

CHARACTER

“Porter, “ Mary said. “Your problem is you just can’t go through life bouncing from one bedroom to another. At some point, you must recognize there’s more to life than sex.”

“Mary, I continue to totally disagree.” Porter grinned.

She scowled at him with that look of hers that could terrify a rat.

Mary had a sprawling bat-and-board house near the park. Not a mansion but she wouldn’t have wanted it to be. To that she had added a rather large gazebo on the left side facing the long lawn that led to the street. At the rear the gazebo opened to her spacious back lot fenced in with tall, pointed wrought iron. An old-fashioned swing and a glider looked out over the back of her city estate. On the other side, she had built a portico for guests to leave off their passengers to avoid rain and snow. The front of the gazebo was well hidden by latticing and climbing roses, their fragrance in spring and summer a welcome scent for visitors who sat inside.

Porter jogged around the park nearly every afternoon. Some days he stopped by to talk to Mary. He often sat on the custom cushions on the roundabout benches inside the gazebo. He entered and exited at will with Mary’s blessing. Some days Mary would come out, her cats and dogs scattering before her to talk to him. Other days she stayed inside and simply ignored him. Left him sitting there by himself. After he decided she was going to ignore him, he shrugged his shoulders, jogged on, looked up into the trees.

In grade school, high school and for the first two years of college, Mary and Porter had been lovers. Mary, at age eleven, seduced him. Porter, at age ten, gladly accepted.

After sharing an apartment at the university, Porter, in the summer between their sophomore and junior years, could no longer tolerate the smell of her cats and dogs, turds on the carpet, pee wee, litter boxes, animal hair wherever he sat down. He couldn’t get that nasty stuff off his sweaters. Mary couldn’t stand him being unfaithful. She longed for a true and honest lover. A soul mate. On the other hand, she couldn’t keep her eyes

off Porter. She had always been in love with him. His face, his look. When he spoke, she could not help but be enthralled. This went on and off for years to the present.

Both of them came from wealthy families. They were trust babies.

Mary's actual name was Harriet Purucker. The Purucker family was one of those dynasties no one knew much about. Except their bankers. Porter's actual name was Harold Porter III. His father was fourth generation wealthy. Real estate. Both of her names, first and last, embarrassed her. His two names bothered him too. Most of all, though, it was the III addition that mortified him.

"Now, who in the shit wants to be called Harold or Harry in this day and age," Porter, as a teenager in the 60's, shouted defiantly to his father.

"Suck it up, boy," his grouchy multimillionaire father advised. "You will be able to pay for your gas and electricity. Get yourself fat or whatever. It's tax deal, son."

The on-again, off-again, couple mutually decided to hide their legal names. Harriet became Mary. Harold became Porter.

"Hey, I'm Mary," she introduced herself.

"Mary," Porter often said. "I'm not sure fits you."

"Oh bug off, Porter. Harold. Harry. Genuine jerk. Spoiled brat. Your mother should have been shot. I can't believe your dad didn't hire a hit man to take her out. Such a domineering, perfume drenched old witch. Those dangling earrings could have been chimes."

"Mary," Porter said. "That's what I enjoy most about you. You go out of your way to make me feel good."

Whereas Porter introduced himself in this way.

The pearly toothed, bushy headed, bright faced fraternity lad would introduce himself to classmates by preempting them with, "I'm Porter."

"Porter, who?" the guys and girls asked him, almost in chorus.

"Save us some time," Porter was prone to answer. "Just Porter will do."

He was so convincing the young men shook hands on it, the young ladies kissed him and overall they bought his name as Porter.

Mary became Mary; Porter, Porter.

This particular night in early autumn Porter felt nostalgic. The air was brisk

but not quite chilly. The strong scent of winter coming raised his hopes high. He looked forward to snow. Vanilla in the air. Strong, cold beers. A crackling fireplace. Cognac after lovemaking. Even so, the dome of the sky remained vast and elusive. As he jogged as he did daily around the park, he bypassed young mothers jogging with baby buggies. Young lovers strolling hand in hand.

