

fied, self-conscious, not like the hasty retreat of yesterday. He is telling me something, this heart of mine. Barely has he settled into the cavity of my chest when the others equally austere and serene join en masse. Kidneys, liver, thumbs, nerve endings, tear ducts, and finally the spleen himself. All these come to me as if I am gravity. The brain maintains a puzzled silence. The judge too has resumed his previous anonymity.

"I am what I am," I state again, this time more confidently and the organs hum like an Indianapolis 500 engine. I can sense that each one of them is as happy to be back in his smooth soft spot as I am to have him there. I shift gears. I rise. I walk. I spit. I think.

"Nothing is settled," the brain reminds me, "the jury is still out."

"But," I say, "I am together again." I roar, I bellow, I beat my chest. When the jury returns glum and single file, I take a deep breath and blow them out of the box.

They scatter in my wind. "We were hung anyway," Einstein's brain calls out from the blue sky. "And you, so recently yourself again, don't be so violent. We're all up in the air anyway."

"To tell me this," I yell to the heavens, "I don't need Einstein's brain." Clouds suck up the jury. Full of myself, on tiptoes I bounce on the grass ready for everything.

Lost Weeks / Jonathan Baumbach

Two years and five months after his presumed death, a bearded somewhat ratty figure appears unannounced at his former apartment. He is about to push the buzzer when he hears a man's voice come from inside. And then in apparent answer comes the voice of his daughter saying, do I have to, Daddy?

It is in this fashion that Francis learns that Nora has remarried, that his daughter, believing him dead, has given away the title to his paternity. He turns around as if he were sleepwalking and leaves without making his presence known. He will not interfere, much as he might like to, with the normal flow of their lives.

Unwilling to admit his disappointment, Francis has a brief fling at alcoholism, moving in dazed profusion from bar to bar on a short trip to oblivion.

A young prostitute, new to the oldest calling, takes him to her hideaway, nurses him through a particularly bad session of delirium tremens, becomes his keeper.

When Francis comes to himself, the hallucinative landscape merging with the real, he is unable to account for two weeks of time. The anonymous room he is in smells of stale sweat and Je Reviens perfume. There is blood under his fingernails and a strange buzzing in his ears.

He wakes with an overwhelming thirst, lips parched, tongue like some plastic implement. There must be a bottle, he thinks, somewhere in this rat-hole. A one-armed kewpie doll on the dresser top winks wickedly at him. He drinks cough medicine, hair conditioner, nail polish, cheap perfume, liquid cleaner. Nothing satisfies. What kind of place is it, he wonders, where there's nothing fit for a thirsty man to drink.

From the apartment's lone window, he can see the on-and-off neon of an all-night bar, flirting with him like a mirage. Locked in (the indignity of it), he considers throwing himself to freedom through the glass of the window.

When Judith Garland returns from work in the morning she finds him pacing the room like a maniac.

Glad to see you got your old sea legs under you, says Judith.

A heartless wretch in his present state, Francis levels her with a punch and goes out to get himself a glass or two of liquid refreshment. Judith has taken the precaution of emptying his pockets, a theft in his own best interests though not fully appreciated.

This is just a brief interlude in Francis's life, a transient decline and fall. The thing is about transience, it has a way of going on forever.

To raise money for a drink, Francis takes a job in the Bowery dusting car windows with an oily rag.

He quits after three days—the job not as remunerative as he had been led to believe—and goes back to Judith's one-room apartment to pick up the pieces of a broken life.

She is fucking a john when he comes in, and he sits on the commode, reading the obits in the *Daily News* waiting for her to finish.

After awhile Judith comes storming in, all icy sex and fire. I told you not to bother me while I'm working, she says.

How was I to know you were working at home?

You could have called, which would have taken no more than five minutes of your precious time. (She goes to the sink to douche, cursing under and over her breath.)

He sits on the bed, a look of sly charm on his face, saying nothing at all.

Are you still here? she asks, scowling over her shoulder at him. Let it be on the record that you are asking for trouble. If you are not gone in five minutes, I'll make you sorry your mother ever gave you birth.

The above is not Judith's exact dialogue, but an accurate estimation of it. She is thought to be Spanish-spoken.

Francis has no intention of staying, has returned merely to say thank you for your trouble baby and goodbye.

