

EJ LEVY

Artichoke Hearts

We would all be better people if we paid attention to our appetites.

—M. F. K. Fisher

When my sister started burping shortly after our father died, I assumed it was anxiety, but she claimed that she was channeling our father. People often speak of visitations by the dead after a death, of having them return in dreams; our father appears to have chosen to return by the digestive tract. And this seems fitting, that our father of fierce appetites should make his presence known through the gullet.

I've heard many such stories of the dead's return: a few months after my mother's sister Katy died, she returned to my mother in a dream, wearing a diaphanous green dress, standing like a caryatid in an alcove of some underworld; though they didn't speak, my mother knew that her hard-driving sister was content now, finally at peace. My friend Morgan, who grew up in Bulawayo during the bloody war for independence in Zimbabwe, dreamed after her father's death that he came back to sit on the end of her bed; she was both frightened and comforted by his presence, as I think she had been in life. Not long after her father died, a biologist saw a fly sitting on an airplane's wing, right outside her window, clinging impossibly to the sleek aluminum as the plane gained speed for takeoff. She was sure it was her father, the entomologist, returned.

The morning of my father's memorial service, my brother and a family friend heard an enormous and inexplicable crash in the basement of my parents' house; they never found its source—no fallen

bookshelf, no broken vase. Each concluded independently that it was my dad's way of saying good-bye.

I was envious of all of them. My father did not come back to me in dreams or sudden crashing noises or indigestion. And for a while, for the first few weeks after his death, I tell myself that it's because he never left me. But that's not how it feels.

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It was a few months after my father died that I began dating men. Mine was a belated entrance into that romantic field. For most of the previous fifteen years I had been involved with women (I said ruefully at times that I'd become a *professional* lesbian, after I edited a prize-winning anthology of literary lesbian fiction; mine was not simply a sexual preference, it informed my work as well).

But after my father's death, I craved the company of men, specifically older men, not men of my father's age—he was eighty-two when he died, forty years my senior—but men in their fifties, ten or fifteen years older than I, men not yet old, but accomplished, robust men, gentled by the whiff of mortality. Men I would have found impossibly arrogant in their youth. I craved their company like water, like food.

When I should be in mourning, I date.

I sign up for the Right Stuff, a dating service designed for Ivy League grads, whose name alone makes me cringe (my best friend and I compensate by making up names of alternate services—the Soft Stuff for people who don't work out, the Not Quite Right Stuff, for the emotionally complicated). Since the site disallows same-sex dating (evidently its makers have their own ideas about what constitutes the Not Quite Right Stuff), and since lately I've been turning heliotropically toward handsome, older men on the street, as I once responded to beautiful women, I decide to give it a try—date guys.

(I wonder, idly, if this is a consequence, too, of moving from Manhattan to Washington, D.C., where I now teach. D.C. in the early twenty-first century is the most masculinist city I've ever lived in—not simply because of the monumental phallus on the National Mall or the startlingly Roman architecture of the WWII monument that never fails to put me in mind of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the*

Will; here, as nowhere else I have been before, men seem to be the measure, what matters, their interests are taken to be *the* interests, their sex the only one—it often seems—that counts.)

Initially, it seems impossible to cross into the realm of romance—not only because I am in mourning, but because I am out of practice: I haven't been on a date in a decade. The cliché of lesbian love has held true in my life—I have moved from one partnership to another, with almost no pause between for the past fifteen years. We meet; we marry. And even there I'm out of the habit: I have not been seriously involved with anyone since I left my last partner, a woman with whom I thought I'd spend my life.

But in the weeks after my father's death, I vacillate between rage and intense desire, a longing for everything, but especially for erotic intensity. It seems to me unsurprising that in the darkness that is sorrow one would reach out for another hand to hold, that one would yearn to take part in those vital acts, that most basic proof of life, immersion in the body's appetites.

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My father was a man of great, if unrefined, appetite. At his memorial service—held in a small chapel of a Minneapolis synagogue on a cold day in October—there was much talk of the foods he loved, how he was sure there would be garlic in the afterlife. Meant as a tribute to his fierce desires, this recitation of gustatory trivia was dispiriting. I wondered if this is all these people knew of him, the detritus of his dining habits.

We hosted a small lunch after the memorial service, which was held in the tiny chapel where my sister was married and I bat mitzvahed (during a brief and fleeting fit of religiosity brought on, like acne, by adolescence), and when it was over I was furious at how little we had done to mark the life and death of this vital man.