Then there was Mary in her antique littered house with three cats and two dogs. Two parakeets. The stink. Animal hairs. Sure, she was lovely, smart, well read, a great conversation. She didn't squat in front of television. But all the attention to the animals. The poop. The pee. Caretaking of plants. All that attention to her "things." What about me? Porter kept asking himself. What about me, Mary?

Porter and Mary had crossed the line into middle age. At a birthday dinner the month before in an elegant restaurant, they had almost simultaneously become fifty years of age.

Mary did some volunteer work. Otherwise, she tended to her houseplants and animals. She had a guy in now and then to pleasure her. Porter had his girlfriends. He enjoyed going to movies, ballgames, art fairs, reading spy novels and historical non-fiction, playing tennis and golf. He liked to get into arguments with people at bars and ballgames he called idiots. He liked to argue that America, the so called greatest country in the world, was built on the genocide of the Indians and on the backs of black slaves. That was the extent of his social activism.

"The trouble with you, Porter," Mary said that particular early autumn evening, "is that you have no character. You are spineless. You love your cars. Your young girls."

"Young women," Porter corrected her. She ignored his intrusion.

"But what have you done with your life?"

"You don't know what I have done or not done. I do a lot. I just don't brag about it like you do at cocktail parties and those stupid balls where women pay thousands of dollars for ornate dresses. By the way, what do you do? Dust, pan up scat, water useless plants, talk to other old bags on the telephone."

"I know what you do, Porter. You play. You fly kites. You take young ladies to lunch. You fuck them all afternoon. Just like you did me. You go to movies, to

ballgames. You play. Pay attention here. You hair is getting gray. It's time to grow up. It's time to develop some character."

At that age, they sniped at one another.

That late afternoon, vanilla in the air, Porter decided to ignore her cats and dogs. He took her by the hand off her gazebo and led her up the stairway to her bedroom. It was a mess, like the rest of her house. Magazines, crumpled panties, books, clothes, scattered all over. Room stinking of cat litter and dogs. The cleaning lady was due the next day.

He undressed her. She was not precious at that moment but he decided, what the heck. He had been jogging. No doubt he wasn't fresh either. They made love anyway, and held each other as they had in the past.

"Mary," Porter said. "I've been thinking."

"What? You? Thinking?" Mary whispered into his shoulder, her voice affectionate.

Porter laughed. "Touche'." He frowned. "Maybe, just maybe, we could give it one more shot. What's your take on it?"

"No way, Porter. We've already tried that. You misbehaved. Are you getting short on cash?"

"No, my stock portfolio is up sixteen percent."

"What? I'm jealous. Who is this guy? Why didn't you let me know? I let you in on my last commercial real estate deal."

"Her name is Juliet. A great stockbroker. Or, might I say, stockbroker-ess."

"How old is she?"

"A fairly new MBA would be my guess. Not long out of grad school. Old family. Good connections. I can get you her card."

"Bedded her, I suppose."

"By way of introduction. Just her way of saying, 'Hello, I want your business.' I'm just a toy, I suppose."

"Porter, you're no toy. Just a worn out antique that needs to be refinished."

Porter reflected on the shadows of the leaves reflecting on the disheveled sheets.

"Well, think about it. I am lonely, Mary. I miss you. I miss the old days.

The war protests. The pot parties. You and me laughing, making fun of people.”

“What you miss, Porter...” Mary said, then sighed, then decided to press on, “is free love. Yes, the purple passion parties. The sexual free-for-alls. I know you well.”

“Mary,” Porter said. “You underestimate me. I have grown. I have,” he said with a broad gesture of his other hand, “I have...” he paused, “I have become more aware.”

Mary laughed loudly.

“You have grown older and more desperate.” She couldn’t stop laughing into his shoulder. “You are so full of it, Porter. I don’t know why I put up with you. There are so many other men more handsome, more honest, richer, younger, more masculine.”

Porter knew what Mary said was true. Yet, they got along, didn’t they? Now and then.

“Mary, do you think we have another chance?”

“Another? How many have we had?”

“Probably not many enough.”

