

After the Fall

John Robinson

Peck arrived in a light rain at Penn Central Station shortly before noon on Friday, September 14. He had rushed to make the 12:03 Acela Express to Boston, cursing his taxi driver—a middle eastern man who spoke continually and frenetically on his cell phone in his native tongue—under his breath the entire journey, only to discover his train was delayed 45 minutes from Washington. He hated trains, especially Amtrak; he preferred flying, but he had to admit to himself that even he, who loathed traveling by rail, was intimidated into it by recent events. When the cab pulled in front of the station's entrance, Peck furtively wrote down the driver's number before disembarking from the vehicle. He didn't actually know why he recorded the number, but he knew he might, beyond giving a meager tip, be able to get revenge by retelling the story of his ride on his radio talk show. He would embellish, of course. He always did that with anecdotes he told on the air to prove a point. The points were usually a distillate of Wall Street economics and blue-collar ethics: bureaucratic hegemony and fiscal malfeasance. People who ran the radio station, WAGE, expected as much. Listeners demanded to be entertained in the form of faux-news that summoned and mobilized their preferences. Now he would add a third menace that had lain dormant for so long in his listeners' hearts, silenced in the wake of the shrill PC attack on "racial profiling." Now he could say, "Arab savages" on the air with impunity; in a few weeks he could organize a fund drive for those who lost someone on 9/11, selling T-shirts featuring an Arab riding a camel into a rifle's cross hairs. The events of the past week, though he chafed at the temporary inconvenience they caused, seemed surreal but seductive, spreading before him like some vast perspective of Muslim women adorned in *i^ars*, heads bowed in dutiful supplication.

Inside Penn Central, after discovering the train's delay and cursing—aloud this time—the departure board, Peck dragged his baggage around to the various shops, stopping at a newsstand for some reading material to pass the time on the long train ride home, and later at a Krispy Kreme where he consumed four "original" honey-glazed donuts in rapid succession. The disappointment with the train delay made him ravenous. He always ate too much whenever he felt cheapened or cheated. Riding on trains always gave him the first emotion, and the second when they were late. He ate three more donuts until thirsty, then strode over to a restaurant where he sat at a bar stool and drank three glasses of Delwhinnies on ice. His eyes watered from drinking so quickly.

Finally aboard, he took a seat across the aisle from a blond nymphet of around seventeen who was traveling, he later learned, from Richmond, Virginia to Providence, Rhode Island. Because he was already seated when she had arrived, her first appearance in his line of vision was her backside: level with his head, she presented it to him as she turned and dropped her belongings into the seat adjacent to a young Asian male her approximate age, who wore a headset. Her white, transparent pants revealed a light blue thong separating two oval-shaped buttocks. She wore a runic love amulet around her neck. Later, somewhere between Bridgeport and New London, between sporadic bursts on her cell phone ("What's up, you sonafabitch?" ... "yes, I partied hard last night" ... "he's really self-absorbed in himself), one of her thick-

soled sandals fell into the narrow aisle—and shortly—a small, barrel-chested, middle-aged Italian man paused in his journey toward the club car and gently kicked her shoe where her feet, now tucked beneath her in the seat as she peacefully slept, once rested. Looking down at her he paused for a long moment and smiled before moving forward. Every man who saw her, including Peck, became slightly aroused, except the Asian male seated next to her, who spent the entire journey ignoring her, listening to music on his walkman until he, too, joined her in slumber, collapsing his head onto the dining tray he had employed to sort his CDs. Two seats up from them sat an Asian mother and her daughter, a child of 12 or 13. For some reason, though Peck could never sort Asians with their native countries, they looked Korean. When they first boarded in New York, they couldn't find a seat together, and now, in Connecticut, the girl resisted sitting with her mother. Earlier she'd experienced the freedom of roaming the slight spaces of the train, often depositing herself at a table in the cafe' car where Peck had twice traveled for lack of something to do, playing with her walkman and cell phone.