So, in tribute to my father, I eat. For weeks after that service, I memorialize him by eating his favorite foods, indulging his appetites and my own. I eat the way the devil is said to dine in certain Gothic stories from the American south, like Randall Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, in which the devil "in one sitting one Christmas Eve . . . ate two whole chickens, an entire mess of greens, corn, cabbage, a whole hog, and a cake and a pie." I eat half a chicken at Market

Barbecue, coffee ice cream by the pint, Jujyfruits (excluding the green ones and the black ones, which my father loathed), eggs scrambled with onions and lox, pickled herring, peanuts by the fistful, anything with Tabasco, hot banana peppers, artichoke hearts. I eat foods I don't even like. Being a daughter, I can't say proper Kaddish at the local Orthodox synagogue—the faith in which my father was reared—so this is my tribute. Good appetite. *Bon appétit.*

But after a few weeks of commemorative gorging, I lose my taste for it. I lapse into the ascetic cuisine of sorrow, the habits of the lonely eater: standing at the counter, eating things poured from boxes or cans.

Three months after my father's death, my diet consists mostly of lukewarm coffee and cold cereal, eaten late at night and alone, often standing in my apartment's narrow galley kitchen or seated in front of my computer. I am two years into my first stint as a tenure-track professor in what I'll come to call the sense-dep tank of academe and am teaching two grad courses late at night (the classes begin at 8:10, run until 10:40), holding evening office hours, living frankly like a vampire, and my dinners are increasingly haphazard affairs—I reach a new gustatory low one midnight when I find myself dining on Wheatabix and skim milk. This is the diet of grief.

I am not very sad, as I had expected I might be; I do not cry and ponder mortality—his, mine, ours. The experience is nothing like I had imagined. Instead I am dazed and panicked. Some mornings I wake at 4:00 or 5:00 in a sweat, my heart racing, a sense of morbid dread, true horror, the sort of feeling I had as a child on waking from a nightmare, but here the nightmare begins when I wake and find my father dead and know—not consciously but viscerally—that I will die, that all I love will.

Some days, I find the presence of other people too much to bear—the company of others feels like nails dragged across a blackboard, jagged and jarring, irritating and horrible. I am self-conscious, awkward, apologetic, ashamed, as if it were embarrassing to live. I find it hard to concentrate, my mind a fog. But mostly I am terrified. Everything seems too loud, too bright. I wake at 4:00 a.m. in a dead panic, my heart pounding as if I'd gone for a run, and for the first time in my life I understand what it means to be mortally afraid.

I can imagine no comfort for this fear, which takes me by surprise time and again, which reminds me that the Latin root of anxiety is a physical sensation—*angere*, to choke. I lie in bed and wait for the dread to pass, to slip off my chest and out of my belly. This can take hours. This can take days. Eventually I will check a calendar and note that a month ago (or two or three) my father died, and I'll begin to cry and realize it is grief that I am feeling, and then it passes. For a while.

By the time I meet Rick, in January 2006—three months after my father's death—I am famished by grief.

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When I first see Rick, he is sitting at the end of a bar in a nice restaurant in a hip section of D.C., Adams Morgan, Washington's answer to Manhattan's East Village. He is wearing a suit coat and reminds me in posture and build of Bruno Ganz (that same powerful chest and squared-off jaw, the almost unhandsome face) in that penultimate scene in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire*, sitting at the bar waiting for the woman he loves. In the film, Ganz is an angel who has traded immortality for the prospect of a human love. But when I first see Rick, what I think of is not that amorous angel, but that he is too old for me, and *is he gay?* (This last, of course, is rich coming from me, since—having spent the last twenty years involved with women—I am gay, if he's not.)

From the start I feel at home with him, if a bit embarrassed to be meeting in a bar, meeting so publicly this person I don't know. But the conversation is good, interesting, and I like him right away, his ease and funny stories, his *bons mots* and vaguely European courtesy. I like, too, that he has taken time to look up a short story of mine and has read it. He says mine is a "muscular prose," and I am charmed by the phrase, picturing (despite myself) little verbs with barbells, bench-pressing nouns.

I am charmed by his stories of his life as a film director—his first film was coming out in theaters that spring—and his tales of life as a Smithsonian-staff flunky. (He says of jobs like this, as with jobs in academe, "It's a short leash but lots of biscuits.") He says a lot of quotable things, and I have a weakness for the quotable. I find him clever, charming, kind.

But I feel no desire for him; none at all.

So when he proposes — as he walks me to my car — that we go see a movie the following Friday, I say *sure*, thinking I like this guy, but I am not sorry to have to cancel when I find myself swamped by grief over my father. I call and apologize and say I simply cannot go. I can't; I am keeping company with sorrow.

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The second time I cancel a date with Rick — this time for an academic obligation I'd overlooked — he sends me a courteous e-mail saying, "It worked out in the end, but this could bespeak ambivalence. The ball is in your court." I appreciate his frankness and his perspicacity (if not the middle-aged man's penchant for sport metaphor). He's right of course. I *am* ambivalent, or rather I *un*-ambivalently want to be his pal. I feel no desire for him. Can't imagine it.

I'm thinking of how best to say this — does one need to meet or phone, or will an e-mail do? — the Saturday morning after I stand him up, the morning he sends his e-mail, but I have errands to run, figure I can write back later. So I get in my car and race around in the early February rain.

