ukiyo-e. series. stages of my mother

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Don't take it personally, I said. I've been this way a long time. When I was thirteen, living in New Hampshire with relatives, on a class skiing trip, one of my cousin's friends said, Patrice, it's really creepy how you never speak. Didn't you yourself once call it, An anal personality in the extreme? Don't think I haven't considered it. My conclusion? Those who seldom talk either have nothing to say or are afraid, once they open their mouths, of what will come out. Possibly, one's heart, you said. Afterward, how does one go on living without it?

That same year in New Hampshire, I went with my youngest cousin to confirmation classes. Confession is good for the soul. I heard that, as well. Also, from the psychologist they sent me to, for evaluation; same sentiment, different version: I can't help a patient who keeps his most basic relationships secret. And had I responded, either time, I hate my mother, would I have been offered absolution, or a path to reformation, or a diagnosis—say, perverse personality—requiring therapy, leading to rehabilitation or adjustment or cure, after which I would be free to speak my mind? And then, were I to have said the same thing to you, supposing you answered, So what! At some point in life everyone hates his mother, inclining me never to want to speak to you again?

It was then you stroked my arm, up and down, up and down; long cellist fingers, cool, calloused, pale; fine blond hairs at the wrist. It was late August, both of us in shorts and T-shirts, in the staff room at the resort where we had summer jobs, you in the band, I in charge of film and other in-door recreation programs. For the first time, ever, I thought I was in love. You said, Won't you have to take that chance, make up your mind to trust me? Else, how can we go on? I wonder, do you remember that conversation? It was that thought, that threat, that caused me, instantly, to withdraw. Only much later, disenchanted by the loneliness that had become my life, did I begin to look backward, analyze my youth, my formative years, try to take charge of its meaning, overcome its influence, use it, eventually incorporate it into my work, my new montage, for instance. It will be splendid if you are able to attend the opening. (See attachment for details; rsvp, regrets only.)

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1. Start here. Springfield, VA, 1995. I've just turned ten. See me, on my toes, leaned over, shooting pool in the recreation room in the finished basement of our house where I live with my brother Maurice, age fourteen, and both of our parents. Also, two large tanks of fish, one fresh, one salt water. No dog, on account of Maurice is allergic. Intact, middle class, we're about as normal a family as one can find.

Our father is a computer specialist, employed by a defense contractor. Same job as the father of almost every third child in my fifth grade public school

class. Our mother works part time as a substitute high school teacher. Photography is her hobby. Here is our Christmas photo from that year: my parents are in the middle. Mom is tall and model beautiful. All her features are distinct: large, wide-set bright eyes, thin nose, chiseled lips, parted for the camera in a smile, pointed chin, strong jawline. In the picture, her hair is pulled back, showing off a high forehead, one small ear from the lobe of which dangles a pearl, shaped like a teardrop. She's wearing a red dress and matching jacket, trimmed with black lace.

Daddy stands, straight up and shoulders back, beside her, noticeably shorter, athletically built. He has a full head of dark hair; long, narrow eyes; high cheek bones; and a sensuous mouth. As usual, he has on a dark suit, a white shirt, and a tie, red for the season. He looks like a banking magnate or a successful lawyer, a person used to being listened to.

Maurice and I stand to either side of them: Two happy, healthy looking children, dressed up like their father, beaming into the camera. "Say pickles" our dad likely said.

What else? Ah, yes! I mustn't forget to point out, our mom is black. She'd insist on my telling you that. Also insist on my saying, our father's part Asian, actually Russian, some of his ancestors coming from east of the Urals. "We're a multi-cultural family. My boys are poly-racial." Two years ago, she started a "multi-cultural club". She involves me and Maurice in activities.

"Fine," says our father but doesn't participate. He says, "We're all of us just human beings, trying to make the best of it." Maurice and I agree.

"You're all three in denial," Mom tells us. "Say what you like. It's not how the world sees you." Was denial why she left our father? His denial or hers? Trust me; it had zero to do with race. A selfish heart more like it.

