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Möbius Trip (16 Degrees)

Last night, I was surprised to receive an email from an old friend of mine, David Vivian, asking after my sister, Joan Boyce.

David's emails are quite rare; he is usually traveling the world, installing cardboard-box fabrication machines. These machines are about the size of a one-car garage, and arrive at their installation sites in multiple tractor-trailer rigs full of crates and boxes. David takes up residence nearby and for weeks he painstakingly unpacks, inventories, assembles, tests, and certifies the machines, which take shape on the factory floor like elaborate mechanical sculptures. They have big red enamel panels and bright yellow catwalks, festooned with conduits and cables and conveyor belts.

For weeks, David may be found crawling over, under, around, and through this maze of steel frames and brackets, hooking things up, routing wires, bolting components in place, pushing on clevis rods, calibrating actuators, and generally losing himself in the mixed media of factory automation. An email from David always gets my attention.



My sister Joan lives in Eugene, Oregon. Her younger son attended the university decades ago, and she gravitated there, in part to enjoy his proximity. Later, her son moved to Portland, but the mildly rural atavistic culture of Eugene, along with the rhododendron and Bach festivals, held her there.

David's email didn't focus on my sister. In fact, he only mentioned her in passing: "How's Joan these days?" But my random-access brain brought Joan's father-in-law to mind, and he stuck there for a while. Joan is the

daughter-in-law of Burke Boyce, a popular historical novelist of the 1950's who specialized in the young George Washington.



I first met Burke Boyce when I was a child and Burke was interim headmaster of a private college preparatory school adjacent to our home. A short time later, my sister became engaged to his son, an astronomer, but that's another story. At the age of ten, I would bump into Burke at various adult events, where he would inevitably ask, "How's your vocabulary?" This question never made much sense to me, since I rarely thought about my vocabulary or anyone else's.

Burke's remark might have stemmed from a strange joke I memorized some years before, concerning a nineteenth-century "big city professor" trying to communicate with a "country bumpkin" at a rural rooming house. The joke never struck me as remotely funny, but most adults were amused to hear the multisyllabic language of the joke spewing precociously from a seven-year-old.

Often, when my parents had guests for dinner, I found myself standing among them in my pajamas at bedtime, having shaken hands with half a dozen giant adults. At such a time, my mother or father would say, "Tell them the professor joke, dear."

I would look at whichever parent it was, hoping they weren't serious, but they always were, so I would pull my attention away from the enormous hands I'd just taken in my tiny grip, and banish the embarrassing weirdness of being the elf in a circle of giants.

"A big city professor," I would say, loathing the blandness of the joke's set-up, "pulled up at a country inn in a one-horse carriage."

My audience of giants would fall utterly silent, enhancing my discomfort.

"The owner's little boy ran out to greet him, and the professor said:

Extricate the quadruped from the vehicle.

Stabulate him.

Devote to him an adequate supply of nutritious aliment.

*And when the glorious aurora doth illuminate the
oriental horizon,*

I shall reward thee with a pecuniary compensation for thy amiable hospitality.”

The adults would then utter polite gasps and exclamations.

I would blush and look down, and then deliver the prestige: “The little boy turned and yelled, ‘Hey Pa! There’s a Frenchman out here!’”

After a brief period of strategic laughter, one or another adult would inevitably ask, as did Burke himself on one occasion, “Yes, but do you know what all those big words mean?”

That a person might memorize a speech he couldn’t understand seemed beyond ridiculous, but conversing with adults was usually baffling, so I would smile and translate the convoluted antique babble into kids’ English. The adults would applaud and then immediately forget the whole thing. For me, the accretion of such performances became a durable scab of blended shame and pride.

Perhaps I should also mention that the joke *per se* is apocryphal; it originated as an example of impaired communication born of pride, in a lecture by George Smith to a congregation of Mormon preachers in 1855.



Although I was unaware of it as a pre-teen, many years later I learned from my sister that Burke often complained about an unflattering review of his most successful historical novel, *Man from Mount Vernon*. Clive Etheridge, the reviewer, had decried certain details in Burke’s book. Joan didn’t remember where Mr. Etheridge’s review had appeared, but claims of factual inaccuracies always made Burke boiling mad; in his cups he would rant bitterly about these unfounded and unresolved assaults on the veracity of his best historical novel.

“If I have got one single fact wrong,” Burke would mutter, “then the whole damn thing is called into question!” It was never clear whether the Damn Thing was his book, his credibility, or history itself.

Clive Etheridge’s specific points about Burke’s book are long lost in the temporal manifold, but they stemmed from his claim that the present curator of the Mount Vernon estate had vigorously denied certain specifics in the novel. This curator, a Mr. Frank Fellows, had apparently cited several credible historians of previous generations. Of these, the most notable was Delmar Weingarten, whose scholarly reputation is rarely, if ever, in dispute.

According to Weingarten, the original grounds-keeper at Mount Vernon had been Anthony Blaine, a Virginian horticulturist originally employed at one of the early sot-weed plantations near Yorktown. Disillusioned by intractable problems with tobacco weevils, Anthony Blaine moved North and happened to meet the young George Washington at the Pope's Pub, a tavern on Pope's Creek. Washington was barely twenty at the time, but the two men became friends, and years later Blaine was recruited to manage the grounds at Washington's newly renovated estate at Mount Vernon.

Blaine, not to be confused with Anthony Wayne, the colonial military hero who drove the British from their Hudson River stronghold at Stony Point (not far from Burke Boyce's home in Cornwall-on-Hudson), was the son-in-law of a well-known pre-revolutionary doctor named Phillip Dannerston. With little success, Blaine attempted to apply early medical know-how obtained from Dannerston to the weevils in the plantations at Mount Vernon. Soon, however, he and his wife became estranged, and his connection with Dr. Dannerston was severed.

This proved socially inconvenient for the Blaine household, because Philip Dannerston was well liked, and was considered something of a local hero. He was widely known, far beyond Mount Vernon, for having saved the lives of the entire K. P. Bellows family, including all fourteen of their children, when an outbreak of cholera from polluted groundwater swept through the region.

Colonial practitioners of animal husbandry had lost track of the traditional "rules of run-off" from their homelands, allowing effluent from their rapidly growing herds to befoul several streams that were critical to the local water supply. More than 200 people perished in the ensuing cholera epidemic, since the disease produces severe dehydration, and the water supply itself was the origin of the epidemic. No doubt far more people would have succumbed if courageous physicians like Dannerston had not labored valiantly, day and night for months, to reverse the sanitation problem and re-establish lost hygienic practices to the population.

