

Contingencies · Sondra Spatt Olsen

NADIA SITS IN HER TINY OFFICE on the eighth floor of the Humanities Wing. She is leaving college teaching in a few weeks and has appointed this time to give away her books to her students. Over sixteen years she's accumulated many unwanted books, most sent unsolicited by publishers, and she is not about to bring them home to her overcrowded apartment. In a year or so she plans to leave New York City, and then she will probably have to give away the rest of her library as well, perhaps to the Salvation Army.

She wonders if any students will show up. Are free books an attraction, anyway? She was honest in her description, "Many useful grammars and anthologies, a little bit of fiction and poetry, but not much, so first come, first served. You can even sell the books at Barnes & Noble. Most are brand new. I'd do it, but they're too heavy for me."

Nadia is a little woman, rather fragile in health right now. This past summer she's had a hysterectomy. Her doctor (whom she trusts) has promised her that she has a long life to live, that surgery was just a necessary preventative for a pre-cancerous condition, and although Nadia believes him, she remains uneasy. She misses her womb. She's forty-five, past childbearing age, but it would be nice to think she has the equipment to bear another child if she wishes.

Because she scheduled her yearly checkup for late May after finals, Nadia didn't miss a single class. At first she was proud of her superb attendance. In the ten years since her divorce she's devoted herself to the academic life, burnishing her syllabi to a high lustre, attending lengthy committee meetings on course requirements, and conferences on Teaching English. When she returns to the Humanities Wing for the fall semester, though, she suddenly realizes that she's had enough. There are far more exciting things to do: traveling to foreign cities, collecting her best poetry into a book, printing up the negatives that occupy a deep drawer in her bureau. If her life *were* going to be shortened, these would be essential occupations.

An inheritance from her aunt will support her nicely. Her son can help her in an emergency. (He is away in Alaska this year, a strapping young fellow making money in a salmon cannery, enjoying adventures.) She will get rid of all encumbrances like strict schedules, midterms, unwanted

books, and find a perfect little cottage in rural Connecticut or Massachusetts.

For most of her office hour, no one at all shows up. “First come, first served” was useless optimism. Actually, it’s not first come, first served at all. Two weeks ago, after some reflection, she wrote a note on the essay of her favorite student, below the A and the laudatory comment—“Please stop by my office before class next week.” He is her pet, an attractive boy whose alert face caught her eye the moment she walked into *Aspects of Poetry*. Peter turned out highly gifted with a romantic naïve heart just like the one that Nadia herself used to carry around. Her own naïveté disappeared long ago, but what a pleasure to find it again in Peter Riordan. He is under-educated, has never read T. S. Eliot or Pound before her class, but his reactions are pure, and it’s wonderfully easy to pick up his expressions of enthusiasm or disgust from the back row, where he sits with his green jacket flung around his shoulders like a cape.

Nadia feels sad. He is the last talented student she will ever have, and she is a little bit in love with him despite or because of his youth. From the back row he looks to be only in his early twenties, about the same age as her son. In the mixed bag of an evening class, it’s hard to sort out the ages of working people who study at night.

Nadia remembers the precise moment she went from interest to infatuation. Discussing poetic images of decay with the class, she began to quote Shakespeare’s sonnet 73 but had a mental lapse. She could remember the featureless number of the sonnet, but of the unique opening line not a single word. “Oh, you know,” she exclaimed, “the one about ‘bare ruined choirs.’” But how would the class know unless she told them?

Then Peter began quoting in his hoarse Brooklyn voice. “That time of year thou mayst in me behold. . . .” She gave him a surprised, gratified smile. Memory returned and she began to quote along with him to the very end of the sonnet, fourteen lines in unison, a dramatic moment, a renewal.

“This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.”

It was as though she could feel her old heart (removed long ago in favor of plastic) beating steadily again in her breast.

In recompense Nadia planned to give Peter first choice of her books, but he didn’t appear. When she invited the rest of the class to her office, she

thought she saw comprehension on Peter's face. We really do think closely alike, she thought. He's very clever and good. Please don't let him do anything which will make me like him less than I do now.

A moment later he was misinterpreting the poem they were analyzing, claiming it was about colonialism when it really described foreign graveyards, and as she gently denied his claim, she felt alarm. To make her joyful he must be better than life, not a real person at all.

At the end of class Peter came to her desk and stared down at her and she saw him close up for the first time. She noted a few flecks of black moles on his cheeks. His thick hair was chestnut combed straight back, and his brilliant green eyes which had been staring at her from the back row for twelve weeks now were just as startling as she had imagined.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to get to your office in time," he said. "Just tonight I had to work late."

"Come and get books," she replied casually. "Any time."

