is *an* innocent, a

figure on par with the Virgin Mary.

Oh, but not Mary Mother of God. The young woman tells Mousy how poor a mother her mother has been to her and her brother. As if Mousy could care. She has her own mother to badmouth, and has chosen not to do so to anyone, including herself. After all, it wouldn't be fair, since Mousy has no one to badmouth what would certainly have been her motherly failures had she had a child. Like most mothers, this young woman's was incapable of caring sufficiently for her children or, for that matter, their father. Who *is* capable? Why is it so hard to recognize that we must care for ourselves? And protect ourselves. Mousy would like to remind this young woman that it is our selves that we need protection from the most, and who can offer this sort of protection? She may be young, but she's not too young to be, or become, an adult.

Getting back to the Virgin Mary, the young woman tells Mousy how successfully her mother communicates to the public her self-perceived purity. She seems like an innocent because she *feels* like an innocent. Innocence is the main curtain behind which she hides her oversized ego, her love of the limelight and, most of all, her need to be revered, if not worshiped. Her greatest skill is her ability to project her self-belief, that is, her denial of who she really is. This is exactly what Mousy's brother and his friends were looking for. They could not have invented a mayor as perfect as this young woman's mother.

Mousy thinks the young woman is wrong to refer to the Virgin Mary in

talking about her mother. More likely, the mayor identifies with Joan of Arc, who saw herself not as innocent but rather as zealously spiritual and, from her teenage years, as a leader and protector of men. For a teenager in the twentieth century, this feeling would have been a ticket to success in high school and college. The likely problem is that the mayor remained a zealous teenager who romantically saw herself as a savior, far above everyone around her. She was the spiritual equivalent of the party girl who can't settle down into an adult life of work and responsibility. This is more likely what happened. Mousy is proud of her analysis, but cannot bring herself to share it, because she doesn't think the daughter will be open to her speculations, especially since her only contact with the mayor has been listening to a speech and, indirectly, hearing the daughter's point of view. Few people are open to disagreement, and Mousy does not enjoy the disagreeable reactions it engenders.

The more Mousy thinks about the Joan of Arc analogy, the more it seems to fit the facts. The French king used Joan's zeal and popularity for his own personal benefit. She had no idea how much the awe she had worked so hard to attain made her the perfect front for politicians, just like this young woman's mother. What would she do if she were to realize she was being used? Would it free her or destroy her?

Meanwhile, the young woman talks of irrelevant things, such as the fact that her mother gave herself the nickname "Hanna" Susquehanna to make herself more memorable. It was years, she assures Mousy, before Hanna

Montana came along.

Then, out of the blue, the young woman tells Mousy that she is an actuary. Mousy would never have guessed this, and yet it makes some sense. Actuarying is a way to seek certainty — all those tables that enumerate the uncertainties of life. But as an actuary, the young woman says, she is frustrated by her mother's situation, because her mother does not consider risk. Where Mousy's brother and his friends have managed for decades to keep information about their conduct from public view, and even from elected leaders like her mother, how can any probabilities be estimated? Every document yields little in the way of facts. Every datum is at best a half-truth. There is nothing to go by.

So a scandal might come along and destroy her mother, but the young woman cannot start to guess how likely this event is to occur, any more than she can decide whether this is something she desires. Of course, if her mother would consider the consequences of her inaction and decide that it was in her best interests, as well as the community's, for her to act and bring a scandal about, then she would not be destroyed by it. She would be the heroine. And then how would her daughter feel? Would this be what brought the two of them together?

But, Mousy thinks, Joan of Arc ended up being a heroine even though she was being used and did nothing to protect herself.

Yes, Mousy thinks, in war and politics an actuary is at a loss. You never

know how things will turn out. And you never know who is using whom. Not only facts are hidden, but also dreams, schemes, intentions, and personal relationships. What actually happened will never be told, and not just because no one individual knows it. There are investigations, but rarely are there reckonings. If the mayor were to call for an investigation of Thomas, she might be seen as trying to bring him down to protect herself, not the community. She might be seen as the biggest schemer of them all.

The young woman believes that what is most important is that Thomas and his friends believe that the probability of a scandal is close to zero. They depend on loyalty, which is to say on fear of retribution. They depend on history, which they, like most people, believe the future will replicate. Mousy realizes that their belief in their invincibility is equal to the strong beliefs of both the mayor and Joan of Arc. There is certainty all around, which means that no one has considered risk, risk has been kept out of the equations.

Mousy has no doubt that her brother is certain of where he stands. He was always certain, or did his best to appear certain. But even this young woman has no certainty that he has done anything wrong. And yet she places the blame squarely on his slender shoulders, as the city's "head law enforcer" and the one to whom the mayor turns to for advice. The mayor is required to depend on his legal interpretations, without any need to seek alternate legal advice. In fact, the city budget does not provide for second opinions.

Her mother, on the other hand, is less responsible because she has

certainly done nothing wrong; she has only failed to do anything right. The young woman insists that we are not obligated to throw our bodies in front of someone who is about to be shot. We are not obligated to put an end to age-old corrupt activities, only not to engage in them ourselves. We are not obligated to be our child's caregiver, only to provide her one who is sufficiently competent. By doing as little as possible, by being more than acting, we can be both innocent and good.

Her mother gives people what they want: someone who makes them feel good about themselves, or at least about the individual they elected to be their leader. Warm feelings, inspirational speeches, good stories well told is what they are looking for, the young woman says. With her mother they even occasionally experience awe.

"Figurehead" is not necessarily a derogatory term, at least to the young woman whose mother appears to be a prime example. The old-fashioned term "cutting a good figure" may, however, be more appropriate. Her mother cuts a very good figure indeed. After all, she is a Church Deacon, a teacher, a mother, and a woman of color.

The young woman finally sits down across from Mousy and looks right into her eyes as she concludes that her mother is a tragic heroine, whose fall will come from what is best in her. Thomas is her Iago, whispering in her ear, but not telling her what she needs to know to act in her own defense and for the good of the people of Melville. Won't Thomas's sister do what the mayor cannot,

using her special influence over the City Attorney to get him to tell the mayor the whole truth? Her voice breaks when she pleads. Sitting down on the chair is for the young woman like kneeling on the floor.

Mousy's shoulder is slammed by a child bouncing out of the restroom hallway. The young woman reflexively laughs, and then consciously stops herself, followed by a flash of horror across her face. For Mousy, this is another indication of the cruelty in the young woman, and the way she hides undesirable feelings from herself. A focus on oneself, but only part of oneself, is necessary for one to make accusations about a stranger's brother and then ask the stranger to intervene for her mother — about whom she is herself ambivalent — by asking the stranger's brother to betray his friends. It is a lot to ask. If only the young woman knew.

Fortunately, Mousy finished her lunch before the young woman arrived. Because now she is in no mood to eat. She feels a bit of satisfaction at the thought that there is a strong probability the young woman will skip her lunch. Mousy feels cruel and, unlike the young woman, she relishes the feeling. She long ago acknowledged cruelty as part of who she is, as a posture toward the world, much like one's standing posture. Both are characteristics that can be changed, but they keep tugging us away from a healthy posture and, therefore, require constant watch and correction. Who has the strength to keep such a watch and look in mirrors all the time? And why bother? Feeling cruel feels good.

Mousy decides to get up and leave the restaurant, without a word. She rises, reaches out a hand, shakes the hand she is, a bit reluctantly, proffered, and walks through the families and solos, out the door, and back into the sunlight. She feels so much better.

Red Queen, Big Gorilla

The thought of running into someone else makes Mousy feel helpless, and helpless is the last thing she wants to feel. Wandering without a plan has given her a feeling of freedom, but running into one more person who sees her only as an extension of or possible ally against her brother — the thought of it makes her throat constrict, like when her sweater gets caught on something when she's taking it off, and she can't pull it off or back down to where it was. She fears a panic attack, what she refers to, to herself, as "an incident." This came out of nowhere.

She decides to get in her car and drive around instead of walking. It's safer and it soaks up her attention. She will cruise the city and see what damage time has done. No, not time, people. People acting and people refraining from action. She doubts that she will find many places that have showed "the ravages of time," that are rusted or dilapidated. And even these places have been left by people to rust and rot.

What she has seen gives her no reason to believe that Melville has failed, or even that it has failed a portion of the populace. It's not one of those industrial cities that attracted immigrants — from abroad and from the South — and then left their children and grandchildren high and dry. No one has been

accusing her brother and his clients of failure. Perhaps the young woman and the others are envious of the success of those who run the city government. Envy is a powerful thing, at least as powerful as greed, and of far less value.

Stopped at a light, Mousy considers envy with respect to herself. She does not come upon anything, not even schadenfreude. That is not her kind of cruelty. It is probably because success is not all that important to her. She is happy when others succeed. It has nothing to do with her. Not much does.

Eventually Mousy finds a couple of neighborhoods that have gone to the dogs. She smiles at this expression, wondering whether dog people would ever use it, or just cat people like her. She wonders whether it would make any difference if people took care of their property, planted bushes and vegetables, made it a community project to paint each house that can be painted, with colors that cheer things up. And wash the others. Dirty white is the worst color of all. Why are so many houses white? Why are people so conventional, even when it doesn't work for them? We are helpless, she decides. Everything comes down to this.

So Mousy drives through the nicest neighborhoods in town, and comes across some mansions that weren't there when she was young. Some of them are completely tasteless, at least on the outside. All those Palladian windows! But she finds some of the mansions fascinating, and not just the modern ones that look like cubist versions of barns or like silos that overflowed. Some of the faux-traditional estates actually work. She wonders what their owners do. Or

did.

She sees a few gardens she would like to walk in. She would very much like to walk in a garden. And she can, she realizes. So off she goes to the university's Arrowhead Gardens, a place she can finally appreciate as more than a place to make out with a boy.

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This was exactly the right decision. Everything remains beautiful, and peacefully so. The plants, the trees, the students. She never realized how natural youth is, how well it blends with nature, how much a smile is like a blossom and young flesh like the leaf of a succulent. The students must realize this, because they are quiet, respectful of their surroundings. Do they identify with the plants they pass? They are even respectful of Mousy, noting her presence, and her interest in them, with a nod or a smile. Two students tell her how much they like her outfit. One boy, lost in the arboretum, anxious about missing a class or an assignation (or did a girl fail to show?), even asks her for the way out, lets the helpless be of help.

Mousy can't help thinking that she would have stood him up herself. She preferred boys with self-confidence. There was nothing motherly about her.

Now she wants to reassure the boy, but what can she reassure him about? That being rejected is actually the best thing, in the long run, because she wouldn't have been right for him anyway? That he will find the right, motherly sort of girl who will calm his anxieties by making him feel protected from the world? That he really isn't lost or that being lost is fun? And that sometimes you're late. So what. He wouldn't buy any of it. He doesn't want any of it. He'll have to find his own way, even if not out of these particular woods.

These thoughts do not ruffle Mousy. The boy is nothing to her. The arboretum, on the other hand, is a wonder of wonders. She wants to be lost in it, never find a way out. She has no class, no assignation, no anxieties. No one has rejected her. It doesn't even bother her that often she cannot give a name to most of the trees around her. Sometimes she cheats and reads the little nameplates on stilts. This doesn't bother her either. Her brother could jump out from behind a tree, shrieking like a banshee, like he did when she was a child, and she wouldn't be shaken. No, not really. But she feels as close to this as she could.

When she has walked all the Arrowhead's paths and passed through all its greenhouses, Mousy sits down on a bench, thinks back over the last two hours, and decides that her visit here has been an escape, a wonderful, appropriate escape, but she has to get back, not because the world demands it, but because the world is out there, like the boy's class or assignation, and although the world does not require her, she requires it. She is visiting Melville,

and this is not really Melville. This is a not-so-secret garden, just as Mousy's visit must be not-so-secret anymore. People will soon come seeking her. She has little time left to make decisions. She has not been helpless – only haphazard – but soon she will be.

Before she is sought out, she wants to seek out someone for herself. No, not someone. Frances Lamberton. And she is only a short walk away. The university is much bigger than it used to be, but the library is still less than a ten-minute walk from the entrance to the Arrowhead.

Mousy takes delight in the students she passes. She daydreams about taking a job at a university. It doesn't make her feel old to be around so much youth. It makes her happy with herself in a way she can't explain. Perhaps Frances will enlighten her. She always did.

As Mousy enters the library, she has her fingers crossed. She would agree to clean a library bathroom if that would ensure Frances had time to talk with her. She feels disgust with her own thought, and hopes this feeling won't make a difference to the outcome.

It doesn't. It's that time of the afternoon when Frances hits a wall and goes looking for tea and company, she says. Seeing Mousy again gives her energy, she can't sit another second, so they walk the aisles of the stacks. They have to talk softly, Frances says faux-sternly, but they'll be walking so fast, like the Red Queen and Alice, that their conversation won't seriously bother any one student or professor nailed to the seat of her carrel.

Mousy loved to hide out in the stacks at her college library, but she didn't like walking through them. They were so much alike, and there wasn't enough space, and the mustiness that didn't bother her when she sat seemed oppressive when she woke the smells by pulling them along in her wake. But here there is no mustiness, or her sense of smell has diminished (surely a sign of something horrible), or it doesn't matter anymore. Things shouldn't, after all. Frances the young Anglophile would have said, "Things oughtn't to." Would she still?

Frances' first offering to Mousy is a shared silence. After the admonition about walking fast and talking soft, she doesn't say a word. She clearly sees that Mousy is happy in her thoughts, and she seems to be happy in her own. But she's wrong: Mousy does not want silence. She has enough of that. She wants Frances. She offers her a penny for her thoughts, and Frances laughs a laugh too loud and raucous for a Red Queen.

Frances says that she can't think of anything but what Mousy is doing here and why she has kept away so long. She wonders whether the answer to one provides the answer to the other, or whether the two questions form an unanswerable paradox. She rejects the adjective, since "answerable" has to do with subordinates: being answerable to someone. Frances appears to consult the thesaurus in her brain and quickly comes up with "unresolvable." Then she acknowledges that this is true of all paradoxes, isn't it. She blows air out her mouth and gives Mousy a wide-eyed, pleading look. Only Mousy can resolve the

unresolvable, even if it means admitting to a paradoxical state of being.

Being. Here. Showing up. She's shown up, hasn't she, so the past shouldn't matter. But this isn't what Frances wants to hear. She wants an explanation. No one wants uncertainty or ambiguity. Black and white, not gray, not self-contradictory, not unresolvable.

Mousy blurts out that what she knows, what she feels, is that it's uncomfortable being here. This makes Frances stop and her forehead wrinkle. Going beyond feeling to thinking, Mousy says that the longer one stays away, the more uncomfortable it would presumably be. But not with Frances. Which is why she is here here, with Frances. They begin walking again.

Frances wonders out loud whether Melville is not what Sandra expected, and then starts talking about nostalgia, how it can make everything real look washed out, like a faded photograph. She cites Milan Kundera on how nostalgia is what's left when one's memories have run dry. Mousy rejects the idea. She insists that she has no nostalgia for Melville. Perhaps that is one of the reasons she has stayed away so long. Is there something wrong with her that she feels no nostalgia for her home town? It wouldn't bother her if she couldn't go home again, if a wall or curtain had sprung up around the city. But here she is, and things look to her the way they are. Not washed out or washed up or even washed. The library's poured concrete, for example, needs a good washing.

Mousy tells Frances about the impetus for her visit, those two words in a

trashy novel. It's just the kind of story that grabs Frances. Not another word about nostalgia, she swears with the three middle fingers of her right hand. But why is Sandra wasting her time on trashy novels? There's so much wonderful literature to read. This is the greatest period of literature in the history of man. Mousy asks her what has grabbed her lately. "Blindness" is all that Frances says, and she watches for Mousy's reaction. But Mousy reacts only with humor, just as her brother would have, she realizes when it's out: blindness doesn't help you read.

Blindness turns out to be a novel by the Portuguese writer José Saramago. A Romantic Languages librarian told Frances about Saramago before he'd won the Nobel Prize, when no one here had heard of him, and she devoured everything of his that was available in English translation. It was wonderful, but so rich that the thought of reading more gave her indigestion. So as more of his work was written and translated, she chose others' dishes from the menu, until finally the time (not the work) was ripe and she took *Blindness* off the shelves. It was familiar to her because it had been made into a film that got reviews so terrible she had stayed away. Not that this is much of an explanation, but it was a good choice nonetheless. Frances repeated the words with merry disgust: "trashy novel!" Then she repeated the other two words with the look one gives a dog who has finally done what you've been telling it to do: "home town!"

Frances goes back to Saramago, telling Mousy that *Seeing*, which is sort of

a sequel to *Blindness,* but not really, does not measure up. Frances should have followed her instinct to stay away from sequels. But what are instincts for but to ignore and pay for it? And what are friends for but to stay away? Frances leaves the "pay for it" hanging in the stacks' surprisingly unstuffy air.

They go up a floor and cover it in no time, without a word. When they reach the top of another flight of stairs, Frances grabs Mousy's hand and pulls her down a row of stacks without turning on the lights. It's as if they were going to make out there, like students. They giggle as they exchange awkward faux-caresses in the dark.

Frances asks Mousy what has struck her most about her visit to Melville, so far. So many thoughts flash through Mousy's mind, she feels as if she were about to die. But after the procession of thoughts has passed, she is left thinking about something that hasn't happened: no one has asked her about herself, at least her self that lives and has lived for decades far away from Melville. Is she married, does she have children, what does she do for a living? Who has she become since she left town?

She tells Frances this, and Frances says, in response, that she is "abashed." And Mousy can see it. Frances is abashed not only about herself, but also about the town, about humanity. She fumbles around for an explanation.

Leaving Melville is taken as a betrayal of those who are left behind. When people feel betrayed, they want to know nothing about the one who has

betrayed them. The betrayer must not be human or she wouldn't have done such a thing.

Or is showing no interest a form of punishment for what she's done? Or is it just the way people are these days, focused entirely on themselves and the world they live in, their circle of friends and family, which does not include outsiders like the now former Mousy? Outsiders are threats, especially when they've changed, and clearly for the better. They take away our jobs and our men and our feeling that we live in the best place to be.

No, Sandra is not *that* sort of outsider. She is a betrayer. And if we hate where we are, if we feel stuck here, the betrayer who has successfully escaped must feel superior to us. And no one likes being made to feel inferior. Of course, there must be some who are so dissatisfied, they're looking for an escapee role model. If she runs into one of them, she would want to know more about Sandra's post-Melville life and would want her to have been successful abroad in the world. Such a person is looking for hope.

And yet it's shameful and rude for the rest of us not to ask. There are explanations galore, but no defense. And that includes Frances, she adds. Especially Frances. She cries on Mousy's shoulder, once she finds it in the dark. Mousy kisses the top of her head.

Eventually, Frances takes Mousy's hand and they start walking again, but slowly. Frances says that Kundera also wrote about how those who leave are treated when they return, but she can't remember how he explained it, and

anyway it was about someone who escaped from a Communist country, which is a whole different can of worms than escaping from Melville. Melville is just a can of earthworms. But earthworms are good for a lot of things, she adds in her usual, chipper voice.

Mousy nods, even though she is neither a gardener nor a fisherwoman and, therefore, finds earthworms icky. She would like to have the patience for fishing. It's something she sees herself doing when she retires. It's one of the few things she sees herself doing when she is old, one of the few positive things, that is. Mousy wonders whether Frances has any negative thoughts. She smiles at how she's trying to turn Frances into something superhuman. She thought she had gotten away from that many years ago. And then there is Thomas.

Mousy tells Frances, in as positive a voice as she can muster, that she is single, has no children or pets, lives in a lovely condo on the edge of a wildlife preserve, and works as a copywriter, speechwriter, grant writer, copy editor, and all-around wordsmith for a health-oriented nonprofit. She says the last part robotically, to indicate how stock the description has become. She adds that her best friend there is her equivalent in the field of graphic design. She gives an emphasis to the word "there" that implies she is in the market for a best friend "here."

