Portrait of a Marriage

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"I want you to be free to hate me again," Simon Gottfried told his wife, Marisa. His ragged voice quavered with sincerity. At his best, he was a gruff, no-nonsense type, and that was the tone he aimed for now, though the weakness of his throat betrayed him. Adjusting himself in his armchair, he summoned his strength and added, "God fuckin' knows you have reason."

They were in his sickroom, formerly his bedroom, formerly their conjugal bedroom in the days long ago when they functioned as a couple. Her eyes had flashed at him with a surprised cobalt glitter, but now her glance drifted away to the upper corner of the wall. She stood erect, arms crossed, and seemed to lose herself in meditation. As the adage had it, her silence spoke volumes, but it was a language he had never learned. She might be thinking of how much she truly did hate him. She might be deploring the Burma Jade of the walls, a color from an antique paint brochure that he had

defiantly applied when they first split the house. She might be realizing the color wasn't so bad after all.

While he waited for her response, he had plenty of time to wonder if his lack of understanding was his own fault. Maybe everything that had gone wrong was his fault—especially this ridiculous situation of living estranged in the same home. But he also sensed that it was too late and too meaningless to blame himself. Their relationship had required thirty-four years and five months to reach this point, and it continued to baffle him.

Like other busy men, he hadn't always paid full attention to his marriage. Once an aspiring urban anthropologist, he had transitioned in his thirties to college administration, and by the time of his illness he was the harried vice-chancellor of an expanding three-campus system. Marisa had been busy too, of course, most recently as head of a non-profit group that recruited business executives to serve on the boards of other non-profits, a kind of serial non-profitizing that he suspected to be fairly profitless, though he had never said so.

Despite their demanding professional lives, Simon and Marisa had been devoted parents to their one child, Samantha, now a teacher who lived a scant ten minutes away by car. It had seemed natural that, during Simon's

invalid period, Sammie became one of his primary caretakers. What was amazing to him was that Marisa not only participated in the nursing but in the end took charge. "You're supposed to hate me," he said one night. "That's right," she concurred, "but somebody had to do this, and I wasn't going to put it all on Sammie."

From their earliest years together, Simon had found Marisa stunningly incomprehensible. On their third date, for instance—he a senior at the University of Pennsylvania, she a junior—they'd sat in the back of a basement bistro, in a dark, uncomfortable wooden booth with generations of carved initials, debating the finer points of child-rearing. She favored a wholly tolerant, ultraliberal, nonjudgmental approach. Certain that she would always be able to reason with her children, she wouldn't admit that the tiniest punishment could ever be justified. He considered this stance silly and told her so: "You've got to be able to say, at least, 'Stop banging the cabinets with a hammer or I'll whop your butt.' And then follow up with a, you know, medium whop on the tush." She shook her head, smilingly dismissive: "Kids aren't to blame for what they do." "Listen," he countered, "I was a quiet kid and *I* banged the cabinets with a hammer. Nothing stopped me but a paddling." She smiled more broadly and shook her head again. In

later years he could never remember how they'd stumbled into the subject of child-rearing on a third date.

At that age, Marisa had long reddish-brown hair divided into two loose clumps that hung to her shoulder blades; bangs reaching toward her highly arched eyebrows; a long straight nose that sloped upward at the tip; a freckled complexion and slim, supple figure; and wide lips that could bend her entire face into a smile when she granted you the privilege. Often, though, she seemed detached from the world's absurdities, with a small twitch of irony at the corner of her mouth. Her blue-gray eyes varied in hue from misty to slate. She volunteered few opinions. She had a habit of gazing into the distance while people spoke to her, as if she had higher thoughts.

Though there were many more beautiful women on campus, Simon was smitten in a way he'd never experienced before. The first time he buried his face in that long fine hair he felt an almost electric shock. Simultaneous flashes of hot and cold ran up his spine. When he tried to explain these sensations, this new level of reality, she laughed at him but listened intently to his jumble of words, including a phrase that contrasted baklava with a salami sandwich. "You're a poet," she told him. "Nothing like that," he

insisted, "I just think I'm falling in, uh, whatchamacallit with you. I'd say the word but it's too soon."