2. That summer our mother took Maurice and me and moved out of the house. She rented an apartment in our same school district. "I don't want to upset the boys' routine any more than necessary," she said. Ms. Helene moved in with us. Tall, like my mom, and a guidance teacher, she was very deliberate and self-contained. She and my mom had been best friends since high school. They shared the rent and, also, the bedroom with the double bed. Maurice and I slept in bunk beds in the other one. I loved Ms. Helene. At ten, what did I know? She cooked delicious foods—fish pies, fried beans, spring rolls. Her skin had the scent of vanilla. She played games with me—checkers, monopoly, go fish. If Maurice knew more than I, he wasn't saying. Well, at any rate, not to me about Mom's friends and relationships. Not yet. He did have plenty to say about the impending divorce. He wanted to live with our dad. By mid-term, he was acting up in school, failing courses, had run-ins with the police. "If you think your behaving this way will change your living arrangements you have another think coming," our mother told him.

Our dad took a hands off approach. "Courts always side with the mom," he said. Soon after, he lost his job, went out to California, stopped sending money. Now we were on our own. Also, poor. Mom signed us up for "free lunches" in school. How humiliating. Neither Maurice or I ever ate them. Also humiliating was Mom's new look. She draped herself in weird vintage clothing, grew her hair long to wear in dreadlocks. She stopped getting calls to substitute teach. She joined an "alternative" theater company. "I always wanted to be an actress," she said.

She took me with her to rehearsals. I did my homework in the lobby, seated at the bar. Sometimes, an aspiring child actor, with a bit-part, waiting to be called, would join me. It was always a preschooler with a parent in the play. We could hear music and laughter coming from the next room. Now and then, cracking open the door, we'd peek. That was how I saw my mother, on stage, naked, dancing with what appeared to be an enormous penis, candy cane striped, and as tall as she was. "Like an electric drill; instant empowerment to the woman who wields one!" Perfect projection. A star performance. While I worked at keeping my dinner down, my co-voyeur informed me, "It's called a dildo." I had no idea what she meant. Though I continued through the spring using the lobby as a study hall, I never peeked again. During break times, actors and stagehands used the room for a lounge. Comedians, almost all. I tried hard not to laugh at their jokes. Their well meant attention embarrassed me. More than once, stroking my cheek, a woman in a sheik costume, murmured, "Patrice, such a beautiful name, such a beautiful boy. Maybe one day you'll join our company." Some of the men dressed as women; the women as men. I couldn't always tell which were which. They all were stunning.

Maurice warned me, "Hang around enough with Mom and her friends, you'll become a fag like them." He was seldom at home anymore. Nights he often stayed over with friends. He'd gotten tattooed. Across his chest was a picture of a red and black motorcycle, and the message: "Die right!". Mom had given up trying to control him. "Keep it up, you'll wind up in jail," she said.

"Fag?" I asked him.

"Gay, lesbian, bi-, transgendered,—homosexual," said Maurice.

I looked it up to be sure. "Is Ms. Helene homosexual, too?"

"Two women who sleep every night in one bed! What do you think?" So then I knew: Lesbians can look perfectly normal; you can't tell just by looking whether two women are only friends, or lovers, too.

I asked Maurice, "Do you think Dad knows?"

He said, "Why do you think he's in California? The day I'm old enough, I'm heading out there to join him." I didn't ask, What about me? In the first place, I loved Mom. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I also liked her friends, especially Ms. Helene. Plus I believed them when they said: "Regarding prejudice, the

same rules apply both to race and to gender. Hate is the root of most evil." I still believe it. Only, now, I understand, life is more complicated than that.

3. For example, a year or so after she'd moved in, Ms. Helene moved out. One day, Maurice and I came home from school to find her gone, along with her belongings. Not long after, Ms. Lily moved in. She cooked, too: chickpea stews, crab soufflés, crêpes suzette, cold soups. The apartment always smelled minty. So did Ms. Lily. She was very girly-girly. In the kitchen, she wore high heel mules and frilly aprons. She favored blouses with lace and ruffled skirts. Her fingers were covered in rings. Smirking, Maurice sang a last century tune he'd heard on the web: "Her nails will be polished and in her hair, she'll wear a gardenia and I'll be there…" Ms. Lily seemed to take it as a compliment. Soft spoken and shy, as time went by she and my mom became ever more opposite.

