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Sarah Wills

Richard Goodman

I didn't care about anything. I didn't care what her relationship with that boy was. It didn't matter. It was as if I'd been given a command. I wish I could describe her beauty with the thunderbolt-like power I felt then. Sarah. Sarah Wills. She had full lips, supple blonde hair, Nordic fair skin, a dangerous sexuality, a slight touch of handsomeness. She had a husky Bordeaux-wine tone to her voice, with strong traces of the South, a honeyed huskiness. It was one of the few times in my life when I didn't think carefully about whether to act or not. I knew I had to be alone with her.

I remember exactly where I was sitting that day when she walked into the living room with a friend of my brother's. The boy was talking. I was looking at her as his words tumbled insignificantly onto the floor. He was invisible next to her. I knew that when he left, he would take Sarah with him. I had to do something. Sarah was smoking a cigarette. Everyone smoked back then.

"Where're you from?" I asked Sarah.

"Roanoke," she said in three separate, but equal, syllables, typically Virginian. Ro-a-noke.

"You havin' a good time?"

“I am.”

“Where’re you stayin’?”

“The Cherry Motel.”

The infamous Cherry Motel! Girls from all over the state stayed there when they came to Virginia Beach in the summer for vacation. It was cheap, not far from the beach and highly unsupervised. I stored that information. Sarah said she was going back to Roanoke in a few days. When she and the boy left, I began plotting. How would I see her again? I called the Cherry Motel later and left a message for her with my telephone number. I’m normally shy and reluctant, but I wasn’t that day. I was haunted.

It was the summer of 1966, and I was between my junior and senior year at the University of Michigan. I was living at my father’s sprawling house in Virginia Beach, Virginia. I was living a typical beach-boy existence, a blend of laziness and indulgence encouraged by the sun. I was soaking it in contentedly. Virginia Beach in 1966 was the sultry, easy-going Tidewater resort it had been for years. It was a dangerous place for a nineteen-year-old boy living pretty much without any rules. The beaches were wide with pliant, warm sand. The ocean was lively, and the froth in the waves played over your face and body. Afterwards, the hot Virginia sun would dry you and leave a film of salt on your arm. Sometimes you licked it off for the taste. This is how it was every day.

What had been a rather easy summer suddenly became fervid, urgent.

When I didn’t hear from Sarah in a few anxious hours, I called her back. This time, she was there.

“Do you remember who I am?” I said over the phone.

“I know who you are,” Sarah said.

“Uh . . . did you go to the beach today?”

“I just came back.”

I was drinking that Bordeaux-flavored voice of hers.

“I was thinking about you,” I said.

“Were you?”

“Yes. Was that your boyfriend?”

I heard her take a deep pull on a cigarette on the other end.

“We’re having problems.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s time.”

“Will you go out with me?” I blurted.

There was a brief pause.

“Okay.”

Her voice was calm. There was no real enthusiasm, just affirmation. The simple directness of her answer staggered me. How different from the giggling, resistant girls I met on the beach every day.

We went to the Pier that evening, where they played rock ‘n’ roll, served beer, and didn’t check your ID carefully. Then we came back to my father’s house. He went to bed early, as he always did, and slept behind a soundproof door. Sarah and I went outside to the porch. We sat in the darkness. The night air wafted over us, with its oceanic scent and touches of pine trees and evening earth. I put my arm around her, touching Sarah Wills for the first time. Then I pressed my lips against the pillow of her lips. I tasted her, the faint odor of cigarettes and her own taste. I plunged my fingers into her hair, like a swimmer cutting into water. We kissed and kissed. When I unbuttoned her blouse and unfastened her bra, she did not begin to stop me. I moved my hand across her breasts. We kissed endlessly in the cricket-sounding balmy night.

Between embraces, she told me about herself. She talked and smoked. When she took a drag, the cigarette’s glow revealed her face, obscure in the night up until then, but now there for me to see—her slightly sad eyes, light peach skin, luxuriant hair, and the disarray of bra and opened shirt. Then the light would recede, and all would be dark again. With every word she spoke, I grew closer to her.