Frances proudly announces that she is married to her books, but then gives one of her raucous laughs and admits that she has a husband called

Nessie, after the Loch Ness Monster, because he's a big guy who rarely showed himself back in his depressive days. They have two children, a girl and a boy, Maggie and Phil, four years apart, the perfect contemporary family. But there are times when independence sounds really nice.

Mousy would like to argue for or against independence, but what's the point? It's what she has, not who she is. It's a choice, but not a choice. It's independence and it's not. Sometimes it even feels like servitude, but she could not explain this to anyone, even Frances, who asks her whether she came to see her brother.

Mousy tells Frances that he is the big gorilla in her visit, but that she came home to Melville, not to a gorilla. And yet since she arrived, her principal identity has been Sister to the Gorilla. That must be why no one has asked about her. Her role in life is clear. When you are Sister to the Gorilla, there's not much more people need to know about you, even though it's been years since they've . . .

She wonders how to put what they haven't been doing together. It's not enough to say they haven't "communicated" or "been in touch," although the latter sounds more personal. Siblinghood is much more than that. There's always "falling out" to fall back on, but that seems old and stale. Everything she can think of seems too odd or old or formal. Mousy's not used to being at a loss for the *bon mot,* as she likes to call it. But then she realizes — what an idiot! — that she instinctually happened upon the right words for it: no words

at all, a blank, what is marked by an ellipsis. Here, silence is indeed golden.

Frances tells Mousy that everyone has a big gorilla, although often the big gorilla is dead and gone. Parents, spouses, ex-spouses, siblings, mentors, sometimes even children. Sometimes the big gorilla is us, but only part of us, some big success, a game-winning home run, a bestseller, a business that had its heyday, or a crime that won't fade into the past. And sometimes it's like Harvey the pooka, something imagined rather than real, but no less big and powerful than if it were.

And who or what is Frances' big gorilla? Her grandmother. Not only the family matriarch, but the community matriarch. Frances went through hell before she learned how to live successfully in her grandmother's shadow. She even moved away from Melville for three years, went all the way to Mexico. She outran the shadow, was only herself to everyone she met there, felt free to do what she wanted with whom she wanted, but it was still there inside her. That was scarier than running into it everywhere she went in Melville.

Mousy insists her brother did not become her big gorilla until she arrived back in Melville. She didn't have a big gorilla when she was a child — other than her parents, but not in that sense. And she doesn't have one where she lives now. She has led a blessedly gorillaless existence.

Because, Frances tells her with an intense look, you left your troop and you haven't joined a new one. I left my troop, too — or was tossed out of it — but I found a new one, one that has no big gorilla, just a big monster of a

husband.

Mousy insists that she doesn't need a troop, and that, since she hasn't been tossed out of one, she's never felt a troop-related emptiness inside her. She's never been a joiner and never had a big gorilla to escape from. Until now. But it's only a comic annoyance, one that people preposterously try to impose on her, not something hanging over her life. It hardly feels real at all, and it isn't even *her* pooka. It's just a figment of Melville's imagination.

Frances jumps at Mousy, with hands flailing and her face in a scary grimace. She makes gorilla noises and then, in a stage whisper, sings that she's the gorill-a Mousy's dreams who's come to take her away, oh ho, ee hee. She grabs Mousy and spins her around one way, and then the next. She gives Mousy a gorilla hug, then pushes her down on the floor and sits on her, beating her own chest with her fists.

After she lets Mousy get up off the floor and brushes her off, Frances gets a serious look on her face. She tells Mousy that she didn't know Thomas when they were kids. He was a lot older and Mousy always kept him away from her friends. Or vice versa, she doesn't know which. She still doesn't know Thomas. She still feels that she shouldn't get to know him, as if it would somehow betray Mousy (no, Sandra). After all these years.

Mousy finds herself asking Frances for advice. Frances' eyes go blank for a moment, and then she says it's hard to know what to say because she still doesn't know why Mousy is here, although she's glad she is. Mousy says she

still doesn't know herself. That's why she made such an open-ended request. She doesn't want to be told why she is here. She doesn't even need to be told where to go next, because sooner rather than later Melville will come looking for her, and it won't matter anymore why she came. Part of her would like to tag along with Frances, go home with her, meet her husband and her children, and get a tour of their house, their life. But even that would be another secret garden, another escape from the inevitable.

Frances says that Mousy doesn't need her to suggest that she go see her brother. She has to be ready herself for this. So the question is, what does she need to do to be ready for the inevitable? Does she want to know more about her brother? Does she have other friends to catch up with? Family members?

Mousy sees that Frances suddenly has an idea. She's mulling it over. She's weighing this consideration and that consideration. Her mouth begins to move, like she's about to announce the price, but then she stops. Her expression collapses. And then just as suddenly it perks up and she tells Sandra she has a suggestion, a great suggestion: she is going to come home with Frances and meet her husband. She won't tell Sandra why. She'll just have to trust her. And if not Frances who?

Being Thomas Ives

Although Frances does not live far from campus, they drive to her house in Mousy's car. When they enter through the front door, they see Nessie playing catch with his son (that's Phil) in the backyard, with his daughter (that's Maggie) running back and forth, jumping to try to catch the ball or, at least, push it off course. The monkey in the middle. Since she's the older one, it isn't long before she bats down a ball that her brother threw, and she does a victory dance.

Mousy and Frances can't take their eyes off the game. They react violently to every throw, laughing or shouting encouragement or crying out with disappointment at a near miss. But the best is when Nessie is the monkey in the middle. The man's huge bulk makes everything he does clownlike. Even the children, who see him every day, can't stop laughing.

Frances finally leaves Mousy's side and joins the game, but not as monkey in the middle, because she's wearing a work dress. The children cheer and the husband smiles. They play as a quartet for a while, and then Frances takes her husband aside and whispers in his ear. He looks toward Mousy and waves. Then his big features are suddenly set in motion again. He grabs Frances' hand and slides the French door out of their way as if it weighed only an ounce.

After Nessie gives Mousy a big hug, Mousy tells Frances that he's a bigger gorilla than she'd let on. Frances makes a face at her and warns her that Nessie's a mason, so he could brick her into their basement if Sandra doesn't play nice. À la Poe, she adds. Poe Poe Poe Poe.

Nessie explains his masonhood by telling Mousy that he's an artist who was responsible enough to learn a trade that would make use of his strength. He knew the odds were 1000 to 1 that he could raise a family on an artist's income. He has to make things, and a mason is never without work.

Frances brags that he's in more demand than any other mason in Melville. He only does the most artistic masonry, pointing at a barbecue pit he built in the backyard. It's a gothic monstrosity that looks to Mousy like something used to burn people in hell. Rodin's gates in brickwork. Frances says that all their children's friends have nightmares about it.

Nessie's masonry isn't what Frances dragged Mousy home for, she says, but she doesn't seem to know what to say next. It's odd to see Frances stumble for words. Nessie helps her out by saying that he likes to do thought experiments, and sometimes they get "pretty weird." He usually doesn't share them with anyone but Frances, who is well beyond shock, at least when it comes to him.

But Mousy is shocked to hear that, not long ago, Nessie tried "being" her brother. Nessie describes this thought experiment to Mousy and Frances, while the children continue to play out back.

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I knew that what people say couldn't be true, or could be only part of the truth, at most a small part of the truth. Motivations are never as simple as greed and lust for power. Those are shorthand terms or, perhaps, tents, like political parties. No one is really a Democrat or a Republican, or even a conservative or a liberal. They're this, that, and the other.

Some people embrace the simple because they lack enough imagination to think of themselves as more complex. Or the energy to *be* more complex. But I am certainly not one of them. I spin my wheels thinking things through and through, have conversations in my head, try on ideas and take them to their logical and illogical conclusions and extremes. It's one of my favorite forms of entertainment. It's the kind of entertainment that never makes it into any of the surveys. Even solitaire must get into them as a card game.

But while I have played out thousands of conversations, voicing other people, I never went the next step. I never really stepped into anyone else's shoes. I complain all the time that that's the biggest problem with people, their biggest limitation, what holds them back from moving another step up the evolutionary ladder. And yet I too have failed to do it, or have done it only

partially, without a full commitment of imagination, energy, and empathy.

The machine that runs Melville got my mind wheels spinning so futilely that I decided, a few weeks ago, that this was the time to make the commitment. But this wasn't the usual situation where there was an Other, that is, someone of a different race, gender, economic background, or world view, or someone with a disability or other obstacle that dominated her life, someone whose difference would allow me, by becoming them, to understand, to grow. They were a group of ordinary professionals and business people not all that different from me.

But then I realized that the people who were at the center of it all *are* disabled, just not in the way we usually think of disability. This excited me, because the difference itself was different. Another Other. This thought got my energy going. I knew I'd need a lot of it.

So I decided to step into one of the high honchos' shoes. First, I had to choose which one's. The Mayor is a sad case of someone who walked open-eyed but blind into an organization where she doesn't belong. Her disability is pretty clear. The Council President is a poster boy for the power-hungry politician. There's nothing complex about *him*. The Director of Public Works is a hard person for me to start with, way too far from what I am or what I know. The executive director of The Cereno Fund always makes me smile. I'd have too much fun becoming her.

As for the city's principal fixer, as fascinating as he appears to be from the

occasional blog post (the news media acts as if he didn't exist because he doesn't have an official position), I've never seen him in action. He is a man of the shadows. I knew too little about him to even know the make of his shoes, not to mention their size or how polished he keeps them. Speculation is fun, but I needed something more solid. And the minor players are, well, too minor to make the effort. I suppose that even those who live vicariously need a certain special something in order to get their kicks. Not that this was a vicarious exercise or a way to get my kicks, or, at least, to be honest, I hope not.

I decided that the best bet for me was City Attorney Thomas Ives. He seemed to be the most fascinating of the major players, and yet not an inhabitant of a different planet than me. So, without giving myself time to reconsider, I decided to figure out what made your brother tick by stepping into his size 11 D cordovan wingtip shoes (detailed by Death and Taxes, our local political columnist, who still writes like the sportswriter he was). I would mentally put on one of the wool-and-silk-blend checked Brooks Brothers sport coats he prefers, comb my hair back the way he does, shape my mouth into the bit of a sneering smile he wears and, most of all, think the way he thinks and feel the way he feels.

When I looked in the mirror, I had to see him combing his hair back the way *I* do it, not the way *he* does.

The first thing I felt when I dressed myself in his body, mind, and clothing was height. I felt taller, even though I think I have two inches on your brother.

But I felt distinctly higher. And a little lighter. Was I levitating? Was I flying, as in a dream? Was he living a dream, the sleeping boy who flies over the world with the greatest of ease?

No, no, that isn't him at all, I realized. That isn't what I was feeling. It was a different kind of height, a different form of flight. It was, in fact, a combination of two kinds of feelings of height, one most often described as "looking down on," the other as "the height of ambition." It was the spiritual equivalent of living in a penthouse suite: I felt no driving force of ambition, but rather a feeling of having reached the place I had ambitiously sought. It was not a calm feeling, however. I did not feel satisfaction. Having reached the place one sought makes one careful, anxious about losing that place. I realized, via the feelings that I experienced, that just as ambition leads people to do things they would not otherwise do, the anxiety that accompanies attaining one's goals leads people to do things possibly even worse. Preservation.

Along with anxiety, what I felt most strongly was disdain, the "looking down" part of the view from my penthouse eyrie. Of course, most of us look down on some people. But there's a certain arrogance, a certain certainty, that most of us – including the pre-Thomas me – are lacking. We look down out of insecurity, out of a lack of self-esteem, the need to have someone be even lower than we feel (not think) we are. What I found myself feeling was something altogether different, something much more positive than run-of-the-mill disdain. It was based on high-grade, giant-size self-esteem. I was sure I knew

not better, but best. I had the answers. Why else would so many people turn to me for advice, and not just legal advice. It's hard, I realized, to separate the law from everything else. I saw myself as an adviser, a mentor, the power behind the throne. In fact, I had the power to get those with power to do what I believed to be correct by making them believe it was either their decision or their only choice. My authority came from being convinced myself.

This certainty is the one thing that has stayed with me. In fact, I still know better . . . no, best, myself, even if few people look to me for advice. I wonder how long this will last.

Perhaps the best way to describe how I felt is "paternal," universally paternal, a font of fatherly advice, a guide, a holder of ancient, magical secrets, the way a clergyman must feel. When you're both lawyer and government official, with arcane knowledge as well as authority, it makes you feel doubly paternal.

Not only did I feel I could do no wrong, but I felt forced to exude this feeling, to display it in everything I did and thought. This was incredibly satisfying, what in my youth I would have called "a rush." This kind of rush was something I rarely feel as a real father. But there are other kinds I do feel now and then.

While stepping into your brother's shoes might have bound me in a painful manner (for example, I can't let on that I'm doubtful, or I feel extremely anxious), they turned out to fit me snug but not too tight. The frissons of

paternal certainty rewarded me even though I wasn't doing anything but imagining. It's like they say about one's mind: it sends off the same sparks whether you're throwing a ball or only visualizing it. Rah rah for mirror neurons.

So much for the feelings, as pleasurable, as nearly transcendent as they were. I decided that I needed to *think* like your brother as well. After doing research on your brother and engaging in meditation, I focused all my energies on trying to remember my way through all that I had seen of him, all that he had said and written, and all of the thoughts that flashed across his face on the videos of public meetings (rarely did I see feelings there). I even took notes, to keep my focus. The first few times, I exhausted myself and had to take a nap.

One Saturday morning, I decided to start right in, not to give myself a chance to be myself. I found myself able to think like your brother, to think in terms of outcomes, in terms of the ends justifying the means. But I found myself unable to keep these thoughts separate from feelings and beliefs. I found myself effectively thinking the belief that lawyers are the best means to those ends that truly matter. I found myself justifying not just his beliefs, but the way he thought, that is, the way I thought as him. I was trapped in a twisted ball of wires, where the rational was knotted up in the emotional. But I didn't *feel* trapped at all. That's only how it seems when I'm back to being myself. When I was your brother, the ball of wires wasn't twisted, it was like a

youthful but highly educated brain where every circuit is interconnected, thousands of neurons are shooting at high speed and with perfect synchronicity. It was as if there were no synapses at all, and the brain's regions were forcibly bound by a powerful will.

I can't believe how fast I was thinking, how many thoughts were pouring into my formerly feeble brain. It was a completely different sort of rush, more like rush hour, painful rather than pleasurable. I had to consciously bring order to what I was thinking. I had to throw out what hurt, throw out what put into question what I was otherwise thinking, turn my mental back on any means that didn't seem likely to lead to the ends that I wanted. More than anything, it was deciding on the ends that gave my thoughts order. I focused on the ends, and the rest be damned.

As myself, I have little in the way of organizing ends. No wonder my thoughts drift so much that Frances calls me "scatterbrained." As your brother, I knew what I wanted and what I wanted did the trick. There was no confusion to the rush of thoughts.

What I wanted, most of all, was to keep my troops in power. Yes, it was really that simple. Everything else that I wanted derived from that. I wanted the city government to work, because if it didn't work, people would start complaining and my job would be a lot harder and in jeopardy. Complaints can be viral, and viral complaints don't put sick bodies into bed, they get them out of bed and into City Hall, which is the last place I wanted them to be.

Another, secondary end: not to do more than I had to do, not to stretch myself too thin, but to focus all my energies on those inside my circle, especially defending them and what they did (and didn't do) against outsiders. What your brother does best is think, in an organized, efficacious manner. The ability to think like a lawyer is a wonderful thing, but when that analytical way of thinking is focused, it's a remarkable thing. A remarkably enjoyable thing, even at its most painful.

You cannot believe how pleasurable it is to think the way laypeople call "sneaky." To use those fast-popping, focused neurons to look *through* everything and see the loopholes hidden there, waiting to be discovered, and then whisk them out of one's sleeve like a magician. Better yet is planting loopholes where others won't see them, but in such a way that they can be made use of when the occasion arises. Visualizing these is as good as visualizing a perfect home run swing, including the violent feeling of contact.

When I was your brother that day, I approached everything I read and heard like an entrepreneur of loopholes. Of course, I'm partly joking when I use the word "loopholes," because when you're Thomas Ives, you realize how woefully inadequate the word is. What is hiding beneath the surface that most people's thoughts cannot see beyond is far more than any word can describe. There is an alternate universe of ideas — of anticipated "interpretations" — that can be employed to get what you want, to be dressed up in ways that make them work for you, like what scientists are doing with viruses so that, once

they've been pirated for a good cause, they can get them past even the strongest immune system. And entering this alternate universe gives access, gives birth, to other alternate universes that no one knows exist.

I sat in my office with the door shut, incubating kernels of these ideas until they were ready to live in the world (in the world of my mind, at least) and to further what needed to be furthered. Until I collapsed with exhaustion. It's not an easy life your brother lives. He does not get the credit that is due him. Being "sneaky," finding, creating, and exploiting "loopholes," is a hell of a lot of work.

I also "got off" on his feeling of invulnerability, which is something different from his feeling of certainty, partly because it is so closely related to his profession's position as advisers not deciders. I felt I had a great deal of authority, and yet, unlike a politician, nothing could touch me. I had no kryptonite. I felt that I could stand before any board or commission and say, "What X did was perfectly legal," and not only would people believe me, but if it turned out I was wrong, nothing would happen to me. Nothing at all. It was as if I were wearing a bulletproof suit coat. Or a cape! Does it get any better than that?

I wonder whether your brother has ever told anyone how invulnerable he feels. How could he keep such an exciting thing to himself? But who could he tell? His wife perhaps. She would have humored him, the way one smiles at a child who believes that putting on a cape makes him a super hero. Anyone else would have considered it pitiful braggadocio or, if a politician, a threat.

Is he limited by this feeling of invulnerability? For example, does it limit his goals? Are his goals his or his supposed clients'? Is he only an invulnerable enabler of others' wants and perceived needs? Or is he a leader whose wants and perception of needs are paramount, and on top of this he is invulnerable because he is seen as nothing but an adviser? In other words, does he have the best of both worlds?

I contemplated this and realized that the way to the best of both worlds was to plant my goals into my clients' heads, to sell them as "in the public interest" or, at least, in the interests of the party or the person or someone the person wants to help. If I couldn't originate their wants, I could shape and limit them, and I could herd officials toward where I thought they should go. Adviser as shepherd. Perhaps the shepherd's hook should become the official symbol of the government lawyer.

What I found about both myself and Thomas is that we do not want to be the hired gun who does the job, but rather the one who selects the victim, the murder weapon, and the place and time of the homicide. And then let someone else pull the trigger. The only real question is, How often can we get away with it? How invulnerable are we?

There really is nothing like putting on the clothes of a member of a profession that portrays itself as, at worst, enabling, while doing far more. To have the great fallback position of being a servant to public servants.

What it really comes down to, I realized, was judgment. If my wants

conflicted with my clients' wants, then my clients clearly had poor judgment. Thomas and I had good judgment, all the time. We even had good judgment about our judgment.

All was going well until I ran into that thought like it was a wall. I didn't see it coming. It snapped me back to my doubtful self. To be so canny and to not have seen this as my kryptonite! To be so smart and yet no smarter than the 90% of people who believe they have better-than-average judgment.

Perhaps, I realized, I had gotten in too deep. As Thomas, I had gone through surfaces, and through the surfaces beneath them. But I couldn't make it back to the surface. I had determined that my wants were paramount, and that others' were clay for me to form and fire, but then I realized that they were obstacles, boats on the surface whose motors I had to swim around, whose wakes I had to take into account in making my own navigational decisions. I had made the opaque clear, but what had been clear was now opaque. What was most opaque was myself, the self that had been, moments ago, Thomas Ives. And this worried me.