Now irritably stationed beside her mother, she kept punching numbers on her cell phone as if seeking a secret code which might transport her from her involuntary incarceration.

Peck journeyed to the dinette for a third time. He wasn't edgy, but the scotch he had consumed in the train station had worn off, and to suppress the growing battle between arousal and boredom, he vacated his seat. Shortly before he left, the nymphet had reawakened, and she had switched from languorously eating honey-mustard pretzels to sucking on a large, spheroid red sucker. At forty-four years of age, he resisted nature's vigorous call as he conceded he was too old to make a play, especially from across the aisle in his coach seat aboard Amtrak: the Amtrak Seduction Method/coach class. So, instead, he attempted to tease his paranoia awake, if ever so slightly, by noting the emergency exits, and checking to see if any passengers were, like his last cab driver, of middle—eastern pedigree.

Peck purchased a bottle of Budweiser with a plastic cup, and then turned and looked for a seat in a club car crowded with people afraid to fly. The only space available was across from an attractive, young dark-haired woman who sat reading a book, ignoring it seemed, all that existed around her.

"If you don't mind..." he said, standing in the narrow aisle, gesturing to the seat across from her.

She looked from up her book, eyes clouded and unfocused. Then, as he seemed to come into view, her green e5res dilated. She finally understood his question. "Yes, sure. Go ahead."

"Harvey Peck," he said as he took his seat, presenting his hand to her as if it were something she had won.

"I know," she said, clumsily taking only the fingers of his hand as if he had passed her a dirty Kleenex. "Marg Holloway." Her grip was light and fleeting, almost as if she didn't want to touch him, and in some bizarre way this made her more attractive to him. He feared she believed he was too old for her. But he was encouraged she knew of him. He gathered then, though she had no discernible accent, she was from the Boston area.

"You listen to my radio show?" he asked quickly, for she was already return-

ing to her book whose title he couldn't spy because her hand covered the spine. He wanted to know what she was reading without asking. It was a smoother segue to the next line of conversation if he didn't have to ask.

She looked up politely, but didn't put the book down. "No," she said. "I'm not familiar. I don't listen to talk radio." She explained to him she had seen his picture in the paper, and had read some of his old columns when she was a journalism major at BU.

He couldn't tell if she approved of what he wrote or not. Or of him. Her face was as noncommittal as it was since he first sat down.

"Wow. I didn't know they were using my stuff in journalism classes." Back in the days when he was a political columnist for one of Boston's dailies, he wrote about city corruption in its manifestation of political patronage. He made it his business to discover who was on whose payroll and at what salary. It was stoooges paying stoooges, and therefore easy to find snitches to sell them out. He called it "Hackarama," and the word caught on, making him an instant local celeb. He exploited the public's basic distrust in government, and over the last twenty years as he witnessed that distrust grow, his own stock rose.

"So you're a journalist now?"

"Was," she said, and blushed a little. Her perfect skin was even more beautiful, he concluded, when she did that. She was possum-cheeked with long, dark eyebrows. Her thick, black hair came down past her shoulders on either side, resting just above her breasts. After being aroused and unable to pursue the nymphet, he resolved to go forward with this one. So what if she spurned him. They were passengers on a crappy train. He would return to his coach seat. They would never see each other again.

"I wrote for some suburban papers, but was unable to get anywhere, and I hated the stories they assigned me. Rotary Club and Garden Show stuff. So I quit after a few years and became a high school English teacher."

"And you like that better?"

"Better, a little," she said, and placing the book on her seat out of sight where he couldn't access it, slid out of her seat and stood. "Will you excuse me for a moment? I need to use the ladies' room."

"Of course," he said, and watched her leave, observing her ass and legs as she left. Since it was mid-September and still summer weather, she dressed in a light, white blouse and a khaki skirt, which hung just above her knees. He estimated she was somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties. Now gone, he thought about checking the title of her book, but decided against it because she'd know he had snooped after she had left.