As a barely-middle-class Jew at an Ivy League university, a skinny young man with a long face and persistent acne, Simon carried a burden of self-doubt—not a huge amount, but enough to cause either hesitation or a swing the other way, to aggressive self-assertion. In those days there were plenty of other New York Jews at Penn, but perhaps Simon liked having a sense of himself as burdened. He described his parents to Marisa as "depressed deli owners—and if you're wondering whether it's the people or the deli that's depressed, it's both. Everything smells like old bologna and chronic failure." She responded by characterizing her parents—a wealthy Catholic, high-society mother who'd married "down" to a mere periodontist—as "pretentiously highbrow anti-intellectuals."

When it turned out that neither set of parents approved of the person their child was dating, the young people chuckled about it. "I'm a better non-practicing Catholic than you," Simon joked at one point; "I believe in original sin." "And I'm a better non-practicing Jew than you," Marisa retorted; "I like chopped liver."

They were great in bed together, and he readily agreed to wait around a year for her to graduate. At his temporary job in the university alumni office, he dreamed of sex and academic triumphs and more sex. Three days after her final exams, the two were married at a justice of the peace with no family members present.

During the period of graduate studies and fellowships, carefully coordinated so the young couple would never have to live apart, they managed two full years in Italy. For her work in business administration with a focus on arts institutions, Rome was a natural finishing school; for him, the effect of migration from Italy's rural south proved an ideal focus for his dissertation. Beyond academics (and there was plenty of time to explore beyond), it was here their love really blossomed—except that blossoms are short-lived, fragile things, and what rose between them was robust and full-flavored, a Chianti Classico of a romance. One day in the tiny courtyard of Sant'Agata dei Goti, as Marisa paused beside a column, her face in profile, he felt such a welling of tenderness that he wanted to rush up and caress her. When he did so, drawing the backs of two fingers across her cheek, she jumped in surprise, but then clasped his hand tight as they stepped into the church. That night they made love three times.

There were strains, of course. Simon's research brought him into contact with struggling industrial workers, and on occasions when Marisa met their families, she wanted to help them with money or gifts. He lectured her to keep her purse shut: "Number one, you're insulting them, it's patronizing, especially from an American. Number two, we can't afford it, we're scraping to get the rent together. Number three, where's this *noblesse oblige* come from, your stupid parents?" Offended, she'd go silent for a full day after such an outburst. Also, when Simon whined, as he had a tendency to do when his research ran into roadblocks, she became surprisingly cold—surprising to him, that is, because in his childhood home whining had been a normal mode of expression.

At times he verged on sharp melancholy. Peering ahead in his life, he imagined brown swirls of potential mishap. What if his advisor didn't like his dissertation? What if Marisa was attracted to that soccer player downstairs who stared at her ass? When they talked about planning a family, he fretted over their finances.

But in the second year in Rome, as the city's grand artistic chaos infiltrated his spirit, he noticed that his movements felt less constricted, and he had a stronger conviction about the future. Walking around the city, he

smiled often for no reason. When church bells reverberated along the streets, he marveled at the weird clamor of a supposedly sacred sound. He took dozens of pictures with a cheap camera, as if he could somehow capture the transformation he was experiencing.

"It's time," he announced one night, posing proudly naked in their fourth-floor bedroom near the Via Cavour, where the heady smell of magnolias drifted through the open window; "we're ready." "I guess you are!" she noticed. "No, I mean, *we* are, for something more. A little Gottfried or three, whatcha think?" In terms of career/family planning, it clearly wasn't time, but Marisa agreed with him and the condoms went out the window—literally, with much giggling. She made a joke about uncircumcised Italians. He asked what she knew about that and they rolled together on the mattress, laughing.

Sammie was born the next winter as Simon settled into his first term as an assistant professor at a New Jersey college. Though the academic pressure brought his anxieties back, the family thrived. Marisa postponed her career in arts management to practice the art of motherhood, at which she excelled. The reserved part of her personality, the habit of standing slightly aside with a wry tilt of the head—a quality he attributed in part to her snooty mother—

disappeared around the baby. Tickling, smooching, making faces—Marisa and Sammie formed such a burbling, contented pair that other parents gazed at them enviously. Of course it was Marisa's theory of childrearing that won out; luckily, Sammie was so well behaved that ultra-liberalism's main consequence was three years of purple sneakers with orange laces.

At this stage, Simon was still infatuated with his wife. The eight pounds she had gained looked good on her, an intriguing matronly roundness. On nights when he couldn't sleep, he would slide one hand along her hip and listen to her occluded breath against the pillow, wishing he could freeze the moment. He felt the same when he watched mother and daughter snuggling together on the sofa—a wholly ordinary, utterly miraculous beauty. He thought of himself as maturing, able to appreciate the loveliness and tragedy of time.