His apology alters the picture, begins a new season in their relationship.

While looking after him, Judith writes a book about the experience of living with an hombre bent on self-destruction. The book, written in broken eloquence, finds a publisher who falls in love with its commercial possibilities.

There is one problem if not two. The book needs the hand of a strong editor. The particular publishing house that has accepted Judith's manuscript has retired, in a recent austerity move, the last editor in its stable who could read and write.

The ideal editor for this book, says the firm's vice-president in charge of sales, is the late Francis Sinatra, who many of us reviled in his time.

Judith comes home from the publisher's lunch and reports the vice-president's remark to her lover, who is busy making out a reading list of great books for her.

The irony is that she doesn't know, hasn't the first idea, that the man to whom she confides this information is the selfsame Francis S.

Covering his face with a newspaper, Francis cries uncontrollably at the loss of his former identity.

What will happen if they don't find an editor? Francis asks.

Judith shrugs, making light of her success (and its attendant problems), not wanting to make him feel inferior or outdone. If he feels overwhelmed by her achievement, she has been advised, he might go back on the sauce again.

She works to build up his confidence, an arguably misguided benevolence, sings his praises at every provocation. Francis can't blow his nose without being admired for talents criminal to hide.

Why don't you be my editor? she says one evening over dinner, trying to keep his fragile self-image together. I'm sure you could do as good a job as that other guy.

I suspect that other guy must have been really first-rate, he says.

Oh you'd be so much better than whatever his name, she says. If they knew how smart you were, they'd go out of their minds. And I'm not saying that to build up your ego or anything. I'm saying that because it happens to be the truth.

It is time to move on, thinks Francis—one can imagine him saying it to himself again and again—though he is unable to make a move, doesn't know how to take the first step. He would like to do something for Judith to repay her kindness, something or other to even the score.

Francis gets bored with being humored so slips out when Judith is not watching to reclaim his self-respect. Drying out has changed him, has left

him without any irony to speak of, the frightened survivor of an unremembered devastation.

He decides to leave Judith and stops in a bar to celebrate his decision.

The first drink leads to a second and the second, though he has set himself a limit of two, to an inevitable third. Just when we think he will never get out of the bar, Francis notices a former friend in the back and gets up to avoid recognition. It is almost too late. The thirst has increased. He has begun to hallucinate, the world in double focus.

Hey, the former friend calls after him, aren't you . . . ?

Francis continues on and out of the saloon without looking back, checking in the windows of passing shops for the reflection of his pursuer, only to discover how unrecognizably changed he himself has become. I am who you think I am, he wants to say. He turns to say it.

I don't know how to tell you this, Judith says when he comes in, but while you were gone I fell in love with someone else. You don't have to clear out right away, Buck. I just want you to know the score.

Francis takes the news mildly, says as soon as he can find the door he will let himself out.—Who is it? he asks.

The story comes out that Judith's new lover is younger and better looking than Francis, though perhaps with not so fine a mind.

Francis resists the disclosure, argues with Judith against the possibility. They have their first acknowledged fight, a minor landmark in their relationship.

Francis sleeps sitting up in the apartment's only chair that night, estranged from the various pleasures of Judith's bed.

He doesn't love Judith (that is, he does and he doesn't), but is drawn to the humiliating experience she has to offer him.

Her book comes out, has a six figure paperback sale and is bought by the movies. Judith is an instantaneous celebrity, goes on talk shows, makes numerous public appearances. Francis tends to stay at home and nurse his indifference.

He seems, observes Judith, to have no interest in life.

Judith likes to talk to friends about her problem with Francis. She calls confidantes up at all hours of the night—those nights that she is not appearing on talk shows—to share her disappointment. Her life isn't all roses, she wants them to know.

Buck doesn't like my friends, she says to one. He feels they ignore him which I suppose is true. But he makes himself so uninteresting at parties. He's much more interesting than that.

Is he? asks the incredulous friend. I didn't know that.

Oh, he has a good mind, says Judith, when he has a mind to use it. Mostly he just sulks around the house watching soapers on the television.

In the meantime, Judith is having a doomed affair with an impotent seventeen-year old heroin addict.

He needs me, she offers in explanation. She is a woman, she confides, exaggeratedly responsive to the needs of others.