Mary was silent a long time. A tear slipped down her cheek.

“Okay,” Mary finally said. “I will take you in if you will be nice to me. No cheating this time. No secrets. I don’t want another woman’s germs. There’s so much more going around these days.”

Porter hugged her nakedness.

She spelled out additional terms.

“No bratwurst, except on holidays. No t-bones except on birthdays,” she added. “Stews and soups are okay if the meat is lean. I don’t want to gain any more weight.”

“No, duck, as far as I am concerned. No fancy, shamcy,” Porter spoke with mild defiance.

“What? No duck?”

“Okay. Well, I’ll have a roasted chicken from the supermarket. You get the duck. I’ll catch the rooster.”

They kissed as a handshake.

They decided Porter should keep his apartment. He moved his usuals to Mary’s house. He tried to avoid the stink of Mary’s animals by smoking Winstons on her patio

of statuary. Her vast backyard of trees and flowers calmed him. He enjoyed some large Scotches there with Mary and jogged a lot. Mary did her charitable work. She fed her plants and animals. She took regular showers and towed her hair for his benefit. When together with him, she touched herself at key points with patchouli. Vogue and Cosmo style smells when going out with girl friends, old aunts and charity types.

In the following weeks, they walked together in the autumn light. They read together in front of real wood fires, talked politics and philosophy as they had in high school and at the university. Porter hauled in the logs that had been delivered by the same farmer who had delivered them for years. They had coffee on Mary's patio in the morning in warm, colorful bathrobes. Porter made a fabulous white chili.

Porter's charitable work was to contribute cash. Once a week he spooned soups and tuna noodle casseroles into bowls at the cathedral kitchen for the homeless. He patted the homeless on their shoulders for good luck.

One afternoon two months after their new arrangement Porter checked his apartment, stood on the balcony and gripped the railing. He looked out over the square.

A great longing still pulled at him. Yes, Mary had been good to him. They had good love, good laughs, good pot roasts, nice wines. Maybe, he thought, he wanted more than life could give. Maybe, as Mary often said, he lacked character. He lacked substance. Mary didn't like the smell of his occasional cigar.

Porter decided to walk around the square and peer into the shops, inhale the succulent aromas of the restaurants. He spotted some blazers in the window of a men's store. He wondered around in the store, opening and closing blazers, lifted and held up shirts off racks. Porter had the knack of being able to go into a store, scan it, and see immediately what would flatter his physique and what would not. This was a Monday night. The store was empty.

Nothing jumped out at him. He turned to leave.

Out of nowhere, a quite young saleswoman appeared. Her face immediately captivated him. Tall, a bit too thin. Hair cropped short but not butch. Small breasts. That never bothered Porter. It was the beauty of nipples he admired in a woman and how they stood tall and hard when properly attended to.

All he could think to say was, "Hello."

For the first time in many years standing before a woman, he gulped.

“Is there something I can show you?” she smiled.

Porter felt speechless. There was never a woman he didn’t like.

He loved all women as he had loved his mother, Mary pointed out. He never really enjoyed the company of men. His mother had doted on him. Mary often told him so. The woman smiling at him was not a girl. She was a beautiful, young woman. She was perfectly dressed, a manikin, and tastefully manicured. She smelled nice. She looked nice. Her eyes were clear, pupils direct and deep.

“Umm,” he smiled back. “I was looking for a summer blazer. An off white one. I suppose I’m out of season. I might be going to Maui.”

“Normally, we don’t get those until January. You might be able to find one in a catalogue or on the internet.”

“The stuff out of catalogues never seems to fit and I don’t have a computer.” Porter said.

“Is there anything else I might show you?”

Porter knew of a lot of things she could. He had a difficult time of not looking at how her long legs and how her thighs pressed against her skirt. He could not avoid trying to capture her face. He wanted her to walk away so he could observe the rest of her. She was a moving target. He could not quite capture her in still life.

“I guess not. Thank you anyway.”

“Would you like my card? We have a sale coming up.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

She handed it to him and smiled again. A seductive smile. Her card said her name was Jan. Jan as in January. New Year’s. New beginnings.