"Like husband and wife," said Maurice. And it was true, more and more, our mom began to look undeniably butch. How did that make me feel? Think of undergoing slow torture; hyperbole not intended. I threw out notices of parent-teacher conferences at school. No more soccer or playing in the band. Never did I invite anyone home. It was easier not having friends. Playing computer games took up my time.

"A boy your age needs to get out more. Spending every spare moment on a computer isn't healthy," Mom said. Maurice got out. We hardly saw him anymore. Then not at all. He'd stolen a truck. Of course he got caught: underage, no license, with drugs. He told the judge he was planning to drive to California to be with our father, that the pot wasn't his. Ms. Lily's connections came in handy. A paraprofessional in a first-rate law office, she got Maurice free representation. The upshot was he was sent to L.A. to live with our dad. And what about me? I was the un-squeaky wheel who went unattended. Except sometimes, to my chagrin, Miss Lily insisted on dressing me up: in silks and scarves and fake pearls. "So beautiful, just like a Persian dancing boy," she'd say smiling, turning on music, dancing with me. "Your mom should get you a part in one of her plays."

Overhearing, Mom laughed. "Patrice? I don't think so. He hates being looked at. He's more bashful than you." Was I? Age twelve, what did I know? Except that I yearned to be invisible. At the same time, Mom was yearning to be a man.

4. Ms. Lily moved out, telling Mom before she left, "I might as well live with a man as with you." From all appearances, it was certainly true. Mom dressed like a man, a business man, in a white shirt, a suit, and a tie. Her dreadlocks were gone, replaced by a military haircut. She walked like a man. She talked like a man. She'd even changed her name to a man's, Berenice to Bernie. Anyone viewing her promo photo would take her for male. Seeing us together, she looked

like my father. How did that make me feel? I tried hard not to have anyone see us together.

From California, my dad e-mailed me. "Hey, there, Patrice. Are you doing okay? I'm in between jobs or I'd come see you. Are you hanging in? Let me hear from you." I might have e-mailed him back, but my computer died. Also, I didn't know what to say.

Snooping, as she claimed was her right ("looking out for you is my duty"), Mom said, "What's wrong with an old fashioned letter? Write your father we're doing fine. Say that you love him, and it would be nice to hear from Maurice. Tell him, also, we're moving."

"We are? To where?"

"How about Rehobeth? It's in Delaware. On the ocean. You'll like it. I've got a job in a club for the summer. Then we'll see." If anyone cared what I thought, no one asked. At least, I wouldn't know anyone there. No one there would know me.

"Man Dancing" read the sign outside the bar where Mom worked as a waiter. Mom's new partner, who when I met her I first thought was a man, was named Tito. She and Mom were the only two females on the job, though who would know it? Both of them tall, well muscled, and slim with butch haircuts, dressed now in khaki's, men's shirts, and sandals. In most of Rehoboth, they hardly stood out. Same sex couples were everywhere. That goes twice for the south side of the beach, a stretch I avoided. I also tried to avoid running into Mom who, when she wasn't at the club, could be almost anywhere in town, taking or trying to peddle her photos: seascapes, children on the beach, cormorants perched on piers at Silver Lake, wings spread wide to dry.

Mom, Tito, and I shared two rooms in a rental house several blocks from the club. There was a communal bathroom down the hall and we had "kitchen privileges". None of us cooked. We ate kiosk-bought food on the boardwalk, or ordered and carried home "take-out", or consumed leftovers Mom and Tito brought home from the bar. For the most part, I lived in shorts, T-shirt, and flip-flops. I could walk almost everywhere. I spent entire afternoons in the library, on the computer. I visited art galleries on the Boulevard. Owners left me alone to explore. Now and then, I was asked to pose as a model. Sometimes dressed, sometimes not. It didn't pay much but enough to keep up with new on-line computer games. Off-line, I remained a loner. That way, when summer ended and Mom and I moved on, no entangling alliances, no ties to break.

