

## THE ART OF THE ESSENTIAL

*Julia Conover*

In early October 1971, I pulled into the visitors' parking area in front of Beaver Heights High School for an appointment with the School Superintendent about a job teaching ninth grade Civics. I'd just returned from a year living in Spain; I was still reeling from the incredible bigness of everything American—big cars, big houses, big roads, big people. But no sooner had I set foot in my house when my parents began pestering me without mercy to apply for this teaching position, which my dad had heard about through one of his golf buddies on the Beaver Heights School Board. Every day for a week, my mom would say, "What's the harm in sending them your resume?" And "What's the harm in talking with them about this job?" So even though I didn't want the job, and didn't want to teach at all, I finally agreed to an interview.

Of course, I knew that the chances I would get this job were slim to none, because I was not a coach. In Western Pennsylvania, all social studies teachers

are also coaches—you couldn't expect coaches to teach something hard like math or science, could you? I only got certified to teach because my parents insisted that I have something "to fall back on" in case I never got married, or married someone poor. I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do—I knew that I wanted to travel more, work on my Spanish, maybe try my hand at writing poetry. But applying for the ninth-grade teaching job was the path of least resistance.

So there I was, Tuesday at 8:45 AM, sitting in the driveway lined with blue steel pillars, reminiscent of the fins on a 1958 Chevy, looking at the low-slung yellow brick building with a huge sign that said Beaver Heights High School. My alma mater, home of the Fighting Eagles.

A wave of nausea rose through my body. But there was no turning back.

The foyer was festooned with a large "Beat Seminole Valley!" banner. I walked past the glass display cases jammed with plaques and trophies and turned into the front office lined with teacher mailboxes, full of papers that smelled like mimeograph fluid. Susie Shaffer, Superintendent Rucelli's secretary, sat at the front desk, her dark blond hair pulled tightly back in a plaid headband with a perfect flip at the end. When she saw me, she smiled and gave me that triumphant look everyone in town gave me when I got home—

that— “We knew you’d come back, Maggie!” look. Like they couldn’t believe I would be able to succeed on my own, in a foreign country, speaking a foreign language, and would ultimately come back home to Beaver Heights, tail between my legs, willing to take any job I could find, no matter how meaningless. Maybe I was paranoid, but it always seemed like they wanted me to fail, so they wouldn’t feel so bad that they were still stuck in Western Pennsylvania.

“He’ll be right with you, Maggie,” Susie said, in a phony official voice, as if we hadn’t known each other forever. I caught her crinkling her nose in disapproval at my skirt—the longest in my closet—which fell several inches above my knee. Then she went back to talking on the phone and typing on her Selectric, sitting straight up high, the way she had learned in the commercial typing class at Beaver Heights High School.

About three minutes after nine, the bell rang, students burst into the hallway, and I heard Mr. Rucelli’s booming voice as he came around the corner and filled the space in the doorway. His nickname used to be “Jumbo;” kids still called him that behind his back. I’d known Mr. Rucelli for years—his daughter April had been in my class at the Joan Barone Dancing Academy before she got involved in majorettes.

“Maggie,” he said. “You’re back from Spain.”

“How is April?” I asked. Mr. Rucelli closed his door and motioned for me to sit down on the chair in front of his desk.

“Great! I guess you heard that the wedding was this summer while you were away. She and Greg spent a week at the lake and got back in time for school to start.” April’s new husband, Greg, was Assistant Football Coach at Iroquois High School, just up Route 19. And he taught World Cultures.

Mr. Rucelli then recomposed his face into his official interview look, fake smile and all.

“You realize the opening here may only be temporary, don’t you?”

I nodded. The whole town knew about the temporary vacancy for the 9th grade Civics position formerly held by Mr. Baxter, the fortyish assistant football coach who used to play for Ohio State. Candy Rice, a sophomore at Rockhill High, had gotten pregnant, and claimed Mr. Baxter was the father. The town was split on whether Candy’s claims were plausible, but the school board felt they had to put Mr. Baxter on unpaid leave, at least until Candy’s baby was born. Unfortunately, Candy’s baby was not due until late November, after the end of the football season.