They smiled at each other. The clock on the wall showed nine o’clock. Closing time. Store still empty.

“You know my name. Now, what is yours?”

“People call me, Porter.”

“Porter, who?”

“Simply, Porter.”

“No first or last name,” she smartly said.

“Only god knows.”

Selling, Porter noted. Assertive. He liked self assured women. Mary, too, did not fear holding forth.

“All right, Porter,” she said. “I need to lock the door. I’m a little scared this time of night. Will you stay with me until I lock down the store? I hate to ask you this favor because the management doesn’t cut me any slack. I’m trying to finish graduate school.”

“Of course,” Porter said. He had an idea something good was coming up. Even after a possibly long day, Jan ravished.

“By the way,” Porter asked. “What field?”

“MBA,” she said, going door to door to lock up. “I was a psychology major as an undergrad. I decided I couldn’t handle all that whining.”

Jan went around the store, turning this on, this off. She called security to let them know she was shutting down.

Porter sat on one of the two chairs in front of a full-length mirror. Please, please, Porter thought to himself. Let something happen. Then, he felt guilty. A little.

Why did he think these thoughts? Mary was home, waiting for him. What she says about me is true, he admitted.

Jan walked briskly out of the fitting rooms.

“All done,” she said. “Thank you for helping and being my new friend. The management here are trash. Retail types.”

“I understand,” Porter nodded.

They stood in front of one another in front of check out counter, stared at each other and simultaneously hugged without any reason to do so.

She eyeballed Porter, and said:

“Would you like to come to my apartment for a beer or a glass of wine. I only live a few blocks from here.”

Porter could not believe his good luck. New generation, he thought. No games, no BS. Mary, he thought, feeling remorseful. Right again. He was a scumball.

“Honey,” he said. “I have a dinner date.”

“Well, Porter,” she gulped and her eyes grew slightly moist. “You have my card.” She then took another card and scribbled on the back.

“Here’s my cell. Just in case.”

The way she looked at him he imagined she might want to kiss him.

“Will you promise to call me?” she asked, her head to one side, smiling.

Coy, Porter noticed.

“No, “ he said. “I cannot promise. Who knows?.”

“I think you may be a case study. I shall write you down in my self discovery journal.”

“That’s fine,” Porter grinned. “Maybe I will learn a thing or two about myself.” For he was handsome, even at the age of fifty, and knew he was. Mary had said so. He thought then about Mary and what they were sharing.

Porter lingered at the door, turned and let it close slowly behind him.

Mary was immediately on his case as he opened her front door.

“For one thing,” she griped. “I fixed you a chicken pot pie. You know about me and chicken pot pies. Timing. Right out of the oven. Cannot be successfully reheated. I told you I was going to bake one. I told you this morning I was going to do a special dinner for you. I spend a lot of time on them. I know chicken pot pies are one of your favorites.”

She crossed her arms and actually stomped her foot.

“I’m sorry, Mary. I checked on my apartment, felt restless, went for a walk and got distracted.”

“No. You are not sorry. If you had listened to what I told you this afternoon, you would have been here promptly. I clearly told you six thirty. You have shown no empathy for me. In some manner, I don’t know what or how, you decided to indulge yourself and didn’t take me into account.”

“Well, Mary, I...”

“Oh, shut up, scumball.”

Mary marched to the sliding glass door to her patio. Opened and shut it with a bang. Plopped herself on a wrought iron patio chair without even placing her new leafy patterned cushions on it. Her little shit snouzer chewed on Porter’s shin. Mary not able to observe his reaction, he booted the snotty, moustachiod little bastard. The ass kissing fellow yelped and let go a pitiful squeal.

“Serves you right, you little prick,” Porter said. “Bite me again and I’ll nail your sawed-off nub of a tail to the wall.”

Porter sniffed the aroma of Mary’s chicken pot pie delivering itself from the kitchen. Yumm. Hungry. Yet, he pictured Jan. He could not fix her features: her sculpted, sharp, tanned face, and pixie styled, dark hair, her pointy breasts, her taut ass presenting itself in a tight short black skirt.

