

PARTY

TODAY I AM SEVENTY YEARS OLD. I am amazed by that simple fact, but will not remark on it further than to express mild alarm and to remind myself that however hard one tries to forget, it is easier to contemplate the past than the future, and there is bound to be more back there than there is up ahead, and to remember that one's life slides by on the fluid crest of time, as they say. That is about as philosophical as I plan to get about it, although I can't help toting up this statistic: it has been one year, nine months, and thirteen days—at just about this hour.

Because I feel, in some obscure way, that the day should be noted, I am giving a party. It is to be catered by some young women who do that sort of thing and they are going to do it all, from drinks to snacks to a sit-down dinner. It will cost me a bundle.

I will go to the office this morning as usual—it is now nearly five-thirty—and I will discuss and probably argue about proofs and editing and jackets and other things more or less interesting, and then I'll come home in the heat of the day to bathe and dress and wait for my guests to arrive. I must remember to plump up the cushions on the sofa.

There will be fifteen for dinner and I have just realized that they all have cute names: Jan, Debbie, Kathi, Emmylou—and they will bring their current husbands or friends—Josh, Uriah, Bones, and Bobby Lee and so on. What ever happened to Tom, Dick, and Harry? I will greet them as they arrive with a peck on the cheek—we kiss thoughtlessly these days—for the young ladies and a firm handclasp for the men. I will be astonished—again—at their youth. These are the people I work with, and for the most part they are pleasant to have around. They pose a little, and some of them drink and smoke too much, but they are good people, and they like me, I think. In any event, they enjoy a good meal and a few drinks now and then and my parties, I know, are thought of kindly.

They will indulge me in my offerings of music—all on tape, for I will allow no one to touch my records. They will half-listen, or not at all, because they will all be busy laying bare their hearts to each other. But I will listen: It's the Talk of the Town, Ain't Misbehavin', Body and Soul, Lover Come Back to Me, Opus 3/4, Sugar—I've even worked in a bit of the last great movement of Dvořák's Fifth, just to see if anyone shifts gears noticeably.

I will watch them all and smile and lust after some of the young women, of course. I'll tell you something about seventy: it isn't necessarily *dead*. I will look particularly at Debbie, who is very beautiful if not terribly bright. She once thought the little junco at the bird feeder was on dope. But she is lovely to look at, and it seems to me that if one has the idea of a perfect late love it should be possible, and should involve such a person as Debbie—if the imagination is capable of establishing the proper circumstances, the active mind should have the power to bring them into actual being. Nothing, I have been told often enough, is impossible. If you think I don't know better, you are a dime short.

So I will look at them and marvel at their vigor and wonder when it was that I lost the moments which were there and those which I felt would someday come and didn't; and I will envy them their youth, but not their insouciance. I will imagine some of them unclothed, but I will not touch—I am very trustworthy in that respect. I will do my best to ignore the young men, in perfectly friendly ways, of course.

When the greetings have been made and the drinks passed around and the music is playing, and after we have observed the formalities of dinner, I will steal out and walk around the shore of our little lake, to hear the sweet evening sounds of spring and to remember seventy fleeting years. I will wonder how I came to this fearful state. I see the world now much as I have always seen it—bearing in mind the facts of four wars, a depression, unimaginable voyages to the moon, an assassinated president and a deposed one—and a world ill at ease with itself in the certainty of imminent destruction. I will hear the night cry of a catbird and the lonely call of a hound across the water. And I will remember the rise and fall of a woman's breast as she breathed her last harsh breaths.

My love was too proud to use a cane. Even when her leg hurt to beat hell she'd struggle along, leaning heavily on my arm. "Your little filly has gone lame," she said. "You limp, too, so folks will think we were both in an accident." Sometimes there was such pain in her eyes I could not bear looking into them, and I often had the feeling that I was somehow responsible, that I must have done something terribly wrong to curse her with that misery she felt every day of her life, every moment of it. When I suggested that possibility she said, "Of *course* it's your fault! Everything is your fault. You are personally responsible for all the evil in the world, and don't think I'm not going to get you *good* one of these days." She'd never

say, simply, “You’re wrong.” She’d point out the absurdities in my logic, but she’d never accuse me of stupidity. “You just don’t understand the joys of pain,” she said.

When we first moved to Toddville we built a house (warm and friendly modern, the architect claimed), in the southeast corner of town only about a quarter-mile through an overgrown orchard to Millen Park, where there were stables for trotters and boarding facilities for the riding horses belonging to city folk. Jenny bought a two-year-old mare from Evert Reed, the kindest man, black *or* white, I’ve ever known, and she named her for him—Evvv. Jenny was in tune with everything sweet and natural. She looked at wild flowers with reverence and gratitude, and at the silliness of people with understanding and compassion. She regarded sex as perfectly natural, whether in humans or animals—a phenomenon quite like lightning—spontaneous and necessary, and sometimes a bit on the destructive side.

Once, when I was away from home for a few days, I returned to my hotel room just as the phone rang.

“Have you a woman in your room?” a voice asked.

“Certainly not!” I almost shouted.

“Would you *like* one?”

“Jen? Is that you, Jen?”

“You betcha,” she said, “and I’m right in the next room and I don’t got no clothes on.”

Of course, that was before Evvv stepped in a gopher hole that steamy day in late August, and fell on Jenny crushing her left knee. Evert was there and got her to the hospital. By the time he found me, in tears himself, Ken Birch was there just looking at the x-rays.

“Looks like gravel in there,” he said. He did the best he could and sent her to Granville where there is a good orthopedist, and he did the best he could, but it was a badly smashed joint. When she took her first steps with the walker following the final operation, I asked her how it felt.

“Stiff as a honeymoon prick!” she said, and wept.

She gave up horses altogether, not only because of her knee but also because Evvv had to be destroyed and that broke her heart, too. She took up art instead—something she could do seated with her gimpy leg stretched out to the left. It was not a good substitute. She punished herself by not

using the crutches and in time got so she could walk without them, but at considerable cost to her in both pain and pride.

About a year after the accident some sort of systemic reaction took place and arthritis seized her entire body and every joint in it. Many operations did some good, but not much. Complete hip replacements did help some, but the bad knee was so messed up that a new joint there was out of the question. She was a bundle of constant and severe misery. She took what medication was available, knowing that the little relief it gave her would most likely shorten her life, but she was damned if she would become wedded to a wheelchair.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that I suffered along with her, but in different ways. I felt overwhelming guilt, as if taking responsibility for her condition would somehow influence chance in her favor. She was too miserable for love and she worried about that, I think, more than I did.

“If you find someone else, I’ll understand,” she said. “I’ll hate her, but I’ll understand.” I looked, but I didn’t buy. I think I had some idea that if she had to suffer so, the least I could do would be to suffer along with her, if only in that particular way. I may have thought that my own discomfort would in some mystical way gentle hers. I am not a wholly reasonable man.

And oh, yes, the party. I will think, My God! the promised time has come and gone, and I will try to tell myself that there is yet time for a good, warm, late love, but I will not believe it. I will say to myself, Let your breath come without willing it to do so, and do not write sorrow on the bosom of the earth—it has plenty without your small part. I will look at my guests and they will not know I have been gone, gone to that other place which flames in my heart. They notice only themselves. And seventy is quite beyond their comprehension.