The Dannerston estate survives to this day, still in the hands of Dannerston's descendants. In the early 20th century, Phillip Dannerston's grandson Stanley held elaborate bohemian parties at the sprawling home, attended by young and upcoming intellectuals from his class at Harvard.

Among these was T. S. Eliot, who briefly became something of a fixture at the Dannerston home until his sudden departure to Paris in 1910.

In the second decade of the 20th century, Eliot's writings were relatively unknown. But Todd Bakersfield, an obscure commentator on Eliot's work, devoted what was to become fully half of his writing career commenting on Eliot's oeuvre. The other half was, with equal persistence, dedicated to the philosophical musings of the prolific American essayist Morris Wellington. Wellington confined his writings exclusively (or so it was thought) to literary criticism of material published in the *New England Review of Literature*, a journal that was popular until well into the 1940's and of which he was editor-in-chief. Wellington's ideas and insights broke the elite boundaries of the *Review* to achieve considerable national popularity, almost entirely through the efforts of his personal "Boswell," Todd Bakersfield.

Curiously, Bakersfield himself achieved some fame or notoriety for quoting Wellington extensively, not just from the *Review*, but also from an unpublished manuscript of Wellington's essays that he claimed to have in his possession. Beyond the recognized editorials known from the *Review*, Wellington's other writings were thought to be virtually nil—apart from these quotations attributed to him in Bakersfield's books. Unfortunately, the provenance of the additional Bakersfield material remained in question. The ensuing controversy persisted for nearly a decade, most notably among literati in New York City, where it consumed several articles in the nascent *New Yorker* magazine and the literary section of the *New York Times*.



In 1949, Bakersfield's nephew, Bill, was patching the roof of the family home in Nyack, New York, when he came upon an old steamer trunk in the attic. After jimmying the antique padlock, he found the trunk was full of old clothes, shoes, umbrellas, a polished spittoon, four medium-sized oil paintings, and a small stack of books wrapped in foolscap and tied together with twine. Among these books was, to young Bill's amazement, what must have been the original source of his uncle's quotes, the long-lost unpublished manuscript by Morris Wellington.

The paintings were themselves also quite surprising, as they depicted

strange and fantastic objects in unusual juxtaposition: perambulating inkwells, clusters of bugs, three-legged nudes on stone staircases, unfamiliar animals, levitating Conestoga wagons pulled by satyrs, and melting clocks. These paintings, as everyone now knows, were subsequently attributed to Boxer and Blaugh, the infamous colonial-Boston pre-surrealists. Years later, Charles MacKenzie of New York's Metropolitan Museum famously unmasked the Boxer and Blaugh paintings as a fraud, although their true origin has never been satisfactorily established. By the turn of the 21st century, however, MacKenzie's nemesis in art criticism had burst on the scene, a Mr. Paul M. Bowler of Pittsburgh, who surprised the art world yet again by announcing that he possessed plausible evidence the Bostonians indeed might well have legitimately preempted Salvador Dali by almost ten generations.

Paul Bowler's thesis was unknown to the art world until 2012, but just before its scheduled publication he had taken on a secretary, Miss Genevieve Delmonte, a chatty young lady from the mid-West, and had discussed his theories with her at length, hoping to arouse her interest in his work, and no doubt also in his availability as an eligible bachelor. To Bowler's disappointment, young Miss Delmonte was already engaged to a graduate student from Delaware named Arthur Yankzиков, and a few months after starting work at Bowler's office in Boston, Miss Delmonte took the train to her paramour's home town of Wilmington. She was almost giddy with excitement, since the purpose of her trip was to meet her fiancé's parents, Professor and Mrs. Frederik Yankzиков, recent immigrants from what is now Belarus.

At dinner on her first night in Wilmington, hoping to impress Paul's parents, she eagerly chattered about the Boxer and Blaugh paintings, MacKenzie's attack on their legitimacy, and—most exciting of all—her very own boss's imminent refutation of MacKenzie. Soon the paintings would be reinstated as some of the most valued art treasures in the New World, and would play a dramatic role in revising the entire history of modern American art.

The Yankzиковs listened politely, eyeing their son discreetly, and stealing an occasional raised eyebrow at each other. Their son's attention was fixed on Genevieve's animated presentation, and on the way it, in turn, animated the upper portion of her anatomy. When she paused for air and

a quick sip of wine, Frederik said, “My dear, I’ve never heard of this Boxer Blow gentleman. Was he a painter of some renown in the Americas?”

Genevieve struggled to let go of her momentum and said, “Oh, Mr. Yankzikov, yes, he was very renown, except he was Boxer *and* Blaugh, not just Blow.” She took another sip, hoping the interruption was but brief.

“Boxerend Blow,” repeated Mr. Yankzikov. “A strange name.”

“But it’s two people!” Genevieve exclaimed. “They were partners. They painted together.”

“I see,” said Yankzikov, glancing at his wife.

“Are you pregnant?” said Mrs. Yankzikov, politely.

In the Yankzikov’s home region in Eastern Europe, the Boxer and Blaugh controversy was entirely unknown, and the Yankzikovs took no further interest in their future daughter-in-law’s office chatter.

However, on the train to Wilmington earlier that day, Genevieve had sat next to Dan Ringle, an up and coming publicist with dreams of starting his own publishing empire. When she casually mentioned that she worked with Paul Bowler, Ringle had recognized the name and asked a few probing questions. She had then gone into great detail about the art controversy, covering every element of her new boss’s evidence validating the paintings. She prattled on almost non-stop for the entire trip, but quite early in her speech Ringle had become lost in his own thoughts, growing more and more infatuated by what he perceived as the truly vast potential book-sales that could be realized from this pair of diametrically opposed art critics.



Unlike Genevieve Delmonte, Dan Ringle was on his way to meet his own father, James Haughton Ringle, who had served 30 years, until his retirement, as editorial director of the University of Delaware’s closely-held printing venture, the Greenfield Press. At dinner that night, his father appeared more imperial than usual, and Dan felt himself once again emotionally regressing to the age of eleven.

Nevertheless, Dan told his father about the forthcoming publication that was sure to reignite the Boxer and Blaugh controversy. Their paintings, regardless of provenance, were worth millions. Dan emphasized the financial opportunity Bowler’s writings represented, and his father immediately saw the handwriting on the wall.