Porter poured himself a Scotch on the rocks and joined Mary on her patio. The wrought iron chair, without the cushion, felt punishing. Mary looked up at the trees. Said not a word.

“Mary,” he began. “I think one of your cats has done a doodoo on your new carpet.” Hadn’t really. He just wanted to tweak her with the image. She was a slob, messes all around, magazines all in a pile, her mail. But she was particular about certain things such as carpets and drapes.

Mary looked up into the trees. The breeze lightly shifted the full leaves. It was getting cold. Late autumn.

Finally, she spoke, not facing Porter.

“The trouble with you, Porter, is you have no self discipline. You jog right and left, willy nilly. You have no focus. Your mind is stuck on one thing, and one thing only. Who knows what you have been up to? And here I am slaving away to make you a picture perfect chicken pot pie.” She stuck her tongue out at him. “Like the ones your mother made you.”

“I’m not the most perfect of human beings,” Porter said. “At least, I’m not an addict.”

“Yes, you are. You are addicted to doing nothing, to playing tennis, racket ball, golf and whoring.”

“Now, now, Mary. I just forgot.”

“Have you no sympathy for a woman who’s just gone through menopause?”

Porter who seldom got aggravated at anything got his back up. He shouldn’t have but said:

“Mary, you sure have become a frump in your middle age.”

In Porter's eyes, Mary had become a frump. She looked the part, wearing those gingham frocks and hiding her unkempt, greasy hair under a bandana. She even wore white anklets with her slippers.

He missed the younger Mary, the hippie girl he once could not be parted from. Probably, it was that law student, Curt. Her mother had a lot to do with their separation. The society hag.

"Mary," she told her, "It's time to stop being an adolescent and become a real woman. Marry, raise children, run a household, contribute to the community."

Though Mary, at one point, found Jesus Christ and married Curt, Porter never thought she was really converted or convinced. Her only child, a daughter, Maureen, seldom called her from her chalet in California except to extort her for cash. Mary also converted for a short period of time to Republican politics but vomited it up one night over the railing of her suburban deck after a campaign party.

Then, she became enthralled with the stockbroker, a Pakistani, who knew everything. That guy, she actually tossed over the railing of the suburban deck she stole from Curt in the divorce settlement. Gained weight, wore frocks and anklets. The Mary now before him.

Porter liked Mary. Many hearty memories. He liked the fact she was financially independent and he didn't have to support her as most men must do with their women. Guys who just occasionally got laid between golf, racket ball, and other sports events on TV. He didn't actually mind her being sloppy, per se. Better than being an ice queen. Okay, he had to remind her to shower sometimes. Found her unshaven underarms appealing. He didn't insist on perfume but now and then a nice sniff would have been pleasant. She smelled nice enough in important places. Mary wasn't really pretty. Not like Jan. To Porter, though, she always was and always would be sensuous.

She grimaced and wagged her head a lot at him. His ways. Probably had to do with his human nature. Porter realized he had imperfections. However, he liked his weaknesses. They were fun. Matter of fact, he enjoyed his imperfections. Laughed a lot to himself about them. Plus, he still had his apartment to escape to.

He chose his *respondez-vous* carefully.

“Mary,” he said. “I’m sorry about the pot pie. You went to a lot of trouble to please me. I was terribly inconsiderate.”

Mary looked up into the trees.

“You always are, Porter.”

Porter looked down at the ground. He wanted to heat up the pot pie. He wanted to take Mary to bed. Maybe it was his excitement over Jan. He sipped his Scotch. The sky was clear. He wondered at the stars.

They sat in silence. The Scotch made Porter feel better. Mary said:

“I’m going in now to feed my friends,” she said. Emphasis on “friends.” Cats, dogs and birds, Porter knew.

So, Porter thought to himself, I am no longer one of her friends.

“The parakeets too?” he asked.

“No,” Mary said. “You already know I feed them in the morning. I will check their water, though.”

“I guess I’ve spoiled the evening,” Peter said, hanging his head.

“Yes, you have.”

