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PHILIP ROTH LETTING GO

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GOODBYE, COLUMBUS AND
PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT



LETTING GO

PHILIP ROTH

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LETTING GO

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All actuality is deadly earnest; and it is morality itself that, one with life, forbids us to be true to the guileless unrealism of our youth.

—THOMAS MANN
A Sketch of My Life

Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt.

—SIMONE WEIL
Gravity and Grace

It may be that one life is a punishment
For another, as the son's life for the father's.
But that concerns the secondary characters.
It is fragmentary tragedy
Within the universal whole. The son
And the father alike and equally are spent,
Each one, by the necessity of being
Himself, the unalterable necessity
Of being this unalterable animal.

—WALLACE STEVENS
“*Æsthetique du Mal*”

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One



DEBTS
AND
SORROWS

1

Dear Gabe,

The drugs help me bend my fingers around a pen. Sometimes the whole sickness feels located in my hands. I have wanted to write but not by dictating to your father. Later I don't want to whisper last-minute messages to him at the bedside. With all the panic and breathlessness I'll have too much influence. Now your father keeps leaning across my bed. He runs in after every patient and tells me what the weather is outside. He never once admits that I've done him an injustice being his wife. He holds my hand fifty times a day. None of this changes what has happened—the injustice is done. Whatever unhappiness has been in our family springs from me. Please don't blame it on your father however I may have encouraged you over the years. Since I was a little girl I always wanted to be Very Decent to People. Other little girls wanted to be nurses and pianists. They were less dissembling. I was clever, I picked a virtue early and hung on to it. I was always doing things for another's good. The rest of my life I could push and pull at people with a clear conscience. All I want to say now is that I don't want to say anything. I want to give up the prerogative allowed normal dying people. Why I'm writing is to say that I have no instructions.

Your father is coming in again. He's carrying three kinds of fruit juices. Gabe, it's to him I should admit all this. He won't condemn me until I do first. All through our marriage I've been improving his life for him, pushing, pulling. Oh decent decent. Dear, the pen keeps falling

HER letter had never been signed. The pen fell, and when the night nurse came on duty she was no longer needed. Nevertheless my father, obedient to the last, put the letter in an envelope and without examination mailed it. I was a second lieutenant in the artillery corps at this time, sta-

tioned in an unregenerate dust bowl in Oklahoma, and my one connection with the world of feeling was not the world itself but Henry James, whom I had lately begun to read. Oklahoma nights and southwestern radio stations had thrust me into an isolation wherein my concentration was exact enough for me to attend at last to the involutions of the old master. All day I listened to the booming of cannons, and all night to the words of heroes and heroines tempting one another into a complex and often tragic fate. Early in the summer that I had been called into the Army—which was the summer after I had finished college—I had spent my last six civilian weeks touring Europe; one week was spent visiting with a friend of my mother's who lived in London, where her husband was connected with the U. S. Embassy. I remember having to hear endless incidents from my mother's childhood while sitting with her friend in a small church in Chelsea; she had taken me there to see a little-known plaque dedicated to James. It was not a particularly successful day, for the woman really liked the idea of putting on long white gloves and showing a Harvard boy around cultural nooks and crannies a good deal more than she liked the nooks and crannies. But I do remember the words engraved onto that small gray oval tablet: it was written of James that he was "lover and interpreter of the fine amenities of brave decisions."

So it happened that when I received the letter my mother had written and my father had posted, I was reading *Portrait of a Lady*, and it was into its pages that I slid the envelope and its single sheet of barely legible prose. When I returned from the funeral, and in the weeks following, I read and reread the letter so often that I weakened the binding of the book. In my grief and confusion, I promised myself that I would do no violence to human life, not to another's, and not to my own.

It was a year later that I loaned the book to Paul Herz, who looked to be a harried young man rapidly losing contact with his own feelings; he might have been hearing the boom of big guns going off all day himself. This was the fall after I had left the Army, the fall of 1953, when we were both enrolled as graduate students at the University of Iowa. Paul's costume at that time was the same day in and day out: khaki trousers threadbare around the back pocket, a white T-shirt shapeless around the arms, tennis

sneakers and, occasionally, socks. He was forever running—it was this that brought him to my attention—and forever barely making it. The point of his briefcase could be seen edging through the classroom door just at the moment that the first unlucky student in our Anglo-Saxon class was called upon to read aloud from *Beowulf*. Leaving the library at night, I would see him streaking up the stairs after some reserve book, even while the head librarian turned the key in the lock. He would stand shivering in his T-shirt until she broke down and let him in. He was a man who evoked sympathy even if he did not come right out and ask for it; even if he *would* not ask for it. No heart could remain unmoved by the sight of that dark, kinky-haired black-eyed head racing toward the closing doors, or into them. Once, shopping for some bread and milk, I saw him nearly break several of the major bones in his body at the entrance to a downtown grocery store. The electric eye swung the door out at him just as he had turned, arms laden with packages, to watch a cop stick a ticket under the single wiper of his battered, green, double-parked Dodge.