The fact that Sammie never had a brother or sister was coincidental; they were neither "trying" nor "not trying"—an approach he thought must be unique among his colleagues. When he paused to contemplate this fact, he was amazed because, in his work, he planned everything so carefully. It was almost as if they trusted fate, and he teased Marisa that she'd turned him into

a good Catholic. Once he said, speaking more generally, "Life is what happens to you." Marisa answered, "What else would it be, sweetie?"

Courtesy of two monographs that he considered less than his best work, Simon won tenure, but when he was appointed temporary department head because no senior person could be bothered with the job, he discovered a new interest and aptitude. "This administration stuff of yours isn't too bad," he told Marisa. "Except there aren't any artists in my area. Just prima donnas who fancy themselves artistes." He edged more and more toward management positions, and when he was offered a deanship at a small but expanding university in a midsize Pennsylvania city, the couple seized the opportunity.

They bought a two-story, 120-year-old house with dormer windows, a porch, a backyard with giant trees—the kind of place pictured in children's books. They both adored it, and the public schools were progressive enough to suit them. Marisa found a job with a county arts agency, and despite his skepticism about non-profitizing, Simon thought of her as doing good in a quiet way. Both sets of grandparents were limited to twice-yearly visits. Contact was similarly infrequent with Simon's three siblings and Marisa's four, but the couple made several good friends, as did Sammie. Marisa had

close pals in the houses on either side, which led Simon to refer to her as the cheese in the sandwich. Life seemed golden, though Simon was working too hard at the university to reflect on it.

Then came the family's first health scare: Sammie collapsed while jogging in a fifth-grade gym class—lost her balance, toppled over and stayed on the floor for several minutes. Afterward she mentioned having felt wobbly for a couple of weeks. Her panicked father rushed her from one doctor to another—cardiologist, neurologist, endocrinologist, hematologist, oncologist—from the local hospitals to the big city, and yet the problem eluded diagnosis until a third CT scan revealed an irregularity that might be a tumor in the cerebellum. More tests, then a biopsy, then surgery in Philadelphia. The growth proved to be benign, with trifling long-term effects for Sammie, but it had a sharper impact on Simon.

During the diagnostic investigation process, Simon served as the pushy, confrontational one. "I'm from Brooklyn," he told a neurosurgeon's receptionist on the phone, "and I run academic programs, which is like herding cuttlefish, so I've got no stomach for excuses. Make us an appointment next week or we'll find some other head-slicer who spends less time on the golf course." Marisa was more laid back, even to the point of

initially supposing the gym incident to be an anomaly. “I used to get dizzy in gym,” she claimed. “It was dehydration, especially after my period started. Remember that hike in the mountains when I had to stop and rest on a tree root?” “Kids don’t fall on the floor for no reason,” Simon insisted. “There’s something wrong and those fuckers are going to figure it out or I’ll sue them for practicing medicine without a clue!”

Afterward, though Sammie recovered fast, Simon’s ever-fragile confidence was fractured. Not only might his perfect daughter harbor secret mutations, but his wife couldn’t be trusted to look after her. “If I hadn’t badgered and pestered,” he griped, “she’d still be in that first stupid neurologist’s waiting room.” “Simon, she’s fine, she’s *going* to be fine,” Marisa argued, “you can stop freaking out now.” “It’s freaks that get things done in this freakin’ world,” he shot back.

At moments like these, Marisa seemed a kind of alien who inhabited his life. What chance had made him fall in love with her? What other choices could he have made? It took several weeks for these questions to fade.

He had turned forty earlier that year, and he realized that his early dream of writing a groundbreaking book in urban anthropology remained unrealized. His father had recently died of a stroke; his mother had sold the

old deli building and used the proceeds to buy a depressing pink condo in St. Petersburg. If his possibilities in life were narrowing, that ought to be okay with him, he thought, but he couldn't shake a nagging, unfocused apprehension.

On a handful of occasions in the next few years, he felt that disaster threatened—for instance, when he and Marisa quarreled about Sammie's first boyfriend. This was during spring break, four years after the surgery, and the boy wanted Sammie to take the train with him to visit his grandparents in Baltimore. "Absolutely no," Simon pronounced. "Why not?" said Marisa; "I spoke to the grandparents, they're lovely people. They'll meet the train. They have two spare bedrooms, and plenty of time to take the kids to museums and so forth. There's no danger." "He's a sixteen-year-old male," Simon pointed out, "nothing *but* danger. You think he's bringing her along so they can go to *museums*?" "Oh, for god sake," she muttered. "Have some faith in your daughter's commonsense." "I do, but sometimes we've gotta have rules. This isn't about purple sneakers."

