

The Fall

When I'd drop by Katherine's house in the late afternoon I'd often find her friend Vera with her. The maid would direct me to the bedroom where the two women would be lounging in deep chairs, talking, each with a cigarette alight and a gin and tonic at her side. They'd look up from their conspiracies — for something in their manner suggested a topic of an intimate nature — and greet me with smiles. Their discussion to be continued later. In these smoke-hazed talks I'm sure that neither woman withheld any secrets from the other. They were friends of a closeness that I don't think men can experience. Not only were they the other's confidante and advisor, but they were fiercely loyal to each other, as if the world were a dangerous place where one needed such an ally.

Perhaps men were seen as the enemy. Both women had been married twice and both were presently single. That total of four failed marriages must be an indicator — like a red dye marker staining the water — of an accumulation of bitterness and suspicion toward the opposite sex. I suppose I added to Katherine's store of those feelings in the end, as did she to mine. But this story is not about us. It's about Vera and her third, and hopefully final, marriage.

For, unlike Katherine, whose last union had yielded a generous alimony — it was as if she had retired with a pension — Vera was just scraping through life. She was living off child support payments and the dwindling revenue from the sale of a house. She was in a drab apartment, and the pleasures of her life — shopping, lunches in fashionable restaurants — were provided mostly through Katherine's generosity. Vera was a woman whose upbringing did not prompt her to look for a job. She had been raised in the tradition of the southern belle, only somewhat modified to fit modern times. When she had gone to Ole Miss her goal had not been to prepare herself to earn a living, but to join an elite sorority and to find a husband. So now, in financial need, she was again looking for a husband. In that search she had to feel some desperation, for time was running out. She was in her forties and, though still attractive, there was no doubt a lot of work required to stay that way. Old age was snapping at her heels — soon the skin on her neck would hang in loose folds, breasts would sag, belly . . . But enough! The whole horrible dissolution was only a day away, and she was holding off that day by an act of will, the will to survive.

And she was, as I've said, still a good-looking woman. Although I couldn't help but reflect on the changes time imposes on us whenever I'd see her daughter, for I hold to the theory that the mother looked like the daughter when she was that age. Vera had been coarsened by time, like a flower past its prime. But Adele, at thirteen, was breathtaking, simple perfection, and it was all delicate, calling to mind the new buds of spring. I'd see her — not often, though I always anticipated her appearance at the door — when she'd occasionally stop off at Katherine's house after school. She'd be wearing a tartan skirt, a white tailored blouse, and clunky boy's shoes, the required uniform of the prudish Catholic girls' school she attended. But her beauty easily overwhelmed those atrocities. Her oval-shaped face and long, slender arms and legs were honey-colored, one of the tawnier shades. Gray eyes, abundant brown hair. She'd enter the room with a walk assured and casual; her movements had lost any girlish awkwardness, and her body was obviously, beneath the white blouse, losing its girlishness too. She'd bestow a smile upon us all, and then kiss her mother on the cheek. A loving daughter.

Remembering that kiss, I must pause to consider that this story is not just about a marriage. Although I will never speak of love between Vera and her husband, there was certainly love between the mother and the daughter. Thus Vera's search for financial security cannot be seen as entirely selfish — the fruits of her labors were meant to benefit Adele too. Seen in that light, an element of self-sacrifice emerges, to soften the hard practicalities.

But, to return to those practicalities — Vera's pursuit of a husband — she had, when I came on the scene, found a likely prospect in the person of one Walter Dubbeck. He was in his fifties, the owner of a successful wire rope company, divorced for five years. They had begun to go out, and Vera — charming, funny, attentive, and, I assume, sexually sophisticated — made him aware of the pleasures a good woman can confer upon a man. All she had to do was continue to play her cards right — and there was no reason to believe that such an experienced player would make a mistake — and she would have the security of marriage to a wealthy man.