5. Here's a surprise. Mom took up with an actual guy. Shouldn't that have seemed normal? Perhaps, because I was now thirteen, she took me into her confidence. She said, "It's like this. Tito walks like a man, talks like a man, dresses like a man. Really, why not just try living with a man. Believe me, given the world we live in, it's easier."

No kidding! I pointed out, "Dad is a man."

"True, but what kind of a man?" Obviously, a rhetorical question. End of discussion. Mom sought and found the kind she thought she wanted in Key West: a macho, hard drinking guy who reeked of beer, whisky, and after shave; a motorcycle freak; curly hair on his chest; rings in his ears; tattoos all over. For several weeks, we stayed with him in a rented trailer. It was eight feet wide, maybe forty long, set up on cinder blocks in a trailer park. In such close quarters, it's hard keeping secrets. Chick liked the way Mom looked. "Woman enough for me," he said. "Plus a clit you could die for." Even after I'd looked it up, I still didn't get its meaning. The time Chick came home drunk, accused Mom of cheating, and beat her up was the time we left. Almost straight from "emergency" Mom headed up the coast to Hollywood where she found a job in a bookstore and a room to rent. I was sent to live with cousins of Dad's in New Hampshire. Mom said, "Just for a year. Until I get settled." Between stages, a hiatus.

I e-mailed my dad. "Can I come live with you?" He e-mailed back what he always did, "We'll see. Maybe soon." He'd remarried. He explained that, for now, his wife, their new baby, his mother-in-law, plus Maurice took up all the room in their "bungalow".

How was life in New Hampshire? You mean, not counting the cold? Picture a fairyland, or a palace. Whoever knew we had such rich relatives? "Uncle John" was some kind of a broker. His and Aunt Lydia's home was a mansion, set on acres of land, surrounded on three sides by woods, and hidden from the main road by a well tended, cultivated berm. At the end of a long driveway, an offshoot of which circled in front of the house, was a row of garages, sufficient to accommodate the family collection of vehicles, some new, some antique —say Rolls Royce, say LaSalle, say Jaguar, say Maserati. Behind the house was a large enclosed area that included a patio, with a table, chairs and a grill; alongside it, a fish pond in which swam expensive and beautiful koi; a heated swimming pool; a hot tub; a state of the art kitchen plus plenty of open space with grass and flowers, hummingbird feeders. Restrained only by an invisible fence, a pair of harlequin Great Danes patrolled the property. A blue-gray, long-haired cat, its front paws declawed, was kept indoors. The house had three stories, including a finished basement, with its own entrance from the patio, and containing a pool table, a bar stocked with snacks, a refrigerator filled with sodas, an exercise room, a theater size flat screen TV which I used mostly for playing computer games.

Here's where Aunt Lydia was like Mom. "Patrice, I don't want you spending all night in the basement on the computer," she regularly told me. Then I'd move upstairs to my room and play games on my pc. I'd discovered, so long as I kept up my grades, grown-ups in my life pretty much left me alone. Keeping up my grades wasn't that hard. True, the school in New Hampshire was more advanced than my previous one. But with only a little extra work, I continued to

get nearly all A's. For the first time since grade school, I participated in extra-curricular activities. I made the lacrosse team and played marimba in the band. I attended school dances. In winter I took skiing lessons, tennis lessons in spring. On a diet consisting mostly of frozen meals, microwaved, lots of snacks, and pizza out, I gained weight, grew taller.

"You'd be the perfect child if only you talked more. We want you to feel part of our family," Aunt Lydia said a month or two after I moved in.

"Talked more? Don't you mean, *at all*," said my cousin Eliot, two years older than I.

His sister Annie, who was my age, said, "My friends are starting to find it creepy."

In private, sounding like Mom, Aunt Lydia asked me, "Patrice, is it a problem for you being the only African-American child in your class? Don't think we can't talk about it."

"It's no problem," I told her. Well, it wasn't for me. In the first place, I never thought of myself like that. Why would I? If anything, I was tri-racial; "multi-cultural" as Mom said. Seated at my desk, I clicked on a photograph of myself and studied it. Slim, long-limbed, features from both my parents; thick wavy hair, nearly black; skin no darker than a slightly tanned Caucasian's. I could be Greek as much as anything, or Turkish, or Egyptian.