I have a date with another man for coffee at 4:00 p.m., and I'm early when I pull up on R Street in a crowded part of town, a block of beautiful embassies two blocks from Dupont Circle. I am amazed to see right ahead on my left a coveted parking spot! (It always feels fated, slightly miraculous to me, to find parking spaces in crowded cities like D.C.) I'm happily pulling into the spot when I look up and see — directly across the narrow street from me — Rick, the man I stood up last night, standing behind a green van, unloading large hexagonal aluminum containers, like tin tires or misshapen suitcases (film cans, I'll discover later). When I look over, he is looking back at me, and it is too late to drive on. I wave, a little queasy. To my surprise, he smiles, bemused, and waves back. *This, I think, is what is meant by karma. Stand someone up, you will have to face him the next day in the rain.* I park, get out, and start apologizing.

"Come in and have some tea," he says.

He invites me into his house, a narrow, red-brick, two-story place wedged between ambassadorial residencies, a place which just the day

before (while walking this street), I'd admired for its marvelous broad blue door and shutters, its heavy green oxidized copper hinges and grillwork, a place I'd taken to be the embassy of Myanmar.

It seems impossible to refuse. He holds open the massive blue door, and when I step across the threshold, he leans over, as if to take my coat, and kisses me. Not with passion, but simply, directly, a little formally, as one might take a coat. I'm surprised to find it nice—and realize that I've crossed more than one threshold here.

His place is lovely, a former painter's studio, built for Edward Morse (youngest son of Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph), with a wall and ceiling of glass panes at the far end of the living room looking out onto an enclosed garden. One enters through a narrow hall, flanked on either side by small rooms, and then enters the great room—a two-story living room with an enormous fireplace to the right and a winding staircase leading up to the second-floor bedroom and balcony on the left. The woodwork that screens the staircase is carved with birds and lily pads and frogs and leaves; the embrasures in the fireplace are bronze ducks. The effect is like stepping into a glade, as if on entering the house, you'd come not inside, but gone out, entered wilderness, the world of Pan. Some enchanted place. The arts and crafts details are lovely—woodwork and tile made by Rick's friends—but it's not the place that impresses me, but the kiss.

While he makes tea, we talk about film and art and love, and I like him, as we sit on his overstuffed couch. I am at ease and I am happy, feel the flint strike of desire—once again—but by the time the tea is drunk, my cup drained, the desire I'd felt is gone as well. I stand and thank him, really happy to have met in this seemingly fated way, and I cross the room to retrieve my raincoat, aware that I have a date waiting for me up the street. I am aware, too, that much as I like this man, I don't desire him, that I will walk out of this room and I will call him and explain everything and we may or may not become friends.

But as I reach for my coat, he is quite suddenly standing before me—his arms loosely encircling my waist, and reflexively, as if it were a high-school dance, I put my arms around his neck. Too polite to decline. I am surprised by how broad his chest is, how muscular his arms. And for a moment we stand like that, smiling at one another,

until I realize this is ridiculous: I don't desire this guy, and I drop a hand to his chest and say how I should really get going, when he leans down and gently kisses me.

It is like no other kiss I've had before; our mouths like shells pressed together, his mouth still but open over mine; his mouth like a cavern, pressed to my open mouth, breathing each other's breath, as someone once said of poetry. And when I move my hand into his hair, I feel my stomach drop, as if in a fast-rising elevator, with desire.

When we move apart, I laugh, a little light-headed, and say, "Well, *that* was nice," and move a bit unsteadily, as if drunk, to the door and go. Later I will think how funny it is that I should experience this confusion with a man—often with women I cannot tell that it's desire that I feel until we are touching, but with men, I have always known. Here desire takes me by surprise. It's wonderful to be surprised by pleasure instead of grief.

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When I began dating men again, I was not—despite appearances—looking for my father. I wanted simply to desire again, to participate in that human traffic, submerge myself in the body, get in trouble, anything that might feel like messy, vital life.

My father was a robust sensualist, earthy and olive-skinned, handsome as Rossano Brazzi, a romantic who adored my mother, a serial philanderer, a City College grad, a PhD who affected the crude language of the working-class men he came from (eager not to lose his peasant roots), son of an ice man, grandson of bar owners in Kiev, a Jew, a psychologist, crude as he was eloquent, a lover of jazz and Bach, a Depression-era boy, chastened by and extravagant because of an early experience of want.

He had the body of a burgher, tall and robust at 6 feet, 220 pounds, well-upholstered and ostentatiously masculine, save for his delicate, feminine milk-white calves. He had a broad, imposing face, like the head of Zeus, an eagling nose; his hair was thick and black in youth (pearl white in age); a neatly trimmed beard and mustache cupped his mouth. Handsome in youth, when he was clean-shaven, slender, and lanky, in old photos he could have been taken for Italian, Spanish, a movie star.