Outside his window the rain had ceased and the sky appeared as sunny and flawless as his mood. But the more he looked out the window and viewed the squalor, his mood changed. Along ancient railbeds spindly birch trees dipped; below them were dead weeds, cinders and litter no one would ever pick up. As the train entered the bowels of a city the facades of houses exposed their dilapidated rears, places where time or money ran out, leaving ragged edges and debris spilling out onto muddy backyards. On a fence separating the residential from the railway tracks a sign read: No Trespassing. No Dumping.

Peck recalled living in a place not unlike where he now looked. It was a place of the dead. His life—from childhood to adolescence—was of dashed hopes and broken

dreams skirmished in dilapidated tenements, seedy barrooms and bleak neighborhoods spalled with crime. Born in East Boston as an only child, he suffered humiliation and poverty. His father was a weak and shiftless man, who lost his job as a dock worker through gambling and alcoholism, eventually abandoning his small family when Peck was eight. His mother solely raised him from childhood to his late teens, supporting them through assorted waitressing jobs in Chelsea and Boston, welfare and prostitution. If it hadn't been for his attendance in the local Catholic schools, Peck believed he would have become his father. The church's stern rules supplied him the only equilibrium of his youth. But they couldn't beat back his sadness. Because commuter trains tended to journey not far from his bedroom window, he never associated them with the freedom of travel; rather, like a hokey C & W blues melody, their wailing was a pathetic cry, a heart-breaking refrain of waste and hopelessness that was his early life. His new life, he believed, was both a repudiation of, and a sanctuary from, a past he came to regard as The Great Shame.

"I had to walk down five cars to find an open bathroom," she said as she retook her seat across from him. "This train is packed."

"With asshole wimps," he said, not intending to sound so nasty.

She looked at him hard as if insulted. "With anxious passengers who don't like taking foolish risks," she said, picking her book off the seat. "Passengers like you and me."

"Touche'," he said. "Can I get you a drink? Anxious passengers like me need alcohol to remove their anxiety." His real anxiety was she would put that book between them again.

She laughed nervously in a way he couldn't decode, but said nothing.

"I'm getting up for another," he said, pointing in the direction of the service counter for emphasis as if he'd be misconstrued. "And you?"

"I'll have what you're having," she said, placing the book on the table, and rummaging in her purse for money. "A beer. A Bud."

"I've got it this time..." he said, and pointing to a wad of folded money he held, continued... and I've got Barbara Bush's mug on every one of these singles!" He almost leapt from his seat. An attractive woman, a stranger whom he had just met, was willing to join him in the consumption of alcohol, and in his mind he envisaged the long procession of booze and seductive chatter wending its way toward the carnal in its most depraved matrix.

She laughed again as he stood up, diis time sounding more encouraging than nervous.

When he returned with their drinks, he saw at last the title as she held the book at the edges.

"*Eyeless in Ga^a* by Aldous Huxley," he said, as he poured beer into her plastic cup. "My God, are you really reading that? I remember being forced to read that book in some college lit class I had to take. I could never quite get what was wrong with the guy."

"Nothing's wrong with the guy," she said as if she were angry again. "It's just another search-for-personal-identity-in-a-world-gone-mad with its crazy-assed dogmas. Kinda like now. That's why I bought it."

What crazy-assed dogmas? He thought she might be a bit ditz. "You just can't look at *now* that way," he said.

"You mean, a-world-gone-mad way?"

"That way," he said. "The wrong way. Sure things may appear a little crazy right now, but this is going to be one of the best things that ever happened to this country."

"A lot of people dead," she said slowly. "Some never will be found. They were incinerated. How is this good?"

"Because," he said, "like so many things that seem bad at first, this one will turn out fine. You'll see. This awful thing will bring everyone together. The whole frigging nation—if I can be so clichéd—will be one. Who wants what was going on in this country before this happened? Who wants the nineties back?"