"Your cousin is cool! What is he?" From the start, children in school had asked Annie that.

"What is he what?" she'd asked back.

"What is his ethnic ancestry?"

"Oh, that. His mother is African American. He's related to us on his father's side. Some of their ancestors came from Siberia. It's in the Asian part of Russia. My father has epicanthic eyes."

Her interrogators looked blank. Then, "Ah, so you're *blasian*," they told me, good-naturedly.

"Whatever," I said. I didn't mind. Only, in the spring, when they wrote it in my yearbook, I knew I'd never show it to my mother. "See!" she would say, meaning, You can think what you like, but, trust me, the rest of the world will always see you as Black.

Aunt Lydia invited me to stay on. And not just for the summer. "Finish high school here. Why not? With your grades and test scores plus your being a minority, you're sure to get a full scholarship to an excellent college." I wanted to stay, but Mom wanted me back. Telephoning, I told her, "They like me here. My grades are good. I play lacrosse. I'm in the band. I'm popular in school." I didn't yet understand that my well being was not what was uppermost in my mother's mind. Or that the consensus of her friends took precedence: "When a child has two parents, alive and well, it seems odd for that child not to be living with at least one of them. Don't discount homophobia as an element in your relatives'

thinking." Mom's non-negotiable reply to me went like this: "Life doesn't always go our way. Your wishes won't always be paramount. It's useful to learn this early." Only much later would I appreciate the audacity of her statement.

I appealed to my dad. He said, "It's up to your mom." He told Aunt Lydia, "It does seem to me best for a boy to be with a parent. Don't you think that, too?" The court agreement allowing Aunt Lydia and Uncle John to be my legal guardians was nearly up. Now, my mom retracted it. No one challenged her action. I was nearly fourteen, a rising high school freshman.

6. At the end of June, I flew "home". Mom was now back in Virginia, living in Alexandria. In the baggage area at Reagan National, I looked for her. Late, as always, I thought. Then, spotting my bag on the moving platform, I reached to pick it up. Mission achieved. Straightening, turning, I saw a man holding up a sign: Patrice Williams. It had to be me he was there for. I approached him cautiously. He was tall, on the slim side, with gray blond, shoulder-length hair, and startlingly blue eyes. He looked middle-aged, his demeanor was encouragingly gentle. He was wearing a white shirt, open at the collar, mismatched dark pants and jacket, green and brown patterned socks, and moccasins.

He smiled. His eyes crinkled and his teeth gleamed. "I take it you're Patrice. I'd know you anywhere from your photos. I'm Max. Your mom's working. She sent me to meet you." He held out his hand. Setting down my suitcase, I shook it. "How was your trip? Are you hungry? Want to stop for something to eat?"

"Maybe." So, we did. Chipotle's, nearby the airport.

All through our meal, cheese nachos and chicken quesadillas, Max did not ask me a single personal question, for which I was grateful. Instead, he told me what he did. "Documentary film maker. Subjects: whatever interests me. I've shot bios, ecology, politics. Right now I'm making a film with Howard University Hospital on AIDS. In D.C., it's truly a scourge, believe me. Part time, I work in a bookstore." I tried not to look bored as he went on discussing his work. At the time, I could not have cared less. No point my asking him about his relationship with Mom. I figured I'd find out soon enough. Which I did.

As it turned out, Max and Mom shared a second story, walk-up apartment in Del Ray, an artsy community with a several blocks long strip of galleries and craft shops. No real surprise, when we arrived Mom wasn't back yet. Max set down my suitcase in one of the two bedrooms. He said, "I hope you won't mind. You and I will be sharing." Mom's stuff took up the whole other bedroom and most of the rest of the apartment. There was a tiny alcove-like den in which Max stored his filming equipment. I spent the rest of my first day there alone with him. I didn't know it, yet, but it was to set the pattern of our lives for the next several years. For me, formative years, and enriching.

