

GRADUATION AFTERNOON

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Janice has never settled on the right word for the place where Buddy lives. It's too big to be called a house, too small to be an estate, and the name on the post at the foot of the driveway, Harborlights, gags her. It sounds like the name of a restaurant in New London, the kind where the special is always fish. She usually winds up just calling it "your place," as in "Let's go to your place and play tennis" or "Let's go to your place and go swimming."

It's pretty much the same deal with Buddy himself, she thinks, watching him trudge up the lawn toward the sound of shouts on the other side of the house, where the pool is. You didn't want to call your boyfriend Buddy, but when reverting to his real name meant Bruce, it left you with no real ground to stand on.

Or expressing feelings, that was that. She knew he wanted to hear her say she loved him, especially on his graduation day—surely a better present than the silver medallion she'd given him, although the medallion had set her back a teeth-clenching amount—but she couldn't do it. She couldn't bring herself to say, "I love you, Bruce." The best she could manage (and again with that interior clench) was "I'm awfully fond of you, Buddy." And even that sounded like a line out of a British musical comedy.

"You don't mind what she said, do you?" That was the last thing he'd asked her before heading up the lawn to change into his swim trunks. "That isn't why you're staying behind, is it?"

"No, just want to hit a few more. And look at the view." The house did have that going for it, and she could never get enough. Because you could see the whole New York cityscape from this side of the house, the buildings reduced to blue toys with sun gleaming on the highest windows. Janice thought that when it came to NYC, you could only get that sense of exquisite stillness from a distance. It was a lie she loved.

"Because she's just my gran," he went on. "You know her by now. If it enters her head, it exits her mouth."

“I know,” Janice said. And she liked Buddy’s gran, who made no effort to hide her snobbery. There it was, out and beating time to the music. They were the Hopes, came to Connecticut along with the rest of the Heavenly Host, thank you so much. She is Janice Gandolewski, who will have her own graduation day—from Fairhaven High—two weeks from now, after Buddy has left with his three best buddies to hike the Appalachian Trail.

She turns to the basket of balls, a slender girl of good height in denim shorts, sneakers, and a shell top. Her legs flex as she rises on tiptoe with each serve. She’s good-looking and knows it, her knowing of the functional and non-fussy sort. She’s smart, and knows it. Very few Fairhaven girls manage relationships with boys from the Academy—other than the usual we-all-know-where-we-are, quick-and-dirty Winter Carnival or Spring Fling weekends, that is—and she has done so in spite of the ski that trails after her wherever she goes, like a tin can tied to the bumper of a family sedan. She has managed this social hat-trick with Bruce Hope, also known as Buddy.

And when they were coming up from the basement media room after playing video games—most of the others still down there, and still with their mortarboards cocked back on their heads—they had overheard his gran, in the parlor with the other adults (because this was really their party; the kids would have their own tonight, first at Holy Now! out on Route 219, which had been fourwalled for the occasion by Jimmy Frederick’s dad and mom, pursuant to the mandatory designated-driver rule, and then later, at the beach, under a full June moon, could you give me spoon, do I hear swoon, is there a swoon in the house).

“That was Janice-Something-Unpronounceable,” Gran was saying in her oddly piercing, oddly toneless deaf-lady voice. “She’s very pretty, isn’t she? A townie. Bruce’s friend for now.” She didn’t quite call Janice Bruce’s starter-model, but of course it was all in the tone.

She shrugs and hits a few more balls, legs flexing, racket reaching. The balls fly hard and true across the net, each touching down deep in the receiver’s box on the far side.

They have in fact learned from each other, and she suspects that's what these things are about. What they are for. And Buddy has not, in truth, been that hard to teach. He respected her from the first—maybe a little too much. She had to teach him out of that—the pedestal-worship part of that. And she thinks he hasn't been that bad a lover, given the fact that kids are denied the finest of accommodations and the luxury of time when it comes to giving their bodies the food they come to want.

“We did the best we could,” she says, and decides to go and swim with the others, let him show her off one final time. He thinks they'll have all summer before he goes off to Princeton and she goes to State, but she thinks not; she thinks part of the purpose of the upcoming Appalachian hike is to separate them as painlessly but as completely as possible. In this Janice senses not the hand of the hale-and-hearty, good-fellows-every-one father, or the somehow endearing snobbery of the grandmother—a townie, Bruce's friend for now—but the smiling and subtle practicality of the mother, whose one fear (it might as well be stamped on her lovely, unlined forehead) is that the townie girl with the tin can tied to the end of her name will get pregnant and trap her boy into the wrong marriage.

“It would be wrong, too,” she murmurs as she wheels the basket of balls into the shed and flips the latch. Her friend Marcy keeps asking her what she sees in him at all—Buddy, she all but sneers, wrinkling her nose. What do you do all weekend? Go to garden parties? To polo matches?

In fact, they have been to a couple of polo matches, because Tom Hope still rides—although, Buddy confided, this was apt to be his last year if he didn't stop putting on weight. But they have also made love, some of it sweaty and intense. Sometimes, too, he makes her laugh. Less often, now—she has an idea that his capacity to surprise and amuse is far from infinite—but yes, he still does. He's a lean and narrow-headed boy who breaks the rich-kid-geek mold in interesting and sometimes very unexpected ways. Also he thinks the world of her, and that isn't entirely bad for a girl's self-image.

Still, she doesn't think he will resist the call of his essential nature forever. By the age of thirty-five or so, she guesses he will have lost most or all of his enthusiasm for eating pussy and will be more interested in collecting coins. Or refinishing Colonial rockers, like his father does out in the—ahem—carriage-house.