The moment Peck saw those lunatics crash airliners into the World Trade Center he knew his life had turned a corner. The kind of jingoism he could engage in now on the air waves would not have been tolerated just a micro-second before the explosions. Now all had changed. Dissent would be difficult. People would be willing to give up anything to feel safe. And he beEeved he could sell them what they needed.

"I just hope you're right," she said. "Things were getting pretty tacky and superficial, I'll admit, what with Gary Condit and OJ and botox treatments. Actually, I went to New York to see if I could change my own tacky and superficial existence, which is looking pretty good to me right now."

"Why were you there?"

"A job interview," she said. "Someone I know fiddled it. A return to journalism, I'd hoped. I was there when it happened. I left without being interviewed."

"Why?"

"I'd rather not get into it," she said, and took a drink from her cup. "Why were you in New York?"

"A job interview," he said, and they both laughed. "I was also there when the collisions occurred, but I hung around for mine. My interviewers seemed weirdly unaffected by the whole thing. As if it were just another big city inconvenience to endure."

"Weird is right," she said. "How awful."

Peck shook his head in censure, but secretly admired their unaffectedness.

"I assume this interview involved some sort of promotion?"

"Yeah, sort of...switch to TV. One of the cable channels. They're *the thing* right now," he said, putting imaginary quotes into the air. "And at the moment they're looking for more talking heads coming up from the farm squads."

He started his broadcasting career on a small, formerly Spanish-language FM station where he immediately embarked on a campaign of attacking bilingual education. Now he could be heard 5 to 9 in the morning pummeling everything from taxes to immigration on the 25,000 watt AM signal beamed to over 400 stations. His show aired during "commuter time," and was a mix of news and talk opinion. He was told his first week he had a radio man's voice.

"Are you going to take it?"

"I'm certainly considering it," he said. This was disingenuous. As soon as an offer was made he would be gone before his bags were packed.

"How does your wife feel about all this?"

"I'm not married," he said. "At present." He wore no wedding ring, and even though he had to concede men his age were usually married, it irked him she thought he could be hitting on her right now if he were.

"At present," she repeated, smiling. "But still searching for a soul mate."

This was inaccurate. He wouldn't describe what he was searching for as a soul mate. He had been twice married and divorced, and had no children nor any real friends. He experienced loneliness, but didn't regard himself as lonely, rather alone. His aloneness did not give him sorrow. Instead, his inability to get close to anyone—and vice versa enraged him. It gave him a grudge against the world, and that grievance sometimes caused a spontaneous, and randomly inflicted, eruption of malevolence. Men brought him fame and money and the cordiality of commerce, but no friendships. Women brought him only physical release. It wasn't that he didn't want companionship and love; it was that both cost too much. With women, like the one seated across from him, he sought their beauty, or rather co-possession of it. But he never got it. After sexual gratification was achieved, they always superimposed their lives on his own, spinning their personal tales of woe, identifying themselves as fellow sufferers, wanting to know—and to conscript—his inner pain and past. He coveted a companion, not a kindred spirit. That association might re-embark him on the road to sorrow, and that was a place he resolved never to revisit.

He wanted beauty alone, dispassionate and perfect. Beauty was a fortress against the siege of sloppy sentiment, and no sorrow could ever breach its walls. It brought order and security. He wanted to exist behind its impregnable embattlements where the arrows of intimacy could not reach him. If he could find the woman who could provide him that citadel, he would finally fall in love. Until then, he would keep his distance and his rage.

"So you were married," she said, taking another sip on her beer. Her eyes appeared amused.

"A couple of times," he said. He always felt like a two-time loser when forced to confess he'd been married twice. Although his motive was transparent, he quickly changed the subject, asking her what, specifically, she taught.

"American Literature," she said. "To high school seniors."

"Do you like it?" he said, forgetting he'd already asked.

"The literature, yes," she said. "The seniors, sometimes. The printed word doesn't mean what it used to—as I'm sure you've heard."

