

HEART
Conditions

S A R A L E W I S

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One

AN OPEN WINDOW

ONE EVENING after a long, difficult period in our relationship, without anything in particular leading up to it, Nick and I made love in the living room. I had been looking through a pile of magazines for a picture of a short haircut I remembered from some weeks or months before.

I was considering doing something drastic to try to get Nick's attention again when suddenly he was behind me, one of my breasts in each of his hands, breathing hotly onto the back of my neck. He pulled my sweatpants off fast, as if sliding the paper wrapper down a drinking straw. Then he pulled me to the floor. Next, I knew from years of experience, he would want to open my bra under my shirt, not to take it off yet but for now just to give his hands more room to move around. It was a brand-new bra, with the clasp in front, unlike my old ones, which had fastened in back. For a moment, I panicked, afraid that he wouldn't be able to find the clasp. I worried that fumbling to get my bra open would distract him, break the mood, and he would lose interest in making love. Swearing or possibly laughing,

he might wander to the kitchen for ice cream or popcorn or to the phone to make a call. But this was not what happened. To my surprise, he did not fumble. His fingers went immediately to the front clasp, clicking it open deftly, as if he had undone me there hundreds of times before. A minute later, I was the one who fumbled—with the top button of his jeans, which were snug in the waist, making it difficult for me to get a grasp. Nick came to my assistance, popping the button open with one hand as the other slid my underpants off in one smooth, practiced motion.

Afterward, it felt a little embarrassing to be naked on the living room floor with the TV on, even with someone I had lived with for five years. The rug needed to be vacuumed. This was my fault. We had divided household chores years before, and vacuuming was mine. It had been at least a month. On TV, there was a commercial about some kind of new laundry detergent, concentrated, more powerful than ever before. The sound was muted, but the two of us looked at the screen, as if expecting it to explain something important to us, something we needed to know right away.

I felt relieved then, believing that now things would get back to normal. It had been months since we had made love anywhere. This evening in the living room had finally broken the spell. It just shows you, I thought, how things can change completely in a single moment.

“Nick,” I said later, in bed, “I love you.”

“Thanks, Alice,” he said sleepily. He was going on tour the next day. He had a big part in a comedy. He would be gone for ten weeks.

“I was really worried,” I said.

He started; he had fallen asleep since I last spoke. “Hm?” he said. “About what?”

“It hasn’t been going very well between us,” I said. “And I was afraid that we were going to break up.”

“You were?”

“You weren’t? Well, anyway, we’re OK now.”

“Sure.” He fell asleep.

I felt so grateful about the way the relationship had turned around that I made plans to change. From now on, I wasn’t going to drop my clothes on the floor. And I was going to take a cooking class. Anyone could learn. All you had to do was practice following recipes and what steps to take when things went wrong.

Just as I was starting to drift off into sleep, an alarming image came into my mind. It was the picture of my diaphragm in its turquoise plastic case and the tube of spermicidal jelly next to it, both at that very moment quietly gathering dust on a bathroom shelf. I hadn’t even thought about the diaphragm until that moment. My eyes sprang open, and I was instantly as tense and alert as if I had just seen a stranger climb into my home through an open window.

Two

THE STORM

BEFORE I WENT to Hollywood,” my grandmother was saying, “I had hardly ever eaten in a restaurant, never gone swimming in an ocean or slept in a house without my parents. I had never seen a man naked.”

I wasn't really listening. I had heard all this before. And at the moment I was trying to keep my grandmother's huge maroon Buick on the Long Island Expressway during the worst blizzard in fifteen years. I was going twenty miles an hour, because it was snowing so hard I could barely make out what was the road and what was not. There were hidden patches of ice under the snow. I had the headlights on at eleven in the morning. In the past ten minutes we had seen six other cars. Luckily, we only had to go two exits. We were on our way to my grandmother's weekly hair appointment. One of the few reasons she would go out in a snowstorm was to get her hair and nails done.

“My life had not prepared me for Hollywood. The year I was born, my father bought a house in town that's still there to this day if you care to visit Drinkwater, Iowa. But

who would? I had taught school at home, but I had no common sense. Within the first month of my arrival in Hollywood, a producer asked me to come to his office," Gram went on. "He said I was a perfect Pollyanna for the new movie he was working on. I was twenty-six years old, but I believed him and I went. Of course, there was no such movie. I was lucky I got out of his office without being raped. I lost a shoe trying to hurry out the door and had to go home on the streetcar without it. That's when I learned the most important lesson of my career: You can't trust anybody who has anything to do with movies or the theater. They are all a bunch of lying cheats, no matter how good and kind they appear. And how is your friend Nick?"

"He's fine, Gram," I said. "He's not a lying cheat."

"Yes, well," she said. Then she went on with her story. "Shortly after that little episode, I went to work at Winnie's. A lot of movie people had their hair done at Winnie's. If I close my eyes, I can just see the place." I didn't dare look away from the road, but I knew she was closing her eyes. "The telephone, the leather appointment book. I can smell all the different things they used on people's hair. I got my hair done there for free, and it changed my life. I mean that. That's how I got into the movies, moved to a better neighborhood, and met Walker Kincaid, who became my lover." She stopped. "You should be getting all this down."