But does this worry your brother? Does he ever feel that he is a sort of prisoner in the depths he has dived down to, that his ability to see things hundreds of leagues down, where others see only darkness, won't let him see above the surface? I don't think he does, and because of this he may not see the depth charges coming. That opacity might be the reason he and his troops will go up in flames or fail to care for their boat to the point where it can't be

fixed. It will be too full of loopholes to float. Even if your brother, being invulnerable, doesn't quite drown.

I had an incredible time down there, but I was just visiting. When I became myself again, I no longer had a problem seeing above the surface. And I had no worries about getting the bends on the way up or running into a propeller. Nor was my judgment any longer clouded by the bubbles my breathing caused, the bubbles being a metaphor for a *false* feeling of certainty, the false feeling your brother has that his judgment, as opposed to his cleverness, is that much better than others'.

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Mousy doesn't know whether to clap or not. She decides not to just as Frances begins to clap and shout, "What a temporoparietal junction that man has!" Mousy joins in. Nessie bows. The children, who came in some time during Nessie's performance, boo and hiss.

Frances tells Sandra that she felt it would be useful for her to know more about her brother before she goes to see him. Nessie's thought experiments, although valuable, are hardly unquestionable. It's the best they can do for her.

But then Frances is struck by a thought or a memory, and tells Sandra

that there is one person she knows who could give Sandra some real-life background information on her brother. It might be worth a try. Frances scribbles some words and numbers on the back of a charity solicitation letter and hands it to Sandra.

There will be no tour of Frances' house. Mousy has seen and heard enough. She is envious and she is not. This could never be her world. Hugs and goodbyes and Mousy is off to another encounter with this other stranger.

A Foot in the Door

From her car, Mousy calls the number on the back of the envelope and asks for the name above the number. She is put through to a man who, although he says nothing but his name, sounds both young and excited. Mousy tells him that Frances Lamberton gave her his name regarding background information about someone.

That was awkward. She hasn't given this call any thought. She all but touches the red button on her cellphone, but decides instead to treat this as a challenge. After spending time with Frances and Nessie, she feels ready for another challenge.

Of course, the young man asks her "whom" she wants background information about. Mousy hesitates, wondering whether it is best to lead with the name or with the relationship. She opts for both. Now it is the young man who does not know what to say. Eventually she hears an "Ah!" This must mean that the young man's memory search succeeded in reminding him that he knew enough about the brother-sister estrangement to know that she would not know much about her brother.

He tells Mousy that, if it would ease her approach to her brother to know more about him, he would be happy to oblige. Would she be willing to meet for

a drink at a restaurant not far from his office? Of course she would. She would do anything Frances suggested, including take a long walk off a short pier. Which reminds her that she hasn't visited her favorite lake yet. Maybe tonight if the sky is clear and the moon is relatively full. She curses how little attention she pays to the night sky. If she had a dog, she'd know. But she has no desire to have a dog.

She wonders whether her brother has one. She tries to pair him with a breed, but nothing comes. She can't even pair the young Thomas with a dog, because she can't imagine the young Thomas having a dog. Warmth and affection were not his strongest points.

Mousy arrives at the restaurant without any memory of having driven there or of what she thought about on the way. She parks in the restaurant's lot and goes for a walk. But it doesn't relax her. She can't focus on anything. She leaves the main street and wanders through a neighborhood she doesn't recognize.

She decides that what she needs is a nap. But she has only fifteen minutes and nowhere to close her eyes without it embarrassing her. She longs for a mirror to stare herself back into normalcy. She has a mirror in her purse. She takes it out. She can hardly even look at herself. Her eyes look dead, like a fashion model's. She tries to smile, because she knows that smiling relaxes her, but no smile will come. She tries to think of something funny, and what she thinks about is Nessie playing with his children. She is thus saved by

Nessie.

Then the thought of Frances, how lucky she is to have found her again, makes Mousy smile in a different way. She takes a very long, deep breath and looks at her eyes again in the mirror. That's better: her eyes show signs of life. All that happened was that she lost a few minutes. What's a few minutes?

Mousy returns to the main street to see if she's ready to window shop again. And she is. There is a moment when she fears seeing her ex-boyfriend again, or someone equally horrifying, but she's strong enough now to tell herself that lightning doesn't strike twice. This is one of the few proverbs she believes, as if it were based on scientific research, as if Ben Franklin discovered it way back when. Perhaps he did.

Suddenly something is wrong. Mousy can't pull herself away from a window, and there is no one in the store but a young woman who works there. More specifically, Mousy cannot pull herself away from a blouse, and it's not even her sort of blouse. It's very sexy. Small and sexy. Ribbed. And young. It's a store for younger women, the sort she barely glances at, only to have a sense of how styles are passing her by or coming back, so that she might be hip without knowing it. Like her brother's flannel shirt she still has from high school, which suddenly, several years ago, drew compliments. The blouse is little more than a camisole. Thank goodness she doesn't have time to try it on. She walks away.

When she sees a man standing in front of the restaurant, the word "interlocutor" comes into her mind. She doesn't know where it came from.

Fifty-cent words like this are not her style, unless she's trying to be funny. She makes a concerted effort not to size him up. He's merely a messenger, after all. Nothing about him matters but his trustworthiness. He looks trustworthy from afar. For a lawyer. And Frances trusts him. That's sufficient. When it comes to trust, Mousy is not particularly generous herself.

He introduces himself as Lawrence LeBeouf and asks Mousy to call him "Lare." Mousy introduces herself as Sandra Ives. They take a table in the restaurant's back room, which is empty. Lare says it's always empty at this hour. He asks what Sandra would like to drink, and goes to the bar to place an order. While he's away, Mousy chooses to do a breathing exercise rather than think of questions to ask Lare. She's better when she wings it. She would have made an excellent lawyer, she has told herself many times. And yet . . .

Fortunately, Lare appears to have no interest in small talk. It appears that he is treating this as an assignment that he will fulfill efficiently and effectively, probably without humor. He begins with an excerpt from his resume. He was a legal associate assigned to Thomas from his second through fifth years with the firm of Prokop & McBride.

He says that Thomas was a dream boss and mentor. Patient but firm, he loved the teacher's role, but he also believed in giving associates as much independence as they could handle. Thomas scratched up everything Lare wrote until he got it right. Thomas protected him against partners who knew only his surface and were not satisfied with it. Lare could always trust Thomas

to be frank with him.

Thomas never considered practicing law anywhere but in Melville, because nowhere else could he bring in clients. Nowhere else did he have the family connections or the friends he had made frankly because he believed that they would succeed financially, mostly by going into their fathers' businesses. Thomas did not have the luxury Sandra had to pick up and move to another town. Mousy had never felt luxurious about her move, but she kept this to herself.

What got Thomas "a foot in the door" at Prokop & McBride was his relationship with June Prokop, daughter of the Prokop in the firm's name. Not only was Thomas not one of her numerous suitors, but he acted as the sounding board for her unrelenting, sometimes infelicitous complaints about these suitors. He loved the varied pitch of her voice when she was angry, hurt, exasperated, satirical, or downright mean. It was in his service as her sounding board, he once insisted, that he developed his style as an attorney: listen to the client carefully, say little, make the correct expressions and head movements, learn the client's needs and weaknesses, gain the client's confidence and respect, make the client's decisions for her, and gain the confidence and respect of the opposing counsel or client, so that one may serve one's own client more effectively.

Even the suitors themselves turned to Thomas when they were failing to have success with June. Thomas told them the story of how and why (although

not necessarily June's version) whatever relationship there may have been with June (although there rarely was what she considered an actual relationship) was over. Everyone knew that Thomas had no interest in June himself, and that his word was good as gold. However, no one realized how much he liked to gild the facts in a manner that gave him pleasure. He shared some incredible stories with Lare. It was a sign of his trust.

Thomas decided that June would marry the young council aide Jake Leviticus, because he was clearly going places in Melville. She considered her choice of Jake the best idea she'd ever had, and took pride in her conquest thereafter.

Thomas made an equally important decision about his own future. He set a single goal for himself, to which he could give every gram of his energy. That goal was not the usual one, of bringing into the firm the work of those of his friends he had picked to succeed (most of whom were already his clients), but rather to succeed Jesse Prokop as City Attorney. Since no one expected him to seek this goal, no one would stand in his way.

Thomas's first brilliant tactic was to convince Prokop that he, Prokop, could do the firm a much greater service by bringing in clients than by expending so much of his time not only doing and overseeing the legal work of a growing city, but also managing the city from the shadows. Prokop would still be The Man, Thomas convinced him, but Thomas would act as his whip, keeping all of Prokop's colleagues in line and doing all the dirty work on

Prokop's behalf.

Having one goal and one goal only, it took Thomas only five years to reach both partner and the second highest status position in the firm, up until that point, City Attorney. As rainmaker and chief puppeteer, Prokop retained (or so he thought) all of his power and authority. And he was able to increase partnership revenues by an average annual percentage, over the following decade, of 18%.

It took Thomas another five years to take over the role of puppeteer. He did this primarily by talking down the role in long, rye-soaked conversations with Prokop. He presented the role in light of how boringly administrative the growing city had become, how "the good ol' days" were past. There is no limit on the telling of stories of the past, especially of its joyous victories. And there is no limit on pointing out how and why there weren't victories like that anymore. Thomas spoke about all the new boards and commissions and, worst of all, the independent agencies, that is, the dispersal of authority. There were also the skirmishes with state and federal officials, and all the new laws and state limitations that made everything more difficult: lawyering rather than politics. There was little joy left in Melville. Prokop agreed, and he let Thomas do more and more of his work.

The truth is that, to Thomas, the dispersal of authority made the job that much more enjoyable. There is no challenge like an independent agency, and he rose to this challenge by ensuring that his assistants were retained as

counsel, in-house or through the Prokop firm, to each of the agencies and authorities. These young men and women (of which I was one) worshiped at Thomas's feet and, after one tried — unsuccessfully, of course — to turn her agency into an independent fiefdom, the others feared the consequences of betraying Thomas's trust. Dependence on Thomas's wise direction became the new norm in Melville.

Loyalty was very important to Thomas. His first loyalty was, of course, to himself, but he had attained what he wanted most. He had no dream house he had to live in or sports car he needed to possess. And since his wife came with money of her own, he had no need to make big money or compromise himself in his government work.

Therefore, he was best situated to step into the shoes of his elders, to follow their rules and preserve the loyalty they felt to one another. He is his generation's referee, interpreting, advising, and enforcing both the written and unwritten rules of Melville. Since he wants nothing for himself but power, everyone trusts him not only to be fair, but also to be ruthless with those who do not play as fair as him.

Thus, while involved in every transaction, Thomas has taken no bribe, no kickback, no favor, no piece of a contract, no legal work from a contractor or developer, no sex from an employee, not even a job for a relative. Far from being the godfather some people call him, Thomas is much more a mother figure, except when he is in his enforcement mode. And even then, it could be

said that he effectively hugs the Judases to death, or castrates them, rather than decapitating or defenestrating them.

Thomas has aided and abetted unethical conduct, but he has not committed a single unethical act himself. Without him, however, the others would have, as they say, given the game away a long time ago. It is Thomas's professionalism, single-mindedness, and self-sacrifice that has allowed the older generation's norms not only to survive, but to flourish. He may not be a Robin Hood, but there is something very heroic and exemplary about his behavior. He's certainly a hero to me. I could never live up to the example he has set. That is why I practice alone. Only occasionally do I get work through Thomas. I more often get work from those who see me as an important connection of Thomas's, someone who can whisper in his ear. But I never lobby him. What we talk about is the law, politics, sports, and women.

Lare stops and, after a pause in which, for the first time, he looks Sandra in the eyes, he asks her if she has any questions. Mousy asks him about her namesake.

Lare says that Thomas has a Chinese wall between his personal and professional lives. His wife never visits City Hall or the offices of Prokop & McBride. The only overlap is for major city events, where it is common for spouses to attend. But Lare was not invited to these events and, if he had gone, Thomas would not have introduced Lare to his wife any more than he did when they made their obligatory appearances at the firm's holiday parties. In short,

Lare has never met Sandra's namesake. He could pass on rumors, except for the fact that he lacks an ear for gossip. He can never remember who is sick or who is supposedly having an affair with whom. Sometimes he even forgets whether someone has died.

What he can say is that Sandra's namesake is well respected in the community and is said to be very loyal to her husband. Her ambitions appear to be his ambitions. She is often called the woman behind Thomas, but Lare doesn't think Thomas needs anyone behind him. He provides his own support. Hers would be superfluous.

Mousy does not have another question for Lare, so Lare tells her how proud she will be of her brother and how good it will be for the two of them to let bygones be bygones. He even expresses a wish, most likely on behalf of Thomas, that Sandra will move back to Melville for good.

Mousy makes an awkward attempt to pay for their drinks. When Lare picks up the check, she insists that she is the one who benefited from this conversation. In fact, she owes him much more than the price of the check. But Lare is unmovable, calling on host-to-visitor etiquette and all the debt he has to her family.

This leaves a bad taste in Mousy's mouth as she leaves the restaurant. But when she gets into her car and starts thinking about what Lare told her, she realizes that this instead is the origin of the bad taste in her mouth. Lare's description of her brother was of a single-minded schemer, a puppeteer who

holds all the strings. It hits her that the principal reason for his being a puppeteer is most likely his desire to be no one's puppet. Was Mousy his practice puppet? Would she become a puppet if she were to reconnect with him? Are all his connections tied to him by string? Do the strings ever twist together? And then what?

Or is Mousy over-reacting? Lare said that Thomas keeps his private and professional lives separate as possible. In his family, his wife may hold the strings. Thomas may be dragged to classical music concerts, rehearsal dinners, family barbeques, and dog parades (a woman who likes to hold strings will certainly want to hold a leash, as well). Maybe that's the reason he puts so much work into his professional life: he can't control his private life. Maybe his own sister walking out on him is what set him off.

Mousy is certain that she never controlled her brother's life. There are too many years between their ages for her to have had any leverage over him. Perhaps he liked being in control of his sister so much that he still has trouble not being in a position of power. Perhaps Mousy was his enabler, as they say about those who go along with alcoholics. Thomas's addiction would be to power. Because he holds power behind the scenes, he does not have to deal with the obligations that go with power. It's all very clever without having to be clever at all. It's probably a matter of instinct.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps Mousy held the power and is in denial about it, and Thomas became a lawyer so that he could serve everyone around him. Or

perhaps it's something Mousy can't even conceive of, or something that evolved, or something mundane like doing a good job, getting things done, making everybody happy, being respected.

Mousy concludes that what Lare told her didn't help her in the least. It raised more questions than it provided answers. And it made her more anxious about meeting her brother. In fact, she wasn't really anxious about it until now. She pulls out of the restaurant parking lot and heads for the haven known as the Magnificent Amberson.

Patience

When Mousy arrives back at the Amberson, the only people in the common areas are five women playing what appears to be bridge. Two of them — the extra and the dummy — are across the room from the others, talking. Mousy is torn between, on the one hand, going up to her room and thinking about what she should do next — that is, whether she should contact her brother — and, on the other hand, making small talk with these women, which has the potential of being relaxing or even entertaining. Or perhaps she could be entertaining to them.

When Mousy takes a step toward the pair, she feels committed to trying to entertain them. Both of the women look at her and smile the way older women do at a younger stranger who seems a bit lost. The woman in a red dress that suggests the Oriental greets Mousy as if they were at wit's end without her, as if they were stifling without her fresh air. They want to know everything about her, and since it all seems so sweet and innocent, Mousy decides not to be the slightest bit begrudging. She molds them a narrative that focuses on running into her old boyfriend, and then she begins to tell them the story of Guthrie Jones' visit to Melville. They eat it up.

Halfway through her stories, both of the women have to return to the table,

and a third woman comes over to Mousy, happy to be part of what appears to be the highlight of their afternoon. A minute later, one of the two original women returns. Mousy wonders if she bid so that she would be the dummy, if that's possible. Mousy summarizes the story of her ex-boyfriend for the newcomer, and then tells both of them the story of Guthrie Jones.

But when she finishes the story, the woman who has been there all along quickly asks Mousy if she is related to Thomas Ives. Mousy answers the question truthfully, although she'd rather not. And then the announcement is made that the game is finished. The two women with Mousy give a sigh of relief.

The other three women come over to Mousy and her new friends just in time to hear the woman's response to Mousy's answer. She tells Mousy that she is Sandy Ives' godmother and a big fan of Thomas's. They are such a perfect couple. They define the term "pillars of the community." They carry themselves as if they were the city's First Family. She's honored to be part of their world.

She reminds Mousy — no one can be expected to remember the names of all these old ladies — that her name is Audrey Stritch, and she says she has an interesting story of her own to share, a story about her only involvement in the world in which Mousy's brother lives: Melville's government.

It has to do with her membership on the Melville Board of Ethics, which is supposed to deal with conflict of interest problems, that is, as best she

understands it, situations where a government official is wearing two hats or helping family members at the government's expense or taking gifts from developers and people like that. Thomas nominated her to the Board, because, as he told the Council, she is the most ethical woman in all Melville. She says that she blushed at this nice compliment, knowing it was far from the truth.

When, after six months, no other nominations to the Board of Ethics were made, Audrey wrote a note to Thomas, asking if he would consider making two more nominations (the Code of Ethics provides for a three-member Board). Sandy called to say that Thomas had made the only nomination he had the authority to make, but that he had suggested to his two colleagues, on multiple occasions, that they make nominations of their own. But, Sandy said, Thomas could not force them to make such nominations.

Six more months went by and there were no more nominations. Audrey wrote typewritten letters to the City Council President and the City Administrator, asking them to fill the vacant seats on the Board of Ethics. Aides to each of them responded in the form of a handwritten note, telling Audrey that no one had applied to be a member of the Board of Ethics and that there were many vacant spots on other boards and commissions that they were trying to fill. They suggested that Audrey let her friends know that they could apply to be nominated to the Board of Ethics.

At church, at the bridge club, at Melville Swim and Tennis, at the beauty parlor and the grocery store, wherever Audrey went, slowly, over time, so that

no one would be disappointed if the positions were filled, she told everyone she knew that she would love them to apply to join her on the Board of Ethics. She told them everything she knew about the Board and the Code, which was not much, because she had received no training and she is neither a clergywoman nor an attorney. But she tried to make it sound both exciting (they might get to deal with some juicy scandals) and rewarding (they would be doing something valuable for the community).

Most of the men, and a few of the women, nodded as she spoke, and then said that they already sat on multiple boards in the community, and since the Board of Ethics did not have a regular meeting date, between their work and their other board meetings they would most likely not be available to attend any meetings that were to be arranged.

The women showed more variety in their responses. Some found clever ways to change the subject. Some said that they did not find it becoming to make moral judgments about others, especially in public. Some said that they were not qualified for the position, because they weren't lawyers or because they knew nothing about conflicts of interest or, with a wink, because they had, in the distant past, been bad themselves. One said she had flunked a college class in moral philosophy. After she said this, she did that thing with her lips that Audrey hates so much. And she wasn't even young.

A few said it was hopeless to expect politicians to act ethically. They smiled sweetly when they said they wished they could be as idealistic as Audrey. One

recommended her eight-year-old daughter, and she was serious.

Some enthused about the idea so much, Audrey was sure that they would apply for membership the next morning. She called the Council President or City Administrator's secretary two weeks after she had talked with each of these woman and each time discovered that they had not applied. So Audrey sent each of them a handwritten note, thanking them for applying, if they had or, if they had not, reminding them about their interest in applying.

Some of them never said anything about it. For a while they managed to evade Audrey even when they were in the same room or store. And when they could not evade Audrey, she had the decency not to raise the subject herself.