Her mother was dead, Sarah told me.

“She was crazy,” she said.

“Really *crazy*?” I said.

“Yes, sometimes,” she said in her earthy Virginia accent. “It came and went. She tried to kill my father.”

“*What?* What happened? *Why?*”

Sarah paused. She didn’t say anything. She took another pull on

her cigarette.

“She found out he was having an affair and tried to kill him with a kitchen knife,” she said. “Then she had a breakdown. They put her in the hospital.”

“A mental hospital?”

“Yes. Eventually, she came home. She was always liable to go crazy again. We never knew when. She might just start acting strange. She tried to kill herself once.”

“Oh, no.”

“She wasn’t much of a mother.”

There was no sense of accusation in Sarah’s tone. Just a declaration.

“I feel sad for her now,” she said, and I could hear she meant it. That was all she said about that. The heavy Virginia night was alive with sounds and swallowed her silence.

Her mother had died of lung cancer when Sarah was fifteen. All of this Sarah told me dispassionately. I became aware of the melancholy in her voice for the first time. When she drew on her cigarette once again, I briefly saw it in her eyes. It was a resignation to life’s blows that I didn’t understand. She was young, but I sensed she knew much more of life than I ever would. I still think that.

I told her that I was so glad I had called her.

“I am, too,” she said. She said it matter-of-factly. I loved the words, but I wasn’t sure of the commitment. Back then, I practically needed a signed contract to convince me of anything.

She was a senior at Vassar. She would be going to New York State in the fall, to Poughkeepsie. I would be going back to Ann Arbor to my senior year at the University of Michigan. Worlds apart. I asked for her address and phone number in Roanoke. She’d be going back home tomorrow. We still had a month before school started. I told her I would call.

“Maybe we’ll see each other in the fall,” I said.

“Maybe,” she said, and the cigarette’s glow illuminated a smile. It was a half-smile. Why did this delight me so? And, despite her sadness, she could laugh. I made her laugh. Is there anything in this world more satisfying than making a girl laugh, especially one you’ve fallen for?

Sarah had a fine baritone laugh. Sometimes it would be preceded by a little yelp if the joke surprised her.

Oh, she entered my bloodstream. She took me over. Sarah Wills. I woke up the next morning, and I realized I had surrendered. I had turned over my army and all my lands to her.

A few days later, unable to wait any longer, I called her in Roanoke. "Hey," she said.

I just wanted to hear her speak. I just wanted to be reminded of sitting next to her. Of kissing her. Of running my hands through her supple blonde hair. I told her I'd like to see her again.

"Come to Poughkeepsie," she said.

"Poughkeepsie," I said. "Really?"

"Why not?"

"You come to Ann Arbor," I said.

I wanted to see her with every molecule in my body, but, I guess, on looking back, I wanted to be in control. Maybe because I felt so out of control around her. She was lovely and desirable, but she was contained. I was as contained as a toddler.

"We'll see," she said. "Maybe."

"How can you resist me?"

"Anyone can be resisted."

I had no vocabulary for her. I almost had no language. Sometimes when I spoke to her I thought I was speaking baby talk. But it was too late. I was her vassal.

I went back to the University of Michigan. To Ann Arbor! Everything I loved about the place was about to come into its own. The dying brilliance of the leaves. The brisk tang in the air. The thousands of delighted, eager faces passing by me as I walked through campus. It was a place of dreams. From the power of certain professors to those Saturday afternoons watching the legendary football heroes in yellow and blue in the sunken 101,000-person stadium—I was crazy for it all. I had an apartment on High Street on the outskirts of Ann Arbor. It was in an odd neighborhood for someone like me who had lived only

in dormitories and modern, student-filled apartment complexes. Parts of Ann Arbor were fat with luxury, but this neighborhood was lean, almost gaunt. It was ethnically and racially mixed. Down the street lived a raucous Hispanic family. The teenage boys looked like updated characters from *West Side Story*, slender with tall pompadours. They would stare at me menacingly. Why? I learned about random animosity that year.