"So, your favorite subject is American Literature?"

"Depends on what day you ask me," she said. "Today, yes. Tomorrow it could be British, French or Classical Literature, but then nobody hired me to teach those. I think I like the classics best. And I love Roman History. Especially gossipy historians like Suetonius."

"Ah, yes," Peck said, nodding familiarity, though he didn't know who the hell she was talking about. Beyond reading political agitprop in newspapers, magazines and websites, the only thing he read were novels by writers like Ludlum and Ganey. He would remember not to get into this subject again.

"For instance, I was delighted to learn from his *Twelve Caesars* that the great Augustus was under five feet seven so wore lifts in his sandals, had weak eyes, and softened his leg hairs with hot walnut shells," she said. "Little things like that make figures from the past much more human, don't you think?"

"America has often been compared to Rome," he said, but had little interest in what he conveyed. Instead, he quickly regarded his wraithlike reflection mirrored in the train's window. Her reference to an emperor's physical inadequacies gave him a twinge of insecurity, as he glimpsed his light brown, Vaseline'd hair, combed straight off his forehead, his large jaw and small mouth. It was his mouth he didn't like. That

was one of his motivations for being a talking head: he believed his tiny mouth was inconspicuous if he kept it moving.

"Excuse me, but that comparison is bullshit," she said, eyes flashing with malice. "Rome was a dominate power for more than five centuries, and America for fifty-plus years. Hardly comparable."

"We'll last as long in first place as Rome," Peck said with conviction. "Maybe longer."

"Not at this rate," she said. "For one, we need a better warning system. Rome had the Sacred Geese who cackled loudly in 390 BC and saved the city from invaders. What have we got? The INS? The SEC? MTV?"

"Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld may not honk like geese, but are all sharp guys," Peck said. "They know how to catch these savages. We won't make the same mistake twice."

"I don't know," she said. "Bush always seems so amateur hour, so rehearsed even when he walks into a room. It's like he's playing president with his rich pals."

"Underneath he's got more than he shows, I've been told by informed sources," he said. In truth, nobody had told him this, but he knew if they could, they would have. "Besides, even if he's a little light on the knowledge base, he's got a great team surrounding him."

"Because everyone's so scared, I'm scared."

"About what?"

"About safety, civil rights, about everything," she said, looking out the window.

Peck followed her eyes there, reexamining his image in the glass. Outside, below a suddenly darkening sky, a narrow, placid river ran parallel to the train's path, while its position—looming close, then shunting away—responded to a series of fluvial oxbows and railway switchbacks.

He told her there was nothing to worry about. He didn't know what it was going to be called, but he heard that a new department created for homeland security was a done deal. And as far as civil rights were concerned, only those who had something to hide needed to worry. Meanwhile, the rest of us, Peck continued, should come together to support the president. End partisan bickering. The more he spoke the more he realized he was rehearsing for his radio show.

"I thought you conservatives believed in civil rights," she said, the blush reappearing, mottling her cheek.

Though he referred to himself as a conservative on and off the airwaves, for him its connotation was far different from its denotation. To him the term *conservative* was more a strategy of life than a template of political beliefs. The rightward drift in American politics had been unmistakable for some time. It -was, therefore, the only teal game around, where wealth and success were possible if you stuck to the program. He had officially joined the Republican Party when Ronald Reagan became President in 1981, and never looked back. Before that he was drifting and had no party affiliation, but it wasn't the ideals of the Republican Party that attracted him. He had joined the GOP for its cachet, believing it was like becoming a member of an exclusive country club for the elite, the chosen. Coming from the abject poverty of East Boston, Peck could not resist its sirens.

"And privacy rights," she continued, the blush traveling all the way to her forehead. "Do you really want the government snooping into your life, even if you're

guilty of no more than some credit card debt and a few parking violations? I don't know about you, but I'm especially sensitive about my private life. It's nobody's business. And nobody's private life is my business, either. Even if we were dating, I'd think the same: nobody has a right to pry."