Francis can see that his days and nights as Judith's lover are numbered, but can't think of anything else he'd rather do.

I'm proud, Buck, she says over breakfast, that you're on your own two feet again. (Success has made her wordy and a trifle incoherent.)

He stands up. —On my feet but a little shaky.

She laughs idiotically. —What a marvelous sense of humor you have, Buck.

Francis can feel the thrust of her conversation pushing him out the door so changes the subject, talks of the economy, the weather, the political climate, the bicentennial, the forthcoming election, the crisis in education, new directions in the modern novel, the great game of baseball, deep-sea fishing off the coast of Madagascar, the care and raising of butterflies, the button-down collar, the metaphysics of despair.

What a wealth of information you have, Buck, she says. I've learned so much from you in a comparatively short time.

Compared to what? he wants to know.

She has no answer to that, laughing gayly before returning to high seriousness, says she wants nothing more than total honesty between them.

In total honesty, says Judith, I believe I have learned all I can from you and the time has come for us to go our separate ways.

Francis is obliged to say that Judith's total honesty deserves nothing less in return. He has grown bored, he feels constrained to confess, with her simpering pretension and unimaginative rutting. He will leave in a couple of days, no worry, as soon as he can get it together.

Fuck off, creep, she says with ladylike iciness. I want your alcoholic ass out of here pronto.

Francis starts to laugh and can't stop, falls on the floor like a madman, his hilarity like a fit.

Fantasies of murder and mutilation occupy an idle heart. Judith prowls the kitchen area in search of a suitable weapon, returns to him with a kick and a word or two of advice. —Pride goeth before a fall, she says.

You can say that again, he says, too weak from laughing to get to his feet. —Judith, you're too much.

Get off my back, she screams, you albatross. You turd. You mother's boy. You maricón. You pimple on my ass.

Francis kisses her shoe to ingratiate himself, but he can see that he has lost the old power to charm. She taps her foot impatiently, no longer moved by his erotic devotion. Stop playing the dog, she says. Have a little dignity, craphead.

His tongue moves up her leg like a snake or an infectious rash. Judith pretends boredom. Ah, she allows.

Francis leaves without so much as a single heart-rending glance back. Promise me you won't take your life, she calls after him.

When Judith discovers that Francis is gone, his life taken with him, she is not without misgivings. She puts her face to the wall and has a good cry—five or six minutes of excoriating grief—before starting on her second book.

Judith can do no wrong. Not only is her second book a smash, but as an outgrowth it is discovered that she has a marvelous public speaking voice, a voice that might speak profitably to a large uninformed public on radio or television. There is even talk (ah but it is just talk) of an exclusive interview with the President, who is said to be an admirer of Judith's work.

One thing you can say about Judith: she has worked for everything she's got. On top of her daily newscasts and her book writing, she takes on an occasional late night date, a woman with a getting through the dark-night-of-the-soul problem.

It is a full and fulfilling life, though she misses Francis in her way, thinks about him whenever she has time to think. *I wonder what old Buck is doing at this moment*, she often wonders.

Although on the rise, her upward mobility something to marvel at, Judith does not forget her origins or her old friends. A hooker acquaintance comes by for some advice or to use her douche, she treats her as she would the Queen of England come on a similar errand.

The only notable change in her life style is that she has to get an unlisted number to protect her from obscene calls. Almost every night between 2 and 3 a.m., she gets a call from a breather.

Judith sees it as the price of fame and tells the story on herself on talk shows, where live audiences tend to cheer her imitation of her awful admirer. In real life, however, it is no joke.

The calls tend to undermine an otherwise indomitable spirit. Judith hires a bodyguard to answer the phone, a smarmy silent type named Grahame who, according to his credentials, is a former CIA agent with a license to kill. There's something indefinably creepy about him, though he seems dedicated to the job.

(She chooses him from an impressively written fan letter, offering his services for a pittance.)

Grahame logs in the calls, marking their exact time and duration, and makes daily reports in a world-weary accent that cannot be cultivated overnight. His style, as Judith says to her friends, is classy in the extreme.

She calls him "Harry" not so much because he reminds her of a Harry, but out of one of those little whims that is characteristically Judith.