“We’re not trying to prejudge anything here, you understand,” he continued. “But we need someone to fill in, probably until Christmas vacation.” He

opened a folder on his desk with my application in it and shuffled through the papers. “Let me see here. History major at State. Student teaching at Penn Hills. And of course, we all remember your fine academic record here at Beaver Heights.” He paused. “Can I ask why you didn’t seek a teaching position right after you graduated?”

I was ready for this question. The truth was, I would rather have died than take a teaching position at a suburban high school somewhere in Pennsylvania. I’d hated everything about student teaching: the spoiled and petulant young teenagers; the narrow-minded teachers sitting in the teachers’ lounge, smoking and talking about pay raises and pensions; the pushy parents always challenging their kids’ grades. And what I hated the most was the way the kids seemed to sniff out my condescension and hate me back. But I had rehearsed my reply.

“When I graduated, I had a great opportunity to live in Europe. I thought this would be the best time in my life to do something like that, before I started my teaching career.”

Mr. Rucelli stared at me for several seconds, like he was trying to comprehend what I was saying. “Well, I guess it’s better for you to be over there, in Europe somewhere, than protesting in the streets like some of those young

hippies are doing here.” I wondered if he’d heard through the grapevine that I’d marched in Washington against the Vietnam War when I was in college, along with about a million other people. His critique of war protesters as “hippies” made me squirm in my seat.

He stared out the window for a minute, like he forgot I was sitting there. Then he turned and leaned forward on the desk, and I almost thought that he was going to shake his finger in my face.

“Let’s get this straight. We have a very disciplined school here. These are good, God-fearing kids, all of them. Patriots. We say the Lord’s Prayer every morning—I don’t care what the Supreme Court says about that.” He looked like he was challenging me to call the Chief Justice himself. “And that’s what keeps these kids out of trouble. No anti-war protests. No drugs. Just good, clean American kids. You have a problem with that?”

I sat there, squirming, my hands clenched. I felt my lips quiver, and I pressed them together, forcing my face not to show emotion. I thought of the guys from my class—the ones who weren’t “college material”—who went to Vietnam, some who died there. I’d come to believe it was an immoral war. And my time in Franco’s Spain had exposed me to the danger of government lies and fascism. I knew I didn’t want this job. So why not make my speech

about the First Amendment, separation of Church and State, the crime of an unjust war, and the importance of the rule of law? Or why not just get up and leave? The answer, I knew, was if I did any of those things, it would get back to my mom and dad, they would be horrified and embarrassed, and my life would be even more unbearable than it already was. “No sir,” I said.

“All right then, I think we understand one another. Now, if we offer you this position, would you be available right away?”

I was stunned. I’d never thought I could actually get this job—I wasn’t a football coach, after all. I was just interviewing to get my parents off my back; I’d assumed Mr. Rucelli agreed to see me as a courtesy to my dad. I could now imagine a bleak fall ahead of me—school days beginning at 7:45 AM, lesson plans, dull colleagues, hordes of 9th graders with absolutely no interest in the towering majesty of the Declaration of Independence or the brilliant symmetry of the Constitution, asking “Will this be on the test?”

“Sure,” I said. What else could I say?

“Great. We’re talking to a few more people, but we’ll probably make the decision in the next day or two.” He started to put my file away, then looked up again. “By the way Maggie, I don’t suppose you could pick up the job of

assistant football coach too, now could you?" He chuckled nervously. "We're in a difficult position there."

He didn't seem to actually expect an answer, so I just stood up, held out my hand and thanked him for the interview, and hurried out the door.

Susie smiled and waved at me as I walked out of the school office. "Maybe I'll see you soon," she said, like we were about to become members of the same secret society. I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

## §

At 9:45, I climbed back into my car and turned the key. It was early; my mom wasn't expecting me back for a while. I decided to drive to Eastwood College, a small school about ten miles up the road. They had a good bookstore there, and I needed some interesting reading to get my mind off my dismal life.

I drove around the countryside, radio turned up loud, feeling free and unencumbered, a few hours stolen from my confinement in the three-bedroom ranch where I'd been born and raised. The morning sun sparkled on the corn fields, most of them already harvested. The bearded men in the Amish buggies smiled and waved when I passed them.

