

*Vigil*

It was one a.m. and Nora and I were thoroughly intoxicated. We had been drinking all night. This was in Boston, nearly twenty years ago. We were first-year law students. Earlier, we had taken the first exam of our legal careers, Civil Procedure. Neither of us felt positive about the experience. In fact, we felt downright miserable. She matched me beer for beer for nearly four hours, trading rounds at a bar called the Sevens. "What's pendent jurisdiction?" she asked. "A pendant is something you put around your neck." At first these questions were tragic. Then they were funny. "What's *ne exeat*?" said I. "I don't even know what language that is." Six, seven pints. A shot of whiskey. A glass of schnapps, on the house. The bar closed and we stumbled up the street to her basement apartment on Beacon Hill. We somehow got her key in the lock, opened the door, crashed into her foyer. We were nearly beyond speech. We could say *ne exeat* but not much more. She went into her bedroom and immediately took off her jeans, her sweater, her bra, laughing, revealing her breasts, larger than I would have believed. My God, she was lovely. She was twenty-three and blonde and the girl I always wanted and would never have. She would marry a yachtsman three years later in Newport, Rhode Island. I was not invited to the wedding. But a mutual friend—a woman who once said to me, "I change men like stockings"—told me that the wedding was "Gatsbyesque." Today Nora has *four perfect children*. Her children are *the most wondrous thing that has ever happened* to her. I know this because she wrote these lines to our law school alumni magazine. That night, as she stood before me naked, I wondered, What kind god has blessed me with this vision? I wanted to sing arias. I wanted to say *ne exeat* over and over, like an incantation. I wanted to keep her forever in my sight. "You're pretty," I told her. "I know," she said. "Can I kiss you?" I asked. "Can I touch them?" She got into bed and pulled the blankets to her chin. "You can let yourself out," she said. I went to the door and looked back. It appeared that she had fallen asleep almost instantly. Her breathing was steady, deep and slow. It seemed like she was taking all the

air from the room in calm, giant intakes of breath. I did not go. Instead, I came to her bedside, quietly, and sat cross-legged on the floor. I considered lifting her wrist and taking her pulse. We'd had so much to drink. I feared she might vomit in her sleep and choke to death, like Jimi Hendrix, or that her heart might stop beating, like Dylan Thomas and a freshman on the football team whom I knew in college—drinkers with greater experience and tolerance than Nora. So I sat quietly, keeping vigil, watching the rise and fall of the covers atop her chest. My eyes soon became accustomed to the semi-dark, to the moonlight streaming through the windows. An hour passed slowly. I had to go to the bathroom, and I did so soundlessly, then returned to her side. Nora sleeping, me watching her sleep. It was like an Andy Warhol film, like watching paint dry, but because it was Nora, I found the experience thrilling. She went from one sleep cycle to the next. Dreaming, her eyeballs darted under her eyelids, her breath quickening. She gasped and moaned, as if suffering small intermittent pain, twitched, passed gas, mumbled stray syllables, dreaming her drunken dreams. A yachtsman walks along the dock. She watches him pass. He turns back. The sun shines upon them. Or something like that. I lay on the rug, dozing off and on but never really falling asleep. Here's what happened sometime in the night, what I felt ashamed about later: she rolled onto her side, pulling the blankets with her, and her bottom was revealed to me, her legs scissored slightly open. Nora's naked lower half. I moved closer. Her pubic hair was soft and fair. She smelled like cigarette smoke and body odor and sleep and cunt. I inhaled her, my face just inches away, sniffing like some dog. Here was the coming of spring, something long hidden under snow, then suddenly unearthed, deep and mossy. I squinted, straining to see. I wanted to turn on the lamp, the fluorescent overhead light, examine her like a doctor. What did it matter? No one would find out. This was the only way I would know her, like a thief, like a peeping tom. She didn't love me. She loved no one, had no boyfriends throughout our tenure at law school, although many of my classmates—handsome boys all—tried to entice her. She dismissed them. Then she met her yachtsman and her future was written. She lives in happiness by the sea. She has four perfect children. Etc. That drunken night, as the light of pre-dawn showed through the windows—she'd slept through the night, never once opening her

eyes—I let myself out and walked home, all the way to Brookline, an hour on my feet. Ashamed as I was of what I had done, I felt exhilarated. Those few hours. Watching her sleep. Her naked bottom, the smell of her. How wonderful, to be that near to the center of my loved one. Why couldn't life stay like that, be always like that, so close to the essence?