Marisa won out—because in parenting, unlike arithmetic, a positive multiplied by a negative equals a positive, and because Simon grew embarrassed at behaving like the stereotypical father of a teenage girl. Since

nothing bad happened in Baltimore—at least nothing they knew about—Simon was proved wrong. The blow to his pride was minor, but again he felt that shiver of distrust of his wife, that annoyance with her little aura of invulnerability that he thought stemmed from her parents.

During Sammie's ten-day absence, too, he felt oddly unbalanced, slightly sick to his stomach, as if he were now the one with a brain tumor. He found comfort in long walks around the neighborhood, admiring the huge shady buttonwoods and overgrown pyracantha bushes, the domesticity of tricycles and yapping dogs. Everything's fine, he told himself. Everything's *going* to be fine.

The overall effect of the Baltimore incident was to make him cling more strongly to their life. One Saturday he even cut the grass himself, a chore usually left to a gardening service, and while he pushed the mower he gazed up fondly at the house's winsome gables and dormer windows. He particularly admired a towering buttonwood in his backyard—*Platanus occidentalis*, he had learned through research—with its flaking dry bark that revealed a new greenish skin underneath. "It's a metaphor," he said to Marisa. "See? I think we had a tree like that near our apartment in Rome."

"The trees in Rome are pines, Simon. Admit it, you know nothing at all about botany."

"I know that the chair of the Botany Department is a flaming asshole. That's what's called practical knowledge. C'mere and gimme a kiss while I'm all sweaty from cutting the grass."

Three more years went by. In light of his deep affection for domesticity, his next major act, at age 47, was incomprehensible, impermissible, all but deranged. He undercut his family in the simplest way of all, by falling in love again.

Clearly he wasn't looking for anyone, or even hoping for anyone. He and Marisa still had a good sex life. As a non-practicing Jew and professional cuttlefish herder, his strongest moral premise was "Keep your word and don't con people." As a father, he believed that family stability was essential and children's needs came first, middle, and last. The affair made no sense at all.

The woman was a thirty-year-old assistant psychology professor he met while chairing a committee. With a narrow face hollowed under the cheekbones, a pointed chin and frizzy, unruly brown hair, Ilana lacked conventional beauty, but her big liquid-brown eyes drew him in. He compared her to his mental picture of his mother at that age, except that he

couldn't imagine his mother as hopeful, curious or sexually adventurous. Ilana was argumentative, too, challenging his positions rather than brushing them aside as Marisa did. One afternoon they disputed Mid-East politics for three hours. They also debated the convolutions of university politics in a way he never could with Marisa, who lacked interest in academic shenanigans. They took their arguments to bed, usually in the early afternoon in Ilana's apartment, where they wrestled themselves into stunned exhaustion.

Maybe the key was the new kind of talk, with a partner who fully engaged him. Or maybe the affair was a reaction to his sense of precariousness. Maybe it was just the different and abundant sex, the hot-cold flashes along his spine. Also, oddly, religion might have played a role. Among Ilana's passions was a fervent if inconsistent attachment to Judaism, and he became curious enough about that side of her life to accompany her twice to the Reform synagogue she attended in a town fifteen miles away. Finding the services interesting, he chatted with an assistant rabbi and thought vaguely about returning to the faith he'd never had; even if you didn't believe in it, it was a cure of sorts for feelings of impermanence. He

imagined the comfort of being part of a community devoted to reflection and spirit.

Though Ilana didn't press him on relationship questions, he suggested several times that, once his daughter was grown, his situation would change. Privately, of course, he dreaded the moment when he might have to make a choice, and yet this professional manager again fell into the mode of letting life happen to him. It was amazingly easy not to think about consequences.

The affair lasted a year and a half, until Ilana, reading the tea leaves of her tenure committee, asked what he could do to help. He explained that he'd have no influence even if it were ethical for him to intervene. Aware of his subtle understanding of academic politics, she wasn't convinced. He insisted, with utter sincerity, that he was being honest as well as practical; any interference on his part would backfire. They quarreled; it was bitter; she accepted a more promising job in Nevada.