“You must do it,” James Haughton Ringle declared, slamming down his stein and beaming proudly at his son.

“Yes, Father,” Dan replied, hopefully.

“Go to New York,” the senior Ringle said. “Find out who represents this Bowler fellow, then get to Bowler in person, and sign him up.”

“OK, Dad.”

“Son, I’ll back you on this. I’ve got enough cash to buy out all the publishing rights on this Bowler character.”

“Sure, Dad,” said Dan. “But what are you going to do with them?”

His father took another gulp of beer, and smiled broadly. “I’ll get the rights. You get your World Publishing International thing set up. And then I’ll just transfer everything to your company. You’ll be sitting pretty.”

“Wow, Dad,” said Dan. “This should really get my company off the ground. Thanks!”

“It sure the hell will,” said his father. “But it all depends on getting the rights to Bowler. Just see that you do it.”

“Yessir! You bet!” Dan’s head was swimming with thoughts of massive press conferences and a long string of best-selling books on the controversial Boston artists, no doubt further fueled by still more discrediting outbursts from the aging MacKenzie at the Met.

The next day, Dan Ringle took the North-bound express train back to New York and checked into the Algonquin on 44th Street, within walking distance of most of the major publishers. Not wishing to tip his hand to Paul Bowler just yet, he called his contacts among New York’s freelance agents, and soon found that Bowler was working directly with an acquisitions editor at Alfred A. Knopf. This was highly unusual, and spoke volumes about the value Knopf evidently ascribed to Bowler’s material. Major publishers almost never signed an author, even the most successful, without agent representation.

As soon as he finished his call, he contacted his lawyer in Boston and directed him to finalize the paperwork for World Publishing International. It wouldn’t be long before WPI was on the map, and Dan Ringle was a force to reckon with in the publishing world.



The acquisitions editor in question was Miss Brandy Thurston, hitherto

unknown to Ringle or any of the agents he had called. She had moved to New York after a successful stint as a creative writing instructor at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, about twice as far up river as Cornwall. She was not a historian, and had no post-graduate degree in literature, but her cousin knew someone at Knopf with pull, and she had wrangled a provisional position as research assistant in the Intellectual Property Rights department.

She took Dan Ringle's call immediately, and when she learned his reason for wanting a meeting, she had a difficult time suppressing her excitement. It was clear from Ringle's somewhat inexperienced presentation that he might be willing to spend a very large sum for the Bowler rights, and she knew from the office grapevine that Knopf was already regretting its arrangements with an unrepresented author, and was anxious to terminate the Bowler contract. This meant she could be in a very strong position to simultaneously solve a problem and land a very profitable deal.

Brandy approached her boss, John J. Johnson, carefully. She hadn't been at Knopf more than a few months, and still didn't know how to read him. He was an attorney, and played his cards close to his chest. She explained Ringle's desire to buy out Knopf's rights to Bowler's work, but she didn't mention Ringle's embarrassing eagerness to close the deal. He had seemed almost desperate, and she sensed that Johnson might tend to avoid commitments with someone he considered even mildly unprofessional.

Johnson was indeed unenthusiastic, but he authorized a meeting, and she called the Algonquin and set up a luncheon with Ringle at the Cottage Shop, a restaurant across the Hudson in Haverstraw. It wasn't clear why Ringle insisted on meeting so far outside the city, but Brandy Thurston wasn't about to argue.

As a resident of Manhattan, Brandy had no automobile, although unlike most residents, she did have a driver's license. She hailed a cab in midtown and gave the driver the address in Haverstraw. With a sullen grunt, the driver slapped his meter into service and took off through the city toward the Lincoln Tunnel. Half an hour later, they arrived at the Cottage Shop and Brandy hurried inside, clutching her briefcase and feeling suddenly very professional. The taxi waited in the parking lot with its meter running.

In his eagerness to launch, Dan Ringle was indeed prepared to pay an extraordinary fee for the transfer of the Bowler rights to the Greenfield Press, since he had a good idea how much disposable income his father could contribute. He was almost giddy with excitement at the thought that these six-figure publishing rights would soon become the property of Dan's own World Publishing International.

After lunch, Brandy Thurston took the taxi back to Manhattan and went straight to Mr. Johnson's office, with high expectations that an unprecedented deal was about to go through. Her boss, however, felt that more market research was needed, a setback that Brandy accepted stoically, hoping thereby to project more of the burgeoning professionalism she had felt pretty much all that day.

Johnson knew that full due diligence would be critical for a deal of this magnitude, especially one destined to involve the severance of Bowler, a well-known content provider. Accordingly, he decided to send Brandy Thurston to discuss the situation with Kendall McGuire, a freelance literary scholar often employed by Knopf in fact-checking and matters of provenance.

McGuire was a fastidious, bookish fellow in his mid-sixties, who liked to stay in his upper West side apartment poring over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore. He had no secretary or assistant because he conducted most of his work alone, originally through extensive correspondence and phone calls, and more recently with the aid of the new facsimile machines.

When Brandy Thurston called him about performing due diligence on both Bowler and Ringle, Kendall McGuire was startled by the jangling ring of his antique corded telephone; it had been two weeks since anyone had called him. Already familiar with Bowler's writings, and the Boxer and Blaugh controversy, this task inspired him. But he wasn't happy to be asked to check up on Ringle, who was not yet established in the publishing industry, and McGuire's enthusiasm for the Bowler portion of the project was damped by this unwanted burden. Grudgingly, although it was a foregone conclusion since he had no other paying clients, he accepted both of Knopf's projects and immediately set about contacting his myriad cronies throughout the world of books.

McGuire was a very private man, with at least a few personal secrets

that would make anyone uncomfortable if they were known, and a host of other minor secrets important only to him. Among those minor secrets, and definitely unknown to anyone at Knopf, was the fact that his sister was Jane Kelly, a very famous dancer at the Copacabana, since before it became a disco, and well before the club began decades of location hopping around midtown. Jane Kelly was, in fact, the oldest continuous performer (showgirl or any other art-form) in the long history of the Copa. She still performed, well preserved and discreetly encased in flesh-colored spandex, and drew consistent applause for her famous and remarkable vegetarian hairdo.

For the last twenty years, Jane had employed a personal dresser, an unknown costume designer named Ginji Jean Jackson. There had always been very few resident headliners at the Copa, and by the present day Jane Kelly was the only one, so there was only one dresser, and Ginji Jean was it.