I first met Walter Dubbeck at a party and first heard him from afar. His voice boomed out, his laughter roared over the noise of twenty other people. Then I saw a figure as big as the sound he made — in fact, he seemed larger than life, for his sweeping gestures took up further space around him. Grizzled and roughhewn, he looked like a tintype of a Civil War general come to life, complete with long, bushy sideburns. He was pure exuberance that night, dominant and overwhelming. He had come to the party to entertain and to be entertained. To whatever group he gravitated he became the center, a force fueled by love of life and by the huge quantity of liquor he consumed. What he enjoyed most was to tease the women, wrap them in a bear hug, bring a shade of red to their cheeks. Often the teasing was vulgar, but no one seemed offended. They just accepted it as being Walter's way. He projected a vision of life so simple and vital that he had a kind of innocence about him. Vera stood by his side, the quintessential good sport, part of the high spirits; she was the one he teased the most and who could give it back to him in kind. He'd roar in delight — it was obvious that he liked a woman with spunk. That night I watched Vera give a masterful demonstration of how to please a man. Three months later they were married.

Although the marriage is the subject of this story, it is not something that I observed firsthand. What went on between Vera, Walter and Adele was related to me by Katherine over the year and a half that the marriage lasted. Before I flesh out her account with my imaginings, I will provide the bare bones she gave to me: First, an uneventful period; then Walter's accident — he broke his leg in a fall down the stairs — after which he became impossible to live with; lastly, he was caught — actually caught in the act by Vera and Katherine — doing something that no fifty-six-year-old man can ever justify doing to a fourteen-year-old girl. Divorce swiftly followed; and, as befits the awfulness of his crime, Vera took him for everything he had.

So, in the end, Vera will have attained the financial security she desired. Again, I'm presenting her in a mercenary light. But this may mislead one as to my feelings; the truth is that, during most of the marriage, it was Vera who had my sympathies. Being mercenary is not, in itself, a sin. Besides, I learned early on that Walter also had a grasping and avaricious side. I'm an attorney, and I found out who his attorney was. We belonged to the same health club, and one day, as we pedaled side by side on stationary bikes, I discovered that Walter was quite a litigious soul, suing at the drop of a hat. And he had no shame to temper how far he went; if he thought someone had wronged him, he would go after that person with no holds barred. This lawyer had

handled the divorce from his second wife. While they were still living together, Walter had had the woman followed by a private detective for six months, and when he finally found something, he used it to the fullest. He was inordinately proud of how little, after seventeen years of marriage, the woman had gotten from him. When I related this to Katherine she smiled wryly and said that, yes, she already knew about it — Walter had told Vera the story, an obvious cautionary tale, on their Las Vegas honeymoon.

His tightfistedness became evident to the watchful eye as the first half year of their marriage rolled by. They stayed in his duplex instead of buying their own home, as I'm sure Vera wanted, and she continued to drive her five-year-old Grand Am. So, while the financial crisis was over, Vera was not living in high style. I couldn't help but believe that this bothered her; I suspect that she had thought Walter would be more manageable than he turned out to be. I also assumed other problems connected to living with him, problems that would seem even more odious because she was not getting enough out of the marriage to make them tolerable. I imagined that Walter would be a real handful in large doses — overbearing, demanding, and probably moody, as that exuberant type often has a morose side. Plus there was his drinking, which was not limited to parties. So, as I said, my sympathies at the time were with Vera. Though of that first year of marriage I heard little from Katherine. She and Vera continued to meet for their daily talks, but few complaints about Walter filtered down to me. The complaints would begin after the accident.

Before I describe his accident — or how I imagine it happened — I need to give a layout of the duplex where they lived. It was two-storied, and on the second floor were two bedrooms, two baths and a beautiful sunroom. That sunroom was Vera's love, the house's saving grace. When Adele went off to school and Walter to his business or to a day of golf, Vera would spend her time tending to the many plants that adorned the room in a profusion of colors. I went there one afternoon with Katherine. I sat in a white wicker chair, a drink in my hand, ceiling fans turning above me, and smelled the roses. Though that was probably one of the few types of flowering plants she did not have; a variety of others filled shelves that ran the length of the spacious room, along a wall of windows. Ivy trailed from hanging pots, a small ficus tree stood to one side. In a corner was an open cupboard whose shelves were filled with gardening equipment -- watering cans, plant food, pruning shears; on the top shelf were a radio and a pair of gloves. There was a TV tray with an empty plate and glass on it; obviously, Vera ate her lunch in the room. An open romance novel lay on a rumpled, pillow-strewn sofa. I thought of Vera secluding herself in this room for hours; I couldn't help but see it as a place of refuge — a place quite different from the world of Walter Dubbeck.