Besides receiving her obscene phone calls for her, Harry cooks her an occasional meal and keeps the apartment in shipshape. He makes himself, this figure of servile demeanor and insinuating silence, an addictive necessity in her life.

One day she discovers that Harry has been stealing her jewels, one at a time, and selling them for considerably less than their value. What to do. She can overlook these symbolic violations of her integrity for just so long. It is hard to continue living with a man who systematically undervalues your jewels.

Harry's seeming faithlessness disillusioned Judith with the entire servant class. She reluctantly confronts him with the evidence and gives him two weeks' notice.

Harry presents himself as a wronged man, framed by circumstance and unseen enemies, seems in fact so outraged and innocent that Judith, who could swear she had the goods on him, begins to distrust her own sanity.

Harry insists on severing all further connection between them, will not be bought off by unfelt apologies.

The least he can do before he leaves her in the lurch, says Judith, is accept a letter of recommendation she has written for him, focusing on his good qualities, ignoring the bad. He will take nothing from her.

So Harry, all shabby gentility and smarmy self-respect, goes his way. Judith's household falls into disarray. Obscene phone calls come at all hours of the night without regard to ordinary decencies of schedule. There is no one about to make her lunch or to tell her what talk show she is appearing on that day.

Although not a religious woman, not in the ordinary sense, Judith wanders into a neighborhood church and prays for Harry's return. What she needs at this time in her life, she realizes, is not a lover or a husband but a good and devoted servant.

Her prayers are not answered, not right away. She wonders if the problem is that she's forgotten how to pray, has lost her relationship to the deity. She remembers reading in a dentist's waiting room that the rich and the powerful sometimes miss the boat with the Lord.

A few nights after Harry's departure, the breather speaks to Judith on the phone for the first time. YOUR LIFE ISN'T WORTH TWO CENTS, he whispers in an awful voice.

What's that supposed to mean? she asks, but he doesn't stay long enough to answer.

Now she is really scared. She calls the police and asks for protection. Well, they've all seen her on TV telling funny stories about her calls and are unable to take her cry for help as anything more than a thinly veiled publicity device. People who threaten on the phone, says the sergeant in charge of her

case, almost never go any further than threat. If an assailant breaks in, however, she should not hesitate to call again.

If I'm killed, she says, you'll be the first to hear.

The police, like everyone else, appreciate a woman who is not afraid to speak her mind.

Who could possibly want to kill her? She goes through the pages of her address book, looking in vain for a suspect she might hang her suspicion on. An internal logic presents itself: the one she would like to kill is the one who wants to kill her.

She meets her principal suspect (the first of several significant coincidences) on a street corner in front of Bloomingdale's, disguised as a Santa Claus. It pains her to see him so out of character.

Can we go somewhere and talk? she says, dropping a five dollar bill in his cup. She is laden with packages at the time, an ambitious holiday shopper, tending to buy everything that pleases her eye.

You've aged, she says.

He doesn't deny it.

When she tells Francis (for that's who it is) of her problem with anonymous callers and threats on her life, she studies his face for a telltale sign.

He has always, for as long as she's known him (or longer), behaved in a suspicious manner.

Judith offers Francis a job as her bodyguard which Francis predictably refuses.

And then she says, straight out so that there can be no mistaking her intent: Was it you? (Judith has never been one to avoid the direct question.)

The intractable necessities of character divide them. Francis answers her accusation with a semblance of his former irony, says that perhaps it is Judith herself who is making the calls.

Judith wants to trust that he is innocent, though it is not in her nature to trust him. She is a woman devoted to the messages of her intuition. —If it is you, she says, I want you to know I understand and forgive.

He jingles his bell and says, Merry Christmas.

When Judith returns home there is someone waiting for her in her new luxury apartment. It is Grahame—the man she calls Harry.

You've come back to me, she says, grateful, willing to overlook the unorthodox mode of his return.

He says nothing, merely smiles as if posing for a photograph.

It strikes her that if he employed that smile more often, he might have gone right to the top of his chosen profession. —How damn lovely to see you, she says (or wants to say) when Grahame clicks something on in his coat pocket and a familiar voice, trapped in there, whispers to her. YOU'VE GOT SOME SINS TO ANSWER FOR, SLUT, it says.