Peck, who had been waiting his entire life for a beautiful woman to utter these words, felt aroused in a way that went beyond the transports of the flesh. She surprised him. Beguiled by independence and nerve, he was impressed she spoke so forcefully to him. At that moment it was difficult for him not to reach across the table and touch her. It was all he could do then to find his voice and speak.

"Let me assure you," he said slowly, more to hide his sudden crush than emphasize his sincerity, "that I will do everything I can to fight any and all arbitrary invasion of privacy. I'm opposed to it. It's on the top of my list."

Even though he had stopped believing in much of anything years ago, he did believe in his privacy. He might have been moved by his own words had he not been so aroused.

"List?" she said, as if she were about to laugh. "What list? You have a list?"

"Actually, it's a manifesto," he said. "But if I told you what's on it, you'd never leave this train alive. I'd have to kill you in one of these tiny washrooms. Your body would be found along the tracks, covered toilet-water blue from head-to-foot."

He watched her head tilt backwards and her mouth open: he could see her perfect rows of white teeth, her tongue rising between. She laughed hard, getting her whole body into it. Another turn-on. He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

"Glad to hear it," she said, raising her plastic cup as a toast, her hand shaking from laughter. "Good to know you killer conservatives have secret manifestos."

"To manifestos," Peck said, taking his cup, tapping hers and drinking.

As the Acela stopped in Providence, she briefly abandoned her seat and returned to the bar to buy another round of beers, while Peck sat amid her residual scent, gazing out the window at people disembarking into the train station. He saw the nymphet being helped with her baggage by an older woman he assumed to be her mother, although in the frail light he saw no resemblance. In the rail yard someone had discarded a small, scrawny pine tree, perhaps someone's long abandoned Christmas tree, with empty, upside-down Dunkin Donut cups as ornaments attached to each branch. The station's walls were busy with Tags; teenyboppers painting their names using the same bloated lettering. Peck understood the motivation: only he wanted to carve his own initials across the arc of the planet, and with a little more originality. He resolved years ago to be more than an anonymous name scrawled on the side of some forlorn surface. When she returned with their drinks, he stared at her breasts as she passed the Budweiser to him.

"I don't think I'm going to make my connection if this train doesn't speed up," she said, retaking her seat.

"When does your bus leave?"

"Six," she said. "On the button. And the next one isn't until eight. I'd have to sit around in the bus station until then. I just can't sit anymore. I'd rather fly between skyscrapers if I could get home sooner."

"Two hours is too long a time to wait alone," he said, seizing upon the opening. "Let me suggest, if I may, you wait at my place. It's nicer and not far from the bus depot. At a moment's notice, I could call you a cab...And, until then, you

could stand the entire time."

"That's very kind of you," she said, laughing, but shook her head. "It's too much of an imposition. I'll be fine, really." But he could hear in her voice the nascent stirrings of compliance. And there was something else he heard, though it was much more subtle. Like air leaving a tire. The faint but uninterrupted sound of supplication. "Don't be silly," he said. "You're not imposing. You're wonderful company. I'd love for you to come and pass the time with me. Please say you will."

"We'll see," she said, a blush briefly reappearing on both cheeks, and took a drink from her beer. "Let's see if the train makes up the time. These things are supposed to be able to book it."

When the train arrived at South Station in Boston more than an hour late it was raining again. Since the delay caused her to miss the bus to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Peck boldly re-offered his invitation, and after a little fencing, she accepted as he presumed by then she would. They had drunk quite a lot of beer, and she seemed a little high. Even Peck, who could hold his liquor, felt light-headed, and suffused in the cozy warmth of alcohol as he disembarked the train.