Every night, she would help Jane into her support hose and leotard, hook up the numerous gaudy showgirl accessories, nudge Jane's anatomy into the expected positions, attach her voluminous bustle, and then spend the next half hour painstakingly installing the huge Jane Kelly salad-like headdress. Then, once her mistress was safely positioned in the wing Stage Left, she would wait until the familiar introductory salsa music began, and watch while Jane strode out into the blazing lights, to thunderous botanically-inspired applause.

Then Ginji Jean would turn away and descend the black rear staircase to her mistress's dressing room, where she remained for the duration of the show. There she would smoke Chesterfields and work or re-work crossword puzzles from the Manchester Guardian.

Throughout the years, having abandoned a career in costume design, and apart from a dash of ostensible glamor as Jane Kelly's dresser, Ginji Jean's life had only one brief moment of color, excitement, and drama.

Ginji was raised in a working class family in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. She wasn't very pretty, and she never stopped snapping her chewing gum, but her body had always matched the 1980's dream-girl archetype to a T; and since her teen years she had endured pursuit by every Y chromosome in her neighborhood between the ages of 14 and 40. After decades fending off inept suitors, casual daters, malevolent intimidators, and leering masturbators, she had grown wary of all human contact and

walked with her head down, bundled in shapeless coats and sweaters, in desperation not to be noticed. But she was noticed, on one colorful occasion, by someone who in fact may well have saved her life.

A few months ago, Ginji Jean Jackson was walking down Flushing Avenue with some groceries, hunched over as usual, her head covered by a dark blue scarf from which a few large yellow plastic hair curlers poked out. She wore no makeup, and had recently sprouted two or three prominent zits which were just peaking in size and vibrancy. She had been working all afternoon at one of her secondary jobs, in the stockroom of a local delicatessen, and her clothes smelled of nervous sweat, salami, and onions. Nevertheless, Ozwin Henzler, a former high school classmate, had been absentmindedly stalking her since morning. Unlucky in love, Ozwin had remained infatuated, through the decades, with his increasingly unrealistic recollections of Ginji Jean.

It was mid-December, and the afternoon light was almost gone, so Ginji Jean was anxious to be safe at home, away from public view, as quickly as possible. She turned down a side street and quickened her pace, still unaware of the shuffling heavyweight who was following her, nursing a pint of cheap brandy.

Ozwin paused in his pursuit to take another swig. The bottle was only one fourth full by now, so he dutifully sucked down the remaining peach-flavored ounces. Then, having immediately forgotten what he just did, he became frustrated when the bottle failed to produce anything more. He shook his head in disgust, which made his vision shimmy for a moment, and threw the bottle at the nearest parked car.

Ginji heard the breaking glass and stole a glance behind her. There, less than 50 feet away, stood Ozwin, staring at her with his mouth open, looking even more Cro Magnon than usual. With a gasp of fright, Ginji Jean shifted to a gait between jogging and trotting, hoping to disguise her flight with something fast but casual, less obviously desperate than running. Ozwin immediately felt primal biochemistry percolate into his blood supply, and lurched into a surprisingly speedy long-legged shuffle. The two figures gyrated their separate ways down the darkening street for several minutes; the distance between them steadily dwindled.

Only a few yards from the stoop at Ginji Jean's apartment house, Ozwin caught up with his prey. He reached out and grabbed her arm, and

Ginji Jean spun round, out of balance, throwing her groceries in a wide arc onto the sidewalk and street. She screamed as Ozwin jerked her against him and wrapped his arms around her, pinning her hands at her sides. She looked up at his sweating face, his sloping wrinkled forehead, his yellow teeth, so close she could see his uvula dangling incongruously at the back of his throat. He was squeezing her so hard she couldn't breathe, and she knew this was the beginning of a whole new phase of life.

She was right, of course, but not in the way her panicked prey-mind expected. As she watched, Ozwin's slack-jawed countenance jerked suddenly to the left with a look of mild surprise. At the same moment, the right side of his head seemed to collapse a little, while a bright red eruption bloomed on the left. His crushing grip on her arms released, and he slowly tilted farther to the left, the surprised expression still painted on his face like a simian cartoon. A second later, he was lying on the sidewalk among her groceries, dark red pooling rapidly around his upper body.

Another scream, a kind of scream within a scream, struggled to burst from her throat, but she could no longer vocalize. She stood still in shock, staring straight ahead at the empty space Ozwin had just occupied, her eyes still focused only inches away.

Then, as if emerging from someone else's dream, a short man in a black coat and a black fedora strode toward her. She turned, and saw him pocket a chrome-plated pistol, and hold out his hand, a look of genuine concern on his round face. He reached Ginji just as her amygdala shut down all higher brain functions, and he just managed to prevent her from falling into the mess at their feet.

Ginji awoke in the back of a limousine, driving through the dark streets of Williamsburg. The short gentleman who had saved her was sitting on the opposite seat reading a newspaper. A dark glass panel cut off any view of the driver's compartment. The car was silent, except for the occasional rustle of folding newsprint.

After a few minutes, she decided she wasn't in immediate danger. In her mind's eye, she could still see Ozwin's strangely deformed face as he tipped over to the sidewalk. The blood seemed to be the only color in a murky twilight mental image that replayed whenever she closed her eyes.

She looked at the man behind the newspaper. He seemed to be

deliberately ignoring her. Eventually, she summoned enough courage to croak, “Thanks, Mister.”

Pignose Barucci folded his newspaper carefully and laid it on the seat. He looked at her intensely, from head to toe, and Ginji felt a new wave of anxiety. She shrank back into the corner of her seat.

“Hey,” said Pignose. “Don’t be scared. I ain’t gonna hurt you.”

Ginji searched his face for any evidence that he could be trusted. His skin was pockmarked with countless acne scars, and looked puffy and flushed. But his eyes were steady, and somehow she discerned that if he meant her harm, he wouldn’t bother reassuring her first.

“You saved me?” she said, a half-question.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

They continued to stare at each other for a few minutes as the car bounced gently through Brooklyn and turned onto the Williamsburg Bridge.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Pignose leaned back. “You needa get cleaned up,” he said. “I’m taking you to my place.”

Ginji looked around nervously.

“It’s a nice place,” Pignose added. “That OK with you?”

Ginji didn’t really think it was, but she nodded.