"Pardon?" I said.

"On videotape," she said. "I saw this on the *Today* show. Fellow wrote a book about people telling the stories of their lives, oral histories. Just your regular video camera you'd use for home movies is all you need. I won't be around forever, you know."

"I don't have a video camera," I said. "Let me just

concentrate on getting us there, Gram. This is very scary driving.” We passed a car on its side in a ditch. “I shouldn’t have let you talk me into this. It’s much worse than I thought, really dangerous.”

“Shall I ask Mary Lou if she has any ideas about your hair?” Mary Lou was my grandmother’s hairdresser.

“No,” I said. My hair was brown, unstyled, not curly and not straight but bumpy, falling just below my shoulders. I was always trying to figure out what to do with it and then, in the end, doing nothing at all. When I was a little girl, my mother had told me, “You have lovely hair, Alice, and someday you will be a very pretty lady.” I had waited and waited for some kind of transformation to occur, for many years believing that my mother had known something about me that no one else did. Nothing happened. I was as plain grown-up as I had been as a child. To some people, maybe, appearance was not important. But to my grandmother, a person’s worth was measured first by looks. Intelligence, wit, kindness, sense of humor—to my grandmother, these were only resources to fall back on if you failed to be beautiful. “I like my hair,” I lied.

Gram said, “That’s unfortunate.”

I almost missed the exit because I didn’t see the sign until I just about ran into it. The temperature was seven degrees, and I was sweating. My heart was thumping in my chest. “You don’t drive much, do you?” my grandmother said. “I can tell you’re not comfortable behind the wheel.”

I managed to get my grandmother’s car to Mary Lou’s Beauty Spot, a small hair salon in a house. As we pulled up, Mary Lou peered out the kitchen window. I went

around to my grandmother's side of the car and opened the door. Holding on to the back of the seat with her right hand, she worked her body around until she was facing me. First she took her right leg out, lifting it with both hands, and put it on the ground. Then she took her left leg out and put it down.

Mary Lou appeared beside me in her bathrobe and boots. "What? Are you kidding?" She held my grandmother's left elbow while I took her right one, and together we pulled her to her feet and steered her toward the back door of the house. "It's a blizzard, Mrs. Williams. Don't you listen to the radio? I'm sitting here in my robe drinking coffee," Mary Lou said. "I'm thinking I'm going to have a Saturday off for once in my life."

My grandmother said, "This is my granddaughter Alice, my houseguest this weekend."

"Nice to meet you, Alice." She gave me a sympathetic look behind my grandmother, bent in concentration on the icy ground. "Mrs. Williams, you must be out of your gourd coming here on a day like this. You could slip out here and bust a hip."

"Just look at my hair," my grandmother said. "It looks like a bird's nest. I can't let anyone see me like this."

"You look like a million bucks," Mary Lou said. "As always. I should be coming to *you* every week. Look at *my* hair."

My grandmother stopped, straightened, and examined Mary Lou's hair, which now had big lumps of snow resting on it. "I've seen you look better," my grandmother said. "I think you've got the color too dark for your skin."

"Oh, shut up. Who asked you?" Mary Lou said. "Alice,

you going to stick around? Come on, where you going to go, weather like this? You can have the coffee I was going to drink with my feet up.”

I stayed and listened to the two of them talk. My grandmother was getting color today. “Last time it was too red,” she said to Mary Lou. “But I don’t want it too blond, either.” My grandmother had been dyeing her hair for about sixty years. If she didn’t, she said, she would look as old as the hills. She was eighty-nine. She slept in a terry-cloth turban and used a special satin pillowcase. During the day, she wore a hair net made of human hair to hold it all in place.

“Golden,” Mary Lou said. “Don’t tell me. You want it ‘golden.’ We go through this every six weeks,” she said to me. Mary Lou was the kind of person who could call my grandmother an old bag and get away with it. I wished I could do that.

“My daughter, Bonnie, was going to come out for the weekend too, but she canceled because of the weather,” Mary Lou said, slowly lowering my grandmother’s head into the sink. “You know, I hate to say this, but I’m just as glad. Lately we’re always arguing, and it gets me down—you know what I’m saying.”

“Yes, I do,” Gram said. “I surely do. You don’t like Bill, and she knows it.”

“I guess that’s it,” Mary Lou said. They went on, talking about why Bill was wrong for Bonnie.

My grandmother probably knew more about Bonnie’s life than she knew about mine. I didn’t often visit Gram. We didn’t get along. But the day before she had called me at my office in New York, where I was an editorial assistant

for a publishing company, to invite me for the weekend. I hadn't heard that a snowstorm was coming, and I didn't know that Eleanor, her maid/cook/chauffeur/gardener/housekeeper, had walked out on her just moments before. When I got there, she had me drive her to the Shopping Basket to buy a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of groceries (including over twenty frozen diet entrées), carry them all inside for her, and put them away—while she barked at me for putting the milk on the wrong side of the fridge and the peanut butter behind the box of crackers, where she couldn't see it. Then she wanted me drive her to the video store and pick a movie for her while she waited in the car.