There is something of the dandy in him even then. When my parents first meet on the stairs of Eddy Hall on the campus of the University of Minnesota in 1954 (where he is a young, post-doctoral fellow in psychology and she is a graduate student working on a master's degree, contemplating entering medical school, typing speeches for the dean of students in a tower on campus, from which she is descending that day when my father stops her on the stairs and asks, "*Who are you?*"), my father is dressed in pink pants, a white T-shirt, and canvas shoes, like a character out of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

It is only in age that he will come to look like what he is—a handsome Russian peasant, with a full-lipped frown and soulful, squinting eyes. And it will seem to me then that he was always meant to be this man. Like Rick, who—when I know him better—will seem meant always to have been this age, a man approaching sixty, a man made tender, made beautiful, by the whiff of mortality.

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My father and I were not close when I was growing up. He was an absent father, as his own had been. A managerial psychologist, my father was often on the road, facilitating meetings for corporate clients in the south and west.

He wasn't around much the first time I fell in love when I was fifteen and dating a beautiful boy, but when that boy and I broke up the following spring, it was my father—not my mother—who grieved with me. I remember standing together in the redwood-paneled foyer of our suburban home, in front of a large, rectangular, gilt-framed mirror that hung above a marble counter, my father frowning with real sorrow, as he said how sorry he was that Tim and I had broken up. He said, as if bewildered by the loss of love, "You just seemed so happy." I thought he was going to cry. It seemed then that my father and I felt more extravagantly than the rest of our clan, that we shared a common heart.

He, of all my family, seemed to understand heartache.

Years later, when I am in my early thirties, I will learn that my father has cheated on my mother for forty years and, while I will be angry, I will think, too, that I understand this choice, or believe I do, having by then discovered my own fear of domesticity, my own restless heart and appetites.

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The first time Rick made me dinner, we had been seeing each other for a few weeks. His expertise in the kitchen impressed me from the start, his insouciance and ease, like watching a musician play a riff skillfully, he moved with a combination of intensity and seeming inattention, utterly without the anxiety that often dogs me when I cook. He talked and sipped his wine as he diced endive and kalamata olives, grabbed fistfuls of pepita from a canister on the counter, crumbled goat cheese over greens, whipping a vinaigrette, basting the rock fish, before he dropped a pat of butter in each of two bowls, then set an artichoke in each.

I had come from teaching an evening class and arrived around 8:30, exhausted, to find him dressed as he almost always was in a T-shirt and loose linen pants, barefoot, drinking a glass of good red wine, a fire in the fireplace. On a small round table in the dining room, he set out plates of fish and salad and bowls of artichokes, and we each took a seat. I am so grateful for his kindness, for this care, reminding me of the sensual pleasures that still exist in the world, as we peel off the heart-shaped artichoke leaves, drag them in butter, and bring them to our lips.

Eating an artichoke is an intimate act; like lovemaking, it requires attention to be pleasurable (otherwise, like inattentive sex, it can seem a chore—one crummy little leaf after another, annoying to pull, nibble, discard), but if it is done well and the diners are eager, the eating of an artichoke can be a kind of gustatory foreplay: the delicate disrobing of the artichoke heart, leaf by leaf—a vegetable striptease—the gentle bite and drag of flesh against the teeth, the salty butter, satisfying as a lover's sweat.

The link between sex and the artichoke is an ancient one, going back millennia. In ancient Greece and Rome the artichoke was thought to be an aphrodisiac; the ancient Greeks believed it was useful in securing the birth of boys.

In Europe, in the sixteenth century artichokes were reserved for men, being considered too sexually arousing for women. (Bartolomeo Boldo wrote in 1576, the artichoke “has the virtue of . . . provoking Venus for both men and women; for women making them more desirable, and helping the men who are in these matters tardy.”) Even

in the twentieth century, the link remains: Marilyn Monroe—that ur-sign of sexuality—was the first official California Artichoke Queen in 1949 (the year Rick was born).

The artichoke is not a fruit, nor a vegetable, but a flower nipped while still a bud. A member of the thistle family from which sunflowers also come, native of the Mediterranean, the artichoke is said to be one of the oldest foods known to humans (though until the Renaissance it was the leaves people ate, not the bud).

The eighteenth-century German Romantic writer Goethe disdained them as did the Roman Pliny the Elder, who called them “one of the earth’s monstrosities.” The Romans considered them a delicacy, but artichokes became scarce in the West after the fall of Rome, only to return (as did classical learning) with the Renaissance. Across cultures and millennia, the artichoke has been associated with the erotic, considered an aphrodisiac, seducer’s food.

The first commercial artichoke fields in the United States were developed in Louisiana Territory in the early nineteenth century. A hundred years later, in 1922, the plants were so valuable that a member of the mob known as the Artichoke King (Ciro Terranova “Whitey”) cornered the market on artichokes shipped from California to New York. In retaliation against the monopoly, Mayor Laguardia in New York banned artichokes in the city—declaring illegal their “sale, display, and possession” (a ban that was lifted after a week; it is difficult to prohibit desire).

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I was in my final year of graduate school, when I learned from my mother—who had just learned herself—the secret ingredient in my parents’ unhappy marriage: infidelity. In the wake of open-heart surgery, at the age of seventy-three, my dad confessed to my sixty-nine-year-old mom that he had been dicking around on her for years.