When I got to Eastfield College, a hand-made poster at the entrance to the student union caught my eye.



Claude Cousteau

On campus for two nights, October 4 & 5

Show – 7 pm at the Eastfield College Auditorium

Free Seminar – 3 pm at the Student Union

Certainly the real Claude Cousteau couldn't be here tonight, I thought. He's a world famous French mime, perhaps the most influential mime of all time. Why would he be in this tiny town in Western Pennsylvania? I looked around at the students walking through the door in groups of twos and threes, busily chatting about biology exams and football games, oblivious to the poster on the wall.

I asked the student clerk at the desk in the bookstore about the poster.

"Gee, I don't know anything about it," she said. "Someone came around this morning and put up those posters. Is he a big deal or something?"

"He's only the most famous mime in the whole world," I said. "You've never heard of him?"

"No. Is he that guy on Laugh-In?"

"No, he's French."

"Ok, well that explains it. Anyway, I can't tell you anything more. Why don't you just come back at three?"

I found copies of *Death in The Afternoon* by Hemingway and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather and bought them both. Then I left.

§

When I finally walked into my house around noon, my mom was waiting in her lounge chair in the sitting room, watching the newscast on TV.

“So how did it go?” she said in that bright, hopeful voice that made me cringe. When I’d arrived at the Pittsburgh airport a month ago, I’d been thrilled to see my mom and dad waiting for me, their prodigal daughter, expectant smiles on their faces. They thought that I was home for good, ready to live a life that rhymed with their own. But my good feelings were gone by the time we reached the short-term parking lot, evaporating with the realization that I was stuck back home. Again.

“Fine,” I said, moving quickly through the sitting room, through the kitchen, and down the hallway to my bedroom. She followed right behind.

“When will you hear if you have the job?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, opening my bedroom door. I felt like closing it in her face, but instead I turned and said, “Anything else?”

“Well, actually yes, you got two letters. I think one’s from your friend Betsy.”

I turned and ran to the kitchen to get the pale blue Air Mail envelope, postmarked Barcelona, España. She's still in Spain, I thought. Betsy and I'd shared an apartment near the Sagrada Familia for about a year, but once I left, I assumed she'd leave too. I closed the door of my room and ripped the envelope open.

She wrote:

*Querida Margareta,*

*How are things? I miss you so much! By the time you read this, I will probably be in Italy. I don't think it's safe in Barcelona any longer. The Guardia Civil have really cracked down. A few weeks ago, they busted that hostel near the Plaza Cataluña, where I used to go and smoke hash with the Canadian kids. I know, I know, you always told me not to do it, that the Guardia knew everything, but it just seemed like the British couple that owned the hostel had some kind of understanding with them, you know? They say some of the Canadian kids were put in Spanish prisons. Anyway, I've decided that Franco sucks and I just have to leave Spain. I hear there are lots of jobs for English teachers in Florence.*

*Any chance you could come back over and join us there? I'll write when I get there so you know how to reach us!*

*The week after you left, I saw Salvador Dali walking down Las Ramblas. I went right up to introduce myself, and he invited me to his villa in Cadaquez. WOW! I'll probably stop there on my way to Florence.*

*I can't come back to the USA just yet, I just don't have my head together at all, and I have no idea what I would do. I just couldn't live at home again. My Dad loves Nixon!*

*Love you to pieces, Maggie! It's just not the same without you here.*

*Betsy*

I folded the letter, put it in my desk drawer, and fell back on my bed with my mother's vacuum buzzing in the background. I'd narrowly missed Salvador Dali. Just my luck. I stared at the pink flowers in the wallpaper I picked out when I was ten—tiny flowers with powder blue ribbons. My bedroom walls seemed to be closing in, suffocating me in the sunlight that streamed through

my windows. The light was full of dancing dust particles that tumbled through the air and fell on the ancient knickknacks that covered my dresser and bookshelves—the china rooster filled with bobby pins and rubber bands, the shredded pompoms from Senior Day, the picture from the Junior Prom. I had tried to escape, but here I was back again.