“Good,” said Pignose. “We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The car turned this way and that into the depths of lower Manhattan, and then dove down into a dark driveway, made another turn, and stopped. The engine shut off, and a moment later one of the doors opened and Ginji saw the chauffeur standing outside, waiting patiently. He was much bigger and beefier than the late Ozwin Henzler, and she couldn’t see his head above the door opening.

Pignose nimbly stepped from the car, and then turned to offer Ginji a hand. She took it timidly, and climbed out after him. She had only ridden in a car four or five times, all taxis, and it was awkward traversing the cavernous passenger cabin of the limo. The door was too far away, and she ended up almost crawling.

They stood in a dim concrete chamber with a roll-up garage door at one end, and polished wood double doors at the other. The man holding her

hand gave a little nod, almost like a bow, and said, "I'm Pignose Barucci. You can call me Pig."

Ginji nodded back.

"Let's go upstairs and get you something nice to wear."

He started to move toward the double doors, still grasping her hand, but Ginji held back.

"It's OK," he said. "You're safe here. Nobody gonna hurt you."

Pignose Barucci was a lesser-known Don of lower Manhattan, and rumor had it that his influence in the city mob scene was not just because he was a Made Man, but also because he was putative heir to both the Zamboni fortune and a substantial portion of various Brooklyn waste management enterprises. His apartment on the lower East side comprised all but the top floor of a venerable townhouse, complete with a subterranean garage with room for three cars (although they could only enter or leave one at a time). The fifth floor of his townhouse was what he called the Gilded Cage, for it was there that he boarded his current paramour, a role shared by a continuous sequence of adequately naïve young women. He was proud of his monogamy: he never had more than one girlfriend at a time. On the other hand, he never had any particular girlfriend longer than three or four months.

Pignose had always been fond of the Copa, and he was delighted to discover that Ginji Jean worked there in the evenings as a dresser. He was even more delighted that her mistress was none other than Jane Kelly, who was locally even more famous than the boss of the entire crime family, Carlo Gambino.

Ginji Jean Jackson took up residence in the Gilded Cage not long after Pignose Barucci rescued her from Ozwin Henzler. To her credit, Ginji Jean cleaned up very well, and with sufficient makeup and hair-dressing, she soon looked quite glamorous parading around the clubs on the arm of her moderately notorious gangster.

They went steady for about three months, and then she was no longer to be seen around the hot clubs of Manhattan. That fall, her few friends and immediate family would be relieved to find her living again in her tiny apartment in Williamsburg, not far from the bridge into the city.

It happened that in nearby Brooklyn, Pignose Barucci had a cousin who ran a small-time numbers racket out of Flatbush. The cousin,

Antonio Sinofoli, was a systematic operator who evaded detection by law enforcement for his entire career. He was less systematic with spouses, however, and went through them much the same way Pignose went through girlfriends, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Sinofoli married his fifth wife Bonitina (née Santorini) at a modest wedding in the Catholic church on Nostrand Ave., named after St. Jerome, patron saint of librarians (no doubt because of his fame as the first translator of the Bible into Latin). Jerome's head is rumored to be in storage near the mineral springs at Nepi, Italy, but St. Jerome's church provided a fine setting for the wedding, as Bonitina was herself a librarian and worked in the stacks at the Williamsburg branch of the Brooklyn Public Library.

Bonitina Santorini Sinofoli had a sister, Drusilla, whose employment was more in keeping with Sinofoli's mafia cousin. Drusilla Santorini also lived in Flatbush, but she worked sporadically in the Big Apple, wherever Hollywood movie location shoots were underway. She had nothing to do with the movie business, however, but instead had developed a parasitic relationship with the film production process.

Drusilla had a cousin, Luigi Pastorelli, who worked at the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre, and Broadcasting, which issues permits to production companies engaged in projects around the city. Luigi would notify Drusilla whenever a large shoot was being scheduled, in particular, productions involving famous names—producers, directors, stars, or other celebrities. Luigi would then scour the approved production personnel to identify someone likely to be interested in a little work on the side, and then Drusilla would meet with them to arrange clandestine access to the secured location. Her primary skill, in fact, was her ability to broach the subject of criminal activities with ordinary people without inadvertently saying anything definitive, so that both parties might plausibly deny any knowledge of what they actually discussed.

Once the production was underway, and one or another celebrity was on call for the day, Drusilla and her small band of assistants, all dressed either as extras or as grips and gaffers, would circulate through the prop tents, wardrobe trucks, mobile dressing rooms, and celebrity trailers, trolling for recognizable memorabilia—anything that would, once the film became famous, fetch a good price on eBay. In rare cases, her minions might come up with something that had to be fenced—a gold Patek

Philippe, a Vuitton or Hermes handbag, or a mink coat—in which case Pignose’s people would handle monetization of the prize.

Rumors always circulated around a Big Apple production that something suspicious was going on, but celebrities are always losing things, and many of them are *non compos mentis*, either for artistic or chemical reasons. Nevertheless, there was a persistent myth of a mob-based “showjack” enterprise operating in the city, and production companies were always on the alert. Drusilla was resourceful, however, and since she recruited her accomplices long before production even started, whenever things did turn up missing it was eventually dismissed as carelessness.

Nevertheless, as security gradually tightened at location shoots, Drusilla began looking for other venues to exploit. When she heard through the family that Pignose was dating a girl who handled costumes at the Copa, new opportunities dawned. She called Pignose’s Gilded Cage and left a message for Ginji Jean. The next day Ginji Jean returned the call, and Drusilla, with consummate skill, began grooming the other woman as her next unwitting accomplice.

The first step was for Drusilla to case the backstage areas at the Copa, without giving Ginji Jean any inkling that showjacking was about to infect her domain. As luck would have it, however, Ginji Jean was idly chatting with Jane Kelly while arranging the star’s salad headdress one evening, and mentioned that a friend of a friend wanted a backstage tour. Jane knew, along with everyone else at the Copa, that Ginji Jean had been out on the town with Pignose Barucci; Jane immediately suspected that the friend of a friend was probably a friend of Pignose.

Over the next few days, Jane couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of a mobster prowling around the dressing rooms and the labyrinthine corridors beneath the stage, and she was still mulling it over when she joined her brother for their usual Saturday brunch at the Russian Tea Room. Her brother, of course, was Kendall McGuire, the literary scholar hired by Knopf.

They sat in one of the big curved red leather booths, surrounded by samovars and antique-looking paintings, while Kendall told Jane about his new project for Knopf. After their coffee arrived, it dawned on Kendall that his sister wasn’t listening.