Twenty years earlier, at twelve or thirteen, I had asked my mother if she had ever thought of having an affair. I knew that she was lonely, that she needed more than us for company, more than my siblings, Mrs. Williams, PBS, the League of Women Voters, and Julia Child. She told me, with the frankness that was her faith, that she and my father

had discussed this a few years before and had decided against it. They had discussed having an open marriage, discussed allowing one another to have affairs because they were so often apart and lonely and modern and liberal and forward-thinking, but at the time my father swore he was faithful, that he wanted no one else, and so my mother was.

All those years, my mother remained faithful, following that old marital recipe for happiness. Even when my father stopped making love to her around the time that I, the last of their children, left home for school, even though he left her untouched for years, my mother remained faithful.

My father blamed his inability to perform on his blood pressure medicine, Reserpine. My mother tells me that after several sexless years she thought perhaps my father might be gay (a suspicion tellingly coincident with my own revelation of same-sex preference). But in truth my father was performing acrobatically elsewhere. He'd been bedding other women from the first year of their marriage—grad students, phone sex, blow jobs, mistresses. His mistresses, preposterously, had four-letter words for names: Lana, Zona. It would be a comic litany, so over the top as to seem a joke, were it not so sad.

My father, it turns out, simply lied.

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A year after my father's revelation, my parents left behind the house where I grew up in ice-bound Minnesota in order to spend the winter in Tucson so that my father could walk daily to strengthen his heart. At Christmas, I visited my parents there. We went out to eat at his favorite restaurant, Sweet Tomatoes, a chain that features an all-you-can-eat salad bar, a dispiriting little joint of pressboard booths and turquoise-vinyl upholstery with a long, U-shaped, stainless steel salad bar, situated in a mall parking lot.

We each took a tray and a plate and heaped these with romaine and iceberg lettuce, spinach leaves and bean salads and marinated mushrooms, Thai noodles, and curried rice pilaf. At the cash register you could pay for a tall glass for sodas and lemonade, or take a short one (free of charge) for water. After our meal, we could help ourselves to the dessert bar, which offered frozen yogurt, brownies.

We slid into an orange, padded-vinyl booth and chewed. My mother and father and I took turns mumbling, sociably—*Mmm, this is good. Did you try this? Do you want to try this?*—holding up forks for one another to sample, pointing with our utensils to little heaps of salad on our plates.

Outside, the night was all palm trees and stars.

“This is America’s contribution to cuisine,” I said, not thinking it a compliment. “All you can eat.” Excess, our national virtue.

“It’s pretty good, huh?” my father said.

I pushed my empty plates aside, leaned back. “Yeah,” I said.

“You want some frozen yogurt?” my father asked us.

“No, thanks, honey,” my mother said.

“I’ll get you some,” he offered.

“No, thanks, I’m full.”

“Are you sure?” he seemed skeptical. *Full* was not a concept he’d mastered. “I’ll be right back,” my dad said, and he slid out of the booth and shuffled toward the dessert bar behind me.

“Oh, well,” my mother said and excused herself to go to the bathroom.

When my father returned to the table, he had his hands full. He held three white paper napkins stuffed with brownies, cookies, and corn bread.

“Want some lemonade?” he asked me. He leaned across the table toward me: “I can show you how you can get some.” He raised his eyebrows, an almost lascivious glint in his eyes. “It’s pretty good. It really is. It really is.”

“No,” I said, smiling, “thanks.” I understood that he was trying to bestow a gift, this small practical knowledge, my PhD psychologist millionaire father, by teaching me to steal from the beverage bar.

“You sure? You don’t want lemonade?”

“I’m sure,” I laughed.

“Oh-*kay*,” my father said, his voice rising and falling on the final syllable as if to say, *Can’t say I didn’t try*. He sighed, glanced around the room, then he got up and walked to the soda machines, which were just a few feet from our booth.

When my father resumed his seat across the table from me in the booth, he held a glass filled only half-an-inch with liquid. That’s all he took, only that. Just to make the point that he could take it. He took his seat again and took a sip of his drink.

"The way to fight the system is to join it," he told me.

"How precisely does that constitute rebellion?" I asked.

"I have no idea," my father said, drinking his lemonade. "I have no idea."

The yellow liquid in my father's cup looked like a urine specimen.

"Want some?" he asked.

"No," I said.

Within a minute a well-scrubbed young man in a striped apron and reindeer antlers (it was Christmas time) stopped by our table and pointedly asked if he could refill our drinks for us. I looked at my father. Pointedly. My father, unruffled, poker-faced, stared into the middle distance, across the table, past me, not looking at the kid. "We're fine."

When the young man moved off, I said, "They're on to you."

He shook his head, frowned. "They don't know."

I told him that they did. I told him that I'd figured out their system: the small glasses are for water; the bigger ones are for purchased drinks, so they can see at a glance who has what. My father had a small water glass. They knew he'd cheated.