I lived alone at the time in a small apartment near the campus, and was having troubles of my own; I was about ready to find somebody to complain to. One day in November, as Herz was darting from Anglo-Saxon, I stuck myself in his path and asked him over to the Union for a cup of coffee. He couldn't make it as he was supposed to have been somewhere else five minutes earlier, but on the parking lot, to which I accompanied him, and where he sat yanking and yanking at the throttle of his car, I managed to put in something about James, and the next time we had class together, I brought *Portrait* for him to take home and read. I awoke that night remembering that tucked in the pages of the book I had pressed upon him, somewhere between the hopes of Isabel Archer and her disappointments, was my mother's letter. I couldn't immediately get back to sleep.

The following morning, directly after Medieval Romances, I called Herz from a campus phone booth. Mrs. Herz answered sounding hurried and on edge—the family tone. She and her husband lived in one of those gray shells on the far side of the river, the married students' barracks, and I was sure that directly behind her, or beneath her, there flailed a squalling infant. Herz looked harassed enough to be the father of three or four small, mean, colicky children.

Mrs. Herz, in a very few words, informed me that her husband had driven over to Cedar Rapids and that she was herself about to rush off. I decided instantly not to ask if I might come over to remove something that I had left in a book I had loaned Paul. Probably neither of them had had a chance at the book anyway, and I could wait and later get to Herz himself. I explained nothing whatsoever to the wife, who struck me as more rude than chagrined; besides, it was daylight and autumn and I was no longer afflicted with thoughts of the dead. The November morning was dazzling, the dead were dead.

My father had called again the night before, and I was certain now that any judgments I had made in the dark about my mother's ghost had been induced by my father's presence. Two or three evenings a week my father and I had the same phone conversation, pointless on the surface, pleading beneath. The old man stood being familyless all day, what with having his patients' mouths to look into; it was alone with his avocado and lettuce dinner that he broke down. When he called his voice shook; when he hung up—or when I did—his vibrato passed directly into the few meager objects in the room. I moved one way, my chair another; I have never sat on my reading glasses so many times in my life. I am, for good or bad, in a few ways like my father, and so have never been the same person alone that I am with people. The trouble with the phone calls, in fact, was that all the time I felt it necessary to the preservation of my life and sanity to resist the old man, I understood how it was for him sitting in that huge Victorian living room all alone. However, if I am my father's child, I am my mother's too. I cannot trace out exactly the influences, nor deal in any scientific way with the chromosomes passed on to me. I sometimes believe I know what it is I got from him and what from her, and when I hung up on Mrs. Herz that morning, without having said one word about the letter, I suppose I was using the decorum and good sense that has sifted down from the maternal line. I told myself that there was nothing really to fret about. Why would they read it anyway? And what if they did?

At five o'clock I was sitting in my apartment drinking coffee and finding no pleasure whatsoever in memorizing Anglo-Saxon verb endings, when Mrs. Herz called me back.

"You spoke to me this morning," she said. "Paul Herz's wife."

"Is your husband home?"

"His car broke down."

It was the sort of news that is not news as soon as one hears it—though Mrs. Herz herself sounded surprised. "That's too bad," I said.

"He blew a piston or he keeps blowing pistons—"

"I'll call him some other time. It's not urgent."

"Well—" she said, "he asked me to call *you*. He wondered if you might have a car. He's on the highway outside of Cedar Rapids."

I put down the Old English grammar book. A long drive was just the inconvenience I wanted. "How do I get there?"

"Could you pick me up at the barracks?"

"I'm sure I could find it."

"I know the way. We live just at the edge of Finkbine Park—could you pick me up?" Cryptically, she added, "I'm dressed."

From the doorway the first thing I saw after seeing Libby Herz herself was my book set on the edge of the kitchen sink; I could not see what was or was not stuck between its pages. And Mrs. Herz gave me no time to check; she ran into the bedroom and then out again, her raincoat whipping around her. Then yanking a kerchief from her pocket, she rushed out the door without once looking directly at me—though she managed to let me hear her say, "Paul called again. I told him we were coming."