“Something wrong?” he said.

Jane studied her coffee. “Well, I don’t know.”

Kendall rolled his eyes, mentally, and thought, *How can you not know if something’s wrong? Either it is or it isn’t.* Then he said, “You look worried.”

Jane raised her head. “I guess I am,” she said. “My dresser wants to bring in a friend of a friend for a backstage tour.”

“So?”

“My dresser is dating Pignose Barucci.”

“She’s what?” Kendall almost dropped his cup. “A mobster? Ginji Jean is?” Jane nodded. “Ginji’s dating a mobster?”

“Just the last few months. You know it won’t last,” said Jane.

“Yeah, it only lasts till he dumps her in the East River.”

Jane looked hurt.

“Sorry,” said her brother. “But Jane, you can’t invite some Mafia guy in there! You know how they operate. They’ll get their fingers into things, and then you’ll never be rid of them.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Jane. “But it’s not Pignose himself. It’s just a friend. And I don’t know for sure it’s a friend of Pignose. All she said was ‘friend of a friend.’”

“Yeah, right,” said Kendall. He looked around the tea room, scanning the other patrons for unusually dangerous ones. They were all tourists.

“Besides,” added Jane, “It’s a girl.”

“A girl? How do you know that? They could just be saying it’s a girl, and then six guys show up with shoulder holsters.”

“Ginji Jean said it was a girl she knew.”

Kendall thought for a minute. “Where does she know her from?”

“I don’t know. I think she’s from Flatbush. Ginji’s from Brooklyn.”

“I’m not comfortable about Brooklyn,” said Kendall. “You never know what’s going on over there. It’s like a different world.”

“Well, it’s a different borough,” said Jane.

“But it’s so close to the City, and yet so—*different.*” To Kendall, proximity and differentiation together implied a much greater threat to normal life.

“I don’t know what to do,” said Jane. “I can’t just tell her no. Staffers bring in friends all the time when there’s nothing going on. She’ll think I’m being mean.”

“Well, it’s not mean to keep criminal elements out of your work space.”

"I know. But what should I say?"

"I'm thinking." Kendall's literary mind was sifting through shelves full of mystery novels he had read, looking for a comparable plot line.

Jane waited, having forgotten brunch entirely.

"I've got it," said Kendall. He lowered his voice. "Tell her some guy in a raincoat and dark glasses was poking around the Copa last week."

"Uh, yes—"

"And then let on that some of the orchestra members thought he was FBI."

Jane frowned. "OK, but what does that have to do with letting her bring a guest?"

"You've got to be subtle," Kendall whispered. "Just plant the seed about the FBI. Then, like the next day, mention that you read about some possible sting operation directed at Pignose Barucci. But don't say anything about her friend being connected with the mob."

"Well, I don't actually know that she is, anyway."

"Maybe not. But we both know that Ginji Jean is, even if it's just dating."

"True."

They both sat back, and then remembered their coffee. A waiter came, and they ordered their usual meals.

"So then what should I do?" Jane said. "What do I tell her about the visit?"

"Don't do anything. If she asks again about bringing her friend, just stall. Say you're worried about the next show. Or you have to ask your boss or something."

Jane frowned. "I guess I can do that. But what if she keeps asking?"

"Just try this much, and see what happens. Can you do it tomorrow?"

"I'm on tonight, as usual," said Jane. "I can tell her tonight."

"Good."

"And then I can mention the investigation of Pignose tomorrow, before the Sunday matinée."

"Perfect," said Kendall. He leaned back and stole another panoramic glance around the tea room. "Where's our waiter?" he said. "We shouldn't breathe another word of this."

"No shit," said Jane.



Late that afternoon, getting her hair sculpted, Jane fed Ginji Jean the story about the man in a trench coat. She kept it short and sweet, but in the mirror she could already see a glimmer of concern in her dresser's face. Jane was tempted to reinforce the story during her headdress installation, but she resisted the temptation. At her age, she had learned to resist a lot of temptations.

After the show, she said nothing more, but she thought Ginji Jean seemed a bit more distracted than usual.

"Got a hot date tonight?" Jane asked.

Ginji Jean frowned. "Well, yes, I guess. I'm meeting someone at 11:00, and then we're going out for a while."

"You seem preoccupied," said Jane, and then decided she'd better stop probing.

"I do?"

"Not really."

On Sunday, Jane was dying to see if Ginji Jean would be acting normal when she arrived for hair and makeup. Unfortunately, her dresser seemed perfectly normal. Jane asked if her evening out had been fun, and she smiled and said yes and seemed mainly happy and a bit tired, as usual.

Finally, while Ginji Jean was pinning Jane's bustle in place, Jane said, "Did you hear about the big sting operation?"

"The what?"

"The sting. Some Mafia guy they're after."

Ginji definitely hesitated for a moment. "What Mafia guy?" she said, with a slight tremor.

"I'm not sure," said Jane. "Something about an ongoing surveillance thing, and some kind of surprise they're setting up. I don't know any details. It was just a news commentary."

"Wow," said Ginji, coming to a complete stop. She was holding some safety pins in her mouth, and remained frozen for a surprisingly long time.

Jane broke the silence. "Ginji, are you OK?"

"Huh?"

"What are you doing? Is something wrong?" Jane's heart was beating harder than it had in years, and she imagined Ginji Jean's heart was, too, though for completely opposite reasons.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” said Ginji Jean, and resumed pinning the bustle. She didn’t say another word for the rest of the evening, and Jane didn’t try to get her to speak. Jane wondered if Ginji noticed that they both were silent before and after the show, but Ginji was probably too distracted.

The next day was a Monday and the Copa stage was dark. Jane didn’t see Ginji Jean until Tuesday evening. She still seemed very distracted, and didn’t say much. Jane knew better than to mention anything more about the FBI or the mob.

By the end of the week, Ginji Jean was a different woman. She moved slowly, and conversed only in low, glum tones. Finally, Jane decided it would be too unusual not to ask what was wrong.

“My guy dumped me,” said Ginji.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Jane.

“He just suddenly had his driver take me back to my apartment, and that was that. It’s over.”

“Back to your apartment?”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, I was staying at his place for the last few months.”

“Really? That sounds serious,” said Jane.

“I guess it wasn’t,” said Ginji Jean. “I thought it was, though.” She paused. “I don’t know what went wrong.”