"They know you didn't pay for that," I concluded.

"We'll make a break for it," my father said. "Here," he handed me a napkin stuffed with corn muffins and brownies. "On the count of three, run for the door. I'll cover you."

I laughed. I knew he was kidding, but I knew, too, that it was true: He would cover me, protect me, if he could, from harm, from the sort of harm he'd done to my mom, from the casual cruelty I have myself inflicted on those I've loved whose love I have taken for granted, confident that there would always be enough, more than enough, like this abundant food, confident it would always be there to sustain me.

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My father is like a character who arrives inconveniently late in a novel, a pivotal figure one wishes had pitched up earlier. One wants to take it up with the author. But can't. The hero and the villain both — arriving late to complicate the action.

The pages of my early life are largely blank of him, or rather, he

was like certain household furnishings, background to our real life, which revolved around our mother, whose gifts seemed limitless—who knew Latin phrases and Czech, could make piñatas for our birthdays in the shape of a donkey or a sun, who constructed haunted houses, games of memory and scent, sewed us costumes, drew magnificent pictures for PTA posters, carved marvelously demonic pumpkins with lifelike ears that she stuck onto the head with toothpicks, made the neighborhood's best toast (forty years later, a childhood friend will say—when I return home for my father's memorial service—that my mother always made the best toast; it will seem, as will most things people say to me then, idiotic). In short, she excelled in all the vital measures of childhood.

When I think of childhood scents and a parent's lap, it is hers I recall, not his. Sitting in her lap after some family dinner, my head leaned against her breast, the soft, pale-blue cashmere against my cheek, scratchy soft, and the almost harsh scent of Chanel No. 5; the rise and fall of her breath and the drone of the heart like a great ship's engine.

By contrast, my father was like the black leather chair and footrest which sat untouched at the end of the living room—a long, neglected room, with high wooden rafters, seeping mortar and exposed brick painted white—or the menorah from Israel on the sideboard that remained unlit.

My father was like the butler in a British drawing-room drama, a shadowy presence in the background, useful, necessary even, but one we preferred to ignore. A distasteful, slightly embarrassing domestic fixture, like plumbing. A necessity we did not want to be reminded of—which makes me wonder now if the necessity we were loathe to acknowledge was economic, affectional, or erotic.

It's not my father's talk I remember but his silences; he had a subtle basso, a velvety voice, but I recall instead how he'd sit silently on the couch across the living room from where I often sat in a small brown velvet chair or later Danish modern with curved wood arms that never offered comfort but were beautiful. My father, his lower lip pressed out, pouted in a handsome, thoughtful frown, his large beautiful head with its thick white hair, his face expressive of concentration, empathy, great understanding. It was not in talk that we were bonded, grown close, but in silence.

His advice was almost always wrong or bad—simplistic and irritatingly banal (when I was overwhelmed by deadlines at school or work, he'd ask me, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer always inane and the same: "One bite at a time!")—and this was disappointing. He had the face of a wise man or an ancient god; I wanted him to be wise, Olympian. But he was all too human.

Still he listened as few do with a look of profound interest and concern, squinting slightly, frowning, so one felt the full power of his attention. It was this that gave me pleasure, not his disappointing replies: the moment of communion before he spoke.

Only later, after he was dead, would it occur to me that this was likely the practiced pose of seduction, the way he convinced corporate clients to talk to him about managerial matters and seduced their secretaries and women from personnel.

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"The world's reality," writer Italo Calvino once wrote, "presents itself to our eyes as multiple, prickly, and as densely superimposed layers. Like an artichoke." And this is how my father seems to me now as I try to fix him on the page. Prickly, multiple, my father. "What counts for us in a work of literature," Calvino says, "is the possibility of being able to continue to unpeel it like a never-ending artichoke, discovering more and more new dimensions in reading." Calvino was writing about the writer Carlo Emilio Gadda, one of Italy's greatest modernists, when he made these remarks in his essay "The World Is an Artichoke," but what he says seems apt for my father as well.

I should like to say that I see my father now in layers, never ending, even though he has. But the fact is I can't see him whole. I hear from my cousin Howard how my father was the smart one in his family, the intellectual, which he never seemed in ours with his crude jokes and tendency to "dip into" books without ever actually reading them. I hear from my mother that he was involved with his mistress Zona for more than twenty years. *Twenty* years? That is longer than I've ever loved anyone. It is the length of a marriage. My father wasn't a philanderer, it seems suddenly, but a bigamist. My father won't add up. My father—prickly, multiple—is an artichoke.

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I was the last one of my family to see my father's body. I was not present when he died, and I am afraid that if I do not see his body—the evidence—I will never quite believe that he is dead. So, the morning of his memorial service, the day he is to be cremated, I visit my father's body at the funeral home, prepared for what a friend of mine has called "the rubber suit"—the horrifically uninhabited body. I find, instead, my father, lying very still on a gurney, under a thin white sheet, his body cloaked in a pale-blue hospital gown flecked with dots or tiny stars. Still handsome, with his familiar frown, hook nose, olive skin gone a bit yellow as it did before he began dialysis, he is, I think, all things considered, looking well.