As we drove, her eyes stared rigidly out the car window, while beside me her limbs fidgeted in turn. My first impression of her had been clear and sharp: profession—student; inclinations—neurotic. She moved jerkily and had the high black stockings and the underfed look. She was thin, dark, intense, and I could not imagine that she had ever once gotten anything but pain from entering a room full of people. Still, in an eager hawkish way she was not bad looking. Her head was carried forward on her neck, and the result was that her large sculpted nose sailed into the wind a little too defiantly—which compromised the pride of the appendage, though not its fanciness. Her eyes were a pure black, and her shiny hair, also black, was drawn off her face in a manner so stark and exact that at the sight of it one could begin guessing at the depth and number of her anxieties. The skin was classic and pale: white with a touch

of blue, making it ivory—and when she pulled off her kerchief she even had a tiny purple vein tapping at her temple; it seemed to me like an affect, something willed there to remind the rest of us how delicate and fragile is a woman. My initial feeling toward her was suspicion.

Nevertheless, by way of conversation I asked if she had any children.

"Oh, no," she said. The deep breath she drew was to inform me that she was rushed and harried without children. She added a few mumbled words: "Thank goodness . . . children . . . burden . . ." It was difficult to understand her because she did not bother to look at me either when speaking or sighing. I knew she was avoiding my eyes—and then I knew that she had opened the book, removed the envelope, and read my mother's letter. Since she did not strike me as a person casual about private lives, her own or others, her self-consciousness became mine too.

Darkness had dimmed my vision before either of us spoke again. "Are you in the Writers' Workshop?" she asked.

"No. Just English. Are you?"

"Paul's the writer," she said. "I'm still getting my B.A."

"I see."

"I've been getting it for about a decade." There was a frank and simple note of exasperation in her voice, and it engaged me. I looked away from the highway and she gave off staring into the countryside, and with a glance as distinct, as audible as a camera snapping, we registered each other's features.

"Paul said you're interested in James," she quickly said, flushing. Then, "I'm Libby."

"I'm Gabe Wallach—" I stopped as once again the words flew out of her.

"Neither of us know anything really outside the Edmund Wilson one—" she said, "the ghost story."

"*Turn of the Screw*," I said, a good half minute after she had not resumed talking.

"*Portrait of a Lady* is much better." She spoke these words as though to please.

"You like it?"

"The first scene is wonderful."

"When they're all on the lawn."

"Yes," she said, "when Isabel comes. I've been living so long in barracks, elegance has an abnormal effect on me."

"The prose?"

"The rug on the lawn. You know, they're all sitting on chairs on that immense lawn outside the Touchett's house. Ralph and his father and Lord Warburton. James says the place was furnished as though it were a room. There's a rug on the lawn. I don't know, perhaps it's just across somebody's legs, one of those kind of rugs. I've read it over several times, and since you can't be sure, I like to think of it the other way, *on* the lawn. That appeals to me." She stopped, violently—and I was left listening for the next few words. I looked over and saw that she was drawing on her top lip so that her nose bent a little at the bottom. All that was dark, her eyes and hair, came to dominate her face. "That sounds terribly private," she said. "Sometimes I miss the point, I know." The little forced laugh that followed admitted to fallibilities not solely literary. I was touched by her frailty, until I wondered if perhaps I was supposed to be. "The rug," she was saying, "knocked me over anyway." Whereupon her gaze dropped to the floorboard of the car.

"It knocked Isabel over," I said.

She received the remark blankly. "Yes," she said.

I tried to remember where in the book the letter was stuck. "How far have you read?" I asked.

"Up to where she meets Osmond. I think I can see what's coming. Though," she rushed to add, "perhaps I can't. I really shouldn't say that."

"You must . . . you must have read all night," was all I finally said.

She flushed again. "Almost," she told me. "Paul hasn't started the book yet—" I was looking ahead at the road; I heard her voice stop, and then I felt her move a little toward me. I believe she touched my arm. "Mr. Wallach, there was a letter in your book."

"Was there?"

"You must have forgotten it."

The quality of her voice had altered so as to make the whole occasion much too momentous; I heard myself saying that I didn't remember any letter.

"I brought it with me," she said, and from the pocket of her shabby raincoat she took the envelope; it must have been this she had raced back into her bedroom to fetch while I had waited at the doorstep. Now she handed it to me. "It was in the book."

"Thank you." I put the letter immediately into my own

jacket pocket. Out of sight I fumbled with it, but there was no evidence either way—the flap was tucked in. Nevertheless, I drove ahead with only one hand on the wheel. Mrs. Herz pulled at her black stockings, then stuck a fist under each knee. For two miles neither of us said anything.

In the tone of one musing she finally spoke. "She marries and is miserable."

I had been musing myself, and so I misunderstood at first who exactly was the subject of her observation. My misunderstanding must have produced a very strange expression on my face, for when I turned to demand an explanation, Libby Herz seemed nearly to dissolve in her seat. "Isabel will marry Osmond," she said, "and be miserable. She's—she's a romantic . . . isn't she?" she asked shakily.

I had not meant to threaten her. I forgot my family as rapidly as I could, and tried hard to be graceful. "I guess so," I said. "She likes rugs on lawns."