They took a taxi across town to his second story condominium located in a three-story brownstone on the South End. He had been the first purchaser of the space when it was then little more than a hollowed brick corner structure; and long before his building became part of a trendy neighborhood for young CEOs and Dotcomers who wanted to play bohemian artists, it was a haven for crack houses and streetwalkers. So he bought cheap, and because he bought first, his design of the condo became the permanent floor plan for all subsequent dwellers above and below him. He liked that.

Inside, his condo featured large, floor-to-ceiling windows with entirely open-spaced living quarters, except for the bedroom. Only the bedroom and the bathroom had doors.

Peck fixed them gin and tonics in die kitchen, then handed her a glass, taking her arm and escorting her to his circular study located at the front of the building on Warren Avenue.

"Wow, look at that," she said, pointing across the street at the three-story building with long, rectangular windows. Though it was still raining the view was clear. Behind those large windows were tight rows of women in leotards raising, in unison, their legs into the air.

"*The Boston Ballet*," he said. "It's like they practice all day and night." Though Peck believed hell consisted of being trapped between performances of the Bolshoi Ballet and Marcel Marceau, he often showed, with pride, this view to his guests, which most often were women he was trying to seduce. He felt it gave his condo a certain charm, and he often admitted to himself he admired the meticulous order imposed across the street.

"What's that they're doing over there called?" he asked, attempting to co-opt her. "An arabesque?"

Marg said nothing, but quietly retreated from the study to the living room. She didn't look upset, but appeared to be suppressing something. "Something wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, in an even voice, but he could tell it wasn't. "Just brings back some uncomfortable memories."

"Anything you care to share?" he said, following her spoor into the living

room. "No," she replied, stumbling a bit on the thick rug as she paused to take a sip from her drink. He noticed her walk was unsteady.

"You're sure?"

"You've got such an orderly place," she said, changing the subject. "You're really anal, aren't you?"

"Really," he said. "Very anal." Reflexively, he looked at her ass.

She took a seat on a long maroon sofa. "Does that hair of yours ever move?"

He took a seat beside her, with just enough room between them as discretion permitted. "If you push it, it will move," he said, closing his eyes and bending his head toward her, but felt nothing as she made no move to try. It was the first opportunity to touch, and she passed.

Opening his eyes he saw her staring down at her drink, held with both hands above her lap. He then took a deep swallow from his gin and tonic. He couldn't get over how pretty she was, and was amazed he had gotten her from the train station to his sofa. Though he regarded himself a relatively attractive man, he never dated anyone who even remotely looked this good. He believed he was courting above his station. He felt lucky then, but also, though he wouldn't admit it even to himself, intimidated.

She looked at him. "Actually, I lied to you on the train."

"Oh?"

"I have heard you on the radio," she said. "A couple of times."

"Really," he said. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I don't...I didn't want you to get a big head, that's all," she said, crossing, then recrossing her legs. "If you'll pardon me for being blunt, you seemed a bit full of yourself when you first sat down across from me. And also I didn't want you to ask me what I thought of the shows."

"And now you *know* I'm going to ask: what did you think of them?"

"Well, the ones I heard were a little off-beat, a little silly," she said, then lightly touching his forearm, added quickly, "I hope you don't take any offense at this. But I feel I know you well enough to say this. And I was, I have to admit, amused."

"No offense taken," he said, feeling her lingering touch when she removed her hand. "I'm just glad you were amused. We often spoof and do crazy stuff. Which ones were they?"

"One was called *The Dead Zone*, where everyone calls in and predicts what famous person is soon to die," she said, smiling enigmatically. "Or as you kept putting it: Who's not coming downstairs for breakfast."

"Sorry about that," he said. "We were digging deep into the pile that afternoon." This was untrue. It was a regular feature every other week. Usually on Fridays. Whenever they ran it, somebody always called in and said Ted Kennedy wasn't coming downstairs for breakfast. On his show Fat Teddy was always raw meat. He was scorned for his size and his politics. Once on another of Peck's features called *Who's Deadly*, a listener called to say he feared one of Big Senator's buttons flying off his lapel and striking a mortal blow to his forehead.