“Nothing I can do to correct my screw up?”

“Nothing,” Mary said, shifting her weight off the chaise. “It was not merely a screw up. You kept me waiting three hours. You ruined the perfection of my pot pie.”

Porter felt devastated. He had hurt her and he was sorry.

Porter noticed that Mary had developed a physical trait of having beads of sweat bubble on her upper lips where a slight moustache was beginning to show. He gained some satisfaction in that discovery.

Even so, he felt rejected. He had tried to make a good suggestion but Mary had repelled him. He wanted to freshen up and go out for a beer. Bad idea. He undressed in the bedroom, except for his jockey shorts, heaped his clothes and sneakers into a pile, stretched out and said to himself, “Well, fuck it. Sometimes, you just can’t win.”

The night was perfect. Mary was dorking around in her library, doing who knows what. Obviously avoiding Porter. The Scotch made him groggy. He slipped into bed in the autumn chill, windows open and that night laid awake trying to visualize Jan. He could not get her out of his head. The hook was he knew she liked him. That was the

main issue. He was tired of people not liking him. He had to do all the work. What would life be like if someone liked him for himself for once? He did not hear Mary come to bed.

The next morning when he woke Mary wasn't there. He knew where she was. The weekly meeting of The Humane Society. Big deal, dogs and cats all over people. That was his take on things.

Porter fixed himself scrambled eggs and buttered whole wheat toast. Poured himself a massive orange juice. When finished, he cleaned up, kicked at the dogs and cats, had coffee on the patio with a pad on his chair, enjoyed the mix of coffee and autumnal air, commented to himself about the lovely nature of nature. At that time of morning, no mosquitoes bit him. That they never asked was primarily what bothered him about them. If he wanted to give blood, Porter would do it voluntarily at the blood bank.

Porter had one thing on his mind. Her name was Jan. Her face showed herself before him. He could envision her features. Eyes. Lips. Forehead. Hairdo. Her fingers. Button tits. Most of all, her smile, her friendliness. Porter wanted to be with her.

He showered and combed his salt and pepper hair. By then, it was ten a.m. — when the shops opened. He had to restrain himself. Don't be too eager. Another cup of coffee and a smoke. About eleven a.m. he drove to the square. The shop was open. He felt gladdened. There was an old bag there in an ankle length muumuu and a pimpled girl who hated her job. Jan was not there. Porter pretended nothing was amiss.

"Anything you would like to try on?" the old bag asked kindly.

"Just looking," Porter smiled back.

He shuffled the hangers on the rack, then left.

Two days in a row Jan was not there.

One night late, about eight thirty, just before the nine o'clock closing time, Porter strolled by, pretending not to notice but looked out of the corner of his eye. He saw Jan hanging up tried on blazers and slacks.

He strolled in. The door made a sound, a ding. Jan noticed him. No one else was in the store.

"Can I help you?" she asked. It was as if they had not had their earlier encounter.

“Just looking,” he said.

Porter flipped through the racks. He found two blazers he might have liked if he needed a new blazer. One was a tweed. He had a half dozen of them. The other a light blue. Didn’t have one of those. Okay, but he had never liked that color. No zip. Both were his size. He liked the buttons. White. Pure.

“Don’t I know you?” Jan smiled. Kidding, he hoped.

“Maybe. I was in the other day. You gave me your card.”

“Porter. That’s it. How could I forget the man with one name?”

Porter and Jan looked directly into each other’s eyes.

“I would like to try these on,” Porter said.

“Help yourself,” Jan said.

Porter went into one of the fitting rooms. It had a full-length mirror. He was disappointed at the way he looked older. He thought his breath might be stale. He had no mints.

There was a knock on the door of his fitting closet.

“How’s it going in there?” Jan asked through the door.

“I sort of like the tweed. Reminds me of autumn. I’m not such a good judge of these things.”

“Well,” Jan said, “maybe you should bring your wife in. Or, of course, you could take it home, try it on, show it to her, and return it if it doesn’t suit her.”

“Great,” Porter said. “Except for one thing.”

“And?”

Porter bent his head sorrowfully.