The rooms of the second floor all opened to a narrow hall from which fell a long, precipitous flight of stairs.

I gave little thought to Walter's accident immediately after it happened — it was later events that would lead me to reconsider it, recreate it in my mind. And under this careful examination, each element, even the hot night, took on a purposefulness in my mind, moving Walter inexorably toward his fall; all seemed to have a role in an intricate causality, like some clockwork mechanism.

To begin with — and we begin in the easy carnality of marriage, with a man and woman in bed — Walter drank as he watched TV in the evening. The bottle of scotch he kept beside the bed was getting low — he had mentioned that to Vera the night before, but she had not brought up another bottle from the liquor cabinet downstairs. So he ran out. When he asked her to get him a new one she told him to get it himself, that she didn't approve of his drinking in bed. He had to stagger up — he had had quite a few by then — and head downstairs himself.

So my imagination has a pajama-clad Walter moving into the hall, where it was pitch black. The lightbulb had burned out. At this point Walter could have left the door to the bedroom open and gotten light from that room to illuminate the hall. But it was August, and hot — the window air conditioning unit was on and Walter didn't want to let the cool air escape. Anyway, he didn't need any light; he had lived in this house for six years and knew where everything was. So, unsteady, grumbling, he moved along the hall in the darkness, his shoulder brushing against the near wall as he went.

It was probably because he knew the hall so well that the accident occurred. For as he moved away from the wall toward where the stairs should be, as his bare feet shuffled toward the first step and his hand reached out for the railing, his knee unexpectedly bumped against something. This something in the total darkness — where nothing should be — so startled him that he was disoriented. He bent at the waist, groping downwards, and as he did he felt himself begin to tip forward, off balance. His hand suddenly came into contact with this thing in front of him, he grasped at it to regain his balance. But as his weight shifted on to it, it immediately gave way beneath him, clattering down the stairs. And he, with a bellow, followed.

The object at the top of the stairs was a TV tray that Vera had left, to take down to the kitchen the next day.

Walter could have been killed — it was a long and steep fall to the bottom, with each of the jutting oak steps capable of delivering a lethal blow. Instead, his flailing leg got caught in one of the posts near the top, preventing him from falling far. But the leg snapped at the knee.

I sometimes watch, with horror, those nature series on TV that show predators bringing down their kill. An elk, his hind legs crippled by the wolves, fights on in the snow, the semi-circle of fangs closing in on him. Sometimes I see the crippled Walter — for he would indeed be a cripple after that fall, complete with wheelchair and crutches — as the prey. Walter had always been very active, had a huge appetite for life. When part of life had been taken from him, the active part that for him mattered, he showed the same rage, fear and bewilderment as a crippled animal. Like the elk with his antlers he slashed out. He slashed out at Vera; it was she who had been responsible for the accident. That damned TV tray. Her carelessness, her stupidity.

Vera paid dearly for her stupidity. It probably would have been better for both if Walter had been killed in the fall. He would not be in the trap he found himself; she would inherit his money. And, if he had died, there would have been no suspicion cast upon her — no one would plan a murder in which death was such an indeterminate outcome of the events I've related.

Indeed, no one would. Though — and, again, this is in the light of what happened later — I see the outline of something premeditated hovering around his accident. It could be nothing more than a moment in Vera's day when the vague thought "Maybe . . ." entered her mind. I've already made it clear that I don't think she loved him. But could she have hated him? And, if so,

could it be that the nearly empty bottle and the drunken man and the dark hall and the long, steep stairway presented an intricate causality to her? Some people — and I am obviously one — have minds that work in such ways. Maybe she placed the tray where she did with the passive thought of letting whatever would happen happen. She needn't be some monster to do so. Not at all. At one time I did a good bit of divorce work. This gives one a revealing perspective on human nature. The careful exterior that people present to the world was often partially stripped away in my office. And, with just that partial look below the surface, what hatred I saw in people's faces, heard in their voices! And this was toward someone they had presumably once loved. During this time I came up with the idea of some sort of device, say a button on my desk, that I could offer to my clients as an easy way to get rid of their spouses. By pressing it there would be an unfortunate accident somewhere, possibly a car hurtling off a bridge, after which all they wished to accrue to them would quite simply be theirs — money, children, revenge. Would they press it? When they felt desperate enough?