That week she went round her bookshelves at home, carefully selecting books for Peter. He was Catholic, she remembered, from his essay on William Blake. Among her stack she chose *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and Joe Orton's *Loot*, a black comedy from the sixties, all works about lost faith. "His mother, if she's pious, will hate me."

She began thinking of her son, March, born in her own early Romantic era. As a boy he'd never liked the books she'd chosen for him at the public library. Neither an artist nor an intellectual, but a man of action like his father, he was happier in a factory in Alaska than in school in New York. Her thoughts turned to the abortion she'd had when she was thirty and studying hard for her crucial doctoral exams. That unwanted child would be fifteen now and still in high school, a girl perhaps, perhaps gifted in painting or drama. Yes, she remembered another reason, their rent-controlled apartment had only one bedroom.

Now sitting in her office on the eighth floor with books piled before her on the desk and lining her shelves to the ceiling, Nadia finally hears a light knock. Here's Peter outside the door, smiling shyly. He's neatly dressed in corduroy pants and a boy's navy blue sweater with a white collar, the sort an aunt would present at Christmas time. A girlfriend would choose green.

"Come in," Nadia cries heartily and seats him on the opposite side of

her desk, an arm's length away. "You are *such* a good student. Are you an English major?"

She soon discovers that Peter doesn't belong in her class at all. He doesn't have any prerequisites for an advanced course; he's a mere lower sophomore, signed up only because he likes poetry.

"You see, I'm only nineteen."

"Oh, dear."

Then Nadia notices the baby curve of his round cheek. She looks down and sees the childish fatness of his feet in his loosely laced Adidas, his general downiness, his just hatched quality. She is drawn to him just the same. He is eager and unprotected, as she once was, open to experience, naïvely honest.

"I'm glad to have the chance to tell you," he says. "You know that time I quoted the Shakespeare poem? I don't want you to think I'm better than I am. We had to memorize it in high school. In parochial school you have to memorize a lot."

"I *was* very impressed," Nadia says, smiling. "But don't put yourself down. It's still a feat to remember a sonnet and then produce it at the proper moment to cause a dramatic sensation."

They smile at each other, feeling at ease.

"I write poetry myself," he says. "It's really terrible. But I do it like breathing, and I took the course to pick up some pointers. Actually, it was the only one I could fit into my schedule. Too advanced, I guess," and he looks guiltily down at his Adidas.

"Oh, but you should take Poetry Workshop!" Nadia cries in a frenzy of helpfulness. "You've got to talk to other poets! We are doing it upside down, from the critical perspective, not the real thing at all. I do want to encourage you. . . ."

"Oh, but I love the 'critical perspective,'" he replies. "I'm the only one in my family to go to college and it's because I write poetry, but I also like the critical perspective. . . ."

Here he gives a slightly superior smile. He's quick to pick up her own attitude toward the academic world she's leaving. Then he grins more naturally. "I have a custodial job in a high school on the West Side." He names a school not too far from where Nadia lives. "I like working there because I'm on my own, I've plenty of time to think while I'm working and do my poetry in my head."

“I do want to encourage you,” Nadia says again. “But you ought to know you’ll never make any money writing poetry.”

“That’s ok.”

They sit and smile at each other, pleased with each other’s capacities.

“I expect you want books, and here are some especially for you,” she says, patting the pile, “and you know there are other useful ones on the shelves, though they’re not very . . .”

“. . . exciting,” he says.

“But since you’re young, you have to take the useful as well as the exciting. When you’re my age, if you’re lucky like me, you’ll do as you please.”

“Why are you stopping teaching?”

“I want to get out from under. Sixteen years is a long time to do one thing. If only all my students had been as good as you. Besides,” Nadia continues with a fine romantic flourish, “how often in your life do you get a chance to create some new contingencies?”

Peter nods, looking a little puzzled. There is a silence.

“I write poetry, too,” she says, but then before any further confidences, Nadia hears a bold, assertive knock on the door.

It’s Alberto, Peter’s rival bright student. Alberto made a sensational start to the term with his essay on Lowell, which Nadia read aloud to the class, but then he’d been absent for a spell and now has another essay long overdue. He is a thirty-five-year-old telephone repairman with three children.

Standing on the threshold, looking down on them, Alberto chatters on apologetically about his problems at work, his eyes fixed intently on her, and Peter is growing restless. She feels the vibrations of his shuffling feet under the desk.

In the corner of her eye she sees Peter’s blue sweater standing up and moving, but she can’t bring herself to pull her gaze away from Alberto. Peter is surveying the bookshelves, but he doesn’t find himself attracted by any useful volume. After a moment, he interrupts Alberto. “Excuse me. Let me say thanks for these books. I’ll remember you by them,” he graciously comments and slips around Alberto and through the door.