"So, you and Max have met," Mom said late the next morning when she got up. She looked fairly normal. She was wearing a long navy robe. Her hair had been straightened and colored red. It was held back neatly with a silver clip. She'd put on some make-up.

Hours earlier, before leaving for work, Max had fixed breakfast: juice, toast, eggs, and bacon for me; for himself, a nutrient drink and a handful of pills; a pot of coffee for Mom. Now, beverage hot from the microwave, milk and sugar added, Mom took a sip. She said, "Max is very easy to get along with. Please, make an effort to be pleasant. I think of you as 'my two guys'. Well, Max's orientation is gay, which is what makes us such a perfect couple. No demands. We each can go our own way." Then, almost as an after thought, she said, "He's HIV positive, but it's under control. Hey, don't look like that. It's not a death sentence. More like a chronic condition. I'm just telling you so you'll understand why all the medicine that's around. Also, if you get a cold it would be a good idea for you to move into the living room, sleep on the pullout sofa, until you're better. What else? Well, for sure you'll find Max is excellent company. He's interested in almost everything plus, a mystery to me, he likes adolescents. He has a godson about your same age. They're crazy about each other. Unfortunately, as soon as Jamie's mother learned of Max's condition, she wouldn't let Jamie see him anymore."

"You mean that he's gay?"

Mom raised her eyebrows. "Don't be ridiculous! I mean about the HIV. Don't think everyone thinks the same as your relatives."

"Oh, right," I said. But which relatives did she mean? Obviously, not my father. Then, surprise of surprises! I was about to discover a gay HIV filmmaker type guy could make an excellent substitute dad; substitute parent. Max took me to ball games, concerts, film shoots. When it came to school, he was always there for me. He offered endless encouragement. He helped me write papers, plan science fair projects, study for SATs. He attended my band concerts, lacrosse tournaments, Honors Society induction, mock trial events. He assisted with my college applications and essays. He arranged for doctor and dentist appointments; made sure I had some way to get to them. Before I got my license, Max drove me, in his fifteen year old Chevy van, wherever I needed to go, including to school dances. When I took driver ed., he took me on the Beltway for heavy traffic practice. After 9/11, he was the one who comforted me. Anytime I think back on our years together, though, what moves me most of all, was how Max totally seemed to care about me. Agh, go ahead! Say it! How Max loved me. This state of affairs persisted throughout my high school career. Even after the summer of my junior year when Max's HIV turned to full blown AIDS and Mom left us, moved out, moved in with Ms. Helene, her old high school sweetheart and first lesbian partner.

"It's nothing to do with sex. Hey, we're both menopausal. The thing is, I never signed on for nursing. I don't do well with bodily fluids, even mine. Plus it's not like I'm leaving Max in the lurch. He's still got Patrice," she told anyone. The last part was certainly true.

All through my senior year I did whatever I could to help him. Now, I was the one driving him to doctor appointments, overseeing his medicine, spending hours waiting for him in emergency. On days he couldn't face going into work, I sometimes filled in for him at the bookstore. I kept up his contacts with colleagues regarding film projects. Evenings, I often read aloud to him. Together, we listened to music, on WPFW, "your station for jazz and justice", or downloaded on ITunes. We played chess and scrabble. Nearly always, Max won. Other times, we simply chilled. In the winter of that year, we celebrated my getting a full scholarship to Princeton. Also, U of V. and George Mason. For me it was no contest. George Mason was almost down the block.

But Max was insistent. "You're going to Princeton. You're the first one ever in my family to get in, never mind being offered a full scholarship. It's the chance of a lifetime. Don't blow it. Don't think I don't have friends who'll look after me, or that I'm dependent on you." There was no disputing him. Sick as Max was, in his own way, he went on nurturing me, more than the other way round, and he certainly had plenty of friends who loved him. By now, I'd learned lots of stuff.

For instance, before Mom, Max had a twenty years partner. When George was diagnosed with AIDS, until the very end, Max nursed him. "Doing so, was my privilege. Also an honor. But I'd never choose to go through it again. See, it's why I so appreciate what you do for me, yet I don't blame your mom." Good for him! I blamed her enough for both of us. Still, I was keen to know what he saw in her. How had they gotten together?