At the exact time when Ilana packed to journey west, Sammie was preparing for her freshman year at Bowdoin College in Maine. Two of the three people Simon loved were moving out on him. He was devastated. He stayed in bed for an entire weekend, lying to Marisa that he felt ill.

Since Sammie could have attended Simon's university for free, it had taken complicated negotiations, with her mother's support, for the girl to escape north. The irony of the situation added to the pain in Simon's gut. By speeding Sammie's departure, Marisa had pressed him toward the choice point, and perhaps made it easier for him to pick Ilana. But Ilana and the tenure committee had snatched away his chance to choose.

Then God put in His bid for supreme ironist. At a charity function connected with Marisa's non-profitizing, the assistant rabbi of Ilana's synagogue recognized Simon and stepped up to greet him. With Marisa standing unobserved to the side, the rabbi said, "So nice to see you again. And the lovely lady you've come to services with, is she here tonight?" Simon brushed the man aside and strode forward, and when he glanced back toward Marisa, her eyes took a hazy slide as if she'd been in a traffic accident. Then they closed for a long moment, and when she consented to look at Simon, they glittered like tinsel.

This ended Simon's flirtation with the faith of his ancestors. No god who hired such an idiot as spokesperson could expect a vote from an intelligent administrator. As for his marriage, the severance proved more complicated.

On the rare occasions when he'd allowed himself to imagine the consequences of his infidelity, he'd supposed that Marisa's ultraliberal, nonjudgmental spirit might extend to waywardness by her husband. Either he would move in with Ilana, maintaining a warm though rueful friendship with Marisa, or he would renounce his lover and grow even closer to his wife. Though he knew he was deluding himself about the ease of the transition, he didn't suspect the enormity of his error.

To his credit, during the late-night scene after the rabbi's gaffe, Simon made no pretense that the affair had been meaningless or trivial. He did argue, in time-honored fashion, that his adultery had no bearing on his feelings for Marisa. He stressed, again and again, that the fling was over. She was unimpressed. Lips tight, shoulders bent, she moved at a measured pace from one chore to the next—locking the windows for the night, turning on the dishwasher—while he trailed behind from hall to living room to kitchen. She looked gorgeous in the thin-strapped gown she'd worn to the charity event. As she headed upstairs, his explanations reached the point of contending in convoluted skeins of words that his behavior could not be elucidated by words; she laughed at him and slammed the bathroom door in his face.

He slept downstairs and kept a respectful distance for two days, hoping she'd cool off, and she did. She calmly presented him with a computer-printed list of divorce terms (the key words highlighted with boldface) and a demand that he move out at once. He was outraged. He wanted to work things out, he said. He was feeling guilty as hell, he said. He still loved her, he said. More than ever, he said. (Only the last statement stretched the truth.) She left her list on the kitchen table and went out for sushi. He wrote an impassioned note in return, mentioning her philosophical disapproval of punishment. Why hammer him when he admitted he'd been wrong? What good would it do either of them? And on for two pages' worth—a strong argument, he felt, perhaps the best short essay he'd ever composed; he taped the handwritten sheets to the bedroom door.

Though he waited patiently, she never responded. His heart and spirit were smashed. If he owned a pistol, he'd shoot himself, he decided, and took sour comfort in this melodramatic view of the situation.

Then his younger sister called to inform him that their mother had been found dead in her Florida condo. Unsuspected heart disease. The next week required a trip to St. Petersburg, another to Brooklyn for the funeral, dozens of phone calls, paperwork for the small but complicated estate. Since Marisa

didn't accompany or assist him, he told awkward lies about her absence. Given the state of his psyche, there was little room for extra grief, and in fact something tightened in him. After a week of exasperating details, he concluded that, if he owned a pistol, he'd turn it not on himself but on the Florida bank manager who wouldn't accept a mere photocopy of the death certificate.

When he returned home in the early evening, his key to the house no longer worked. He called Marisa's cell phone—no answer. He checked the other entrances, pounded on the front door, and finally broke a window to get in. In his mind, that settled it.

These events led to the arrangement that, to all their acquaintances, defined their life as bizarre. They split up and stayed together. Neither would agree to move out of the perfect, charming home that their daughter would return to during college vacations. Thus they put aside divorce as well as reconciliation. Instead, they divided the house as evenly as possible, with Marisa getting the front half and Simon the back. He entered from the rear porch, used the family room as his living space, slept in their old bedroom, and washed in the bathroom with a tub. She entered from the front, had the original living and dining rooms to herself, slept in the former guest room,

and used the bathroom with a stall shower. The cost of a second kitchen being prohibitive, they shared the existing one by adding a second refrigerator. Time in the laundry room was apportioned per posted schedule.