I expect him to open his eyes, say, *Hey, El*. But of course he doesn't. And I realize that this expectation and useless stupid hope is precisely what I have come here to dispel. So, as if to prove to myself that this body is not my father, I lean down and hug him—and am startled to find that he is cold and hard, his chest unmoving, stiff on a metal gurney, under a sheet, in a pale-blue hospital gown in the basement of a funeral home on Franklin Avenue, five blocks from an old apartment of mine, but even this does not dispel my impression that my father is present, still here, that the sonofabitch (a favorite term of his) is still among us, with me, even now that my dad has done what Gilgamesh could not, he has beaten death.

But, of course, the impression passes.

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When I first see Rick's body by firelight, I am breathless, a little awed. I've never before felt this about a man, though I've often felt this in the presence of beautiful women, amazed by the loveliness of the human body. Naked, he is incredibly beautiful—the thick, soft, gray pelt across his chest, the powerful curves of his shoulders and pecs, the tapered waist and muscular legs, the arc of his cock—powerful and vulnerable, exquisite. He looks like sculpture, like a model of man, like something Michelangelo would invent. (He has, someone said of him years ago, the ass of an eighteen-year-old.)

I am used to having opinions about sex between men and women,

its social and political meaning. I am of a generation that read Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse*, that was weaned on Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*; I am not used to being desirous. But I am now. He is the human thing, the animal thing, the vital body. We are alive. We might make a child. It does not seem a feminist issue; it seems a human one: I want to take part in the chain of being. I desire this man intensely. But more than that, I want something to come of desire, not simply the body's pleasure but the pleasure of biology, of participating in those ancient rites.

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"The Romans," novelist Andrew Holleran writes, "were practical [when it came to death]: in every funeral procession there were prostitutes ready to help the mourners resume their appetitive existence."

Sometimes as Rick moved his mouth over my body, as if opening the chakras (head, throat, heart, belly) with his breath, it seemed as if he were ministering more than making love, like a sacred concubine to recall one from the dead to life's desiring.

More than restoring me to desire, Rick returns me to wonder.

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The mourner's Kaddish, which Jews traditionally say in the year following a death, is not a lamentation but a song of praise; I am surprised to learn this; it is tradition that in the year following a death, the mourners say Kaddish daily, praising again and again the goodness of the world.

I cannot say Kaddish for my father in the Orthodox synagogue where my friend attends shul. I am not a son. I print a copy off the Internet and say it, stumbling over the transliterated words, embarrassed by my clumsiness, my inexperience, my failure to honor my father in the way he deserves. To offer those ancient prayers. Those comforts. Instead I spend days in bright sunlight with Rick by the pool, nights by a fire, listening to Chopin and Prokofiev and reggae; we picnic on rocks by a creek, we skinny dip and kayak; we make love in the bath by candlelight. Watch Visconti films at the National Gallery. Attend parties in the country with film people and horse

people, where the landscape looks like a rug shaken out in the wind, green and rolling away to trees.

We'd been deeply happy all summer, since we'd patched things up after a brief breakup in July. Once, meeting him at the Washington Hilton's pool off Florida Avenue one afternoon, where we liked to swim, he took my hand and said, "We've been having a lot of fun lately." I said, joking but unnerved, "We'll have to stop that." But it didn't stop. We were happy for months. But it was a fragile happiness, like a dream you struggle not to wake from.

I often felt drugged in his company, walking home by moonlight or making love midday in a sunspot on his couch, the light flooding in through a skylight. And all that time, we never spent twenty-four hours together at a stretch. We might get together at 6:00, stay together till the following afternoon, but I never stayed for a full day, as if wary of wearing out my welcome, or wary that the spell would break.

Dining with Rick or making love (whether swimming nude in a creek and picnicking atop sun-warmed rocks on salmon and aioli sauce and drinking cold white wine, or going to the symphony on a rainy night then stretching out before a fire to listen to Debussy and to rain striking the glass roof while we made a slow kind of love), that immersion in the world's loveliness filled me with prayerful gratitude, as if our days together were praising again and again the goodness of the world, like a kind of embodied Kaddish.

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The old saw *chacun à son goût*—to each his own taste—has never had such poignant, painful import as in its application to love.

A friend will describe Rick as an aging hippie, but I find it hard to sum him up. He has lived a difficult, magical life. He lost his father at twelve, earned a scholarship to Andover at fifteen, where he was New England's pole vault champion before he broke his back (missing the mat), which saved him from the Vietnam War. He won a scholarship to Columbia only to drop out to become an actor in New York and later at LaMama in Amsterdam, where he lived on a houseboat (and briefly shared a girlfriend with Miles Davis). He's been lover and friend to some of the twentieth century's great American artists, created a

downtown art gallery, visited Jane Goodall in Africa, married an American heiress, meditated with Carlos Castaneda, biked across America, made a film, had a child, and a divorce. He is a multimillionaire by marriage, who believes the 9/11 collapse was an inside job (the government did it), who unapologetically voted for Nader, loves Proust, and devours books and composes operetta, who says he never misses people but tells me he misses me tons when I'm gone, who just when I'm inclined to dismiss his ideas as preposterous reflexive iconoclasm, comes up with a brilliant analysis of a film or a piece of music by Dvořák or Reich.