“I don’t have a wife.”

“Oh,” Jan said. “Hey, look, see what you think. I need to shut the place down. Actually, in about five minutes. I need to notify security I am out of here. I need to meet my boyfriend.”

“I better leave,” Porter said, sliding off the tweed blazer one arm at a time.

“No hurry,” Jan said. “I’ll let you out.”

Porter pulled off the blazer and carefully hung it back on the hanger. He sighed.

His shoulders shrunk. The lights were going out. Except for the security lighting. There was a knock on the door of the fitting room. He opened it. Jan stood there.

“Undress me, Porter,” she said earnestly.

Porter did. The experience was uncomfortable there, more or less, cramped on the carpet of the fitting room. Nevertheless, it was what he had dreamed about. It was like when Mary seduced him under a tree in the park at the age of ten.

When they were finished, Porter kissed her ear and whispered into its lobe:

“Jan” he whispered, “I have an apartment not far from here. Nobody lives there but me. It’s my insurance policy. If you would like, why not come over for a drink or a glass of wine. Oh, I forgot, you have a boy friend.”

“I’m not in love with him, Porter. He’s just a date.”

“You know, Jan, I’m fifty years old.”

“I don’t care. I like you. You’re fun. I liked the way you fucked me. I like the way you smell.”

They held each other. A security guard came by and beamed in his flashlight. He could not see them but they could see his flashlight beam. He moved to the next store.

Porter had Jan follow him in her Honda to his apartment. He gave her a pass from the supply in his glove compartment to park there. She liked the way he had decorated it. She had expected contemporary. It was full of cushions. The gas fireplace lit the tasteful carpet. Porter did not tell her his place was done by an old girlfriend. A Scandinavian.

When Porter got back to Mary’s house he felt bad. She was watering her plants. She wore a nightie. She looked cute. Barefoot, hippie, loving him again.

“Hi baby,” she smiled, looking at him over her shoulder.

“Hi, Mary,” he said.

She hugged him. She pushed him away.

“You’ve been with another woman,” she said, backed off, and stomped her foot. Her face drooped. She bowed her head. Her happiness flew out the window on the harried wings of a frightened bird.

“I can smell the perfume. I can smell the sex.”

Porter had no reply.

“Porter,” she fumed. “Your problem is, as I have always said, you have no character. By this time, at age fifty, you will probably never have any character. As far as I am concerned, you must make a choice. I am not a masochist. I no longer want to be abused by you. If this other woman does, bless her heart. Me, myself, I refuse to live in the in-between. Just am not going to tolerate how you treat me any longer. So, asshole, make up your goddamn mind or get out of my life for good.”

She was shaking but continued to water her plants, the hanging ones and the ones on her window sill, her mouth bent. Sweat beads appeared on her upper lip. She slammed things around. Made banging noises.

Porter smelled her dogs and cats. The litter boxes. The turds. He went out on Mary’s patio and felt himself breathing heavily. He felt dirty and sheepish. A cad. A slimy worm. He longed for Jan.

Jan had also questioned him at his apartment. She asked:

“Porter, how can you live multiple lives?”

“Easy,” Porter said. “A lot of people do. How do you explain me to your boyfriend?”

“He’s just a basketball player. You get the drift.”

“That’s not very nice of you to say that about him. He must be a nice person and here you are being mean about him.”

“You tell me mean things about your....your...your what?”

“She’s a friend. She thinks I’m a loser. I get mad at her for being judgmental. Sometimes I criticize her. I am sorry afterwards. Sometimes we click. Sometimes we don’t. Sometimes she criticizes me.”

“What for?”

At this question, Porter halted his part of the conversation and cleared his throat.

“She claims I have no character.”

Jan stretched out on his sofa, topless, in her undies, her head in his lap. Her tiny breasts shook with laughter.

“But, Porter, that’s exactly what I like about you. You are totally worthless. That’s the point. You have no goals in life. All the people I know are so driven. They want to be doctors, lawyers, CEOs, senators, peace corps volunteers. You...you Porter,

don't want to be anything. You just want to play and make love."