I closed my eyes and could almost see Betsy, sitting at the café around the block from our apartment, drinking café con leche and laughing, surrounded by American kids in peasant tops and embroidered blue jeans. I missed her, even though we'd had completely different approaches to living in Barcelona. For her, it was just an extension of the American college experience, a new and more exotic venue to continue the endless round of partying, smoking dope and listening to Crosby, Stills and Nash. In her bell bottoms and tie-dye t-shirts, she had no trouble identifying other like-minded American kids, ready to party in Barcelona the same way they had partied in Ann Arbor or Madison, with Betsy leading the way through the tapas bars. They were definitely noticed, not always in a friendly way.

But I thought there was no point being in a foreign country if you were just going to hang out with other Americans. I sought out Spanish students at the university and gave English lessons to earn money. I bought Spanish

clothes at El Corte Ingles, drank vino tinto and practiced my Spanish. Of course, I still stood out as American—my accent, my long blond hair, my American face that was, I was told, *muy típica*. But I was not a cultural imperialist. I saw myself living as an expatriate in Spain indefinitely, far from the counterculture wars in America.

But the more I tried to live as a Spanish girl, the more I realized how much I missed America, warts and all. I became tired of trying to be Spanish; my brain ached sometime with the effort of it all. I wanted to relax, to be around people who got my jokes about “Leave it To Beaver” and “I Love Lucy,” people who’d heard of Woodstock. I wanted to support the Americans who were fighting to make things better.

And I ran out of money.

But back in Pennsylvania, lying on my bed in the back corner of my parents’ tiny ranch house, I missed Spain so much it made me dizzy: the smell of the black tobacco cigarettes and burning olive oil, the tapas, even the churros. I missed the men calling “rubia!” to me as I walked the streets. I missed the taxi drivers who boasted that the folks in their little village somewhere in the Spanish hinterlands spoke the purest Castilian Spanish in the entire world. I missed

the exhilaration of feeling that I was free to go anywhere in the world, anywhere at all.

I couldn't imagine living the rest of my life as a Civics teacher at Beaver Heights High School, that's for sure.

The other letter, postmarked Santa Fe, was from my college friend Linda. She was working in a small crafts shop on Canyon Road, learning macramé. "It is so-o-o-o liberating to work with my hands," she wrote with the same breathlessness that infected her speech. "You would love it out here—it's so different from Pennsylvania."

That's exactly what I wanted—something different from Pennsylvania. But I didn't want to join Betsy in Florence and become part of the crowd of American kids hanging around the Duomo or near the pensiones by the train station. And I didn't have enough money to get to New Mexico, or any idea what I would do if I got there. I needed a plan and I had none.

## §

After lunch, I headed out again, muttering some flimsy excuse to my mom. I drove toward Eastfield College to see if the real Claude Cousteau would be there. I went directly to the Student Union, to the seminar room at the end of the hall. I'd expected to find a large group, drawn by the novelty of hearing

the world's greatest mime *speak*. But there were no more than fifteen students and professors in the room, watching and listening to a wiry man who looked like a dancer, dressed in a tight-fitting black T-shirt and black slacks.

Claude Cousteau was *speaking*. I pulled up a chair at the back of the room, and I watched and listened.

I don't really know what I expected to find behind the white makeup of the familiar Bip The Clown, but this was not it. Claude Cousteau was a very attractive man. He looked to be in his early fifties, but he moved with the liquid grace of someone in his teens or twenties, agile and completely comfortable with his body. His voice was deep and resonant, and of course charmingly accented. I sat transfixed for about an hour as he demonstrated, with running commentary, all of the signature moves I'd seen him perform on Ed Sullivan—climbing stairs, walking against the wind, releasing a bird perched on his shoulder.

When the seminar was over, he invited questions from the audience. I hovered nearby, watching him talk to professors and other students. As soon as he was alone, I approached, having no idea what I was going to say. He spoke first.

“So, what can I do for such a pretty girl?” he asked, smiling.



I blushed. “Monsieur Cousteau, I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your seminar. I recently returned from living in Europe for a year, and it was so wonderful to have someone like you visiting this area.” I wanted to make clear that I wasn’t just some hick from Western Pennsylvania.

He smiled and his gaze brushed over my entire body. I had seen this before in Europe, where older men seemed immediately smitten by my all-American looks.