I asked him. He told me. Shortly after George passed away, Max served on a local jury that awarded one of Mom's photos first prize in an exhibition. It was a black and white picture, shot with film, of a wintry scene at Rehobeth. In the foreground was a sunlit, snow encrusted sand dune, with ice crystals glistening, and frozen thistle twigs sticking up and sticking out; in the distance were breaking waves, pale sky, wispy clouds. "It was stunning," Max said. "It sold the second day, but for too low a price. I met your mom at the awards ceremony. I thought she was stunning, too. Later, she showed me other of her works: paintings, songs, poems, videos from her shows. Your mom is pretty amazing. So original, so intelligent, such a free spirit. Don't frown that way. We all have our good and bad points. Do you know what *her* childhood was like? Did you ever ask her? George used to say, 'Isn't it enough to be a good artist? Must one be a good person, too?' And who's to judge what is good?" I wonder.

During winter break of my sophomore year I saw Max for the last time. He'd been moved to a hospice. I sat beside him. I held his hand. He could barely

speak. Whispering, he said "Patrice, I'm proud of you." He smiled his old smile. Then, "Don't cry," he said. I licked away tears, salt and bittersweet.

7. The last time I saw Mom was in the spring of that same year, at Max's memorial service. She was there with Helene. Both their expressions were appropriately sober. They were dressed all in black: high heel pointy shoes, patterned hose, brimmed hats, stylish suits. If you didn't already know about them, you wouldn't know. Peering at me through dark glasses, Mom said, "So, how are you doing?"

I told her, "Fine,"

"I always knew you would. Max was lucky having you to look out for him at the end."

I stared. What could I say? Eventually, I muttered, "Maybe."

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How the hell are you! I can't begin to tell you how thrilled I was seeing you there at my opening. Also, surprised. Sure, I invited you. But, so much time has gone by. Both of us getting on in years. Well, only I look it. You still look lovely. Maybe fame does that to you. Yes, I've kept up with your career. The times you played in D.C., at the Strathmore or Kennedy Center, other venues, I thought of going. I imagined sending you an e-mail, reminding you who I was, even risking rejection by suggesting we meet backstage, afterward. But face to face with you, what would I say? Congratulations! Then what? In the days following your concerts, I searched for reviews. Raves and more raves. I'd tell myself, Next time! Next time I'll go.

What have *I* been up to? Haven't you just seen my show? Ah! You mean since Max died, after my mom and Helene were a pair again—since then. It's a bit of time to go over. No, I have nowhere else to be. Would you like a second glass of Merlot? No? Herbal tea is fine? Waiter, two herbal teas, please. Where was I? Right! After Max died, it turned out he'd named me beneficiary of his life insurance policy. I was surprised he even had one. It wasn't a lot, but it gave me a cushion to make up my mind about what to do after college. I followed Max into film making; my specialty is animation. It's a good career for a person like me. Much of my time is spent on computers. My audience is made up mostly of children. I seldom have to make conversation.

What about us, what? Of course, I remember our last conversation? Wasn't I the one who asked *you* that question? Anal personalities? Trust between partners? Yes, I suppose one can say, in some ways, we haven't

changed that much. Am I in a relationship? Not now. You mean, since that summer? Not really. Sure, it's been a long time. I guess, commitment isn't my thing. Maybe I'm afraid of turning out like my mother. Are she and Helene still together? Oh, yes. Every year I get a Christmas card from them, along with a photo. Sure, high school sweethearts. If that's not commitment, what is? Well, fine. All, I can say then is this: Before a committed person has children, it would be a good idea, first, to know one's own heart.

I beg your pardon? You think I should examine my own? That all that time ago, I broke yours? You can't really mean that? You'd like us to give it another try? You say, Sometimes, it can take a whole lifetime to find out that what one wanted at twenty was right? Are you speaking of me? Of yourself? Of my mother? Of anyone? You say we're older now and know more? Conversation can be overrated? There's lots of ways beside speaking to communicate? I see.

That was when I asked myself, What would Max say? Then, having thought it over, I plunged headlong into the next phase of my life.