My friend says he's wounded but not in a charismatic way, that he is neither a wealthy conservative guy, nor an artist hippie guy, either of which would be understandably appealing in its way; he is both and neither, and not handsome enough, she says, to compensate for his weird ideas. And she is right, and yet I adore him. He seems to me, and to her, a man caught between incarnations—half-man half-frog, or perhaps a satyr (both his ex-wife and I call him this).

I know that he can seem ridiculous, but I know that he is remarkable, too, magical, a man like no other I've met or ever expect I will. A man who seems not entirely human, but some other kind of creature—a frog prince, a squirrel king.

When we first lay naked together on Valentine's Day, four months after my father's death, we stretched out before a roaring fire on a blanket, pillows crowded around our heads, our skin orange in the firelight, the hair on his muscular body like a corona, and he bent over me and placed his mouth at the vulnerable spot below the sternum above my heart and breathed in as if he were drawing out some poison from my body, and I felt as if he were drawing out of me snakebite venom, as if it were some ceremony, which he repeated at the point between my eyes.

It will be weeks before we finally make love, but that first night naked before the fire was as intimate as anything we would share, that I would share with anyone. We had been to dinner at a political salon, where we sat at a table with a former ambassador, the focus of a recent Washington scandal. Rick's friends were an impressive circle of Washington insiders of the sort that didn't impress me but I knew should. He will in time prove to be a flirt, a man given to ignoring the woman he is with, courting other women in the company of his wife

or lover, a man (it seems to me) so afraid of losing love that he flees the love he seems to crave, a man whom I will love despite all of this.

There is no arguing with taste. I adore him, despite myself, and despite him. A sapphist with a roving eye and an aging Lothario are a recipe for disaster; I can see it from here. But there is no hope and no helping it. No accounting for and no arguing with taste after all.

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I want to believe that appetite's redemptive. That desire is the answer to what ails us—not consumerism, its poor cousin, but the recognition of ourselves that comes of recognizing what we long for. "We are what we love," as Thomas Merton wrote. Discovering my own desires—for women, for books—brought me back to myself when I was in my twenties, as desiring Rick restores me in the face of grief, and I've wanted to believe that my father's appetites were salvific as well, that they represent some fierce passionate nature, some great lust for life. But I have my doubts.

When my father fell and broke his hip, the year before he died, we didn't think he'd last. He seemed too passionate a man to manage life in a wheelchair or with a walker or a cane, on dialysis or in a rehab center. Time and again we were amazed by his recovery—how he came back from the brink. He began to seem indestructible. His will to live appeared fierce as his appetites had been.

But I wonder now if it wasn't desire that fueled his heroic effort to live, but fear, and perhaps fear that fueled his adulterous affairs as well. A rather ordinary fear of limits. The limitations imposed by vows. The limits of life itself. Like the restaurant rules that he refused to honor, or the doctors' orders (to eat less, drink less, exercise), which he ignored.

When surgeons took three of his toes, a few days before he died, it must have seemed too much. I imagine he must have felt then, looking down at his diminished foot, that he was being cut away from the world, made smaller, bit by bit, limits he could neither refuse nor accept, which appetite could not assuage or answer.

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Almost a year to the day after my father's death, I go to synagogue for Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish year, when God is said to inscribe each person for blessings or burdens in the coming year. Those in mourning are asked to stand, those who have lost someone in the past year, so I do. And standing brings tears to my eyes, like a trick of altitude. The rabbi asks the congregation to note those who are standing, to make a point to ask them after the service about one thing that is remembered about the lost loved one, to pass on the legacy. I am mortified. I do not fear public speaking, but I hate being a spectacle, asked intimate questions; I hate pity. I think in a panic about what I might say to sum up my father, a man whose contradictions and complexity—his crude talk and love of Bach, his PhD and penchant for professional wrestling, his admiration for and betrayal of my mother, his twenty-two-year affair with a woman he claims he cared nothing for—still puzzle and move me.

I think of what my brother said of my father at his memorial service—that our father said there had to be garlic in the afterlife. But this seems trivial, a punch line to my father's life, and my father was so much more than the sum of his gags, as he called them. Even if I wanted to say this, I couldn't, because first I would have to say his name—Seymour Levy—and I would have to say that he is dead, and that is more than I can bear on this first dark October evening of the year. So when a break comes in the service, when the whole congregation rises to say Kaddish, I slip out into the aisle and walk to the back of the hall and stand alone and pray for my father, praising God, and praising, praising the wonders of this world.

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