My apartment was on the second floor of a two-story house. The house was not handsome. It was actually pretty drab, but I didn't care. There was a capacious kitchen and decent-sized living room. The landlady lived down below. She was a large, amiable, dramatic black woman, a minister. She had a lunatic German Shepherd who barked in an endless monotone. It became a source of wonder to me that this dog could bark without the slightest change in key or volume, on and on. It was my own place, though, and I had a car. This was everything I dreamed of for my senior year at the University of Michigan. It was better than real life, and all I had to do was graduate.

During the next few months, I kept up contact with Sarah by telephone. I called her every three or four days. The intense feelings I had for her didn't abate. They were fueled by the flames of distance, of separation and, of course, of fantasy. I dreamt of her, thought of her blonde hair and sad eyes and pillow lips when I was in class. I kissed her when I was walking to the library. My hand glided across her breasts when I was waiting for my car to warm up in the cold morning. Every time we spoke on the phone, I tried to edge her closer to coming to Ann Arbor.

"Okay," she said simply one day.

"Really?" I said.

"Really," she said.

Sarah Wills had agreed to come to see me. Was I dreaming? Was this real? In the next days, the phrase would echo in my head, "She's coming! She's coming!" It was all I could not to shout it to the entire campus.

One weekend in late October, it happened. Sarah Wills flew from New York to Detroit, and I met her at the airport. It was fall now, really fall. Though I had loved the summer Sarah, the autumn Sarah

made me take in my breath. Those fervent fall colors—the palette of fallen leaves: wasp-yellows, tans, profound reds—looked so good on her. With her lush blonde hair flowing over a brown wool sweater and tweed skirt, she was the muse of autumn.

“Oh my God, you’re here!” I said as she came up to me at the airport.

“Yes” was all she said, smiling that half-smile that so intrigued me.

We got to my apartment. It was early afternoon.

“So *this* is where you were calling me from,” she said, looking around. “I was trying to imagine in my mind where you were sitting when you were on the phone.”

I blurted out something incredibly stupid. “Thank you for coming! I know it’s a long way.” I sounded like someone’s father-in-law at a rehearsal dinner.

“I wanted to,” Sarah said.

She was here. We slowly began adjusting to the actual Sarah and Richard being together. We sat down on the old couch in our living room. I suddenly felt embarrassed by the ragtag appearance of my apartment. It had cinderblocks for bookends and an old telephone cable spool for a table. The couch was worn, depthless. Sarah didn’t seem to mind. She lit a cigarette. The room was full of afternoon light. Sitting there, next to a window, she was bathed in it. The smoke from her lit cigarette trailed upward, past her face, like a crawling vine. When Sarah took a drag, it was a commitment. Later, I would empty the ash-tray, with its little hills of butts, each one patterned with her crimson mouthprint.

I was next to her again, just like I’d been in Virginia Beach that hot summer night. I was nervous being that close. She didn’t seem to be.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, not knowing what else to say.

“No,” she said.

I leaned over and kissed her. I tasted her once again. She ran her fingers through my hair. Then she pulled back slightly.

“I want to make love with you,” she said.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

She crushed her cigarette out with two definite stabs.

“Let’s go to your room,” she said.

So we did. I was still a modest kid, and I drew the blinds to keep out much of the daytime light—but not all. We embraced and kissed fully, expectantly. It was a kiss of total abandonment, fully given and taken. She opened her mouth. She placed both her hands on my cheeks and held me like that while we kissed.

“Make love to me, Richie,” she said in her lilting Virginia voice.

“Yes, Sarah,” I said obediently.

We undressed, and I, somewhat ashamed of my full frontal obviousness, jumped under the sheets quickly. It was bright enough to see her nude body, a Titian. Those full breasts that I had caressed in Virginia, her fine strong legs, between them a blond tuft illuminated by the shafts of light streaming in from the blinds. She slid under the sheet beside me and we reached for one another. Then, for the first time, I held Sarah’s naked body against mine in my little bed. I felt the length of her warmth, and the smooth contours of her skin. We entwined and kissed. Oh, there are clothed kisses that are lovely, but kissing someone when you are both warmly sleekly naked for the first time has an unimagined majesty. The living fragrance of her body entered my body and brain—her blonde hair, its subtle oils and cleanness, the light scent of her skin, her moving arms, her back, her stomach, the taste of her breasts, the sweet salty odor of lust coming from between her legs, slick, damp, all of it I smelled and breathed in happily.