Some would say that she let them off the hook, but in fact there was no hook. They had just responded to Audrey's request enthusiastically, in the moment, but then their interest died or, at least, when they got home and thought about what it might really mean to sit on a board that made decisions regarding the ethics of the people who ran our community, that is, people who worked for the law firm that their husband's company used or ran a company that was their husband's customer, they changed their minds.

Audrey realized, after confronting one of them — a good friend — in a very non-confrontational manner, that they might reasonably believe they had a conflict of interest (or several) themselves. Audrey decided that she had no right asking people to put themselves in an uncomfortable or even harmful position. How terrible it would be to make the husband of a friend or even an

acquaintance lose a customer, or even a job!

There was no appropriate way in which Audrey could determine who might have a conflict of interest or who simply got cold feet. So she gave everyone the benefit of the doubt, and there were no more uncomfortable situations.

But, as a result, Audrey was still alone on a board that did not have enough members to meet.

Finally, a new woman in town, who grabbed Audrey as her bridge partner due to her patience with beginners, jumped at the idea of serving her new community by sitting on the Board of Ethics. She immediately applied to the Council President. But nothing happened. She called him and received no reply. Audrey sent a handwritten note and also received no reply.

So Audrey called Thomas, and once again her call was returned by Sandy. Sandy said, with a note of horror in her voice, that no one knows who this woman is, nor does she know who we are. How can someone as anonymous as her sit on such an important board? No one has any idea what she might or might not do, what she might or might not be capable of. Audrey, you need to find someone like yourself, someone who can be trusted to do the right thing, who is committed to the community.

Audrey thought long and hard about this and decided that just because she had been appointed to the Board did not mean that she had an obligation to fill the other positions on it. She had done her duty by accepting the position and agreeing to serve. She had tried to find another member and had failed.

She is, as the new woman in town said, an unusually patient person. She decided simply to wait.

Audrey looks up out of her storytelling, as if she has been reading an internal teleprompter. This thought makes Mousy smile, and Audrey appears to be warmed by this smile. She says that Mousy's brother is the only person in the story who comes out looking good. Even Sandy seems to have over-reacted to the possibility of a young stranger on a city board. Audrey is sure she would have been fine. But things will work out. Mousy and the other ladies nod. Mousy excuses herself: she has to ready herself for dinner. But by the time she reaches her room, she has already decided to skip dinner. Fasting is something Mousy does, not as part of a diet, but for spiritual purposes, to cleanse herself when she feels too full of something. Right now she feels too full of confusion. Fasting, an early bedtime, and she should wake with a clear head and an open heart. Whatever that means.

Tears

Mousy wakes to a dreaming hangover. She had so many dreams, her mind is mush and she can't remember any. She can sense that the transitions between them were abrupt: the joy of flying crashed into the anxiety of falling, which fell victim to something monstrous without. Its face was familiar, but that's all she remembers. Not some sort of gorgon, but her brother perhaps, or a sweet and welcoming woman, like the bridge ladies. But nothing rings a bell. She can only guess, so why bother? Mousy does not enjoy speculation. No, she has a love-hate relationship with it.

Instead she tries to grab hold of her dream emotions. But she can't. The onrush of emotions piles up into a mud-brown feeling of dismay and dislocation.

Mousy chocks it up to her fasting. Don't monks fast in order to have ecstatic experiences? All Mousy gets is anxiety dreams, tight limbs, and an aching in her right temple. Perhaps you have to stick to it for days, take your body and your mind to different places, different planes, cleanse yourself of your self, as they say. Cleansing is what she was looking for, but she doesn't feel cleansed at all.

She doesn't have time for it anyway. She needs to get up and decide at last

what she is doing in Melville and whether she should stay or go back to where she belongs. No, she doesn't have to decide what she's doing here. That's asking for too much. She just has to decide what she is going to do today. And the kind of cleansing she needs now is a shower. Cleanse body and wake mind. Get the day started.

In the shower she starts thinking somewhat clearly. There are no monsters to vanquish here, just people telling her their stories. She read somewhere that one's own story is made up of the stories others tell us. But that couldn't be. We also see and hear and feel. But does Mousy trust what she thinks she sees any more than what she thinks she feels? Or feels she thinks?

Yes, there are all those stories she grew up listening to, that made up her past, that led her to interpret the present, and placed in her head the system of beliefs she jettisoned when she escaped Melville's atmosphere. Her story *was* made up of the stories others told her, but then she started making up her own. Back here, the stories have started right back up again.

She has always been surrounded by stories, but until she returned to Melville they didn't have much to do with her. The stories here do, even when they don't. It's as if she walked into the middle of a movie that was made for her, that was showing constantly just so that when she entered the theater she would see one part of it or another. No, that's silly. She set it off by tripping a wire set across the entrance to the town. Like a landmine.

But it could have been worse. She might have been greeted like a foreign

body, an invader who must be ignored, dispatched, or eliminated. Instead she has been welcomed. As her brother's sister mostly, but welcomed nonetheless.

Toweling off, Mousy decides that she has to ignore others' stories and focus on her own. But when, she realizes, has she ever focused on her own story? She's always let others tell her their stories, and made no effort to force hers on them. When she has no choice, what does she do? She gives them a précis. That's the word that pops into her mind, but she's not quite sure what it means. It just seems right: foreign, cold, short, accented, unknowable. What she gives people is a story that has been weathered to the smoothness of a river stone, weathered by retellings that slowly grind away the ridges and edges. A précis, precisely.

Wrapped in the robe the inn provided, Mousy steps into her room and sets her day's clothes out on the bed. She removes the robe, but stops herself from letting it fall on the floor. On the bathroom floor, yes, but not here, on an old Persian rug. Why didn't she leave it in the bathroom? She forces herself to say the word aloud: "mirrors." It's not out of shame or even dissatisfaction that she is shy of them. Her body is simply not something to take notice of, to critique, to include in her précis. She decides to go against her . . . is it anything more than habit? She forces herself to go back into the bathroom, drop the robe on the floor, and look at the full-length mirror on the back of the door. To view it, she has to close the door. She feels trapped, as if in a hall of mirrors, forced to reflect on her reflection.

She almost doesn't recognize what she sees. It's not what she sees when she looks down to put on corn starch and moisturizing cream. She tries to get herself to take pleasure in it, but she can't. You can only force yourself so much. But this is a good first step. Now she can cover it again.

She is going to have an endless day, she thinks, after an endless night. And yet the night ended, as will the day. And there will be no more anxiety dreams, just anxiety. She takes a deep breath and shakes out her hands. She goes back into the bathroom, walks up close to the mirror above the sink, and smiles. Seeing herself smile makes her smile all the more. There's nothing like smiling to put herself at ease. But the opposite of "at ease" is "attention." And she needs to pay attention. She cannot sleepwalk through this day.

She will . . . She will . . . She will go down to breakfast. She will enjoy the omelette or frittata that Laurel will place in front of her. She will not eat the potatoes. She will drink as much orange juice as seems appropriate, taking into account the supply and the demand. She will not have any coffee or tea; she will supply her own buzz.

Dressed, she returns to the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. She wills herself not to smile. She will only smile when she feels she has succeeded, when she feels she deserves it.

As Mousy enters the Amberson breakfast room, she is greeted by the waving hand of a man, about her age, who has just the worn, weary look that Laurel is trying to achieve with her themed urban inn. He catches her eye and

will not let go. But he doesn't stare. He holds her with an old-fashioned, almost goofy grin, as if to say how delighted he is to be able to break his fast with her. The fact that she has no idea who he may be is irrelevant. His grin somehow keeps any objection from arising. She will sit with him, whoever he may be, not in order to solve the mystery of his identity — because there is nothing mysterious about him — but because there is simply no reason not to. And no other choice.

Actually, out of the corner of her eye Mousy does see another choice. Across the room, at a table for four, are Guthrie Jones and her Layly. If she turns her head that way, Guthrie will likely wave and make it impossible for Mousy to ignore her. So Mousy walks right over to the man with the goofy grin, as if they had a breakfast appointment. He nods to the chair across from him, and she takes it. She feels like she is in a movie, but one without a script. She feels certain she can improvise her lines in response to his, even in anticipation of his. She is a fan of improv groups, and the idea of embracing their merry self-confidence excites her. She might even play a role.

The first lines are easy. He introduces himself as Andrew Zastra, but says she can call him "A to Z," like everyone does. And then he says her name — Mousy — with a note of sarcasm that marks him as the rebellious kid who, after leaving town and changing his name, came home and took his father's place in Melville politics. Nothing is his own. He has nothing to be proud of but his name.

A to Z tells Mousy he is aware that, although she came to Melville seemingly out of the blue, she has been meeting with “certain individuals” who have confidential government information and “beefs” regarding some of the people who run the city, including her brother.

This is a man who doesn’t fool around. He’s all business. He’s got his lines down. He makes Mousy feel like a Mata Hari, and so this is the role she embraces. She does this by giving A to Z the most smoldering look she can muster, as if by hook or by crook she will get confidential government information even out of such a man as he. She might even get him to share his own “beefs.” Or so she wants him to feel.

But no, he simply grins. She feels humiliated, because she completely misjudged him. Or herself. It doesn’t matter which. In any event, the movie’s over and she’s back in the role of Mousy Ives. She should rename herself “M,” right in the middle between A and Z. She studies her fingernails. She so wishes he were Bogie rather than Sydney Greenstreet. She will let him put another couple of cards on the table.

A to Z tells Mousy, with a goofy laugh, that he’s the local fixer and she’s what needs fixing today. Then, for the first time, his face takes on a serious expression. It’s time for her to go. She’s mussing feathers, she’s disturbing things that are better left undisturbed. Does she understand? She shakes her head.

A to Z’s face takes on an angry expression. Apparently, he does not like

negative responses. He challenges her: if she came here to see her brother, why hasn't she contacted him? Mousy responds only by glaring at him for an instant and then looking back down at her nails again. "A woman's prerogative" is what A to Z would likely say about this under different circumstances.

Thomas is concerned. Out of the blue like this, without warning. Sandy is concerned. A to Z is concerned, as well. She's met with the mayor's daughter, with Jørgen, who can't keep his mouth shut, even with A to Z's very own niece, a darling girl, but a troublemaker. You never know what'll come out of her mouth. Or where it's been. He turns and starts to spit, but stops, looks around, and swallows.

A to Z tells Mousy that he doesn't care what she's up to, even if it's all innocent and people are overreacting. Whatever, it has to stop.

Disgusted now by this man, Mousy speaks. She asks him why Thomas isn't here. She questions the manhood of a person who sends someone else to talk to his own sister. A to Z denies being sent. He says it was his idea. But, Mousy says, his idea conveyed to Thomas. Thomas does pretty well with ideas himself, right. He has no need for a fixer's ideas.

"How would you know?" falls on Mousy's head like a brick. She knows. He's her brother. Or is the past tense more appropriate? He was her brother. Now her brother is much closer to this character out of a B picture. Closer to everyone she's met in Melville than he is to her.

What A to Z doesn't realize, Mousy realizes, is that this isn't at all about

Mousy disturbing things in Melville. It's just about Mousy disturbing her brother. It's about her brother being disturbed by her unheralded visit. But would he be any less disturbed if she had sent him a warning letter? Would he be sitting across from her now?

What did Thomas say to make A to Z ask, "How would you know?" Was it a line such as, "She's a stranger to me"? Or a statement that he hasn't heard from his sister in decades? Whatever it was, the intent was to make it clear that he is not responsible for what she does. So he's not responsible for fixing her, either. Fixers are responsible for that.

She would be the last person in the world to insist she didn't need any fixing. But what sort of fixing? And by whom? Could even her brother help to fix her? How would she know? How would he know? These are not things people know.

Mousy did not come to Melville to be fixed. This she knows. She also realizes, at last, that she came here to see her brother. She came to see him and not this flunky of his, or a former associate of his, or even her old friends, whom she left behind her and with whom this was perfectly okay. All she wants to do now is echo back the words of this horrible little man: "How would you know?"

But she is interrupted by a guitar playing, of all things, a lullaby. And then a voice singing the lullaby. Guthrie to save the day. Or at least the morning. Mousy smiles at Guthrie, and Guthrie smiles back. A to Z does not look

pleased, especially when Mousy gets up and walks over to sit closer to Guthrie and give her all her attention.

When Guthrie has repeated and repeated the two verses of the soft little tune, Mousy gives her something more than applause, which would have sounded both too loud and too lonely. Mousy gives her a kiss on the cheek and asks her to play another song, this one to wake her from the lovely slumber induced by the lullaby. She says that Guthrie owes her that much, and winks. Guthrie winks back and sings a rousing tune about travelin' the rails.

When this song is over, Mousy sits down at Guthrie and Layly's table and asks Layly whether "that man" is still sitting there. Layly laughs, as if to say that "that man" isn't going anywhere until he's done with you. Mousy feels she has no choice but to go back and finish the conversation, even though, for her, it's finished already. But she is going to make him wait. She stays another few minutes and then wishes Guthrie the best of luck with her performances today. She expresses the hope that she'll be able to see her play this evening.

When Mousy sits back down across from A to Z, she doesn't look at him. It's as if she's been bad, and she's come to get her punishment. But A to Z remains silent. Perhaps "How would you know?" is all the punishment he chooses to impose on her. Eventually she looks at him, and she is astonished at what she sees. A to Z is crying. Silently, but surely.

She doesn't know what to do or say. She can't get up and leave him like this. And she still finds him too repulsive to give him any sort of comfort.

Repulsive with a soft side. But what's "soft" about crying? Maybe he just doesn't like to be walked out on. Or he has a weakness for lullabies. Or he's depressive. Fixers can suffer from depression like anyone else. It must be hard not to have a real job, with an office and a salary. You never know where your next kickback is coming from. And to not even have earned your lack of position! Mousy still can't think what to do or say, or even what expression to give this man. The blankness of her face must feed his sadness.

After Guthrie and Layly leave, and Laurel removes their plates and goes back into the kitchen, A to Z takes out a handkerchief and dabs his eyes. Then he gives Mousy an explanation for his tears. He starts by talking about Lucy, from *Peanuts*. Lucy kept holding the football for Charlie Brown to kick, and when Charlie Brown's foot was about to make contact with it, she would pull the ball away, and Charlie Brown would end up not only missing the ball, but landing on his rear end. Humiliated not that he'd missed the kick, but that he'd let her do it to him again.

This describes A to Z's relationship with Mousy's brother. He trusts Thomas — everybody does — and then he is betrayed. Thomas does something behind his back or acts as if he had nothing to do with the transaction. Each time he apologizes, and there is always a good excuse. And unlike Lucy, there are many times he leaves the football in place. No one trusts someone who does the same thing over and over. Intermittent reinforcement is Thomas's modus operandi. A sentence A to Z must have said to himself — and likely others —

innumerable times.

And yet, he says, it's Sandy that's really behind it all. She's holding A to Z's hand when he whisks the football away. She's whispering things in his ear. She lets him know that her favors are conditional. And she has her own agenda, although A to Z doesn't even hint at what it might be. Blame Electra, why don't you, thinks Mousy.

Mousy realizes that her mouth is open like a largemouth bass, and she consciously closes it. That's one of the things Thomas used to call her. Mousy bets that he doesn't call Sandy that. Does he have any pet names for her? Oh yes, he has to.

Mousy asks how A to Z knows that Sandy is behind Thomas's betrayals. Not from Thomas. That would be impossible for him to admit. No, this is part of a long history of friendship and animosity Mousy never knew anything about, since her family wasn't part of it back then. Where she is living, there appears to be no history of animosity, of loves gone bad or enmities passed on generation to generation, like in Faulkner or the Bible. But then how would she know?

Mousy wants to know who's behind A to Z coming to see her, but he won't divulge. Sometimes, he says, he does things all on his own. Sometimes he has his own agenda. He might just have wanted to meet Melville's mystery woman. He won't divulge his client, even if it's himself.

For some reason, although the thought of being a "mystery woman" makes

Mousy laugh, it also makes her cry. She tries to hold it back — in front of this man — but she fails. It's been welling up for too long. And what can he say after his own performance?

Sisterhood

Eventually, Mousy looks up at A to Z. He appears to have been waiting for this and to take it as permission to leave. After all, he has said what he came to say, and more than enough tears have been shed.

Mousy does not watch him go. But she listens. When she hears the front door close behind him, she rises and goes up to her room. She turns on the light switch just inside the door, which turns on the light in the middle of the ceiling fan. She walks over to the distressed nightstand on the near side of the bed and turns on the faux Tiffany lamp that sits on it. She kicks off her shoes and climbs onto the high four-poster bed and, on all fours, crawls across it to turn on the faux Tiffany lamp on the other nightstand. Then she scrambles to the bottom of the bed, slides off it onto the floor, and turns on the floor lamp in the corner. Finally, she opens the cream Venetian blinds on each of the two windows. As if all this light will dry up her tears.

Another opportunity. She goes into the bathroom, turns on the overhead light and the light over the distressed mirror above the cracked marble sink, and looks at herself. She breaks into laughter. Post-lamentation, she looks just as ridiculous as everybody else. As when post-coital. Post-release. We tear when we see others cry, but then we smile at their faces afterward and want to

hurry the process up by drying away their tears. But we can't do this unless we're intimate with them.

Mousy goes back into the bedroom to meditate. But she cannot focus her mind on her breathing. Breathe slowly in, breathe slowly out. Nothing but the nose. And yet she cannot stop her thoughts. She wants them motionless, but their desire is to run away with her. Do they want her to run away?

She is saved from her thoughts by a knock at her door. Perhaps she'll be able to talk about nothing with Laurel for a while. That would be almost like meditation.

But it's not Laurel, it's a youngish woman, a mix of Black and Asian, it appears to Mousy. Or possibly Brazilian, who knows. A pretty mix, probably prettier than either of her parents, a good argument for diversity in breeding. Unlike Mousy's family.

The young woman looks down, as if she were taken with Mousy's bare feet. Or perhaps she learned to do this from her Asian parent. She says that Mousy probably doesn't know who she is, and then looks up, but with no sign that she is expecting recognition. She says that Mousy ought to know about her, that she ought to get back with her brother, that he needs her in his life.

She introduces herself as Evie. And she says Mousy's name, with a giggle and then a look of pain. She apologizes. She has never said Mousy's name out loud before. She knows Mousy's adult name, but it's not an easy name for her to say. As her brother's mistress.

Thomas sometimes calls her his “concubine.” He thinks there’s something Asian about the word, because of that movie. Sometimes Thomas is an idiot. He’s certainly an idiot about Mousy, about not being in touch with her, about almost never mentioning her name. Evie says that it would be equally stupid of her not to visit Mousy and help her cross the barrier between her and Thomas. The barrier must have grown pretty high over the years.

Evie shares her opinion — or hope? — that Mousy is a big girl who can handle the idea of her brother having a mistress. But is she? Can she? She’s certainly not going to “out” her to Sandy, which is likely Evie’s concern. Is Evie concerned that Mousy might hate her brother, that she’s here to hurt him? Like A to Z is? Like Sandy perhaps? At least, unlike A to Z, Evie isn’t here to convince Mousy to go away. She seems to be here to truly offer Mousy help crossing “the barrier,” but if she feels it is necessary, she will likely create a barrier or even act as a barrier, throw herself in front of the man she loves in order to protect him. Another woman out of Euripides!

Evie says that she is an only child, and that her mother made a big mistake. She would do anything to have a brother. And in many ways Thomas is more a big brother to her than anything else. She is willing to share him with Mousy. Now that she has a brother, a sister would be great.