She walks slowly up the long acre of green grass, looking out toward the blue toys of the city dreaming in the far distance. Closer at hand are the sounds of shouts and splashing from the pool. Inside, Bruce's mother and father and gran and closest friends will be celebrating the one chick's high school graduation in their own way, at a formal tea. Tonight the kids will go out and party down in a more righteous mode. Alcohol and not a few tabs of X will be ingested. Club music will throb through big speakers. No one will play the country stuff Janice grew up with, but that's all right; she still knows where to find it.

When she graduates there will be a much smaller party, probably at Aunt Kay's restaurant, and of course she is bound for educational halls far less grand or traditional, but she has plans to go farther than she suspects Buddy goes even in his dreams. She will be a journalist. She will begin on the campus newspaper, and then will see where that takes her. One rung at a time, that's the way to do it. There are plenty of rungs on the ladder. She has talent to go along with her looks and unshowy self-confidence. She doesn't know how much, but she will find out. And there's luck. That, too. She knows enough not to count on it, but also enough to know it tends to come down on the side of the young.

She reaches the stone-flagged patio and looks down the rolling acre of lawn to the double tennis court. It all looks very big and very rich, very special, but she is wise enough to know she is only eighteen. There may come a time when it all looks quite ordinary to her, even in the eye of her memory. Quite small. It is this sense of perspective before the fact that makes it all right for her to be Janice-Something-Unpronounceable, and a townie, and Bruce's friend for now. Buddy, with his narrow head and fragile ability to make her laugh at

unexpected times. He has never made her feel small, probably knows she'd leave him the first time he ever tried.

She can go directly through the house to the pool and the changing rooms on the far side, but first she turns slightly to her left to once again look at the city across all those miles of blue afternoon distance. She has time to think, It could be my city someday, I could call it home, before an enormous spark lights up there, as if some God deep in the machinery had suddenly flicked His Bic.

She winces from the brilliance, which is at first like a thick, isolated stroke of lightning. And then the entire southern sky lights up a soundless lurid red. Formless bloodglare obliterates the buildings. Then for a moment they are there again, but ghostlike, as if seen through an interposing lens. A second or a tenth of a second after that they are gone forever, and the red begins to take on the shape of a thousand newsreels, climbing and boiling.

It is silent, silent.

Bruce's mother comes out on the patio and stands next to her, shading her eyes. She is wearing a new blue dress. A tea-dress. Her shoulder brushes Janice's and they look south at the crimson mushroom climbing, eating up the blue. Smoke is rising from around the edges—dark purple in the sunshine—and then being pulled back in. The red of the fireball is too intense to look at, it will blind her, but Janice cannot look away. Water is gushing down her cheeks in broad warm streams, but she cannot look away.

"What's that?" Bruce's mother asks. "If it's some kind of advertising, it's in very poor taste!"

"It's a bomb," Janice says. Her voice seems to be coming from somewhere else. On a live feed from Hartford, maybe. Now huge black blisters are erupting in the red mushroom, giving it hideous features that shift and change—now a cat, now a dog, now Bobo the Demon Clown—grimacing across the miles above what used to be

New York and is now a smelting furnace. “A nuke. And an almighty big one. No little dirty backpack model, or—”

Whap! Heat spreads upward and downward on the side of her face, and water flies from both of her eyes, and her head rocks. Bruce’s Mom has just slapped her. And hard.

“Don’t you even joke about that!” Bruce’s mother commands.
“There’s nothing funny about that!”

Other people are joining them on the patio now, but they are little more than shades; Janice’s vision has either been stolen by the brightness of the fireball, or the cloud has blotted out the sun. Maybe both.

“That’s in very ... poor ... TASTE!” Each word rising. Taste comes out in a scream.

Someone says, “It’s some kind of special effect, it has to be, or else we’d hear—”

But then the sound reaches them. It’s like a boulder running down an endless stone flume. It shivers the glass along the south side of the house and sends birds up from the trees in whirling squadrons. It fills the day. And it doesn’t stop. It’s like an endless sonic boom. Janice sees Bruce’s gran go walking slowly down the path that leads to the multi-car garage with her hands to her ears. She walks with her head down and her back bent and her butt sticking out, like a dispossessed warhag starting down a long refugee road. Something hangs down on the back of her dress, swinging from side to side, and Janice isn’t surprised to note (with what vision she has left) that it’s Gran’s hearing aid.

“I want to wake up,” a man says from behind Janice. He speaks in a querulous, pestering tone. “I want to wake up. Enough is enough.”

Now the red cloud has grown to its full height and stands in boiling triumph where New York was ninety seconds ago, a dark red and

purple toadstool that has burned a hole straight through this afternoon and all the afternoons to follow.

A breeze begins to push through. It is a hot breeze. It lifts the hair from the sides of her head, freeing her ears to hear that endless grinding boom even better. Janice stands watching, and thinks about hitting tennis balls, one after the other, all of them landing so close together you could have caught them in a roasting pan. That is pretty much how she writes. It is her talent. Or was.

She thinks about the hike Bruce and his friends won't be taking. She thinks about the party at Holy Now! they won't be attending tonight. She thinks about the records by Jay-Z and Beyonce and The Fray they won't be listening to—no loss there. And she thinks of the country music her dad listens to in his pickup truck on his way to and from work. That's better, somehow. She will think of Patsy Cline or Skeeter Davis and in a little while she may be able to teach what is left of her eyes not to look.