In Vera's case, though I was never treated to a glimpse behind her pleasant, smiling exterior, I can still say that, if she was indeed guilty of something vaguely premeditated in leaving that tray where she did, she is not yet outside the bounds of human nature.

But, for whatever she was guilty in the accident — even if it was merely innocent, careless stupidity — she paid. Of the following months of their marriage Katherine told me much. Walter stayed home all the time, and it was Vera's sunroom where he stayed. He had a bed and the TV moved in there and most of her plants moved out. The long row of Venetian blinds that had always been pulled up were now down, the slats closed. Whenever she came near him he was ugly and abusive toward her. Katherine told me of how Vera patiently, silently bore it, waiting for him to get over his angry feelings. But the months went by with no change. Vera must have felt as trapped as Walter did.

It is at this point that Adele emerges to take front and center stage in this story.

Not that I hadn't wondered before about the role she played in the marriage. I had often reflected on how Walter would feel having this vision of youthful beauty so close, on so intimate a basis as sharing the same house entails. Did she emerge from the bathroom after a shower, skin aglow, wearing only a short terry cloth robe, her damp hair wrapped loosely in a towel? But my speculations of this sort could not be explored comfortably with Katherine, and to my simple question about how Adele was taking to the marriage I got an equally simple answer: All right. So Adele was, for me, the most shadowy figure of all. As I've said, I seldom saw her, never really talked with her. Besides her beauty I knew little of what she was like; only that she was her mother's daughter. That loving kiss on the cheek.

And, indeed, it was love for her mother that caused her to begin going to Walter every day. Or at least that was what Katherine told me. A few days after the scream, the scream that would end it all for Walter, Katherine told me of what went on in the sunroom, the story that Adele had finally sobbed out to her and Vera. And, as it was related to me, Adele had felt compelled to go in to Walter when she got home from school. To bring him things, to keep him company. She felt compelled to do this so that her mother would be relieved of those duties. Adele could not stand to see her mother treated as she was by Walter. She was therefore willing, without a word of complaint, to take her mother's place.

She would not abandon the role she had accepted even when the sexual advances began. First he asked her to massage his back; he said that sitting in a chair all day tightened his neck muscles. Then he told her that she needed some lessons on how to give a first class massage. Let me show on you, he said. She felt unable to stop him as it got worse, as his hands undid the buttons of her blouse — she had already accepted, in her fourteen-year-old mind, that she would be sacrificed. The words Katherine used to describe the psychology of a young girl forced into such a predicament — how Adele internalized blame for what went on, how she feared some sort of emotional explosion happening if she told anyone of what he did to her, how she would make her thoughts go far off when he touched her — were words that had become the province of popular magazines and talk shows. I couldn't help but think how effective those words would be in court.

And so it went on for days. And then one afternoon the door to the sunroom opened and Vera and Katherine stood there. Vera screamed.

On that shrill note the story of Vera's third marriage comes to an end.

Or that was Katherine's version of how it happened.

But, as I mentioned before, I know one of the other players in this story: Walter Dubbeck's lawyer. I managed to have lunch with him — this was shortly after the divorce had been finalized — and as part of a tradeoff of confidential information I asked him what Walter's version was. It turned out, surprisingly, that Walter had said almost nothing. Except for one cryptic remark, which his lawyer took as a roundabout admission of guilt, Walter had never denied nor confirmed doing what he had been accused of. But, even without that one remark, it was clear that he was guilty. His lawyer had known the man for over ten years, knew him as a battler who, if he thought he had been wronged, would fight to the end. But the Walter who finally came to the office looked like he had aged ten years. He sat, mostly silent, in the big leather chair, his leg extended straight out, his crutches leaning against the chair's arm. He seemed strangely small sitting there — in the past he had filled the chair to bursting. It was as if the force that had made Walter larger than life was gone, and only an empty shell remained.

The explanation for such a drastic change, his lawyer decided, was that he was looking at a man who had condemned himself, a man who was showing the telltale apathy of the guilty. Walter must have done what he had been accused of doing, and it was something he could not accept having done. Added to his age and his injury, touching that girl turned out to be the coup de grace for Walter.