“You were in France?” he said.

“No, Spain. In Barcelona.”

“Ah yes. Well, the Catalans are more civilized than the rest of that country. They are almost like Frenchmen. And you are from around this area in Pennsylvania?” I nodded. “It’s such a lovely countryside here. It reminds me of parts of Alsace.” He saw my expression. “You don’t see that?” I shook my head. I’d always felt like the trees and mountains in Pennsylvania blocked my view, limiting what I could see and become.

“Well, it is sometimes difficult to see the beauty in the familiar, yes?”

I then realized we were standing alone. He touched my arm lightly and smiled.

“Are you free for some coffee? My escorts from the college won’t be back for another hour or so.”

“Sure. My name is Maggie, by the way,” I said.

He placed his hand on the small of my back, a gesture of possession, and guided me to the coffee shop inside the student union. It was virtually empty at this time of the day. He complained about the bad American coffee, but we bought some anyway and moved to a small booth in the corner. For the next hour, we talked nonstop. He told me about his tour through college towns throughout America, trying to spread his love of the art of pantomime. His eyes sparkled as he told me funny stories about his trips to Japan and his appearances on TV and in the movies. I confided in him my experiences in Europe, my frustration at being home, my confusion at the difficulties of figuring out who I was and what I wanted to become.

“This ‘search for meaning’ is so typically American, Maggie,” he scoffed. “My life is devoted to mime, and mime is the art of the essential. You cannot lie; you have to show the truth. And the truth, Maggie, is that sometimes there is no meaning in life. There is only truth.”

“Aren’t you the existential cynic!” I said, attempting to sound urbane, unsure if I had used these terms correctly. I watched him look down at his hands,

spread out on the table, inching to where mine rested next to my coffee mug. When he looked up, he was still smiling but his eyes contained a shadow of inexpressible sadness.

“I am entitled to be a cynic, Maggie. I am a European Jew,” he responded, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I didn’t know.”

“My father was a kosher butcher. I was part of the French Resistance. I think I was about your age then?”

“I’m twenty-three.” I added, “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Nothing for you to be sorry about. The Americans saved us. I was in Paris for the Liberation, Maggie, and it was glorious. But, sad to say, you Americans have no idea how devastating it was to have such a terrible war in your own country.”

I couldn’t speak. Claude Cousteau fought to save mankind when he was my age. My concerns seemed parochial and even childish.

He stared into my eyes for what seemed like five minutes, then finally looked down again at his hands on the table. “I speak with my body, Maggie. I always have. And I always tell the truth.” His fingers completed the journey to mine until they grazed the microscopic hairs on the backs of my fingers,

sending a tiny shudder through my body. We stared at each other. I felt the blood rushing into my head, my body suffused with desire for this man, this famous man, I had just met.

Finally, he spoke. "I have a show tonight, but can I see you afterwards? I am staying at the new Holiday Inn out by the highway, you know it?" I nodded. "Room 64. The show should be done by 9:30. Please come—around 10:30?" I nodded again, and then I left.

### §

I sat in the parking lot outside the student union, dizzy, my head resting on the steering wheel. Could it really be that this world-famous artist had just propositioned me, and I had more or less agreed? He's my parents' age, I thought. This is crazy. But my heart kept beating fast. I yearned for some excitement, and I didn't want to miss out again. Finally, I lifted my head and drove home.

At dinner that evening, my parents quizzed me again about my interview that morning. "I made a few calls," my dad said. "Jumbo also interviewed Tony Rizzo." Tony had been the star running back at Beaver Heights High a few years back, and then made a name for himself at Pitt before he badly injured his knee. He was currently selling cars at Beaver Heights Chevrolet out on

Route 224. I had seen him at the Giant Eagle supermarket recently, and his smile gave me goose bumps in spite of myself. Tony was very personable, although he was not, as they say, the sharpest pencil in the box.

“Tony’s a nice guy,” I said. I was having a hard time paying attention to what my parents were saying; I was thinking ahead to the rest of the evening and the first exciting adventure I’d had in months.

“He’s nowhere near as qualified as you are. I don’t even think he has his teaching certification.”