Sammie, at the age of knowing far better than her parents, left no doubt of her opinion. "This is absurd. You could at least speak to each other," she declared to her mother soon after the split. "Why?" Marisa asked. And when Sammie made the same statement to her father, he shot back, "*I'm* not the one that stopped speaking! But I refuse to talk about it!" Sammie soon realized that these middle-aged adolescents would have to solve matters on their own.

For paying utility charges and other such expenses, Simon would write a check for his portion and leave it with the itemized bill on the top tray of a wire-mesh desk organizer on the kitchen counter. Marisa would add her corresponding check and mail the return envelope, shifting the bill to the bottom tray for him to file. Larger operations like roof repairs required negotiation by e-mail.

From the packing materials in the trash, Simon learned that Marisa had bought herself a new sofa and chairs in a style known as Tuscan Contemporary. From Sammie he heard that Marisa's friends in the houses on

either side loved the fresh decor. In reaction, he had his walls repainted with colors from 1950s brochures: Caribbean Coral, Burma Jade, Harvest Gold, shades he vaguely remembered, or imagined remembering, from early childhood. "I need some life in my life," he noted to Sammie, while privately he thought, "Take *that*, fuckin' Tuscan Contemporary."

Despite the new paint, Simon began to spend 90 percent of his waking hours at his office, and he and Marisa managed to go days without seeing one another. His biggest spoken complaint about the arrangement was that Sammie's room lay in "the Tuscan villa," i.e., Marisa's half. Privately he felt that his life had been destroyed, that it was Marisa's fault as much as his, and that she was likely enjoying it. He stomped around with barely suppressed rage. His guilt, when he acknowledged it, seemed like somebody's cruel joke on him because he wasn't that kind of person. He felt he was the one who'd been betrayed—because commitment demanded forgiveness, didn't it?

Years passed. Sammie—slim, freckled, blue-eyed, captivating, a taller version of her mother—finished college, took a job as a barista in Bangor, lived briefly with a ski instructor in Vail, waited tables in Sacramento, earned a graduate degree in education in Colorado, and returned at last to Pennsylvania to teach tenth graders six miles from her childhood home,

where her parents continued to live estranged but married, in the same house but alone.

During this chapter of his life Simon had grown dry and brittle. His own rooms felt foreign to him. He had given up love, except for his daughter and for certain aspects of his job, such as steering the adoption of a faculty ethics code (a task whose irony was not lost on him—but hey, he thought, I never fudged a grade or fucked a student). In his voice and personal style he became even gruffer than before; he put up a sign in his office, "THE CUTTLESHIT STOPS HERE," and the uniqueness of this approach in a university setting worked to his advantage. A smattering of pills and alcohol kept his depression at the merely chronic level. Marisa, for her part, seemed to be active, with a number of friends coming by the house—her neighbor pals and also some males, though none stayed overnight as far as he could tell. (While pretending not to snoop, he noticed every sound from her quarters.) He attributed her staying in the house to pure stubbornness, a quality in which he vowed to match her.

In fact, their relations had marginally improved by this point. They would trade a grunted "Good morning" when they stumbled past one another in the kitchen. Or Simon might offer, "Your chicken stew smelled

good last night." "It was curry," she'd correct him; "you ought to know the difference." "Ah, yeah, you're a spicy one, aren't you?" he'd say, ending the conversation.

For his fifty-fourth birthday one March, a fatigued, overworked, morose Simon decided to have a thorough physical. It turned out that the swollen glands in his neck and armpits represented Stage IV Hodgkin's lymphoma. Over the next two years he lurched through chemotherapy, radiation, exploratory surgery and a bone-marrow stem cell transplant, along with treatment for side effects such as acute myeloblastic leukemia and bone necrosis. At least twice, in a coma, receiving oxygen through a tracheotomy and nutrition through a gastric feeding tube, he was assumed to be dying, and he wanted to.

After multiple stints in rehab facilities, he returned home at last with a good prognosis, but he required 24-hour paid care. For much of this period Sammie would come by after school to sit with him. Once the feeding tube was removed, she prepared his dinner and helped the night aide get him ready for bed. Though incredibly grouchy, he had his old determination back.

