

Vines · Kenneth Bernard

LATELY I NOTICE that I *smell* more. I used to be able to wear the same shirt three or four days without being aware of it. Now, even in the course of a day, it smells foul. I smell foul. It doesn't seem to matter whether or not I take cosmetic precaution. My *deodorants* smell foul by the end of the day. Along with this my feet are getting colder and sweating differently. My blood is circulating less. I think about my teeth a lot. Not too long ago I used to begin days feeling on top of things. Lately I realize I'm full of little stratagems to hold it all together. I wiggle a toe here, take an extra breath there, tighten my buttocks inconspicuously on the subway. I asked my wife recently whether or not she ever got that rotten fruit feeling, that sense of galloping inner deterioration before falling from the vine with a sickening *plush*. She answered quickly and emphatically, as befits a Vassar girl: "No," she said, "I don't. I get tired. I get headaches. I get disgusted. And I get periods." There was a pause. "*Sometimes*," I said, repaying her for the speed and emphasis of her answer. She cackled. All things considered, she wasn't bad.

Not so my friend Norman. "What do you mean, that rotten fruity feeling?" he said. Norman is a health culturist. He does a lot of yoga and eats well. He impresses people as having a clean system. "Look," he said. "Maybe *you've* got to go, but *I* don't." I wondered whether he had moved on to something besides yoga. "I've told you for years," he said, "that you are literally full of rotten shit." I don't really like talking to Norman. For one thing, he never knows what I'm talking about. But my wife and his went to elementary school together. I'm really waiting for him to get a hernia before I talk to him seriously. I have several friends like Norman.

It actually comes down to the fact that I can talk to my wife best of all. Not that I don't make her sick a lot. But we've been together twenty-five years. That kind of thing is stronger than just about anything. Who else, for example, knows how many inconsequential and humiliating things my body has been through? "Look," she said, "the fact is that you're going to die sooner or later. Some bodies are in better shape for it than others." It was a devastating statement in its ambiguity. "You know," I said, "Norman isn't really so dumb. What kind of shape is Marie in?" Marie is Norman's wife. "Do you really want to know?" she said. "Well, yes. Why not?" "She thinks she might have cancer. She's having a biopsy Tuesday." "My god," I said.

My wife has a way of shortening my conversations. It's not just that she's a busy and successful woman. Through inadvertence or intent she frequently misconstrues my words just to that extent that I cannot respond to

what she says. I am very subtly confused. I used to consider it girlish charm, but I don't anymore. It rather upsets me. I met Norman later in the week of his wife's biopsy. He practically hugged me. "Listen," he said, "why don't you start working out?" He looked at me with a lot of pain in his eyes, as if it was really important. "Norman, I'm really in a hurry," I said, moving off. "We'll talk about it." From half a block he shouted: "She's all right! She's all right!" It was all I could do not to run.

Two days later, for reasons totally beyond me, I felt like a heart to heart talk with my wife. *Her* name is Edna. "Listen," I began auspiciously, "I realize we're *both* going to die." She stared at me. "And I want you to know it's all right." Her mouth opened, but she didn't speak. "I mean, the children, the twenty-five, or thirty, or . . . years. I mean, let me say something ridiculous. . . . I just want you to know that I love you." Having spoken with my usually clarity, I was about to speak again. But she forestalled me. "Will you please *shut up*," she hissed. Her eyes filled with tears. She gripped my hand, tightly, lovingly. *Lovingly*. That's rather important in retrospect. "*Will you please shut up!*" I did.