“I’m not sure I want the job, Dad,” I said, keeping my head bowed. I pushed my fork through the mashed potato mountain I had built, and watched the gravy flood my plate and engulf the peas.

“Well of course you’d prefer a permanent position, but they don’t come along every day, especially in this economy. This would at least get your foot in the door.” His face was impassive. I wasn’t sure if he really didn’t understand what I was saying, or just pretended not to understand. “You need to start supporting yourself, Maggie. You’re twenty-three.”

“I did support myself in Spain, Dad.”

“You call that support? We paid your ticket home, Maggie. I’m not complaining—we want to help you, we really do. But it’s time, Maggie, for you to

get a real job.” I could see his mouth twitching, struggling to control the urge to say something that started, “When I was your age . . .” and ended with “the Depression.”

“Ok, Dad, I’m working on it.” I got up from the table and returned to the sanctuary of my small pink room.

### §

Four hours later, I pulled into the Holiday Inn parking lot. I was early; anxious to get out of the house even if it meant waiting in an empty parking lot. I sat there in the dark, my head cradled against the vinyl headrest, anticipating what was to come.

Around 10:15, a car pulled up in front of room 64. Claude Cousteau climbed out of the passenger’s seat and walked toward the motel door. Then a girl got out of the driver’s seat and joined him in front of the door. She was very pretty, with long dark hair and bangs sweeping across her eyes. She wore a short skirt that ended a good ten inches above her knee-high fringed boots. Even with my window up, I could hear them talking in French and laughing, as she tossed her hair with her free hand. She didn’t look to me like an Eastfield College coed—maybe someone up from the booking agency in Pittsburgh. I crouched down behind the steering wheel so they couldn’t see me.

He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. Then they stepped into Room 64 and the lights went on inside.

Stunned, I slinked out of the parking lot. What a fool I had been.

I drove around aimlessly, trying to get control of my emotions. I replayed in my head my afternoon conversation with Claude Cousteau, trying to see if I had somehow misunderstood him. Perhaps he meant tomorrow night? If so, did that mean that I was just another young girl parading through his motel room? Nothing special, nothing extraordinary.

I got home late, relieved that no one was up to greet me. I raided my parents' meager liquor cabinet and drank some of my dad's Jack Daniels, on the rocks. I'd felt a bond with Claude Cousteau, but now saw that was just an illusion. My attempt to find adventure here in Beaver Heights was a crushing failure. I eventually stumbled back to my room and fell asleep.

The next morning around ten, I heard the phone ringing in the distance, then my mom knocked on the door. "It's Susie Shaffer," my mom said, barely able to hide her excitement.

I put on my robe and went to pick up the phone in the kitchen. My mom hovered nearby, pretending not to eavesdrop.

“Maggie?” Susie said. I grunted. “Mr. Rucelli wants to talk to you. I’m putting him right on.”

I waited, my stomach in knots.

“Maggie, this is Mr. Rucelli,” he started. “I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed our interview yesterday morning.”

“Yes, Mr. Rucelli,” I responded, not sure where this call was going.

“I’m afraid I have some good news and bad news. First the bad news. The position you interviewed for has been filled. We just had another candidate who had perfect qualifications for the position and we couldn’t pass him up.” Tony Rizzo for sure, I thought. A great assistant football coach.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Rucelli,” I lied. My mom was nearby, wiping the Formica counter for the third time.

“Well, Maggie, then I’m happy to tell you another position is opening up mid-year, right after Christmas vacation. Mr. Jacobs, who teaches senior World History, will be taking a sabbatical, and we would love to have you fill that position. It’s just temporary too, but it could lead to a permanent spot in the future. I don’t want to rush you, but we need to know by tomorrow. So, what do you think?”



“I understand completely, Mr. Rucelli.” I glanced at my mom. “Thank you so much.”

“So, I’ll hear from you by tomorrow, Maggie?” he said. He sounded hesitant, like he expected me to accept the job on the spot.

“Absolutely.”

I turned around and saw the crushed look on my mom’s face. I tried my best to look disappointed, but I felt like I had just dodged a bullet.

“So you didn’t get the job?” she said. I shook my head. “Oh, Maggie, I am so sorry. Your dad really thought you had a shot—he is going to be so disappointed.”