It made his lawyer's job easier. When he had first been contacted by Vera's attorney and told of the case against his client, he had reckoned that his main task would be to convince Walter that it would be suicidal to contest the divorce. Of course, he was expecting then to see the battler, either denying he had done anything or claiming entrapment; he had expected Walter's detective to already be on the girl's trail, sniffing out evidence of prior sexual knowledge. And, expecting those things, his lawyer had spent that day preparing arguments to convince Walter not to let the case go before a judge. But, as he stacked up the overwhelming odds, a suspicion began to form in his own mind.

He thought about the two women who had caught Walter in the very act, including a non-family member — a person whose testimony, coming from someone who had nothing to

gain, would be critical. Then he pictured the tender young girl telling a judge her story — a story she had been spared telling the police, since they had never been called.

All that damning evidence. The airtight case . . .

Of course, as it turned out, all that damning evidence was unneeded, for Walter had already damned himself. But his lawyer, with the nagging suspicion in his mind, could not resist asking one question. He had been told that Walter had been fondling the girl for two days prior to the afternoon he was caught. He could not understand why a man doing such a thing would leave the door unlocked. So, in a lull in the discussion of Walter's finances, his lawyer leaned back in his chair and said, "Walter, what about the unlocked door?" At this intentionally cryptic question Walter looked up, and the eyes under the shaggy brows suddenly had their old intensity. He nodded, and as he did his lips twisted into a gruesome smile. "Oh, but it was supposed to be locked. She told me she had locked it." He looked fixedly at his lawyer for a few seconds, with that flare of life animating his face. But then it was as if a thought passed over his features; his eyes shifted uneasily away from his lawyer's and then fell to where his huge hands lay curled in his lap. He stared down at those hands, and slowly, visibly, subsided back into an apathy. One from which he was never again roused. Even when told of Vera's terms for an out-of-court settlement — he was to be stripped financially to the bone — he took it resignedly. At the end he looked as if he had been hollowed out; his hand shook as he signed the final papers. And when he left the lawyer's office for the last time, how he struggled with those crutches!

This is my closing image of Walter, and I have to confer on that struggling figure a bit of honor. A bad man, indeed, but at least his badness had some limit, and when he crossed over that line he did condemn himself.

Vera I still saw, during the brief time left to my relationship with Katherine. The women still met for their smoke-shrouded talks, and when I'd walk into the bedroom where they lounged in deep chairs they would, as always, greet me with smiles. Their discussion to be continued later. Vera put on a lot of weight after the divorce, but seemed to be thriving. Adele I saw more often than before; sometimes I would find her sitting with the other two for those afternoon get-togethers; another cigarette in an ashtray. Adele was as fresh and beautiful as ever.

Perhaps I am overly fond of the dramatic moment that comes at the end of movies with courtroom trials, when the lawyer rises and with heavy deliberation approaches the jury box. This, of course, is when the incriminating piece of evidence is about to be revealed, when the revelation will occur. In my structuring of this story, which may have seemed at times to be a morass of hearsay and my imaginings, I have withheld one personal recollection, one bit of evidence. A grain of sand. But how, if that grain is turning in your eye, it can be unavoidable. In weighing its significance, this legal fact needs to be kept in mind: If one can establish that there was premeditation, one has gone far toward proving guilt.

And so I rise, I approach you, ladies and gentlemen.

On the day of the scream — Vera's scream when she and Katherine opened the door — I had arrived unexpectedly at Katherine's house. I had returned a day early from a business trip. She didn't seem pleased to see me. Although she went through the motions of a greeting, it was clear that she didn't want me there. No offer of a drink when I settled into an armchair — I even detected a look of alarm shift over her features. And she both made and received a phone call in

the fifteen minutes I stayed. She looked at her watch frequently. I wondered if she was planning to meet another man. When I asked who the call was from she said it was from Vera, and after another look at her watch she got up abruptly and said that she had to go to Vera's house. I was dismissed and three minutes later stood on the pavement, watching her drive off. At that moment I thought that she was lying to me. But now I know that she was being perfectly honest.

She was going to Vera's house. She had to be there for a certain time; the bolt on a lock was withdrawn, awaiting them. A clockwork mechanism was ticking toward a scream. Her friend needed her.