What are you saying, Harry? (She laughs with disbelief.)

The name is not Harry, says her visitor in his unrecorded voice, though I've always been free and easy with my identity. The other voice interrupts, whispering, **YOU THINK YOU CAN ESCAPE ME, JUDITH. THERE IS NO ESCAPE. I'M GOING TO DO YOU, HARLOT. I KNOW EXACTLY WHERE YOU ARE AT EVERY MOMENT OF THE DAY AND NIGHT.**

Harry, he's here, she says, the caller. He's in the room with us.

I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE, the voice in his pocket says again. Grahame says nothing, puts on a pair of black vinyl gloves.

Judith, beginning to comprehend the danger, offers Harry (or Grahame if he insists) anything of hers he wants. Her love. Her undying friendship. The rest of her jewels.

First I want you to sign this declaration of suicide, he says, holding out a neatly typed letter (on her private stationery) which she reluctantly accepts.

When she unfolds the sheet she finds that she is unable to focus, the words written in smoke. —I'll have to get my reading glasses, she announces.

Reading it will not improve your mind, he says. He gives her his thick orange fountain pen and points to the dotted line designated for her signature.

I'd rather use my own, she says, if you don't mind.

It turns out, of course, that he does mind and refuses her access to her black satin purse.

I've always wanted to get into that purse, he says, removing the delicate hand gun she keeps there for emergencies.

She delays signing, insists the pen has no ink, then as if by accident, testing it, spurts the black fluid into his eyes.

I was just kidding, she says when she sees how angry it makes him. If you had a better opinion of yourself, Grahame, if you saw yourself the way I see you, you would have no need to behave in an anti-social manner.

Grahame has been chasing her around the room, knocking chairs and lamps and vanity tables from between them when Judith makes this remark, which occasions an apparent change of heart in him. He becomes contemplative, achieves a moment of small dignity.

Judith works him over with compliments while fleeing his pursuit. When he catches her they embrace, Judith treating him as she would one of the johns in her former life.

The doorbell rings, changing the weather in the room.

Grahame claps a vinyl-gloved hand over her mouth, warning her if she makes a sound her life isn't worth pins.

After the sixth ring, whoever is at the door seems to go away. Judith, struggling for breath, inadvertantly bumps her assailant's pocket, activating

the tape recorder. YOU'RE ITCHING FOR IT, AREN'T YOU, SLUT, the eerie voice whispers. Grahame clicks off the tape, but the voice continues, no longer in his pocket. JUDGMENT DAY IS AT HAND, HARLOT, he says in perfect imitation of her mysterious caller.

It's you, she says, the last shred of doubt gone.

Grahame ties her hands behind her and stuffs a monogrammed dish towel in her mouth. —I suppose you'll want to know why, he says before strangling her with the sash of her red velvet drapes. Judith nods her assent.

Grahame tells his pathetic story. Since earliest memory, he has been fatally attracted to violence as some are to cars and others to money. It is the kind of predilection that can earn a man a decent living in government service if he follows orders and disposes of only the people they want no more of. That isn't the whole story about him. He is also an idealist committed to righting the wrongs of the world, particularly when those wrongs have no other spokesman.

I think of myself as a modern day Robin Hood, he says.

His limited understanding of himself brings tears to Judith's eyes. You need help, she wants to tell him.

Graham stalks the room, spilling out his story, working himself into a condition from which there is no turning back.

Abruptly he is on top of her, the sash (a knot at its center) around her neck. He is grinning madly like a death's head.

Judith is losing consciousness, is seemingly moments from death when Francis, a local policeman in tow, descends through the skylight to save her.

How did you know he was here? she asks later (she is lying on the bed looking up at him) after the policeman and Grahame are gone.

I had once read something in manuscript with a similar plot, he says. When you let on about your problem, the coincidence struck me. The author of that book was a former CIA agent named H.R. Grahame-Forsythe. I followed you here and when I heard your screams for help I got the policeman and we broke in.

That's odd, says Judith. I never had the opportunity to call for help. You must have heard the screams of someone else.

He is about to leave when Judith calls him back for one last go at love, something to remember her by.

When he inclines toward her—he is already in his own heart on the road toward reconciliation with his former life—Judith screams. Screams. It is what he remembers of his time with her.