My grandmother wasn't supposed to stay alone. She didn't drive anymore, since she had flattened a stop sign once on her way home from the dentist. About twenty years before, she had had a heart attack, and she was supposed to have someone around to make her take a walk every day and keep her on her low-salt diet. This was not humanly possible, but my aunt and uncle felt better believing that there was someone there trying. My grandmother did not cook, so she also needed someone to do that for her. I didn't cook, either. The best I could do was put little frozen food trays in the toaster oven. Aunt Louise and Uncle Richard came from Connecticut about once a month to pay the bills that Gram crammed into drawers; to chop away at the bushes and trees in her yard, which always seemed to be either growing or dying too rapidly; and to take care of hazards like frayed electrical cords and scatter rugs on slippery wood floors. My aunt and uncle were giving a big dinner party this weekend, or they would be here now. And they were about to leave on a trip

to Europe, I expected my aunt to go into high gear trying to hire someone to look after Gram while they were away.

I wouldn't have minded if Gram had asked me to help her over the weekend. But my grandmother was not that direct. She didn't ask me to come out to help her. Instead, she said she just thought I might like a change of scene, a weekend in the country.

For dinner, I had scrambled eggs and rye toast, two things I knew how to make. My grandmother had a frozen diet spinach soufflé that I had heated up and carried out to her in the living room, where she was watching television.

I put the video I had rented into my grandmother's machine. It was *Broken Promise* (1938), which had been a Cheapo Chestnut at the video store, two nights for two dollars. "I've seen this a thousand times," Gram said.

"That's why I got it. You told me it was your favorite movie. But we don't have to watch it if you're tired of it. We can see if there's something you like better on television."

"No, no," Gram said. "You're the guest. We'll watch your movie." I pushed Play. "Walker Kincaid almost got this part," she said.

She had told me this at least a hundred times. Walker Kincaid, her married lover, was a movie actor she knew before she met my grandfather. "You're kidding," I said.

"He was too old to play romantic leads by then. The rejection nearly killed him. He left his wife and took up with an eighteen-year-old extra he met on a studio lot. This was years after my time. His wife tried to commit suicide. Have you heard from Nick?"

“I left your number on our answering machine, in case he tries to reach me,” I said. “Why do you always ask about Nick after you’ve told some awful story about creeps you knew in Hollywood? Nick isn’t like that.”

Walker Kincaid had been a classic leading man type—tall, with chiseled features and a deep, resonant voice, a big phony. Nick was a character actor—short, dark, and funny. I had met him at a party five years before. As soon as I met him, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

“Nick? Like Walker?” My grandmother laughed. “Certainly not. Walker was an overnight success. For twenty years, he was never out of work. You know yourself how rare that is for an actor.” Nick had had a hard time getting acting work for a while. For almost two years, I supported us both. But lately Nick was getting a lot of acting jobs.

Halfway through the movie, my grandmother said, “If you’re still hungry, put some of those frozen cookies in the toaster oven and get yourself some ice cream.”

“Do you want me to get you some cookies?”

“If you’re having some yourself, you might as well,” she said.

“Do you want some ice cream too?”

She looked at me. “Oh, no.” I pushed Pause. “You wouldn’t be able to find the chocolate syrup,” she said.

“Tell me. I can find it.”

“In the icebox, on the middle shelf on the door. But you won’t put enough on.” She shuffled her feet around, pretending she was about to stand up and do it herself.

“Gram, I’ll get it. Cookies and ice cream with gobs of chocolate syrup, right?”

“Get yourself some ice cream,” she yelled after me. “I bought it for you.”

In the kitchen, I took the box of cookies out of the freezer. I opened the lid and put two cold lumps of dough in my mouth. I could barely close my lips around them. Lately I did things like this. At an office party the day before, where I had had to put out the food, I had hidden behind a door and put a whole brownie in my mouth, practically swallowing it whole. Then, after stuffing myself at the party, I had a bagel with butter and a hot chocolate on the train on the way out here, really enjoying it, as if I were eating something unusual, delicately prepared, as if I had been very hungry for a very long time.

When the cookies were done, I reminded Gram that you were supposed to wait a few minutes until they cooled slightly, or they wouldn't have the right texture. She stuffed them into her mouth, one after the other, without waiting for anything. With her mouth full, she said, "Hot." Maybe this was what I was becoming.

I pushed Start on the VCR.

The phone rang, and my grandmother picked it up. "Hello?" she said. I pushed Pause again. She smiled the way she always did when she was having her picture taken and pushed her chin out so that her neck didn't sag. "Well, how *are* you? . . . Oh, how *wonderful*. I wish I could be there myself." She tilted her head, doing a flirtatious look that she had probably practiced in the mirror as a teenager. This was how I knew she was speaking to a man. "Yes. She's sitting right here. Just a moment." She put her hand over the receiver and hissed at me, "It's *Nick*. Run up and take it in my room."

I took the stairs two at a time, thinking he might be right in the middle of a rehearsal or something, he might