“Ok, well, it’s disappointing but I’ll be ok,” I said. I hoped my dad hadn’t pulled too many strings on my behalf.

“It’s that Tony Rizzo who got it, didn’t he,” she asked.

“He didn’t say.”

I went back to bed, pulling the covers over my head. I had already told a lie by omission by withholding the information about the other job, and it was only a matter of time before my parents would hear about it. I returned to the cocoon of sleep, the refuge against reality.

Of course, my dad was extremely angry when he came home that evening and heard that I hadn't gotten the job. He blamed it on the system, the "old coaches network," but eventually trained his sights on me. Why couldn't I have majored in English or math, where there were plenty of positions for female teachers?

I needed to escape from the house.

I drove up to Eastfield College, spent \$20 for a ticket to the performance, and watched Claude Cousteau from the back row in the balcony. It was strange seeing him at last in his full regalia—the white face makeup, the red bow mouth, the black leotard. He was magical, of course; his make-believe butterflies seemed to fly out of his hands to find me in the rear of the balcony. I lifted my hand to send the butterflies back to him, even though I knew he couldn't see me.

After the show, I decided to confront him and let him know how angry and hurt I was at his duplicity. I pictured the two of us having a fiery argument right out of a French art film, like *Jules and Jim*. I waited to confront him, standing beside a large oak tree just outside the stage door where I expected him to emerge. Soon he walked out of the building alone, a middle-aged man

dressed in black, and I moved out of the shadows. He placed his hands on his hips and smiled broadly when he saw me.

“Maggie! What a nice surprise. Where were you last night?” He showed no sign of embarrassment.

I was thrown off balance by his openness. “I saw you with that girl,” I said, finally. My voice sounded spiteful and small, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“What?”

“That girl! I was there in the parking lot. I saw everything.”

He still looked perplexed. Then “Oh, you must mean Charlotte. But of course! Charlotte is my driver. She dropped me off and then left. I lit candles and poured champagne for you last night Maggie. But you never came.” He reached out and patted my arm gently, like a kindly uncle consoling a favorite niece who’s disappointed with her Christmas presents.

For a minute, I couldn’t breathe. This was unexpected. “Tonight then?” was all I could manage.

“No Maggie, I’m so sorry. Tonight we are driving back to Pittsburgh. I am finished here in your lovely town.” He waved his hand in the air as if he were dismissing all of Western Pennsylvania in a single gesture. Then he leaned over and kissed me gently on the corner of my mouth, just grazing my lips.

“Last night was to be our night, Maggie. So sorry, but now I must go. Have a wonderful life.” Then he left.

### §

For the second night in a row, I cried as I drove my car back home. For one mad instant, I was tempted to keep driving, to drive all the way to Pittsburgh and track down Claude Cousteau, to recapture what might have been. My headlights followed the broken white line curving down the middle of the road, repeating the same pattern over and over for almost ten miles, past the strip malls, and the gas stations, and the bowling alleys. Missed opportunities, failed dreams, broken promises.

I don't know if I hit rock bottom then—after all, there are probably worse things in life than being a jilted Claude Cousteau groupie—but I felt busted. I'd felt the tremor of excitement for a few days, reminding me there was something beyond Beaver Heights, even though I couldn't see exactly what it was. I knew I couldn't stay here one day longer.

The next morning, I told my mom I had to run some errands. I drove the car down to the bus station just off the downtown square. I had enough money for a ticket to Santa Fe, plus an additional fifty dollars seized from my mom's secret stash under her sewing basket in the hall closet. I left the keys behind

the front right wheel. Then I bought my ticket and mounted the steps of the Greyhound bus. I vowed to call my parents at the first bus stop, right outside of Columbus, and to pay them back once I got to Santa Fe and found a job. I hoped they'd understand. Eventually.

And in those first minutes on the bus, I was sure that being in Santa Fe was going to help me figure out what was essential in my life. I could feel the difference the minute I crossed over the state line to Ohio. Ohio is flatter and the roads are straighter. And I believed—if only for a few days—that everything was going to get better, that blue sky and red rocks would help me find the answer.

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