“Well,” Jane said, “men are pretty stupid sometimes. And they’re never likely to explain themselves.”

“I guess not. He was pretty private.”

Jane thought about it. It seemed that the ruse had worked, though perhaps a bit more dramatically than expected. Pignose must have gotten wind of the FBI rumor through the ‘friend of a friend,’ and then decided to play it safe.

In the days that followed, Ginji Jean made no more mention of bringing someone for a tour, and Jane called Kendall to tell him the good news.

“It really worked,” she said.

“What happened?” asked Kendall.

“Well, day one, I mean two, since it was Tuesday before I saw her, she came in looking really down. I didn’t dare question her, but today I came right out and asked what was wrong. It looks like Pignose dumped her right after I told her the FBI story, so I’m pretty sure her ‘friend’ isn’t going to be asking for any more backstage passes.”

“Do you know what day Pignose dumped her?”

Jane thought a moment. “It must have been the next day. I assume she told her girl friend, and then probably that day she told her about the sting. And the next day Pignose moved her out of his apartment without a word.” She paused. Kendall said nothing. “I didn’t even know she was staying with him.”

“Everybody knew that,” said Kendall.

“Well, then the whole thing’s taken care of,” said Jane.

“That doesn’t sound good, actually,” said Kendall.

“What do you mean? It solved the problem, and he would have dumped her sooner or later anyway.”

“Yes, but he reacted too fast. If Ginji’s contact told him and he immediately cut all ties with Ginji, that means he doesn’t trust Ginji.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” began Jane.

“Well, I do. These guys are very careful. And ruthless.”

“I guess so.”

“I know so. I’ve been reading about them for years. They’re probably keeping an eye on you, too, Sis.”

“Me?”

“Yep. And me, too, I’ll bet.”

“Oh come on, Kendall. That’s a bit paranoid.”

“I’d rather be paranoid and alive than relaxed and dead,” said Kendall.

Jane said nothing. They both listened to the phone electronics for a minute.

“I’ve got to go,” said Kendall.

“OK. I should head home soon. See you this Saturday at the Tea Room?”

There was no reply. Then Kendall said, “I don’t think so. Not this weekend.”

“Why not? Got something planned?” Jane knew that Kendall never had anything planned that hadn’t been planned years ago.

“No,” he said. “Well, I’ll see you later.” And he hung up.

Jane stared at the phone, and then shrugged. Her brother was always a bit of a mystery. She didn’t hear from him again for months.



The next week, Brandy Thurston called Kendall to see if he had made

progress on his investigation of Paul Bowler and Dan Ringle for Knopf. There was no answer, and as Kendall didn't have an answering machine, she couldn't leave a message.

A week later, Brandy went to McGuire's apartment and banged on the door for ten minutes, but there was no response. Finally, in a fit of investigative journalism, she peeked through the letter slot in his door. Several days' worth of mail lay in a heap inside.

The following week Mr. Johnson demanded to know why Brandy hadn't gotten back to him with results from Kendall McGuire, and she admitted that he had inexplicably dropped out of sight.

"That's odd," said Johnson. "Didn't he say anything before he left?"

"Not a word," said Brandy. "And he doesn't have a service."

"Did you try emailing him?"

"Yes, sir. No reply. The messages went out OK, but nothing ever came back."

"Very odd."

"I even peeked into his letter slot, and there's a ton of mail inside."

"You what?"

"Peeked into the letter slot in his door. Last week when I went to his apartment."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd be interested in his letter slot."

"I'm not!" John Johnson exclaimed. "But that means he's literally disappeared!"

"That's what I'm telling you," said Brandy, growing perplexed.

"When somebody goes missing for weeks without leaving a word, you call the police!"

"Well, I—"

"Listen, call them right now and report him missing. And don't mention looking through his letter slot. It'll just make them wonder why you didn't report this a week ago."

"Alright. Yes. I'll do that right now, sir."

Mr. Johnson stood up and looked around his office. "Where's that proposal?"

"Which one?"

"Ringle, for chrissake. The one you're supposed to be investigating!"

“I, oh, well, it’s right here, sir.” Brandy pulled a manila envelope from under a pile of papers.

John Johnson snatched it from her, opened it up, and pulled out the proposal. He flipped the pages and glanced at each numbered section. Then he abruptly held it out at arm’s length. Brandy looked at him uncertainly.

“Take it!” he snapped.

Brandy took it.

“Tell him we’re not interested.”

“Ringle?”

“Who the hell else?”

Brandy turned and left her boss in a more agitated state than she had ever seen him. She no longer felt the slightest bit professional. She returned to her office and sat at her desk without doing anything for a very long time. Then she called Dan Ringle and told him the deal was off.



Dan Ringle slowly put down his phone, with deliberate gentleness. In his mind he was slamming it into the cradle with all his might, although phones with cradles hadn’t been seen (outside of Kendall McGuire’s office) for decades.

It took weeks for Dan Ringle to recover from his disappointment. His father listened patiently while Dan speculated about why Knopf had suddenly told him to get lost, but James Haughton Ringle was a jaded publisher himself and well understood the demands of expediency. He told his son to get over it, and suggested looking for a different line of work. Dan floundered for a few days and then called his father again, and received the same advice, framed slightly differently. This cycle repeated three or four times until on one fateful evening Dan realized that his father was simply reading aloud some text he had prepared about getting over it and looking for a new line of work.

Again, Dan Ringle gently hung up while melodramatically slamming an antique mental telephone. Then he went to the bar and asked Hoy Wong, the Algonquin’s immortal bartender, for a glass of whiskey. Wong asked him what kind of whiskey he preferred; Ringle didn’t have any preferences, but he swiftly consumed five of them and then staggered out into the Manhattan night.

After wandering midtown for a few hours, Ringle entered a corner diner off Lexington to use their restroom and get a cup of coffee. While sipping his coffee, still moderately inebriated, he struck up a conversation with his neighbor at the counter, a silver-haired man wearing a massive gold Rolex.

“That’s one mighty fine watch you have there, Sir,” Ringle said, gesturing at the man’s watch.

The man reflexively pulled his arm back and studied Ringle, looking for warning signs. One doesn’t walk around New York wearing a \$17,000 gold watch and ignore people who draw attention to it. “Well, thank you,” he said.

Ringle looked the man up and down. “You come in here often?” he asked.

The man smiled thinly. “All the time,” he said. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure—”

“Ah! My apologies. Dan Ringle, here,” he declared, holding out his hand.