On the last evening of classes just before Christmas, Nadia enters her classroom to discover wine, cheese, crackers, plastic cups and paper plates on her desk. Her students, all but one of them, are beaming at her. Peter’s

place in the last row is empty, but he bursts dramatically through the door a few minutes late, breathlessly flourishing a bottle of New York State Champagne. He's run from the bus stop, she deduces, to preserve its chill.

There's enough in the bottle for every soul in class to have a drop. Every soul stands up and lifts a glass to Peter's salutation—"Sorry for our sake but glad for yours." Nadia is ecstatic. Though she doesn't like champagne and takes only one sip, she is made drunk by all the friendly pleasant faces around her. They don't seem like her students anymore, these well-wishers, but more like her *audience*. "But why didn't any of you come and get books?" she cries out, feigning bewilderment.

"We wanted them," goes the cry. "We couldn't get here early." "Babysitters." "Mean bosses." "The subway."

Nadia brandishes the key to her office, which clinks against the police whistle she carries on the chain. (This is New York, after all, capital of crime.) "Come with me now. Free books for all."

They troop noisily through the hallways together, fourteen of them, disturbing other classes, no doubt, but what does Nadia care about good academic behavior now? She throws open the door of her little cell, then leans negligently against the corridor wall as her grownup men and women students root amongst the shelves for treasures.

In the brightly lit hallway Peter stands beside her. He's much taller than she is, she realizes. She must tilt her head up to look at him. Around his neck he has flung proudly and self-consciously but with an authentic dashing air a bright red and green tartan wool scarf. "I had to buy it in the Women's Department," he confides, as she compliments him on how well it suits. "They never sell anything as bright as this in Men's."

"I wonder if you understand how much I'm enjoying all this," she says. "My farewell appearance."

"Because you only do it once," he replies. "It's never as much fun the second time around."

"There will be no second time," she promises.

"May I send you some poems?" he asks. "If I write some that are decent enough?"

"I'll be glad to look at whatever you produce, and if you send yours, I'll send mine."

Nadia and Peter exchange addresses on little scraps of blue lined notebook paper. The whole group of joking and laughing students then re-

turns to their classroom where the boldest among them read aloud their favorite poem from anthologies they've just chosen. Peter recites "Tyger, Tyger burning bright," from memory, rising to his feet and tugging on the tartan scarf as he declaims. All stand up around Nadia, drinking and reciting until the janitor comes in to complain about their lateness. It's almost ten-thirty. That night Nadia goes home to her snug apartment on the West Side feeling much happier than she had expected.

Soon a new semester begins, but Nadia ignores the academic calendar. She is busy refurbishing her life as though it were a new apartment. She has the time now to fulfill her most urgent and her smallest desires. She buys theater tickets. She goes to the Caribbean for a week. She lies in bed late in the morning, writing poetry. She lunches with friends whom she has long neglected, catching up on the small gossip of their lives. She cleans out her files. She buys new clothes of a less sedate character.

After several months, her teaching career of sixteen years seems dim. Peter is the only bright memory, as bright as his Christmas scarf. She's surprised that he doesn't send her a sheaf of his poems. She decides to forget about him. Most of the time she succeeds, but every month or so she is seized as if by a powerful virus with an urge to see him. His recurring physical image is indeed just like the bout of an illness, consuming but never lasting more than three or four days.

One night she dreams that she and Peter are standing together in her office, looking at bookshelves, their bodies nudging each other lightly. She reaches out for one bright book covered in glass and feels him stirring beside her. She wakes racked with desire.

The next day she strolls slowly past the high school where Peter works. She stops for a moment beside the barred courtyard.

Could these feelings possibly be the result of the hormones she's taking? She asks her doctor about it uneasily during her checkup.

"Anxiety can sometimes cause increased desire. Have you tried intercourse since surgery?"

"No."

"If you did, you would find your responses in excellent working order. Just the way you returned to normal after childbirth. Your sexuality hasn't been impaired in the slightest. Try it." The doctor smiles, only slightly patronizing. "You'll see."

More time passes. Nadia has meant to find her own perfect cottage, but

as the time approaches to start combing real estate listings, she changes her mind. Isn't there something a little tomblike, after all, about a little cottage? She is too young to retire to rural solitude. Besides, she will never meet any desirable men in the country. She craves the excitement of foreign cities.

A chance listing in her college alumnae magazine leads her to a luxuriously furnished apartment in Rome on the Via Teatro Marcello. She remembers Rome as not especially comfortable yet full of exhilarating contrasts. But then she was a dizzy college student in pointy-toe high heels tottering through the blinding hot streets in search of culture. Her airhead days, she's called them to herself, but what have the succeeding days been then—earthhead? She decides to live in Rome for one year. But is it worthwhile to give up her rent-controlled apartment which doesn't permit subleases? And what will she do with her furniture?