Marisa, too, visited him at least twice a week, first in the hospital and then at home. Seeing her in his bedroom made him woozy at first, though this reaction was difficult to distinguish from the effects of medication. Looking closely at her for the first time in years, he noticed that her hair had grown more reddish, meaning that she'd started to color it. Her skin was paler, the freckles blotchier, her waist thicker, her shoulders almost imperceptibly rounded.

One night during his first week at home, he croaked at her from his bed, "Hello there, do I know you?"

"The doctor says your brain is fine, so if you don't know me, that's by choice."

"Oh yeah," he mumbled, "I recognize the sarcasm."

"We thought we'd lost you, but clearly you're back now, as obnoxious as ever."

"Sorry to disappoint you, lady, because you kind of look like my daughter."

After a few weeks, somebody must have spoken with somebody about expenses. As soon as he could move around with the help of a walker, the

night-duty aide was released—to save money, Sammie informed him. "Who said you could do that?" he demanded.

"We're having a hard time paying the bills."

"*We*? Who's that? Who's paying them?"

"Insurance, mostly. But it won't cover the night care."

Deep grooves cut across his forehead. "What about," he puzzled, "I mean, electricity and—cable, there's a TV over there…Gas. What …" His eyelids drooped with the complexity of the problem.

"Mom pays the bills."

He woke up again. "What, from her account?"

"Hers and yours, both. You're still collecting your salary because you had so much sabbatical time built up."

"*My* account? Who said she could do that?"

"The lawyer. The court. The bank. She's still your wife even if you haven't spoken for eight years."

"*What*? I didn't agree—"

"You were unconscious, remember?"

"No, I can't fuckin' remember being fuckin' unconscious!" He goggled at her. "How'm I supposed to get by at night after you leave? If I fall going to the bathroom or something? If I need a—"

"Mom's taking over as your night nurse."

"No, she's not."

"OK, you can stay alone. I have to be home by nine, my cat needs me. I'll put your walker next to the bed and a glass of water on the nightstand."

"NO!"

"Get over it, Dad."

Thus began a new level of intimacy with Marisa that Simon had never wished for or imagined. She assisted him in the bathroom. She cleaned vomit from his pajamas when a chicken-soup dinner failed to stay down. She counted his pills for him. She brought him ice water and hot tea. She was efficient and attentive and professional, amazing him with her skill.

"You could've been a nurse," he told her. "Paid, I mean."

"Who says you're not paying me?"

"Am I? You're taking money from my bank account?"

"That's an idea! No, but there are other forms of compensation." She was supporting his arm as he labored from the little table where he drank his tea to the armchair where he watched television.

"I got you," he rasped as he sat. "Pay *back*, you mean. It's good to see the old bastard suffer."

"I didn't say that."

"Yeah, yeah, there's a lot we don't *need* to say, isn't there? Where's that remote?"

"Right by your hand. Don't be grouchy."

"I'm not grouchy, I'm sick. I'm just saying, all this gratifies your need for revenge."

She scowled, tightened her shoulders and retreated across the room. A couple of minutes later, as she exited, she passed close enough to his chair to murmur, "Revenge, Vice-Chancellor Gottfried, has never been the issue. You've never understood my pain."

A month went by. With Simon increasingly mobile, the insurance-sponsored care was cut back to three hours in midday. Bored and lonely, he found himself eager for Marisa's company at night but upset by the charity it represented. He brooded on this state of things and decided to speak out.

Having nearly died, he told himself, gave him authority on important matters.

"Look," he said to Marisa one night, "I don't know how we got to this point."

"What point?"

"You detesting me and being my nurse."

While he fidgeted in his chair and fiddled with the remote, she was tidying clothes, dishes, medicines, the detritus of a sickroom. She paused to consider what he had said. A window had been open to let in the spring evening, but now as the air grew chilly she tugged the sash down.

"We got here step by step," she answered slowly. "A little at a time. With one colossal—I don't know what to call it."

"Yeah, that. You haven't forgiven me at all, have you? That would mean the end of the world. I've been down and out awhile, but I think I would've noticed the Four Horsemen or whoever."

She expelled breath with a sort of snicker.

"So?" he pressed.

"So, what? You haven't asked a pertinent question."

"Good. I'm glad I can still be impertinent, I must be recovering. Take a memo to all department heads: It's the Second Coming of Simon the Insane!"

"You're not going back to work anytime soon."

"By the summer term, I'm thinking."