The man looked at Ringle’s moist palm, saw that it was probably clean enough, and gave him a quick, firm handshake. “Gerry,” he said.

“Well, Gerry, I’m glad to meet you,” said Ringle. “The best plan I ever had for making a name for myself in publishing has just fallen to pieces, and I’m back at square one. So it’s good to meet someone who can afford a wristwatch as fine as yours.”

Gerry was uncomfortable dwelling on his watch in a public place, so he quickly changed the subject. “Publishing, eh?” he said. “I think that ship has sailed, Dan.”

“It sure the hell has,” Dan agreed, glumly.

“Frankly, I don’t see how anyone could make money in that racket these days.”

“It ain’t easy,” said Dan, growing more depressed.

“Ask me,” said Gerry, “The real money is in footwear.”

“In what?”

“Well, sneakers, to be specific. One pair of Taiwan Keds costs about fourteen cents to manufacture, another twelve cents to import, about four bucks to distribute, and retails for over a hundred. Those are margins.”

“That’s amazing,” said Dan. “But there’s not much status in selling sneakers, to be perfectly frank.”

“Status?” said Gerry. He held up his left arm, brandishing the Rolex. “Only about seventeen grand worth of status.” Then he realized what he was doing and hastily put his arm down and pulled his coat sleeve over the watch.

An hour later, Dan was making arrangements to relocate to Portland, Oregon, to set up an import business in Asian-made sneakers.

Three days after arriving in Portland, while riding the Portland Light Rail into town from the suburbs, Ringle attempted to chat with a tall, red-haired fellow in the facing seat. This particular man was a factory automation mechanic from Providence, Rhode Island, in town to install a high-speed folding-box fabrication machine made by his employer, Emmeci Corporation, an Italian company based in Florence. Ringle had never heard of Emmeci Corporation, nor had he ever wondered how fancy cardboard jewelry boxes were made. The mechanic had little interest in imported sneakers. The two men gravitated back to their reading material and the conversation fizzled.



Much earlier that summer, just before the vernal equinox, Jeff Corsiglia stepped off an Alitalia 747 at Fiumicino airport in Rome. Originally from Lakewood New Jersey (not far from Lakehurst, site of the Hindenburg disaster), and whose father had been a police officer in the 23rd Precinct in Manhattan, Corsiglia was on a pilgrimage to northern Italy in search of his ancestral home. He cleared Rome passport control with the usual hand-waving and rubber stamping, and hurried on to a connecting flight to Cristoforo Colombo airport in Genoa, in the Liguria region of north-western Italy. Genoa is the front garter on the Mediterranean, opposite Venice, the garter of the gluteus maximus, of the Italian boot.

In Genoa, he rented a 1996 Fiat Punto (the Pininfarina Coupe being unavailable) and drove East on the Galleria Castelletto toward Santa Margherita Ligure and Portofino. He turned left onto the Strada Statale 333, which wound up into the northern mountains, away from the sea. A few tortuous miles later, and about three thousand double-clutches, the Fiat rolled into Gattorna where Jeff refueled, had a cup of espresso, and

started up the lesser Strada Provinciale 21, through the serpentine lake area in the Neirone, and pulled up in front of Pensione Braggadocio in his ancestral village of Corsiglia.

Nearly everyone in Corsiglia was related to Jeff by one or another circuitous genealogies. Corsiglia is the second most common name among the thousand or so people of the Neirone region, second only to Gardella, so it didn't take Jeff long to meet someone who was delighted to connect with a presumably long-lost relative from "I Stati." The seventh Corsiglia whom Jeff encountered, after as many cups of espresso, was Silvio Bacigalupo Corsiglia, a carpenter known throughout the area as master of on-the-fly repairs of anything involving at least one piece of wood. This included everything from umbrellas to antique dueling pistols, and soon the two Corsiglias from disparate and far-flung worlds were happily lost in a tangle of Italian and English, salted with technical terms from a dozen disciplines.

In the course of an unsuccessful attempt to bridge the language gap with a colorful example of cultural engineering styles, Jeff happened to mention an old college chum named David Vivian, who was an installation engineer employed by Emmeci, the Italian box-making machine company in Florence. This was, of course, the very same David Vivian whom Dan Ringle would eventually briefly encounter, without consequence, during a morning commute into Portland.



Coda

Naturally, I called my sister Joan, and told her the whole thing.

"It was nice of David to be thinking of me," she said, much later.

"Yes, but what did you think of the story?"

"Well, it's a pretty incredible coincidence," she said. It sounded like she was trying not to hurt my feelings.

"But it's not a coincidence," I said. "It's a story. I made it all up."

"I know, but that doesn't make it any less coincidental."

"What do you think is the main coincidence, then?" I asked.

"Don't be defensive," she said. "You called me; I didn't call you."

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Now you *are* being defensive.”

“I am not.” I said. “Why won’t you answer my question?”

“Well,” she said with a sigh, “the main coincidence is that the guy at the very beginning is the same guy as the one at the very end. Isn’t that what you intended?”

“Yes,” I said, “but there really is no connection. There are these huge gaps.”

“Of course—you wrote it that way.” She sounded like she might have added, *you idiot*.

“Yes, but there’s no *actual* connection. All that stuff in between is unconnected. Arbitrary.”

“You mean he didn’t email you and ask how I was doing?”

“No, he did. That part was true.”

“The Burke Boyce part was true, too. He was *my* father-in-law, you know.”

“Only the first bit. He never complained about some critic finding factual errors in *Man from Mount Vernon*.”

“Not to me anyway, but he might have mentioned it to you, later, when you were grown up.”

“Well, he didn’t.”

“Then why did you put that in?” she asked, as if it was the most obvious question and I should have asked it myself.

“Because it’s a story,” I said.

“Well, maybe I don’t understand this kind of thing,” she said cautiously. “But I really didn’t get it.”

“There’s nothing to get,” I said. “The story is just one thing leading to another. I was just following these non-sequitur connections to see where they would go.”

“Well, then I’m sorry I didn’t get it.”

“You don’t have to be sorry—it’s only a story. I don’t mind if you don’t get it.”

“Well, I’m sorry it didn’t work the way you wanted it.”

“It’s really not a big deal.” I paused. Joan said nothing. It was awkward. “So,” I said. “What shall I tell him?”

“Who?”

“David.”

“Tell him what?”

“How are you doing?”

“Oh. I’m fine.”

Ω