Evie realizes how horrible this must sound: having a brother’s mistress as a sister. But this is the 21st century, right. And Mousy will need someone to balance Sandy. Sandy is a spoiled monster. Sandy has claws and fangs, and

she uses them. Not on Evie though. Somehow Evie is still a secret. As was Mousy until Evie took it as her mission to learn about Thomas's mythical sister. Not that she learned much. Lawyers are very good with secrets. Nothing is more important to them than confidentiality. It's like having an affair with a priest.

Evie's used to it. She has a history of being a mistress to lawyers. Yes, to lawyers of all people. She can't even say that she likes them. But she's loved a few. What she loves most about them is their self-confidence, the way they believe in themselves as much as they believe in, say, closing a deal or ending capital punishment. You can feel their self-confidence, really feel it, when you touch them, when they touch you, when you close your eyes and listen to them lecture to you. *At* you. On and on. That's something Mousy hasn't missed.

Evie loves the language they use, how precise it is and yet, sometimes, so vague, intentionally vague. Everything they do and say is intentional. And yet half the time they don't know what they're doing. Personally, that is.

She loves how you have to be on your toes with them, keep them from finding fault with you, or tricking you. They even trick themselves. It's like having a very intelligent dog, say a border collie, who will get into all sorts of trouble if you're not careful, if you don't keep them active, if you aren't willing to put your own desires aside and see to theirs.

She loves how curious they are, how they want to know about everything, how they hate being ignorant. They're Renaissance men, at least the ones she's

taken up with. A nice, old-fashioned way of putting it, huh. “Taken up with.” Like “taking up” a hobby. Lawyers are Evie’s hobby, that’s for sure, but unlike other hobbies, they’re a two-way street. Hence the “with.” And unlike other hobbies, they’re difficult to get along with. And protective of their marriages and children.

That’s another thing Evie loves about lawyers: how ethical they are. When their interests are in conflict, they always know which interest to choose and which to toss away. They badmouth their clients, but will do anything for them. They zealously defend their wives, even to their mistresses.

You’d think she wouldn’t want to have an affair with a man who defends his wife and is willing to toss away a mistress when things get rough. But she does. The last thing she wants is a man who dumps on his wife, who blames her for everything. A marriage is both people’s fault. Evie was married once, but not to a lawyer. She couldn’t stand the blame.

Evie’s not here to talk about herself or about lawyers. She’s here to help Thomas and Mousy add a present and a future to their distant past. She’s a great believer in the future, of creating a future. Like getting herself a big sister to complement her big brother. And of letting go of the past. Not forgetting, but forgiving. We all have a lot to forgive ourselves for. Not just others, but ourselves. Right? Mousy can only nod.

Evie says that Thomas and Mousy don’t realize how lucky they are, and how stupid they are not to take advantage of their luck. It’s like they won the

lottery and put the money into a savings account no one in the family can touch. As a bank employee (no, she doesn't depend financially on Thomas), she can assure Mousy it's not earning any appreciable amount of interest.

Evie knows that this relationship she has with Thomas won't last forever. Maybe Mousy's coming to Melville will be the catalyst that brings it to an end. That's okay with her, because she's not married to her affairs. She doesn't want them to end, but she expects them to end, just like every visit Thomas makes to her apartment. Mousy agrees that this is healthy. It's healthy to have reasonable expectations. The time came to say something, and what else could Mousy say?

Evie repeats that, whatever happens with Thomas, even if Mousy is the catalyst that ends it, she wants to have a relationship with Mousy. She has little but intuition to go on, but she feels that there is something there. Mousy feels Evie examining her face for a reaction, but she holds back, because she doesn't want to encourage this fascinating young woman. Mousy herself has never longed for a sister. She doesn't know how the planting of the seed of this idea will affect her. She would never have imagined a sister like this.

Evie says that the hardest thing about an affair is not being able to share it with others, the joys or the sorrows. She can't believe she used the word "sorrow." It's not a word she ever uses. It's not a feeling she ever has.

The best thing is not having to deal with the man's friends. She doesn't think she'd like Thomas's friends, either his law partners or his government

partners. She doesn't think Thomas even likes them himself, or that they're really friends. She doesn't have to socialize with any of them, all she has to socialize with is Thomas. Otherwise she is free to socialize with whomever she wants. Even Thomas's banished sister.

Evie tells Mousy that she's enjoyed baring her life to her, not knowing whether she'll ever see her again or if they'll become "sisters." Why does that sound so odd? Evie offers Mousy her help connecting with Thomas, for what it's worth. She owes Mousy nothing, but she's here for her. Mousy can make use of her, talk about herself, or blow her off. Mousy owes her nothing either. She doesn't even owe her confidentiality, considering that she didn't ask for this, or even agree to it.

Evie tells Mousy that she's an incredible listener. She doesn't let on how she feels. She doesn't appear judgmental or annoyed or bored. Or, for that matter, overly interested. But she would now like to hear from Mousy. Does she want to patch things up with Thomas? Can she conceive of a sisterly relationship with her long lost brother's mistress? Does she have any questions, about Thomas or about anything here in Melville? Is there anything Evie can do for her?

What Mousy needs is air. This bright little room has shrunk and become stuffy and blinding. It's cloudy outside and the wind is blowing. She needs to feel the wind in her face. But can she walk down the streets of Melville with her brother's mistress? Correction: his secret mistress. She can't think why not.

She's not one to stand on ceremony. And after all, couldn't this be an anything-goes, twenty-first-century ceremony? Get to know your brother's mistress before you get to know him again, or his wife. Half shower, half stag party. A rehearsal conversation. An away homecoming.

Now she's being silly. And critical. Why can't she acknowledge that Thomas has done well for himself? A mistress like this is a sign of success and good taste. Mousy can't look down on this woman, even though, she realizes, she would like to. She doesn't like this knee-jerk mockery of hers, although she can't say that she's surprised. She did grow up in this priggish society. And she's hardly zipless herself.

No, it's not about the sex. What she is is jealous. Or is she envious? Somehow in this situation they seem the same. And either way they're emotions that Mousy finds unacceptable. Even worse than priggish. This alone is enough to make Mousy want to feel sisterly toward Evie, to take her under her wing as a little sister. But she's afraid *she*'d end up the little sister. That would be the worst result she can think of.

So Mousy has to take charge. Evie has taken the first step. Mousy must take the second, and she must do it with authority. She takes Evie's hand and leads her down the stairs and out the door. They are going for a walk. The breeze on Mousy's face feels wonderful. She thinks this is the beginning of a beautiful sisterhood. She is certain that both of them share a love for happy endings.

Anticipation

But where are they going to walk? It's fine for Mousy to have no destination in mind when she's out walking on her own. But when she's taking someone else for a walk, and when she wants to assert her big sisterhood, she has to have a destination that will fulfill her own needs and desires, but be sensitive to Evie's as well. And she has to think quickly, since they must turn left or right when they reach the sidewalk.

Mousy says that they're going to Evie's place. That's a good destination for a walk. Perhaps Thomas can meet them there, or somewhere nearby for tea. Mousy can't believe how easily this came out. It's only because she didn't think about it for an instant.

Mousy asks Evie whether it's walkable, and is told that it's about a 45-minute walk. Perfect.

Evie pivots gracefully and walks away to make the call. Grace is something Mousy has always wished she had, has always considered one of her greatest deficiencies. She used to think about what she'd trade for it, but gave up such dreaming long ago. Suddenly she wants it again. She keeps replaying Evie's pivot in her mind. She keeps seeing herself pivoting like a hippopotamus. That's unfair, but then we all have a right to be unfair to ourselves. It's in the

Constitution.

Evie walks to the other side of the Magnificent Amberson, out of sight, and comes back five minutes later, all shaken up. She tells Mousy that Thomas is "fit to kill." She never calls him at the office, and to drop this in his lap early on a busy workday. This of all things! Without any preparation!

Thomas has to be fully prepared. The only time Thomas shows signs of anxiety is when he's caught off guard. Evie has to admit that she enjoys catching him off guard, enjoys throwing him for a bit of a loop. But this is a first. He had no idea she was going to see Mousy.

The only time Thomas yells at anyone is when someone prepares him poorly, when he isn't warned of everything that might go wrong. In this case, it's something going right. But he doesn't realize this, yet.

He also doesn't like it when he wants to yell and can't.

Evie is shaking. Mousy reminds Evie of their destination and asks her whether to go left or right, takes her left arm, and gets her started on the right path. Mousy will find out in good time what Thomas said to Evie. In fact, it's exhilarating not to know what the plans are. She wants to walk fast, as if she were with Frances, but Evie is still shaking. It must be shameful for her to let Mousy see how fragile she can be. But Mousy is glad. She likes the role of big, strong sister. She likes the thought that it is her job to pull Evie out of what she's in. She has a long time to do it. The question is, should she do it out here on the street or get her car and do it at Evie's place?

Mousy wants to walk, so she opts for the street. Walking will calm Evie down, she argues to herself. If exercise is good for depression, it will be good for however Evie feels after whatever Thomas said to her. She wishes she could have heard Thomas not only talking more softly than he wanted, but managing not to say the name of either woman. Just "you" and "her." And "me." Pronoun soup.

For the first ten minutes, Evie's only words involve directions. Mousy spends the time thinking about where Evie lives. First she imagines the interior of a cozy one-bedroom apartment decorated Scandinavian Modern, with a touch of Shaker. But she decides that Evie has more personality than that, and that she probably would be willing to invest more in a place where she entertains men than, say, in a car they never see.

Mousy envisions her dining on one of those thick slabs of natural wood sitting on a trestle. Perhaps she even has a matching slab for her headboard. Or a slab of a completely different wood, like her. If Mousy were her, she wouldn't have anything match. A display of chutzpah that men may hardly notice. It's how she feels herself that matters. Or wants to feel.

Mousy realizes that she is going to have to rethink her own condo. But she doesn't want to think about it now. All in good time.

It's hard to imagine Evie in a suburban house, or even an urban one. She's not a detached person. But a townhouse, yes. Mousy can see her running up and down the narrow staircase of a townhouse on a gentrifying street not far

from where she works. Very young, hip. The opposite of Mousy. Evie has taken furniture she found on the street and refurbished each piece to look like something really special. Lots of painted-on color folk patterns. She has a knack. The opposite of Mousy. The expensive, modern things are in the bathroom. The latest bidet-toilet. Wildly-veined marble jacuzzi. Heating under a cantaloupe-colored tile floor. Après sex gadgetry. She rarely cooks, she eats out with friends. The opposite of Mousy, who prides herself on her cooking and loves to give dinner parties.

The idea of an opposite sister is exciting. She wouldn't want one too much alike. What fun is there in that? She wonders whether Evie hoped to find Mousy similar to her. Whether she does find similarities in Mousy. Or is she only looking for weaknesses?

Evie speaks, but not about Thomas. Her place is a mess. Of course it is. There's no reason for it not to be. On any given day, it can be cleaned up in a jiffy between coming home from work and Thomas's arrival. Mousy pooh-poohs, which is what Evie must have expected. She's trying to buy time. It's okay. Mousy can bide hers. There's a half hour left till they get to Evie's.

Mousy decides to be helpful by filling the silence. She will describe her own messy condo to Evie and make it clear that everything in it was bought, at a store, with no value added by the condo's inhabitant. She will make it clear how different she is, even though the comparison is to the Evie she's imagined. No, why do that? This is an opportunity to be a little adventurous, to play, to

push herself. She will describe Evie's mythical townhouse as her own. After all, Evie will likely never see it. And if some day she were to see it, they can laugh over her made-up description. By then they'd be sisters.

Early on in her description, Mousy can see that Evie knows she's making it up as she goes along, even though it is based on an actual daydream. Daydreams lack detail, and Mousy is not accustomed to spinning tales. But instead of dropping the whole thing, she starts exaggerating, turning it into a farce. Soon the two of them are holding each other up, they're laughing so hard. And it isn't nervous laughter. It was just the right thing to do.

Then Evie starts describing her place as if she were a royal concubine. It's even better. Anyone would think they were wildly drunk. At this hour!

When they reach Evie's place, Mousy has been paying so little attention, she doesn't know where they are or even what sort of neighborhood they're in. All she knows is that Evie lives in what appears to be a large apartment built above a garage behind a house. It seems brand new. There's lots of built-ins and there's wall-to-wall carpeting, since there's a big cold hole underneath, at least in the winter, Evie explains. They both shed their shoes at the door. Mousy loves the fact that the carpet has some roughness to it. She rubs back at it. They turn it into a dance.

Although they've managed to keep a lid on it so far, what Thomas said to Evie is suspended above their heads. They have no idea what to do with themselves until it pops out, falls down, or whatever. They have to keep up the

dance.

After all the wild décor they've described, a tour of the actual apartment would be seriously anti-climactic. So they stand — exhausted — in the living room, letting their minds churn, to keep Thomas's words, and the time until they have to deal with them, enclosed and suspended for as long as possible.

Mousy is not in this alone anymore. This makes her feel wonderful. But Evie knows what will happen, or not happen, next; Mousy does not, and yet that's okay with her. Unlike her brother, she prefers to wing it. She fears that she'll stumble trying to recall what she prepared to say. She acquired this fear in high school. Her solution is still to wing it. But it's easy to wing it when you're all alone with your computer screen. Mousy has to wing it with Evie, and possibly with her brother. Even if she were good at preparation, though, how could she possibly prepare for this encounter or for the disappointment that there won't be any? It's better to be energized by surprise. And by the joy of acting as if there's no tomorrow.

A perusal of Evie, and Mousy is certain she's thinking along the same lines. Evie's knowledge isn't helping her much. Evie looks up out of her thoughts, and they smile at each other. Mousy knows that, as the older sister, she has to take the lead. Put on the tea pot! Check out the snack cupboard! What gives this concubine pleasure?

Until they hear a knock at the door — and who's to say it's the first knock, considering how loud and fast they've been talking — their sole subject of

conversation, as they sip their tea and crunch their crackers, is the pleasures of a concubine. Mousy has never imagined that so much could be said about the self-flagellant joys of anticipation. It's not just waiting, it's something more, something that approaches transcendence. In experienced hands, fantasies can make hours go by like seconds, and seconds are enough to work oneself into a heightened state that mixes agony with ecstasy.

They describe the agonies (and their flip sides) in what Evie declares as "agonizing detail." The humiliation of being the one who sits and waits. And yet it's him who comes to her. The shame of being part of a betrayal. And yet it's him who does the betraying. The nausea that accompanies the thought that he might not come, and he might not be able to call or even text. But while he's suffering the agonies of frustration, she can read a good book.

The joys do not stop at a good book, however great they certainly are. There are also memories — of the awaited one as well as all the others, which become increasingly delectable (undermining her reading concentration) the longer the concubine waits. There are the anticipated pleasures — which, sadly, are often greater than the real. They decide to make lists, starting with coital positions, real and made-up:

Spooning	Missionary	Cowgirl	Doggie Style
Forking	Atheist	Supergirl	Kitty Style
Whisking	The Witch	Wonder Woman	Teddy Bear Style
Blending	No, The Wicca	Invisible Girl	Turtle Style
Spatuling	Flicka	Funny Girl	Mock-Turtle Style
	Horsing Around	Funny Lady	Porpoise Style
		Lady with a Dog	Style Without Any Porpoise At All

Next list: what concubines are called, and sometimes call themselves, Evie adds: tramp, slut, whore, hoe, harlot, courtesan, skank, floozy, scarlet woman, working girl, lady of the night.

It's this list they're shouting out amidst nervous giggles, each syllable given its undue emphasis, when they hear the knock. "The telltale knock," is what Mousy calls it, and they break into a laughter of relief before that is put to an end by the theatrical dropping of Mousy's vertical hand. They stare blankly at the door. Mousy doesn't want to answer it, and it doesn't appear that Evie does either. But they have to do something, since Thomas appears not to want to come in uninvited, as if he were a vampire. They look at each other and then

shout together, holding each of the two words beyond its time, “Come in!”

Spin and Bounce

Thomas enters bearing a face that expresses anxiety and bewilderment, two things Mousy does not recall having seen on the face of her brother before. His expression is so unlike him, and as ridiculous as it is welcome, that the two women break into laughter again. This laughter causes a shadow to pass over Thomas's face, a shadow of anger, the worst kind of anger, arising out of humiliation.

Being laughed at is something that Thomas has probably not experienced since childhood. Mousy guesses that it brings to mind his pals' response to his failure to get his body behind a ground ball or to his crying when all he did was skin his knee. This on top of the fact that the laughter is coming from his mistress and his sister, his two little sisters who shouldn't even know the other exists. This alone is a serious failure on Thomas's part, something he could have avoided, somehow, he must feel. This is a solemn situation, not an occasion for laughter. It's a hard place to be for someone who employs humor as a principal offensive and defensive weapon.

Mousy feels sorry for her big brother. This is not the first emotion she would have expected to have when she encountered him after all these years.

She's never felt sorry for him before. Only for herself. How nice it is to feel sorry for someone you've placed so far out of reach of pity.

Mousy feels something strange and uncomfortable. She closes her eyes and sees her young self laughing at Thomas. When she was a child, she found this the easiest way to knock him off his pedestal, to get back at him. There must be a special button in Thomas marked "Mousy's laughter: At." Of course, he laughed at her at least as much, but she delighted in his laughter. Didn't she? Yes, it was like applause to her. She would egg him on to laugh at her. And he would egg her on to laugh with him.

Mousy does not remember Thomas being angry. Annoyed, yes, often, but never angry. This makes her concerned about his anger now. Evie too looks concerned and takes Mousy's hand, as if she anticipated something terrible. This looking to Mousy for help makes Mousy feel stronger and, when Thomas says nothing and starts to scowl, she turns to humor, just as he always did. She stands up straight, gives Evie a look that makes her do the same and, moving away from Evie to emphasize the solidarity of their hand-holding, says, "Red Rover, Red Rover, we call Thomas over!"

Thomas smiles. She has allowed him to respond with humor himself. He lowers his head, scrapes his shoes against the carpet as if he were a bull about to charge a red cape, and then, head up, runs right at the women's joined hands. The women have no time to decide together what to do, so big sister

Mousy, at the very last second, lets go of Evie's hand and lets Thomas stumble through.

Together, Mousy and Evie turn toward Thomas, and this time it's Mousy who takes Evie's hand. They are neither laughing nor looking serious. They are looking at Thomas, waiting for their elder to say his first words. Thomas speaks in a mock-stern voice. He tells them that they didn't follow the rules. They're not allowed to break the chain. Only Thomas can break it.

Mousy cites a Supreme Court opinion saying that, if public safety demands it, members of a Red Rover chain are permitted to break it. In this case, the one called to come over had such an angry expression that there was "reasonable concern" that he would not only break the chain, but also break the chain members' hands, requiring them to seek aid at an emergency room, consequently requiring public expenditure. Mousy cites another Supreme Court opinion concluding unanimously that when a government official participates in a child's game, the rules are suspended. Yes, she continues, the dissent of three justices to the first opinion insisted that those who play a dangerous game tacitly agree in advance to the possibility of injury and their responsible treatment of such injuries they sustain, at their own expense. But this argument did not hold the day.

It is clear to Mousy from Thomas's amused amazement at her ability to make up mock Supreme Court decisions that Thomas is unaware of his sister's

matriculation in the first year of law school. He has not had her investigated. She has her own secrets, although none as adorable as Evie.

Thomas approaches Mousy with his arms open. She prepares herself for the hug and looks him in the eye as long as she can. He kisses her on one cheek and then the other. After a second squeeze, Thomas slowly lets go of Mousy, steps back from her with a smile on his face and then, for his sister's amusement, leans Evie back on the support of his arm and gives her an old-time cinematic kiss.

But now what? Will Evie referee their encounter? Will she learn more about Thomas than she ever hoped? Or has Evie fulfilled her role? Is it time for her to offer them her apartment for as long as they need it, go back to the bank and put in the rest of her day's work? As if she could focus on work.