Porter clinched his teeth. He did not want to alienate both women. Maybe...he calculated, maybe...he should fire them both and start anew with another.

Porter decided to change the subject.

"Tomorrow is supposed to be sunny. Wind 15 miles per hour. How about we go kite flying?"

"Sorry," Jan said. "I have classes all day. Don't you remember?"

"Forgot."

"You may have nothing to do, but while you play, the rest of the world works."

Porter ho hummed.

"I guess I'll just have to go for a long walk," Porter said, baiting his hook.

"What. To your girl friend's house."

"I doubt she will have me."

"Poor guy," Jan said, sitting up. "I need to sleep. I have an early class."

"Me too."

"What kind of class?" she laughed, tickling him.

"Life," Porter said, morosely.

Jan did her nightly chores, brushed her teeth and went to bed. Porter sat on the sofa staring out the sliding glass door.

He considered his privileged life. His first concern was whether his Porsche had been repaired. The bumper he dented in the parking lot at a Walmart. He'd left a note. Hopefully the jerk wouldn't sue him. Hopefully his insurance rates wouldn't go up or, worse, be cancelled. No ticket, no moving violation.

That night, he crept back into Mary's house and slept on the carpet where the cats peed. His sweatshirt had dog hairs all over. Mary's house simply stunk. He happily remembered Jan's sweet skin. The softness, the sweetness of the curve of her neck. He loved his apartment. The furniture. Fresh and clean. The paintings and prints he had picked out over the years. The abstract sculpture on his balcony.

He felt a pang. Mary sleeping alone in her lovely bed. Forlorn, he guessed.

But what to do?

Next morning he opened the coat closet in Mary's hall where he hung his jogging outfit. He dressed as he always did in shorts, sweat shirt, his Mary's house sneakers. The leaves were turning yellow, red and orange. He jogged once around the park in a state of mental confusion when he came to a fork in the path. He became aroused remembering his evening with Jan. He had heartbreak thinking of Mary. The air was crisp and fresh. He had a choice to make. Right to Mary's house. Left to his apartment up the hill, then to Jan, whom he hoped would decide to move in permanently. She lived only six blocks away.

He was having, he decided, a moral dilemma.

Porter loved Mary.

He desired Jan. Dang it, she was irresistible. A center fold. Responsive as well. Her high-pitched squeals.

Mary right, Jan left.

Left, right, right left.

Which way, Porter?

Porter decided, out of breath, jogging up the street out of the park and planting himself on the worn-out slats of the swing hanging in Mary's cluttered, messed up, stinky, gazebo, to sit there and think.

Mary was not up. Jan was probably at his apartment getting ready for class. Porter swung a bit on Mary's swing. Her dogs barked. He fantasized about wiring their jaws shut. Her caged birds were upset, fluttering and jabbering. Who knows what the cats were stealing from her larder? Sneaky little shits, he thought.

Porter reluctantly rose off the swing. He exhaled. He walked down the steps of Mary's house and did a one-eighty out of the neighborhood through the luxurious homes, the maples, oaks, flowering pear trees losing their leaves, tulip trees and others turning red. He ambled down the walk to Mary's front door. Looked back at her house. Looked right and left.

On impulse, he ran away from Mary's house as fast as he could, slowed, decided to jog again around the park.

He reached the fork again: left to Mary's, right to his apartment.

Impulsively, he left the jogging path, ran full speed across the grass through the middle of the park. Georgia! What about Georgia? He hadn't thought about her for months. Older than Jan, a lot younger than Mary. Another trust baby. She had a house similar to Mary's on the other side of the park. She was a late sleeper, he knew. If he rang her doorbell often enough though, she might, just might, answer and let him in. Someone to talk to. To be sympathetic.

"Push my button, anytime," Georgia had always told him.

She was easy to be with. A full-blown laugh followed by snorting.

As he ran across the grass in the direction of Georgia's house, his knees pumping high and powerful, he entered into a shallow vale of fog. He shouted out in pure glee to a morning sky he could not quite see:

"Now, goddamnit, that's character!"