Just as she's worrying over her options, March returns from Alaska. He has a lovely young woman living with him now. With Mary Jo's help March will be able to pay the rent on Nadia's apartment. It's all turning out for the best. March even looks different. Broader, with a dark, solid-looking beard, he has the sculptured, finished look of a Michelangelo. In her conversations with him Nadia is impressed by his steady air, though she is a bit annoyed when Mary Jo calls him "Mark."

March ought to have the apartment. After all, he was born there. He can even keep all the furniture. Not the books, though. Nadia is still determined to get rid of most of the books which take up so much room in her life. Nadia's books are arranged in an idiosyncratic style—in the exact order in which she acquired them. This means that no one but Nadia can ever locate a volume among all the ill-assorted shapes on shelves that line every room.

In the bedroom are old books from high school and college, the memorable golden volumes that shaped her literary tastes. Nadia will never part with these. In the living room, once March's bedroom, now Nadia's study, stand handsome oak shelves filled with the stolid tomes from graduate school, Pope, Hazlitt, Piers Plowman. Why has she never thrown away Baugh's *History of English Literature*? Here, too, are the many poets of the forties and fifties upon whom she based her dissertation. The hallways and vestibule are filled with books of the sixties, seventies, eighties. In a separate case under the window are all the unwanted specimens her hus-

band managed to palm off on her when he moved out. Nadia decides to throw out everything she has bought since she was twenty-one. The shelves, stripped of books and filled with occasional pots of flowers and objects d'art, will look much more airy and free.

With Nadia's next regular spasm of desire for Peter comes a sudden happy idea. She will simply call him up and offer him the entire collection. He can sell what he doesn't want to read. They did say, "We will keep in touch."

Feeling a good deal of anxiety, Nadia begins packing and making arrangements. She thinks about taking classes in Rome, but then realizes that the last thing she wants is to be stuck again in some academy. It's exciting to have a new passport and be learning Italian from a little handbook and practicing it on her dentist, but once she leaves and March is installed in her apartment, will she be displaced, an expatriate forever? What if he marries and has a child and decides to stay in Manhattan? Surely she won't want to reclaim her space? Everything is being left up in the air. Only a young person, a poet, could find such open-endedness exhilarating. A middle-aged person needs a nest. For the first time she thinks with nostalgia of her little cell on the eighth floor of the Humanities Wing.

With her flight booked, lease signed, books already packed in cartons from the liquor store, it seems appropriate for Nadia to call Peter.

She has saved the scrap of blue-lined paper in her jewel box among the pearls and corals. The address represents his parents' home in faroff Brooklyn, somewhere near Jamaica Bay — terra incognita for her — but she imagines a neighborhood of neat brick homes, a Catholic church with a tall slender statue of the Virgin, shady streets of sycamore trees.

Nadia decides to telephone Peter on a late Saturday morning, when she hopes he will not be out working, studying, going to church. She feels unnerved, walks around the apartment several times, holding her own hands.

At last she finds resolution, picks up the telephone. A woman answers, old, exhausted, whispery-voiced. Nadia's own voice in contrast sounds shrill and rapacious. "Hello, may I speak to Peter?"

"This is Peter's mother. Who is calling, please?" Nadia hears an odd note of suspicion or astonishment.

"Mrs. Reiter. I used to be Peter's English teacher." There is no need for any further explanation, but she runs on nonetheless. "I'm leaving the

country. I thought Peter might want to have my books. I once gave him some books.”

“You don’t know about Peter’s accident? Peter got smashed up in a motorcycle accident.”

“Oh, no!” Nadia feels harrowed, unable to speak.

“It wasn’t even his motorcycle. He was just going around the block to be polite, riding behind, a two-minute ride, but he had no crash helmet. He was in a coma all summer. He’s still sick but he’s home now.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You want to send him books?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he can’t do any reading now. I don’t know if he’ll go back to school.”

“Would he be able to speak to me? I’m about to leave the country. Mrs. Riordan, I’m so sorry. He was one of my very best students.”

There’s a long pause on the other end. “I’ll get him. He likes to get telephone calls. I’ll see if he remembers you.”

Mrs. Riordan is gone for a very long time. Nadia, feeling worse and worse, is tempted to hang up the telephone. A coma is something for which she’s not prepared. She feels herself slipping away from the situation.

Finally she hears a commotion near the telephone, and Mrs. Riordan saying loudly, “Your old teacher. From college. She wants to give you books.”

She hears the receiver bumping several times, and an unrecognizable voice saying, “Hello, books?”

“Peter, this is Nadia Reiter. How are you doing?” She holds her breath.

“Books,” he repeats in a stumbling, glottal voice. “I want books. You send them, baby!”