Mousy realizes how hard it would be for Thomas to dismiss his mistress. So Big Sister takes charge. She continues the old-time cinematic theme by catching Evie's eye, scrunching her face up into a puritanical scowl, and pointing her finger dramatically at the door. Get thee hence, scarlet woman! she doesn't need to say.

Evie falls to her knees, pleading for mercy. But a shake of Mousy's head makes it clear that there shall be no mercy for a harlot such as she. Evie looks at her purse sitting on the coffee table, and Mousy nods. Evie takes the purse, gives Thomas a pained, wide-eyed look, and leaves without saying a word. An

excellent improv performance, but applause is not befitting this solemn occasion.

Mousy and Thomas are now alone together. It's been twenty-seven years. It helps Mousy to have an image to grab hold of, in this case an image that will capture the state of her Thomist memories. She comes up with an image of her memories covered by fog and then frozen into a block of ice.

But there's no fog now; he's clear as day and she can't believe how little he seems to have aged. And yet she doesn't feel she can *really* look at him, because there's a shyness between them. As for ice — which, between them, has been only slightly cracked, not broken — the most frozen thing is the uncertain smile on Thomas's face after watching Mousy point and Evie leave like a lamb. What he must be thinking about his sister! Or is he remembering? Are his memories coming back to him the way they are not coming back to his sister? Are her actions confirming his memories, or putting them into question?

Another image comes to Mousy, this time about the present. Their minds are flowing like streams after a big rainstorm. The streams have been parallel for years, but they're about to reach their confluence. Mousy feels sure that Thomas likes this word as much as she does. They usually went for the same words and phrases, and kept using them together. Some would call it a secret language, but they considered them a series of running private jokes. But how can she be sure of anything? He might despise the word. Their tastes may have

diverged. They probably have.

She is without certainty and, she acknowledges to herself once again, without any plan at all. She came to Melville because it is her home town and she went with the flow. And yet here she is, alone with her brother, just as she would have planned. Perhaps.

He must interpret her expression as quizzical, because he shakes his head. She nods. He nods. She shakes her head. And then she puts out her arm and points, telling him in so few words to sit on a particular chair. As if it were her apartment above a garage behind somebody's house. He sits where she has indicated, and she sits on a chair across from him. She fends off a thought about whether he's sat there before and, if so, where Evie was. Not that she's jealous or envious, decidedly not.

Mousy wishes she had a plan or, at least, a goal, because without a goal it's hard to know where to start. Alice had no goal in Wonderland, and things just kept happening to her. She couldn't even control what size she was. Dorothy went off to see the Wizard, and that decision gave her courage. She already had a brain and a heart. Mousy has sufficient brainpower and sufficient courage. What she needs is a heart, she realizes. But how do you get a heart? Through companionship. Alice was alone.

She is here with her brother, but that is not enough. They are not companions anymore. Mousy will have to work without a plan, without a goal,

without a companion. Her first decision is to take control of what size she is. She asks her brother to stand up and turn around. He does it hesitantly. He's not a model after all, used to being told where and how to stand. And it must feel strange being directed by his little sister. By anyone most likely. She is sure he has taught his colleagues how to talk to him. She forgets whether he ever taught her. He probably taught her first, and then she taught him, until they found a point where no more teaching was required.

Mousy backs against her brother and, with her hand, measures where she comes to. She turns, tells him to turn, and shows him where she comes to. He doesn't seem to care less, but to her it means, "This is how tall I am." For Mousy, height is not an absolute but a relative. It doesn't matter to her how tall she is relative to Evie or Frances or any of her friends back home. She reached her full height when Thomas reached his, and that was their relative height throughout the rest of her time in Melville — for six years. It is still the only meaningful way for her to determine her size. It's a nice realization. Thank goodness it's still the same. Someday they'll start to shrink, but not together. Thomas first, as always. Reaching full height is just about the only thing Thomas didn't do first. It was a tie.

Now that she has Thomas confused, although this isn't what she intended, Mousy turns to honesty. She tells her brother that she didn't come to Melville to see him. At least not consciously. She looks for disappointment on his face,

but finds what appears to be skepticism. Honesty is not always the best policy. Or is it that policy is not befitting this occasion?

Her brother responds in kind. He was not looking forward to seeing Mousy. He would have preferred her to have left town without seeking him out. There, now they're even.

You can't always get what you want, Mousy would like to say to her brother, but doesn't. Whether they planned it or like it or not, they're having a reunion. What people in their situation normally do is reminisce. But they're not really having a reunion; they didn't schedule a time to get together, and it's just the two of them. Does that count? In this case it should, because it was always just the two of them. Their parents were busy with lives of their own, and they were so far apart in age that they had completely separate groups of friends.

Because she and her brother have never had the opportunity to reminisce together, they've had nothing to keep their memories fresh and no patterns to follow. They have no iconic anecdotes to tell again, other than the ones their parents told, and they always made fun of those, retelling them only in funny voices and with what became stock gestures.

Mousy hardly ever reminisces alone. When she does, her memories contain few details, and the few there are — his expressions, her feelings — are cast in stone and, most likely, not shared at all: him being stoic as, giggling, she hops

into his lap; his sly smile as he tells her a joke that's inappropriate for a girl her age; the excitement she always felt when she heard his car pull up outside, and the willpower she worked on not to get up from her chair or her bed. How she always knew it was *his* car. But she probably forgets all the times she was wrong. Who likes to remember the times one is wrong?

Her memories of the two of them are mostly abstract. It's as if she were trying to recall a novel she read years ago, and had never attended a lecture or a reading group about. Except that with novels one moves on to the next, and the next. With her brother there was no next. There's no excuse, nothing to get all mushed up together. Thomas hated her phrase "mushed up." That must be why it's him who became the lawyer. Mousy's mind is mush, Mousy's mind is mush. That's just the kind of thing Thomas would have said when she used the phrase. No, Mousy realizes. It's the kind of thing that *she* would have said to *him*. And she finds herself doing it now, taunting him as a form of reminiscence: Thomas is chicken of Mousy, Thomas is chicken of Mousy.

Thomas says that she sure has that right. He says it like he would have said it thirty years ago. His smile tells Mousy that this is what he intended, that he's joined in her game of active reminiscence.

But his adolescent voice unnerves her. She's not sure she can handle reminiscence. She wants to focus on the present. She wishes Evie were here, because Evie is present as it gets. But she can't talk about Evie, and she has

nothing to say about herself, at least nothing of interest. What is interesting is Thomas's life, at least to her. And apparently to everyone else in town. So she asks him whether he really runs Melville from behind the scenes, adding that everyone she talked to said that he was the greatest.

He says that he's always getting confused with Muhammad Ali. It's something he's managed to accept. As for running Melville from behind the scenes, to the extent there are scenes, he does try to keep out of them. He still holds the primitive belief that cameras steal your soul. She must remember that.

No, she doesn't. There is nothing she must remember. There isn't even anything she must forget. Ability is the issue, and Mousy doesn't feel capable of much right now. Only a minute ago she was ordering her big brother around and setting the agenda. Why do his easy humor and the mention of something she doesn't recall make her feel she has no bones? Maybe it's him who steals souls. Maybe she ought to pull out her cellphone and make things even with a photograph. But not for the sake of remembering in the future.

No, what makes them even is that Mousy knows more about Thomas than he knows about her, and that she has knowledge of the law he doesn't know she has. Knowledge is power. Secrets are powerful. So she isn't as powerless as she feels. She should write on the back of her hand: Knowledge is power. But is book knowledge as powerful as life knowledge?

One thing Mousy knows is that Thomas didn't answer her question about running Melville. He told her only that he's a behind-the-scenes sort of guy, but most lawyers are. Most lawyers don't even appear in court. They have consultations. They attend meetings. They do discovery. They draft documents.

So she asks him again whether he runs Melville. Are you The Man? she thinks but doesn't say, wanting to be serious right now.

Of course he responds that no one runs Melville. Melville is a city, not a company. No one even runs his law firm. It would be like herding badgers. Running Melville would be like managing animals on the ark, except you can't choose the best specimen of each gender. You're stuck with whoever's elected and whoever these people appoint. They're never the best specimens, the ones you'd want to keep each species going. Even Noah must have grabbed the lowest-lying fruit.

Seriously, not literally, Mousy implores. Thomas is hiding behind the screen of literalness, an essential element of humor. And humor is an essential element of Thomas. As essential an element as his name, which is intended to make others treat him seriously, to give him a monopoly on humor. When, she asks him, was the last time a major decision was made that he disagreed with, that he failed to stop?

He responds that it's much easier to stop decisions from being made than to get the decisions you want. On Planet Government (or most big

organizations, for that matter), when there isn't a crisis, there is only one Law of Thermodynamics: no dynamics, that is, inertia. There are varying levels of thermo, most of it hot air and the friction of personal and partisan animosity, but Thomas engages in neither hot air nor animosity. He engages in humor, advice, and impersonal, nonpartisan "bonhomie." If that makes him the most powerful individual in the government, it has nothing to do with power. It is due only to self-control, and others' lack thereof. He is at best a one-eyed man.

Mousy asks whether a good example of this one-eyed man's self-control would be the fact that he would never simply show up somewhere for no particular reason. Like Mousy has. Thomas smiles. Not only will he not make use of this opportunity to criticize her again, he won't even go along with her self-mockery.

Even though she's not sure it's true, Mousy tells Thomas that, collectively, the people she has met in Melville told her that the Government of Inertia would not only not move forward, it would fall apart if it weren't for Thomas. It would fall apart out of personal animosity, as Thomas noted, as well as out of incompetence and corruption.

Mousy picks up on the last of these to make her questioning of Thomas more specific: Is he the one who determines the distribution of the spoils? She is pleased with how medieval this expression sounds. There is something pre-modern about the Melville she has found on her return. Even graft seems too

modern for this city. Pillage, plunder, booty — all these words seem appropriate to the Melville of the stories she has heard and the characters who have told some of them. As if it had been sacked by barbarians. But there is nothing barbarian about Thomas. Or does she have it all wrong? Is this the way barbarians act in twenty-first-century America?

If there were any "spoils," as she calls them, Thomas, as counsel to the mayor, the council, and everyone else in the government, could not acknowledge that they exist. He owes his clients confidentiality. He fulfills his professional responsibilities to the letter. He is "a man of integrity," he adds in an affected accent, implying that this is what everyone says, including the crooked.

Mousy plays a bit dumb by asking her brother who among all these people and institutions is his client. His simple answer is, each and all. Then if one of them asked you to spill the beans, you would be required to do so? No, he responds, only the mayor could ask him to "spill the beans," to spoil the spoils, and even then he would have to consult the council and determine whether this was in the best interests of the city.

But if he knew it was in the best interests of the city to begin with, why would he even have to have the mayor's approval, especially if the mayor were getting some of the spoils.

Thomas opens his hands, places them flat in front of him, palms up, flips

them suddenly, palms down, palms up, and give each of his sleeves a tug, as he tells her that there are no “spoils,” nothing up his sleeve. He says “spoils” with just a touch of disdain, as if to concede that if she had given them a more proper name, he might have admitted to their existence.

Mousy laughs and assures her brother that she knows him well enough to know that he wouldn’t take any of the spoils for himself. But saying this makes her realize she doesn’t. It’s only what she’s been told. The truth might be that he has successfully engendered a myth about himself. He could have a fat Swiss bank account for all she knows. He may be planning to run off to a villa in the Alps with Evie any day now. She would almost like that. Evie deserves some good luck. But why? Does anyone deserve good luck? Doesn’t Mousy herself deserve it as much as anyone? But what would that luck consist of?

This approach isn’t working. The ice still isn’t broken. She needs to go outside their relationship, to a reminiscence that has nothing to do with them. She asks him whether they ever found who murdered the girl in her class, whose body was found in the woods the summer after high school. Thomas tells her that they never figured out who did it. It’s a mystery that still hangs over Melville. People still talk about it all the time, and occasionally a possible clue is found and the investigation begins again. But no one is ever arrested.

Mousy realizes that what she wanted from Thomas was a story. He always told her stories and jokes. That was his favorite form of communication, his

favorite way of entertaining and showing off to his little sister. They need to find a way to communicate now, to entertain each other, not with a particular goal in mind, but because they are here together and she doesn't want it to end. Or get ugly.

So she decides to ask her brother to tell her a story. It will make her feel like a little girl, but that's what she was to him. Asking for a story might make him feel comfortable with the whole situation, or at least forget about it as he entertains. So she goes ahead and asks him, but without enough confidence in what she's doing to look him in the eye.

When there is no response, she looks up to find her brother looking inward. He's either thinking of the right story to tell or of how best to get out of telling one at all. Perhaps even how to get out of this apartment. He may feel that by showing up he's done his duty and can go back to work now. But, on the other hand, he might not be able to resist such a request. He may still love to tell stories. Evie may love to hear his stories. Or it may take him back, even if that's not where he would choose to go. Or he may be afraid to tell a story, because stories are revealing.

Mousy suddenly realizes that she doesn't want to hear one of Thomas's stories. She doesn't want to be entertained and she doesn't want to give her brother an opportunity to show off. It might disgust her. But she doesn't know where this comes from, because she has only fond memories of his stories. She

wonders whether Thomas ever feels disgust . . . or perhaps everything disgusts him, perhaps it's all the same to him one way or the other.

Of course, everything depends on the story Thomas chooses to tell, if this is what he chooses to do. Some stories would seriously disturb her. An inappropriate joke that goes on and on, with a stupid, punny punchline. A story about Mousy as a child. A story about Sandy. A story about Evie would be welcome, but, for some reason, not one about a former mistress, although she wouldn't mind hearing a story about one of Evie's former lovers. Hmm. A story about corruption in Melville would also be welcome. He could tell it about a mythical city, so he could say anything he wants. Fiction is a great way to tell the truth. Or hide it. Or twist it. Or dispense with it altogether.

Thomas begins. He used to begin all of his stories with "Twice upon a time," but this time he finds a way to update it. Thrice upon a time there was a valley not far from a big, big city that lay at the edge of a huge ocean. The big, big city was full of knights and ladies, witches and dragons, astronauts and movie stars, skyscrapers and tunnels, and millions of normal people like you and me. But the valley not far from the city was deserted. In fact, it was desert. Even cactus didn't grow very well in the valley, and there wasn't enough rain in the low hills surrounding it for any extra water to trickle down its way. All the valley had was a king, a king without subjects other than his family, which consisted of a wife, two daughters who had never had any friends except each

other, and a pygmy dane.

One day, a wizard (known professionally as a “consultant”) came to the king and said that, in return for the hand of his eldest daughter (and, of course, her future interest in the kingdom’s property), he would tell the king how he could turn his desert valley into a paradise. The king was so melancholy, and felt so frustrated with his desert domain, that he agreed to the wizard’s terms.

The wizard told the king that industrial companies wanted to get out of the big, big city because its spoiled populace didn’t like all the noise and all the smoke and all the odors and all the stuff that spilled into the river that ran right through it. The big, big city people protested all day long, in their loudest, highest voices, shouting out just one little acronym: NIMBY. They shouted it so loud and so often that it drowned out all the machines in all the factories and utilities in the big, big city. It was calculated that their protests could be heard on the moon, where NIMBY means “he who slices the cheese,” a position of great distinction.

The wizard advised the king to let all the industrial companies and utilities know that the valley’s otherwise useless land was for sale, and that the new city, which would be named after the king, would be the most special city in all the land, because although many thousands of people would work there every day, no one would have a home there, except for a few of the people hired to

manage the government and its services. There would be no one to shout NIMBY to the heavens and drown out the beautiful sounds of industry. There would be no children to send to school, no land to waste on parks or playgrounds or libraries or shopping centers. Just plants and warehouses and parking lots and rail lines, with a couple of government buildings. That's what the desert valley is good for.

The wizard ensured that there would be no management problems, no election campaigns, no citizen complaints, no garbage pickup or recycling programs, no environmental rules, no need for a big police force, no public transit. There wouldn't even be any corruption, because there would be no need for government contracts and no need to grease any hands in order to get faster approval. All approvals would be fast, because there would be no handouts to hold out for and no opposition.

The valley would, the wizard envisioned, be a paradise of stability and order. There would be no need for knights, because there would be no war. No self-respecting dragon would enter the valley, because the smoke that came from its mouth would be nothing compared to the smoke that came from the smokestacks that would be like telephone poles all across the valley. Neither witches nor movie stars would find anything of interest in the valley. It would be a paradise different from anything anyone has ever imagined.

The king talked to his wife about the wizard's advice, and she was

enraptured. They would have a kingdom and subjects, and maybe even some friends. The eldest daughter insisted on meeting the wizard first, and was happy that he was neither an old bearded man nor an over-anxious young wizard in training. He was just right for her. The youngest daughter expected to have thousands of wizards, princes, and others to choose from, once the paradise was complete. So they all lived — or, at least, expected to live — happily ever after.

Mousy bets they didn't. The story brings back memories of how twisted some of Thomas's tales were. They were funny, but they were perverse and contrary. This one, told likely for old time's sake, was more conventional, but he liked to get a rise out of her then and, perhaps, he still does. An all-industrial city as paradise! A consultant winning a princess's hand! Thomas knew how Mousy would take such twists. Clever, but annoying. Even troubling.

Mousy finds that she feels somehow dirty. It isn't that the story got under her skin, it's that it spread *across* her skin, like being splashed by a mud puddle. And she wants to get back for what he did. He could have told a lovely story. He could have told a story *for* not *against* his little sister. What can she do to him in return?

She couldn't tell a story against him; that would be copying. She could tell a story that was essentially *about* him, but she hates playing tit for tat. She

thinks “an eye for an eye” is the most horrible phrase in the Bible. In college she wrote a paper arguing that this is why Gloucester’s eyes are plucked out in *King Lear:* to show the horrifying insanity of “an eye for an eye.” The plucking was called for by Goneril, who had called Lear “dearer than eye-sight.” Thus, in her lie she placed the highest value on eyes. That’s what Mousy wrote, and she got an A. She hates herself for remembering her grade.

And yet what have she and her brother been doing all these years? A negative variation on tit for tat? Neither anything nor nothing, back and forth.

In any event, she has no desire to tell a story. She was right not to want to hear his, even though she asked for it. She always asks for it. The story of her life in four simple words.

Instead of a story, Mousy decides to tell Thomas a dream she had last night, a dream in which Melville’s mayor is telling a story about Thomas at the ceremony Mousy attended and Thomas skipped, because he hates ceremonies. Thomas interrupts the dream by telling Mousy that he hates going any place where he doesn’t have a necessary role to play. It’s an inefficient use of his time. People are elected to attend ceremonies. No one hires a lawyer to go to them. Although he does attend the funerals of those he’s served.

Mousy insists that Thomas hated ceremonies before he even went to law school. He didn’t just hate formal ceremonies; he hated anything that smacked of ceremony, including what is now referred to as “closure.” That’s why, when

they fell out, Mousy said nothing. She thought he'd be pissed if she tried for closure, if she made any attempt to get him to acknowledge what had occurred, to make sure they were on the same page.

Thomas dissents. He says that he's always liked ceremonies where he had a role to play: a friend's wedding, a relative's graduation, even fraternity rituals. What she calls "closure" has nothing to do with ceremony. It has to do with stating what does not need to be said. It's once again a matter of efficiency. Thomas despises waste.

There is nothing, Mousy insists, that goes without saying. Misunderstanding is the norm. All of literature and film, high and low, tragedy and comedy, is based on misunderstanding. Her job in life is to bring clarity to what her organization is doing. His is to obfuscate and make ambiguous, except when clarity is advantageous.

And, Thomas says, high on a taller horse than his sister's, *you* don't put your organization's activities in the very best light possible? *You* don't leave out what you don't want others to know? *You* use statistics only for understanding and not for the organization's benefit?