"She likes rugs on lawns," Mrs. Herz said, grinning. "That's the least of it. She wants to put rugs on other peoples' lawns."

"Osmond?"

"Osmond—and more than Osmond." She raised her hands and opened them, slowly and expressively. "*Everything*," she said, drawing the word out. "She wants to alter what can't be altered."

"She believes in change."

"Change? My God!" She put her hand to her forehead.

It was the first time I was amused by her. "You don't believe in change?"

Without warning she turned momentous on me again. "I suppose I do." She stared a little tragically into her college girl's raincoat: change, alteration, was not so much the condition of all life as it was some sad and private principle of her own. The hands tugged again at the stockings, went under the knees, and she withdrew. I drove faster and hunted the highway for Paul Herz.

"Well, do you believe," Mrs. Herz suddenly put in, "in altering that way? Isabel's trouble is she wants to change others, but a man comes along who can alter her, Warburton or what's his name, Ramrod—"

"Goodwood. Caspar Goodwood."

"Caspar Goodwood—and what happens? She gets the shakes, she gets scared. She's practically frigid, at least that's what it looks like a case of to me. She's not much different

finally from her friend, that newspaper lady. She's one of those powerful women, one of those pushers-around of men—"

Before she went off the deep end, I interrupted and said, "I've always found her virtuous and charming."

"Charming?" Incredulity rendered her helpless. Slumping down in her seat, as though konked on the head, she said, "For marrying *Osmond*?"

"For liking rugs on lawns," I said.

It was as though I had touched her. She pushed up into a dignified posture and raised her chin. Actually I had only mildly been trying to charm her—and with the truth no less; but in the diminished light, alone on the highway, it had had for her all the earmarks of a pass. And perhaps, after all, that's what it was; I remembered the seriousness with which we had looked at each other some ten miles back.

To inform me of the depths of her loyalty to her husband, she insulted me. "Perhaps you just like pushy women. Some men do." I didn't answer, which did not stop her. Since I had asked for the truth, I was going to get all of it. "That book, as a matter of fact, is really full of people pushing and pulling at each other, and most often with absolutely clear—"

She had been speaking passionately, and leaving off there was leaving off entirely too late. There was no need for her to speak that final word of my mother's: *conscience*. I was not sure whether to be offended or humiliated or relieved; for a moment I managed to be all three. It actually seemed as though she had deliberately challenged me with my secret—and at bottom I did not know if I really minded. The worst part of certain secrets is their secrecy. There is a comfort to be derived from letting strangers in on our troubles, especially, if one is a man, strangers who happen also to be women. Perhaps offering the book to be read in the first place had been my way of offering the letter to be read as well. For I was beginning really to be exhausted with standing over my mother's memory, making sure the light didn't go out. I had never even been willing to believe that my mother had treated my father badly, until she had gone ahead and told me so. Much as I loved him, he had seemed to me, while she still lived, unworthy of her; it was her letter that had made me see her as unworthy of him. And that is a strange thing to have happen to you

—to feel yourself, after death, turning on a person you have always cherished. I had come to feel it was true that she had not merely handled him all her life, as one had to, but that she had mishandled him . . . At least I believed this with part of my mind. I had, curiously, over a period of a year, come to distrust the woman of whom the letter spoke, all the while I continued to honor and admire the memory of the woman who could have written it. And now, when I had begun to handle her husband myself, the letter came accidentally back into my life, to decrease in no way my confusion as to what to do with my father's overwhelming love.

"I'm sorry," Libby Herz was saying. "It was habit. Which makes it even worse. I am sorry."

"It's okay."

"It's not. I had to open it. I'm the sort of person who does that."

Now I was irritated at the way she seemed to be glorifying herself by way of her weaknesses. "Other people do it too," I said.

"Paul doesn't." And that fact seemed to depress her most of all; she worried it while we passed a tall white farmhouse with gingerbread ornament hanging from the frame of every window and door.

After some time had passed, I felt it necessary to caution her. "It's rather an easy letter to misunderstand," I said.

"I suppose so, yes," she answered, in a whisper. "I don't think—" But she said no more. Her disturbance was private and deep, and I could not help but feel that she was behaving terribly. If she was going to feel so bad about somebody's feelings, I believed they should at least have been mine. But she seemed unable to work up sympathy for anyone but herself: *she* was still getting her B.A., after "a decade"; *she* lived in barracks, so that elegance had a special poignancy for her . . . Her own condition occupied her totally, and I knew that she could no more appreciate my mother's dilemma than she could Isabel Archer's. I was, at last, fed up with her. "*Portrait of a Lady*," I said, "is an easy book to misunderstand too. You're too harsh with Isabel Archer."

"I only meant—"

"Why don't you wait until you read it all?"

"I read half—"

"She shows herself to have a lot of guts in the end," I