"It's OK," she said, waving him off. "Who knows? If I had a show, I might have to revert to that stuff every once in a great moon myself, though I wouldn't feel too good after."

"You're too nice," he said, stealthily moving closer. "What was the other one?"

"Oh, that show," she said, taking a drink, and then pausing with narrowed

eyes and a furrowed brow as if attempting to retrieve the memory. "That was during the whole Monica Lewinsky flap. Everybody was talking about it then. You put it so aptly that day: the whole country has turned into one large locker room."

"Oooh, yeaahh," Peck said. "What was casually said back then between members of the opposite sex would have been regarded at any other time as *prima facie* evidence of sexual harassment"

"I remember the endless jokes."

"And the terms," he said. "Presidential kneepads, a stained party dress, a cigar, and of course, Lewinskys."

"Oh my God, that's right!" she said. "Before nobody would dare speak so openly in mixed company of giving a blowjob."

"Or getting one," he said. He had had enough. He set his drink down on the long, glass coffee table running parallel to the sofa, then reached over and took her glass from her hands, placing it next to his own.

"What's going on?" she asked with an amused smile.

As she looked at him, he leaned across the narrow space between them and kissed her. After a moment he felt her mouth open, and—as agilely as he could—moved his body against hers, placing an arm around her shoulders.

Things stirred and quickened. With his other hand he grabbed her breast, using his thumb to ply her nipple. She reached down and fumbled with his fly as he began unbuttoning her blouse. Then he suddenly stopped and stood, clasping her hand as he rose.

"Let's go to the bedroom," he said in a voice husky with intent, the message coming forth less a seductive invitation than a command. Though he didn't mean to sound peremptory, his sudden realization he had no erection where her hands probed gave him a start. He needed a moment to recover. To move. He stared at her partially exposed breasts through her half-opened blouse, attempting to convey the image to his groin.

"Wow," she said, half-saluting as she arose. "Yes, sir. Anything you say, sir."

But in the bedroom things didn't improve. Finally, in darkness and naked together in bed, he assumed the missionary's position, and grabbing her ass, tried to focus but produced no stiffness. He knew what was wrong: his effort to match in physical performance her beauty had so unnerved him, it impaired his lust. She pushed him off, and sat atop, straddling his hips, vigorously moving her genitals against his in rhythmic, spiraling, pendulous strokes. Nothing. All he could feel was pubic hair and moist, wet flesh pushing against his slackness. Panic rose. He wanted to turn on the light and get excited by seeing her naked, but feared she would see his smallness and abruptly stop, retrieving her clothes. Still undaunted, she licked his ear, whispering—"How about a Lewinsky?"—and then bent to his crotch, seizing his lifeless penis. Before she could place it into her mouth, he shoved her hand aside, grabbed her shoulders, and tugged her alongside him, turning her onto her back again.

"It's all right," she said. In the darkness he imagined her rueful face.

"I know it," he replied hostilely. He didn't want her sympathy. Accepting it meant humiliation and loss of control.

"We don't have to—"

"Let me do this," he said.

"It's not—"

"Just let me do this," he repeated, softly kissing her, and reaching down to her

groin, began stroking her clitoris, then entering her vagina with his fingers.

After a time she said, "I can't do anymore," though he was uncertain, because she had remained silent through it all, if she had achieved an orgasm, or even enjoyed what he had done.

After some post-coital interchange in the darkness Peck heard her fall asleep. But he did not join her. He could not. He was too keyed up. And when the pearl glow of first light illuminated the room, he rested his head on one elbow while he watched her sleep. While she lay unconscious, he removed the sheet covering her and stared at her body. At that moment he believed she was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen, and he wanted to wake her right then to confess his love. But he did not. Instead, he re-covered her, and placing his head on the pillow beside her where he could smell her skin and hair, he hoped for, at the very least, to display a morning erection when she finally awoke.