Mousy wants to say nothing, but after saying that nothing goes without saying, she can't very well remain silent. She tells Thomas that he is right. She represents her employer's interests as much as he represents his. Only it's always the organization's interests, never the interests of those who run it.

With one raised eyebrow Thomas puts this too in doubt, puts Mousy in doubt of herself, of her ethics. So she starts grasping, not for straws — she feels no desperation — but for a weapon, something with which to put her brother Thomas in doubt. Tit for tat, / It's come to that.

She is not a child anymore. Jumping on his lap and pitilessly teasing him won't cut it today. She is an articulate adult. She wields words. The fact that he too wields words makes it only more of a challenge. Is that what she came here seeking? she thinks, and a smile comes to her face. She doesn't think it is, she never saw her brother as a challenge, but she wants more than anything to pit herself against him now.

Mousy tells him that he is indulging in moral narcissism, that in order to like what he sees in the mirror, he keeps himself clean rather than trying to clean up the environment in which he works, the city in which he lives. But, she adds, it appears to work only because he is looking in the mirror and has excellent control of his expressions. In fact, he long ago caught the contagion and he is ignoring its symptoms inside him.

She is ashamed when she realizes that, as she spoke, she was not looking at her brother. When she comes out of hiding, she finds a stoic face. She missed the expression he had as she spoke, an expression he might not have sufficiently controlled. That is important information, and information is power.

Mousy praises her brother's interpersonal skills, from his ability to befriend

anyone to his ability to show no emotion even when personally attacked. But, she asks, are his *intra*personal skills a match for his *inter*personal ones? Does he control his emotions just as well when he's alone? Is he any less insecure than the rest of mankind? Is it just as hard for him to criticize himself as it used to be? Does he ever make time for self-criticism, or does it make him feel better to criticize others — or not even bother — to see himself as superior due to his superior competence, his superior self-control, and his insistence that he take nothing for himself, that his spoils be limited to power and self-righteousness?

That last word elicits a twitch from Thomas's mouth. A twitch is a good start. It's wood to the fire she feels openly critiquing the brother she hardly knows and knows so well. How, she asks, does that self-righteousness hold up to the concept of complicity, that one is responsible not only for what one does, but also for what one helps others do and what one allows to occur without reporting it?

Thomas won't let this go. He argues that everyone — and not only those in government — is complicit in what has occurred in Melville — in everything, for that matter — but in different ways: indifference, career concerns, personal friendship, duty, tradition, partisanship, fear of change, fear of retaliation, refusal to waste one's precious time. And then, oh yes, there is greed. But greed plays a relatively minor role.

Mousy practically shouts at him that this is an Ad Populum Defense: everyone does it, so it's okay for me to do it. To which mothers say, "If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you?" She expresses her disappointment that Thomas is not above stooping to logical fallacies.

Thomas both changes the subject and shows how little he knows about Mousy: he asks whether she is herself a mother. She is not. But she is forced to ask how he enjoys being a father. And he tells her, although the change of topic frustrates her so, she doesn't listen. She's thinking tactics, especially how to force him into more logical fallacies. She hates chess, but she feels this must be how people who love it feel. She pays just enough attention to make him think she is listening and to recognize when Thomas is done.

Mousy cannot bear the smirk of paternal satisfaction she thinks she sees on Thomas's face, so she finds a way to bring his children into the earlier discussion: she asks him what his children would think of his role in Melville's corruption. But as soon as she asks, all she can think of is what his wife thinks, how much she backs him or, on the other hand, how much he hides from her and denies when she asks. If she has the courage to ask. If she would even consider putting him on the spot, out of fear, out of concern, or out of respect. This is the relationship she realizes she cares about the most, and this disturbs her. Whoosh, and it's gone. Mousy's tactics vis à vis herself are well-honed.

Her brother's response is that his sons aren't interested in Melville's government, and he's not interested in them being interested. What he does is Dad's stuff, not theirs. They would much rather talk about sports than politics, especially local politics. No one cares much about local politics except for those who have something to gain from it, financially or socially. Others only talk about it when there's a scandal, and one of the most important duties of his job is to prevent scandal. The best way is not to hide things, but to help make everyone happy.

Mousy says that a lot of people talked about the government with her. She stalked the streets of Melville as if she had a big sign on her back: Thomas Ives' Sister, Open for Opinions. Thank goodness it didn't say, Kick Me, her brother says, adding that talk among politicos is fine. That goes with the territory. But out-and-out scandals cannot be tolerated.

Because, Mousy suggests, too many people might want to speak out and seek change? Ordinary people participating in government is a big pain, isn't it.

Thomas agrees, at least when it involves a scandal. Citizens go on the attack, broadly, and ask for all sorts of criminal remedies that cities can't provide. You've got to do something, so symbolic actions are taken, laws get passed, and nothing is actually accomplished. Everything else gets put aside for a while. It's a waste of time and effort, and it leaves a bitter taste in everyone's mouths. Government works best when people trust it.

Getting caught is tough, Mousy allows. She recalls the tempest in a teapot when one of *them* got caught doing something they weren't supposed to be doing. As rare as it was, she adds with a smile. And it was rare. They were pretty much left to themselves, separately and together. No one in the family wanted a stink. No one in Thomas's family probably wants a stink either. Sandy probably leaves well enough alone, but Sandra can't, not once she gets going, even if it's taken twenty-seven years and involves things she knows little about, things that might not even be so. But there's no bitter taste in her mouth. She thinks of Listerine, and decides she feels right now the way it makes her mouth feel. And that's good.

As if on cue, Thomas gets up and asks if Mousy would like a drink. She doesn't. She wants alcohol only if it's mixed with menthol and eucalyptus and whatever else they put in Listerine to have it pack that different sort of punch. Why does everyone talk about "clean hands" when a clean mouth feels so much better? Can one lie with a clean mouth? With a clean mouth can one kiss lips one isn't supposed to kiss? Or take the opposite, how easy it is to kiss anyone's lips when your mouth (but not theirs) tastes of smoke.

On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt if Mousy were to calm down a bit with a drink. The cleanliness of her mouth isn't the issue, it's how the whole of her feels. On yet another hand, she can't afford to lose any of her faculties. On the very final hand, seeing that Thomas is getting antsy, one drink will do more

good than bad, and she has no problem stopping. She wonders whether Thomas does. She could see him holding his liquor well, being able to get away with one drink after another, never reaching the limit of his self-control.

She asks for a gin and tonic. He pours himself a scotch and water, a fancy scotch she's never heard of that must be here just for him.

The time-out is good for Mousy. She does a breathing exercise, clearing her mind in preparation for having it blurred a bit by the gin. Balance is everything. The golden mean.

Where she requires silence in order to focus her energies, Thomas seems to require action. He probably clears his mind by doing something, playing a game, for example. What is his game? Yes, what is his game?

Mousy wants to get back to self-criticism, one of her bugaboos, but the thought of it forces her to ask herself what *her* game is. She wants to say she doesn't have one, but that can't be the case. Everyone has a game, often many different games for many different occasions or individuals. She may not have a game for Thomas now, but didn't she once? Is she still playing it, instinctually? This isn't the sort of self-criticism she wanted to get back to. It's the sort she wants to gets away from. Yes, this is not the time to engage in self-criticism. It's the time to get some cards down on the table, before it's too late. His cards.

She tells her brother that, from what she has heard, his problem is that he feels entitled. Has he thought about that? She ticks off the boxes of things that,

she believes, give him a feeling of entitlement:

- Man
- White
- Lawyer
- Smartest Person in the Room
- Knows How Government Works
- Is Respected by City and Civic Leaders
- Sacrifices Income for Public Service
- Takes Nothing for Himself

Has she left anything out? With respect to her, she would add “elder,” but this isn’t about them. This is about trying to knock Thomas off his horse in the square in front of City Hall. He’s been put up on that horse only to protect the backs of his sleazy colleagues. He’s better than that. But telling him he’s better than that will only feed into his feeling of entitlement. No one should be this entitled. Entitlement is like wealth; there’s only so much any one individual should have.

Thomas insists that he does not feel entitled. Except for his gender and race, he’s earned everything he has and everything he feels. Nothing has been handed to him. Mousy hardly needs to be told that their parents gave him no

advantage whatsoever.

It wasn't only difficult to get where he is, it's just as difficult to stay there. And the rewards don't grow. That's why he has started thinking of retirement, about the egg and the nest he needs to build for it. Regular legal practice is starting to seem like semi-retirement: shorter hours, fewer pressures, better clients, the joys of mentorship, and a much larger partnership percentage. He's not addicted to power, to the extent he has it now. There's a lot more to life.

When Thomas is being serious, he sounds so reasonable. He always has. His is the voice of reason. And hers? Hardly the voice of emotion, no, of irrationality (Mousy hates setting reason against emotion; they're not opposites, she insists to everyone who will listen; she is reasonable at her most emotional, and emotional when she reasons).

However, what seems to her brother to be so logical — his position in the city — isn't so logical at all. He is where he is only because of what he contributes to the protection of his colleagues. This she left off the list. No one could say it the other way: that his colleagues are where they are because they serve him. And yet, in a way, they do. They give him power because they need him so much. They need Thomas to be their calm, respected brain just as they need the mayor to be their warm, beloved face. Which brings her back to the list: all the things the mayor lacks, except that she probably takes nothing for herself either, although who knows how much she helps her family and her

supporters.

But that's a different sort of entitlement, the sort that acknowledges that everyone else, through the years, has taken from the trough, and then argues, perfectly rationally, that my time has come and I'm entitled to what my predecessors got. There's no reason to be better than one's predecessors. Why should the unwritten rules be changed now, just when one's own group is finally allowed to benefit from them?

Mousy feels both that she's right and that she's painted herself into a corner. She doesn't want to talk about the mayor, because Thomas won't see this as relevant. He probably recommended putting her up for the office, and mentored her, and continues to help her through her obstacles. But he is unlikely to have any interest in their different levels of entitlement.

Mousy looks up to see Thomas sipping the last of his scotch and water. He appears to have been enjoying her expressions as she was lost in thought. Or perhaps he's thinking of a little victory he's recently had or soon expects to have. It's healthy to let your mind wander away from the present when there is so much tension at hand. His patience is impressive. She has always been impressed with Thomas. He's always sat up on a horse as far as she is concerned, but not to protect *her* back. That was never a need. So why shouldn't the entire city be just as impressed? And why shouldn't he internalize this?

The entire city? Come on. As he said, only those with a special interest in politics — or, in the case of the minister, men's souls — probably even know that Thomas exists. Nor would many people notice a sculpture of him in the square outside City Hall. And few of those who did — and of these, mostly tourists from out of town — would think to look and see who it was up there, expecting it to be, in Melville at least, an equestrian writer such as Dick Francis.

But, to those who know him, Thomas is clearly something special, an old-fashioned, local living legend. Mousy thinks of the line from the Carly Simon refrain, "A legend's only a lonely boy when he goes home alone." But Thomas isn't alone at home, or at work, or at Evie's. He may feel alone, but that's because he separates himself from his environment, feels that he's above it.

Even Evie? Yes. Can she ask him about his relationship with Evie? No, she cannot. She's not ready to throw that in his face. She wishes Evie were here, so they could gang up on him. But would female solidarity override their very different positions vis à vis Thomas?

No, it's Mousy who's gone home alone, and yet she's hardly been alone for a moment, except for when she's slept. Which of them — her and her brother — is more alone right now? It's a draw. "Alone Together," the song of choice for duos.

It hits her suddenly: her brother's feeling that he earned his feeling of

entitlement doesn't take away from the problem of feeling entitled. Whether you earn it or not doesn't matter. It's how you approach it, how you deal with it, how you abuse it that counts. Someone who's been handed entitlement might at least feel guilty about it and treat it with kid gloves. Someone who feels his entitlement was earned is more likely to put on boxing gloves and defend it to his death. Or lord it over others. How the feeling of entitlement is obtained doesn't really matter much.

Thomas uses his boxing gloves to deflect the jabs and hooks of politics. He doesn't need to throw a punch. He learned that back in the day; she gave him innumerable opportunities. With all her taunting, she enabled him to be what he is today. So who is she to complain when he deflects whatever she can throw at him? Mea culpa.

Of course, he enabled her to be the way she was, and is, just as he enables his colleagues. But he would say that they were the way they are long before he came into the picture. He's not enabling anyone, just doing his job by letting things be. If anything, he's keeping things from going too far, getting out of control. You've got to work with what you have. She can hear him say it. When there is no such thing as "a solution," the best you can do is keep things under control. He would probably say that solutions are highly overrated. And yet he would like to solve the problem sitting on the chair across from where he's standing.

Thomas breaks the silence by putting on his teacher's hat and explaining "the way things are." Mousy feels a great debt to Thomas for the lectures he gave her when he was in college and she was just a child. They prepared her for college — both academically and personally — better than high school did. Everything he said was relevant. Thomas never said or did anything without a clear purpose, even when he was being funny.

He and his colleagues live in a fish tank, he says, with people dipping their little nets in to grab one or more of them, or just scare them so they panic and rush around the tank. With enough pestering, people think, maybe they'll even jump out of the water trying to get away.

In other words, life in city government is about being all in the same boat, as leaky as it may sometimes be, as beset as it may be by the sharks swimming around it: the other political party, the news media, the blogosphere, the gadflies, the unions, the big developers, the out-of-town contractors, the business and professional associations, the environmental and community organizations — they all want a piece not just of the action, not just of their time, but of them. They're all gadflies: insects out for blood, desecrating the flesh. And most of them no more understand managing a community than a mosquito does. There may be freedom of speech, but fortunately there is no obligation to listen.

That's why loyalty is so important to those who work in city government.

When you are beset, unquestioning loyalty is all you have. The gray areas are small and meaningless. You're with or you're against. You argue, you push your weight (and your supporters' weight) around, but you don't betray. That goes for Thomas as much as for anyone. Loyalty is the most necessary virtue in municipal government.

Where, Mousy wonders aloud, do people not feel beset? The only way not to feel beset is to keep to yourself, and it seems like most people who keep to themselves do so out of a fear of being beset, they are escaping something, so that they still feel beset after all.

Mousy has found that while everyone likes to be the hero of his or her story, it is often in the old-fashioned sense of a hero beset by monsters, who is forced to go through tests to attain her goal. We are victims who overcome or are overcome. We can therefore justify any sort of loyalty or, for that matter, betrayal. They travel in lockstep together.

Thomas looks half annoyed, half in awe at the way his sister's mind functions. He must always have been. That must be why he put up with her: you never knew what she would say or do next. He likes to be surprised because, she thinks, he is easily bored. If he does run Melville, it might just be that otherwise he'd be bored. His talk of retirement implies that, at this point, he is.

And yet representing companies would also keep his mind occupied. He

clearly needs more. He needs power. With Mousy he had power . . . and yet he didn't. She had power, and yet she didn't too. It wasn't about power, or it was all about power, but it was divvied up equally between them. Different but equal. She just had to work harder, because being female and younger she had fewer means. But he would have said that being older and male, his hands were tied. Mousy has never thought of it like this. She has always seen Thomas as the more powerful of the two.

No one is satisfied with the power one has, that must be the lesson (and for Mousy there *must* be a lesson). Often, like Mousy, we don't even acknowledge that our power exists. Power is a strange thing. Were Thomas to move up to the state level, it would mean less power, unless they made him Attorney General. And he'd have to kiss too many asses to get there. Is power just another thing in life that's Sisyphean, except for the very very few? Is power necessarily tragic? Mousy wants to think of power as comic, because those who seek it can be so ridiculous. But Thomas is never ridiculous. For him, power is probably neither comic nor tragic, just a useful tool. Is that good? Peculiar? Sad?

It is clear to Mousy that Thomas is not going to respond to her odd putdown of his paean to loyalty. Thomas was kind enough to break the silence once, but it won't happen again, and it is clear that the silence cannot continue or Thomas will get up and leave. Although Mousy may be in the driver's seat, she has no alternative but to go through the intersection each time the light

turns green. Mousy hasn't painted herself into a corner, she just doesn't know whether to turn left, to turn right, or to keep straight. She is without a road map, as they say in international affairs.

A word pops into Mousy's head: family. Besides a distant past, this is what still connects the two of them. But it is also one of the things that separates them. Thomas has multiple families — his nuclear family, his government family, his law firm family, as well as his Evie. Mousy has only a partial one, at work, but Thomas doesn't know this. Neither has each other.

Mousy tells Thomas that Evie wants to bring her into their lives, make her a sort of outlaw-inlaw. This is why Evie sought Mousy out. Mousy says that she finds this offer "attractive." Their own family has disintegrated. But Thomas has families galore. Is there room for Mousy?

Thomas says that his primary obligation is to his wife and children. His law practice is necessary to everything his family needs and wants. His relationship with Evie takes pressure off his wife; it takes nothing away from his family. Would this be true of Mousy?

Mousy can practically see the walls that would stand between her and Thomas's worlds were she to become a part of his life. But this assumes that he holds the power, and that what he says is true. Is Evie truly just a form of family relief? Can any attachment not take something away from others? No, there is only so much time and so much emotion.

And there are the secrets and the lies. Thomas has secrets in all parts of his life that must be kept from the others. Adding Mousy, especially to just his life with Evie, would add a whole other layer of secrets and require a series of fresh lies and concerns. But there would not need to be any secrets from Evie. This would be a relief. And if Thomas were to open to Mousy, he could have someone from whom he had no secrets at all. He could truly breathe in her company, at least if she were him. But Thomas would likely feel more relief from let sleeping secrets lie, from keeping them in the dusty attic where they belong.

Mousy tells her brother that he's being "unrealistic" (which will wound him much less than "irrational"). Every relationship adds something and takes something away. You never know how the pressures and demands that come with being a friend or relative will affect others that you like or love.

Mousy has no financial worries, so Thomas doesn't have to worry about that. She has no horrible husband or lover to keep him up at night. Her needs are limited, but coming to Melville, and especially meeting Evie, has made her realize that there is more to life than the life she is leading. Since she recognizes how important secrecy is to Thomas, it is good that she likes the idea of becoming part of his secret family and not the rest of his families. As children the two of them had their own nuclear family, with its own secrets that she kept, even if it meant exile. And it did mean exile. It wasn't easy. It

hasn't been easy. Even here in Melville she is exiled, because the exile was only from Thomas, not from the rest. The rest simply capitulated, never put up the slightest fight. Out of sight out of mind is a powerful thing.

She stares at Thomas, forces him to look at her, really look at her for the first time. Her success, against his will, makes her gaze that much stronger. She feels as if she could hypnotize him. It might take that for him to let his defenses down, to give something up to her.

But his gaze is empty. Thomas is able to empty his gaze, to give in on the surface while refusing to give in beneath. Mousy is not surprised, but she's disappointed. There's nothing worse than for what starts out feeling like success to be failure. She drops her gaze and sighs. She is ready to give up and leave.

No, no, when Mousy hits an obstacle she's like one of those battery-powered toys that spins a bit and goes at it again until it finds the end of the obstacle and continues on its way. If the end of the obstacle is another, perpendicular obstacle, then spin and bounce, spin and bounce until the door is reached or the battery runs down. But Mousy's battery hasn't run down yet. It's obstacles that keep her going, however she momentarily feels. And there is no bigger obstacle in her life than the man sitting across from her. Spin and bounce. Spin and bounce.

Things As They Are

Thomas gets up and walks around Evie's apartment. Mousy isn't sure her mind has the capacity to deal with a moving obstacle. But it's not like she's looking to shoot him.

Thomas walks by Evie's bedroom door, which is open, and suddenly he rushes in, snatches a hat off the bed, and places it up on a closet shelf. Mousy would love to get up and look in that closet, but she couldn't bear the thought of the smile on Thomas's face as he watched her flipping through his mistress's clothes.