"You're on leave till fall. You should take as long as you need to recover."

"Everyone's telling me what I ought to do."

"That's not true at all. No one's telling you anything because you won't listen. You give new meaning to the word *pigheaded*."

"Stop a minute," he snapped. "Look, I can walk on my own now, get to the bathroom by myself, even hobble downstairs if I need some orange juice. You don't have to do this anymore. See? You're released."

"Why, thank you," she offered a mock curtsey. "But I'm not doing it because I have to."

"Listen, I want you…" he paused, his voice faltering, "I want you to be free to hate me again…God fuckin' knows you have reason."

Her mouth opened slightly and her arms folded across her chest. When her eyes drifted away to the Burma Jade walls, he studied the sharp contours of her elbows and the articulation of her fingers as each hand gripped tight on the opposite arm. He thought about making a speech in which he

accepted full blame for everything but realized he'd sound insincere even if he wasn't. Besides, he didn't care about blame anymore, that trivial concept.

"I respect your hatred," he said. "And I hope you respect my depression. It's the way things are. I come from bologna, you from upscale gum disease. We should've known we'd be incompatible. You said I never understood your pain, and I admit it, there's a lot I don't get. But what we've been through—it hasn't changed my, my…ah," he trailed off.

Her lips seemed to pout for an instant, then flattened again. Her nostrils flared slightly. "I never hated," she mumbled, to herself more than him.

After watching her for a moment, he tried again. "What I've got to do is…I'll be out and about in two, three weeks, I think, a month at most, and if I can't go back to the cuttlefish right off, or if they don't want me back, maybe I'll head somewhere else to get out of your hair. Which looks very nice tonight, by the way. I like what you've done with it. This afternoon I found—I was digging in the closet for my moose-hide moccasins and there was a box of old photos, remember that little Kodak camera? Crummy shots, it's not my talent. But they gave me an idea where I might go for a while."

Her focus drifted down from the wall to catch his glance. "In the nightstand," he pointed.

With a puzzled frown, she stepped across the room and yanked out the drawer. Inside, jumbled in with his comb, nail clippers, a bottle of sleeping pills and a packet of cough drops, curled a small square snapshot. In the light of the bedside lamp she studied a faded yellowish image of herself on the steps of Sant'Agata dei Goti.

"I'll use my faculty connections, find a street not overrun by tourists."

"Good luck with *that*."

He twisted his fingers together. "Yeah. Well, I'm calling in some favors. And returning your big favor. By letting you go back to your life."

"I haven't granted you any favors," she muttered.

"Hee-hee. Right. Not that kind." He watched the graceful slope of her nose in profile and the way her hair fell like strokes of rain across her forehead.

"Besides, I resigned from my job, so there's not much to go back to. I'm doing some consulting, that's all."

"You *quit*? Huh? No, you didn't! Nobody told me! You love your job, that, that—non-profit thing."

"Yes, you always understood it so well. But I couldn't work eight hours after waking up six times a night to see what you're moaning about."

"You quit for *me*? I didn't ask you to—" He had a few seconds of vertigo, as if someone had reached into his head and tilted his brain by 45 degrees.

"Wait," he then found a reason to object, "when was I 'moaning'? I don't moan, it's not in my character. I whine."

She didn't answer, continuing to study the snapshot.

"OK, listen," he went on in an undertone, "you know…I don't believe you did that for…because if it…why would you *possibly*?"

His throat clogged. An idea, a revelation, had occurred to him, and he wasn't sure it made sense, but the fact that it might be inappropriate made it more appealing—after all, what was the point of all-but-dying if you couldn't take risks afterward?

"I mean," he stumbled ahead, "listen, if there's any chance…if you, maybe, might think about…coming to Italy with me. Not as a nurse, a…whatchacallit, companion."

"What?" she answered, but she had heard him.

After a moment she said, "*If I might think*? What kind of remark is that? If I might…then what?"

Still surprised by his own proposal, he could only shrug. "How the hell should I know?" he said.

Another several seconds passed. “It might be fun,” he added, and then, plaintively, “Can we still have fun?”

The corner of her mouth twitched, and her blue-gray eyes darkened. He waited for the next stage of their life to happen.

Sam Gridley is the author of the novels *The Shame of What We Are* (New Door Books, 2010) and *The Big Happiness* (available at Gridleyville.com). His fiction and satire have also appeared in more than forty magazines and anthologies. He has received two fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University, and several honors from magazines. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and neurotic dog.