There is no smile on Thomas's face as he leaves the bedroom, more calmly than he went in. He explains to his sister, with professorial earnestness, that it's bad luck to place a hat on a bed. Considering her obsession with the number 14, one would think that Evie of all people would understand this.

This hat superstition is a new one to her, but certainly not to Evie, who must have forgotten or, more likely, ignored Thomas's rule. Evie probably wasn't expecting Thomas when she tossed her hat on her bed. She probably humors him when he's around, in order to preclude a lecture. Mousy got off easy because she didn't know and, of course, it wasn't her who brought bad

luck into the apartment, at least not by the toss of a hat.

Mousy realizes that, when they were young, she lacked the ability to humor Thomas. She often fought him and made fun of him, but she soaked up most of what he said and felt. She's thrown by the realization that, along with his ideas and language and expressions, she soaked up the superstitions he taught her, and his phobias as well. She wonders whether she has any of her own. She thinks not. Fortunately, the thing about hats must postdate their falling out.

Mousy decides to list her brother's phobias to herself. One, he was afraid of the ocean. One of her earliest memories of him is his refusal to swim in it when they went on a beach vacation, the only one she can recall. He must have made excuses, but what she took in, what she remembers, is the tension in his face. It is through the shame of his phobias that he learned to make excuses, to explain things away. Great preparation for law and politics. Mousy is not ashamed of her phobias, not really. They are just part of who she is: someone whose anxieties don't make her anxious.

Two, he was afraid of roaches. Not one roach, but the dozens of roaches that scurried when he turned the light on at night in his college apartment. No, when Mousy turned the light on, because he never did, at least when she was visiting. She did it to annoy him. She took this phobia in, deservedly. Now she is not only freaked out by roaches scurrying, but it also makes her think of Thomas. She keeps a clean condo. She does not take beach vacations.

But is it because of the special relationship she had with Thomas, or is there osmosis with any housemate or roommate? After all, didn't she catch a fear of loud, sudden noises by sharing an office with Ruth, who's jumpy as a puppy? Or is it that Thomas was her principal environment throughout her childhood? Is that the lesson she should take from this, that environments can be harmful and that we too rarely think about how deeply they affect us?

So what has the environment in municipal government done to Thomas? It certainly hasn't made him spooked out, as if by a hat sitting on a bed. What would he be like if he had worked elsewhere, if he had taken a job with a law firm that doesn't represent Melville? Is she trying to let him off the hook? Or does she want to stop trying to hook him, not in the romantic sense, but in the sense of hurting him, of making him pay for what he's done, to her, to Melville, to himself?

Enough of this mind wandering. Once again Mousy has to say something, even something throwaway. Does he ever, she asks, consider throwing his hat into the ring and running for office, not here in Melville, but at the state level? Attorney General perhaps?

He shakes his head and asks her if she ever considers throwing her hat into the ring and getting married, assuming that she hasn't yet, pointing to the plain gold band on his ring finger.

Mousy shrugs her shoulders. It's not something one considers abstractly.

No, it's not something *she* considers abstractly. She says that all she'd have to do is snap her fingers, but he knows she never could snap her fingers, and she still can't. You can whistle, he responds, but that doesn't do the trick, she insists. Have you tried? She does her best wolf whistle, and that's that.

With Thomas still standing, Mousy gets up. Not knowing where or how to stand with respect to him, she walks over to a humorous painting of a woman reclined on a sofa, wearing nothing but a strand of pearls and a crown. No, it's not a painting but a drawing that's been painted; no, it says it's an etching. The crown is painted thickly with metallic paint. When it catches the light one way it appears gold, another way it appears silver. The woman's legs are crossed at the ankles and her breasts are fried eggs. She looks languidly at the viewer. It's just the sort of humorous art she would expect Evie to have found in an antique store on a country road somewhere.

But before she can look at the next artwork, Thomas takes hold of her right wrist and turns her around to face him. She tries to give him the same languid look as the woman on the couch in the etching. He seems to notice — he has presumably been looking at what she was looking at — but he doesn't want to play. He looks down into her eyes as if he were about to smack her. Mousy doesn't know why she thinks this, because he never once hit her. He tickle-tortured her and pinned her down . . . and this may be how he looked at her then, as if it were more serious than it was, if it was.

In order to wipe that look off his face, she turns her head suddenly as if she's been struck. The look remains, so she does it again. Forced to do something more striking, she punches him just below his solar plexus. Hard, as hard as she used to hit him when she was a girl, to get him to stop the tickle torture, which led him to pin her down, with his shins pressed into her arms. If this is the game he wants to play . . .

Somehow he manages not to change his expression at all. He clearly wants to let her know that she has no power over him. Mousy wants him to feel that she does. To throw him off balance, she informs her brother that she attended the first year of law school, that she never intended to graduate, she just wanted to learn how to think like a lawyer. It had nothing to do with following in his footsteps. But she did want to experience what it was that attracted him so, and she succeeded. It was the most valuable year of education she ever had, but she couldn't see the sense in a second or third year.

She has successfully wiped that non-expression off his face. She can see that he wants to know more about her experience, but that he is not going to ask, so she tells him not what he wants to know, but rather something he doesn't want to hear about. She tells him that the best part of her education was her affair with a professor, who liked to lecture even in bed. She makes sure to leave out pronouns that would identify the professor's gender, just to keep him guessing. She feels lucky they don't speak French or some other

gendered language.

She tells him that the professor was single, so that Thomas knows she wasn't a mistress like Evie and that the professor was only breaking university rules. She tells him that the professor was interested in comparative law, so she learned about alternative approaches to criminal justice, civil litigation, and rights. She tells her brother that one of the nice things about being a woman is the ability to attract older and wiser mentors. His expression sours. She has finally struck home.

He tells her that she would have made an excellent litigator. She likes to write and she likes to fight and she knows how to get under people's skin. You've got to be a terrier for that, which is why he leaves the litigation to others at his firm. Then he throws out what should be a question, but is made as a speculative statement: that he's probably the only thing she's given up on.

Mousy is hurt when she realizes that this would mean the professor gave up on her (which he might have, had he existed). She wants to tell her brother that, *au contraire,* she has a long history of giving up, on both people and things. Spin and bounce she does, but eventually her batteries or her patience wears out. Perhaps he was the first thing she gave up on, perhaps he set the pattern for this aspect of her life. But instead she nods her assent. And him?

He's never given up on anything. He couldn't have given up on her, because she wasn't there to give up on. He does, however, have a pattern of

accepting things — and people — as they are. You can't change anyone. Mousy nods again, and then adds that you can't even change yourself. And yet here she is, the exception that proves the rule?

Thomas says that exceptions don't prove rules, they undermine them. Lawyers feast on exceptions, as she well knows. And they love to write them into laws, to cook what they like to eat.

Mousy suddenly feels hungry. How could she, as tense as she is? Has she somehow suddenly calmed down? Was it punching her brother that did it? Confessing to her year in law school? Or is it just the power of suggestion, nothing more? How weak is she?

She asks Thomas if he would like something to eat. Considering that food is (was) Thomas's most vulnerable spot, Evie must have a fridge full of his favorite things. Whipping something up would certainly help calm Mousy down. It's a much healthier way to interact with her brother than punching, physically or emotionally.

Thomas turns her offer down. He must want to get this over as soon as possible and get back to work. What would we do without work to get back to?

With his love of logical fallacies, Thomas probably sees a shared meal as another step on a slippery slope: from her befriending his mistress to their meeting at Evie's apartment to their talking to their sharing a meal. This could lead to Mousy moving back to Melville and becoming a fixture in Thomas's life.

But there aren't any slippery slopes, which is what makes it a logical fallacy. We make decisions at every step. Befriending does not necessarily lead to invitations to someone's home, nor does sharing a meal necessarily lead to greater intimacy. Both sides to any relationship can prevent any further step from occurring. Unless he is concerned about blackmail. But that's something altogether different. Blackmail can be accomplished from afar.

So, Mousy tells herself, she'll go back on the attack if that's what he wants. She's amazed at how mercurial her emotions are. It's as if she could feel the atmospheric pressure pressing in on her not just from above, but from all sides. Part of her wants to burst, the other to keep herself under control. Her insides are being crushed, and they ooze out in the form of emotions and sweat. Does her brother feel the pressure too? Is there any part of him that wants to burst? Well, not much oozes out, that much is clear.

If he did burst, it would be a cataclysm. Mousy guesses that, when they fell out, he did not burst. It would show marks even all these years later, like a asteroid striking the earth. Nor will he burst now. All his seams are solid.

And yet she wants to get a rise out of him. It was always her role, and she wants to embrace it again. So she asks her brother whether his government is a "machine." Of course, he responds, that depends on one's definition of "the operative term." Operative term, her ass. A machine is a machine. But she holds this back and is rewarded with a concession that, yes, Melville's

government has been very successful at keeping itself in power by bringing every element of the community into it, making sure everyone in the government and the party are on the same page, rewarding everyone appropriately for the work they do, including in political campaigns, and having a popular figurehead as mayor. Melville has patronage, but not, however, a "boss." And yet everything runs smoothly.

Mousy makes a childish face at him, and then blushes with shame at how immature this was. Thomas doesn't let her get her feet under herself again. He explains, as if to a child, that a political machine's virtues include its diversity, its fairness, its efficient use of resources, and its rewarding of selflessness. For example, when a few houses of worship wanted to host refugees in Melville, instead of having them spend huge amounts of time and money raising the necessary funds in bits and pieces, the mayor made a few calls to developers, contractors, and liquor licensees on behalf of The Cereno Fund, and the funds were almost instantly available.

Thomas insists, in the same paternalistic tone, that the city government consists of good, well-meaning people who could make more money elsewhere. And that outsiders neither know the facts, nor what they want. Or they want things they cannot have. Nor do they understand what it takes to manage a community. If left to their own devices, the city would be in chaos. As things stand, Melville has order.

Mousy twitches the beginning of a Sieg Heil, but stops herself before, she thinks, Thomas can tell. He continues by telling his sister that, for a lawyer, a machine is not optimal, because it runs by unwritten rules. He could make better use of his skills in a non-machine government.

Mousy asks about the accountability of a machine, and is told that in a machine accountability is less direct. But isn't it appropriate that a community be managed by a group effort rather than by a king? Or a queen? People have such a limited concept of accountability. Five intelligent lawyers could join together and put an end to a machine. But why would anyone want to, other than to start their own machine or take over the one that already exists?

What people don't realize, Thomas says to his fully attentive student-sister, is that public service is actually about public service. He likes being needed, filling a role, serving a purpose. He likes feeling that he has a moral obligation to do what needs to be done to manage the community, realistically, never idealistically or ideologically. But this sort of attitude gets harder as people show less and less interest in government, or become emotionally hostile to it. When you don't feel needed, due to indifference, and especially when you feel hostility from the public, you find yourself serving only your colleagues. You don't feel responsible to people at all, your role narrows, and life in government becomes less satisfying. All that's left is shared loyalty.

Mousy takes stock of herself. Is she emotionally opposed to government?

Or just indifferent? Her town's government never occurs to her, except when there's an election or budget referendum, and usually not until the last minute. She's never thought for a second who actually runs her town's government. She assumes it's the mayor, but what about the town manager, or some party boss behind the scenes? It might be no different than Melville. She doesn't know any of the top officials, or even their opponents, and not a single party officer. They might as well be in the military. She might as well be a shut-in.

Thomas says that this is the way things are, and that he doesn't let it bother him. He says that he read in a novel recently the best formulation of this: "Stress is resistance to things as they are." Thomas Farber's *The Beholder.* Mousy is not familiar with the book or the author, but she loves the title. Behold, beset, bewhiskered. Lots of great words begin with "be."

She thinks about Thomas's quotation and decides that it doesn't go far enough. It stops at the problem without mentioning the solution, which isn't necessarily "not letting things bother you." She tells this to Thomas, adding that she finds relief from stress — what she calls "joy" — in transcending "things as they are." Isn't this what art is for? Isn't this what Evie is to him? Isn't this what they had when they were young? An outlet to transcend the ordinary, a shared outlet.

It is this that Mousy lacks, she realizes. Not a true love, not faith or belief, but a shared outlet, a personal as opposed to artistic sharing. Does her brother

not realize that he has this, or could have it, with Evie? She tries to put the idea to Thomas in different terms. He looks sad. Is it because he doesn't have this with Evie, because he has no desire for transcendence, because he lost this when he fell out with Mousy, or because he doesn't realize he ever had it at all?

This worked, when she wasn't even trying. This got under his skin and truly changed the expression on Thomas's face. If she only knew exactly what it was that did it. She wants to believe that it was a reminder of what they had lost, but she's worried that it's his inability to desire or realize transcendence, which she can do nothing about.

She walks back to the chair she sat on before, and sits down. Thomas sits down on his chair, and they each indulge in their own sadness. This makes Mousy smile, and her smile makes Thomas confused. His confusion saddens Mousy, and they stay there, not quite sharing their sadnesses and confusions.

What they need is a knock at the door. Evie. Her cleaning lady. A neighbor looking for some milk after finding that hers has gone sour.

But no knock comes. They're stranded. Mousy goes off with the word — "strand" being her favorite word for "beach" since she read Daphne de Maurier's *The House on the Strand* — and imagines them as two dolphins separated from their pod, too sad to fight the tide anymore, who let themselves be beached. Bleached. Breached.

With all his families, Thomas has no more family than she does. He's just as dried out as her, only it doesn't show, on him or on her. Does he know why he's sad, why he's stranded? No, he probably doesn't. It's a secret he's kept even from himself. Perhaps it's just that he doesn't know what to do when he doesn't know how things are.

It's not as if she knows much more than him. She's never been able to decide if their falling out was the liberation she needed to become an adult or a tragic event that ruined her life. It's not as if her life is in ruins, or that she's fully an adult. Their falling out is like everything else, "a thing that is." They sit across from each other and it, along with everything that's happened since and that might have happened since and that one may think happened to the other since, hangs in the air between them, air that they can't breathe any longer than a beached dolphin can.

Mousy clears her throat so that Thomas will look up at her. Then she asks him whether he feels any more at home in Melville than she does. He nods. She realizes that he may be stranded, but he's stranded where he feels he belongs. The air in this room may be hard to breathe right now, but the air in this city is like milk and honey to him.

No, this isn't true. It isn't true at all. This is a man weighed down by secrets. His colleagues, his lover, his sister, who knows how many secrets this Atlas of secrets holds. And yet he feels at home with this. This is the way things

are for him, and that's okay. He can take it, and so should she.

He must feel that he's good at holding secrets up. It's unlikely that he feels he deserves a burden like this, or that it's a burden to begin with. It's a win-win situation. Why would he ever go anywhere to see if he feels better there, to see if it would remove, if it could help him escape, his burdens? It would just add another burden, another secret to keep. And although they aren't problematic to him, why should he add another? Burdens are fungible but, unlike money, you *can* have enough burdens.

Thomas has his own method of transcending his burdens — things as they are — a Taoist method: bend and let things roll off of you. Bend and stand straight. Have your cake and eat it too.

Or is he doing no more than Feste the fool in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* who, to justify dressing up as a clergyman to persecute the foolish Malvolio, said to himself, in a pseudo-scholarly manner, "That that is is," just as, a scene earlier he had said, "Nothing that is so is so"? Does Thomas feel just as free to say whatever works for him in any particular context? Did playing the role of Feste in high school teach him everything he knows?

Mousy takes a good look at her brother. She hasn't focused on how he's changed since the young adult he was the last time she saw him. You'd think this would have been the first thing she did, but she didn't.

She now sees how little he's changed in twenty-seven years. Although he

didn't wear a suit, he was so clean-cut back then that it feels completely right, as if he wore suits then as well. Ditto for his hair, even if it's shorter and shows signs of graying and balding. It all fits the Thomas she knew. His filling out, his upright carriage (a term she loves to say to herself), the grace with which he walks, which implies that he is still playing tennis regularly. Or should be. He still has that little smirk, that sign of arrogance she found so impossible to look at in the exaggerated form it took on W. It was what she wanted so much to wipe from Thomas's face, and always failed. In fact, she might be its principal cause. She so wishes it weren't there anymore, that Sandy or Evie or life would have erased it. But then Thomas's mouth might have collapsed. He would look defeated, perhaps even lost. And she doesn't want that.

Mousy is not at all disappointed in the way Thomas has turned out, because she came to Melville with no expectations. There is no change she wanted to find. There is nothing she wanted to find. What she is is disconcerted. What disconcerts her the most is that she too hasn't really changed, and she does have expectations of herself. She realizes that she wanted to see changes in herself when she came home, but here she is even more like she was than she was before she came.

Thomas drops a bomb on Mousy by asking her what she wants from him. Plain and simple, just like that. What does she want from him? He wants her to put *her* cards on the table.

She isn't holding any cards. Will he believe that she wants nothing from him? She wouldn't believe it herself, if she were him. Coming here out of the blue, after twenty-seven years, becoming pals with his mistress, talking to political friends and enemies, effectively forcing an encounter here of all places — she must want *some*thing. She must want money, family, reconciliation. She must seem to Thomas to be a prodigal daughter, with only a brother left to come home to. But she is not. There is nothing she wants, not even to one-up him anymore. She did not come to Melville out of desire. She simply came. As if anyone would believe this; she doesn't really believe it herself.

But here she sits, across from a heavily burdened middle-aged man who has better things to do than welcome his little annoying sister back into his life.

Mousy gets up and walks around the living room of Evie's apartment. She is looking for something, but she doesn't know what. A trip to Melville in miniature. But this time she feels she'll know it when she finds it. And she is right. She picks up a pair of binoculars she spies under a blanket on a chair, she puts them up to her eyes and she looks at Thomas, square in the face. His follicles are huge. She puts the binoculars down and looks at Thomas, square in the face. Is this all she wanted, to see him again? No, she hardly looked at him when he entered. She never sought him out.

She asks him what *he* wanted in coming here to see her, and gives him

some alternatives. Multiple choice:

1. Come to some kind of reconciliation.
2. Get her to go away and leave him alone.
3. Make sure she doesn't get too close to Evie.
4. Make sure she doesn't do anything that might undermine his position in the city government.

Thomas is not amused. He always hated the way Mousy answered a question with a question. No, "hate" is not the right word. He's not a hateful person. He didn't *hate* anything about her. She was annoying in much the same way as his current colleagues must be. He liked the patterns they shared, likely more than she did. She was frustrated; he was just annoyed and, to an extent, delighted. She was a living toy, like a dog. Like a dog who refuses to be obedient a lot of the time. A spoiled dog.

He asks her if *she* wants some kind of reconciliation. She shrugs her shoulders, then says that isn't what she came for. Did she come to remove the weight of the guilt of her abandonment of their family and of Melville? She shrugs her shoulders again. To turn his life upside down? She says she didn't know whether or not it was rightside up. She still doesn't. Does he?

She hopes he'll shrug his shoulders, but it looks like he won't give her that

kind of satisfaction. No, he must feel his life is rightside up, as rightside up as anyone's. Certainly not in need of an annoying savior like her. She could only flip it the wrong way around.

She realizes that she is also like a dog in the way they chase their tail and never catch it. There's no reason to catch it, nothing to be gained, it's just there, an inch beyond her reach, and she can't let it go. She has to let it go. She knows that if she stops, it won't be there anymore. It's only there when she chases it. She can walk away from it with just a smidgen of her brother's willpower. She can do it.

She gets up and walks out of the apartment without so much as looking at her brother. She walks to the street and turns without a thought about where she's going. After a while, she heads in the direction of the Magnificent Amberson and, a little later, she remembers that Guthrie Jones will be playing at the church this evening. She will rest at the Amberson, order out from a nearby restaurant, attend the concert, spend her last night at the Amberson, and drive home in the morning.