“I want you,” she said. “Now.” Her voice sounded as if something dire would occur if I didn’t act this minute.

Then we were making love. So simply and easily. She was beyond ready for me and we were kissing each other madly, and starting to moan and gasp in delight.

Describing it any more seems sacrilegious in a way. I mean it in the sense that some things are not only too intimate to reveal, but, more important, once you enter into the realm of wonder, you risk marring its delicacy if you try to put it into words. We were harmonious. Perfectly harmonious.

Years later, when we were long past our time together, she said to

me, “Our lovemaking was perfect.”

She was right. Everything about it was perfect.

Afterwards, we were spent, lying there side by side, Sarah smoking a slow cigarette. She looked dreamy. I remember it started to rain. I remember the sound of the rain slapping against the leaves on the ground, and the damp smell of it breathing into the window and cooling our bodies. My arm was draped around her bare shoulder. The cascade of her soft hair fell onto my naked arm. I took a drag from her cigarette. I was happy. I don't remember if it came to me then, or later, when we made love again, but there was a moment when I knew this was different. I was with a woman. Sarah was a *woman*, not a girl. Girls I had known resisted me. Sarah encouraged me. Girls I'd known clung to their mothers, even at eighteen. Sarah had no mother. She wouldn't have clung to her anyway. Girls I'd known thought that life was unfair to them. Sarah thought life was unfair to everyone, and that was that. Girls I'd known made you feel their girlfriends were part of the romance. Sarah wanted me, and only me. The girls I'd known made you feel guilty for taking. Sarah was just waiting for me to take.

She looked at me and said, calmly, “I knew from the minute I saw you I wanted you.”

No girl had ever spoken to me like that.

I often think about that rainy fall afternoon. I often think about the soft sound of the rain against the windowsill and on the leaves on the ground. Of us in bed together with an ashtray propped on my chest for her as she smoked dreamily. As I look back on it all, on my precious time with Sarah, it seems like a dream, with the resonance of a Japanese poem. I feel like bamboo should be swaying and geese should be flying overhead in a chevron pattern with the first cold touches of fall. The fleetingness of it all is what the Japanese poets know so well. There comes a time in your life when the past becomes more significant than the future. You stop and look at your life with retrospective clarity, seeing to the depths of it, all the way down. “This is what I've done. This is who I was. This is what cannot be changed.” I look back at that boy in bed with Sarah, with all his luck and cockiness and passion, so ignorant of his good fortune, so unaware of the lurking god of time, and a wave

of regret and of wistfulness washes over me. What I'm writing is partly a warning, then. I'm asking you to listen to me.

That languid, rain-sweetened fall afternoon, I got to know Sarah Wills more and learned so much about her mind, which was keen. She was studying philosophy at Vassar. When she spoke of that, or of linguistics, I was lost. I comprehended nothing. I had never met a girl—a woman—or a boy as smart as she was.

“What do you learn in philosophy?” I asked her.

“We're studying ontology now.”

“What in the hell is that? Sounds like a car. ‘Come see the new 1967 Oldsmobile *Ontology!*’”

She didn't laugh. “It's not a car. It's the philosophy of existence. The ontological argument. Everyone knows that.”

“I don't.”

“You don't? It's a way of proving God exists.”

“Oh, sure, yeah. He exists because otherwise nuns would be out of a job.”

“Ha,” she said, without mirth. This was important to her.

She plunged me straight back into boyhood. I was petulant, jealous of her brain. I was flustered, too, because I felt she'd humiliated me. Always, though, even when she was speaking about Vassar—a place that intimidated me—or of her classes, there was that sadness emanating from her. She had a kind of wisdom about suffering that I longed to have. As she talked, she smoked another cigarette, her breasts slowly ascending as she drew in, and, as she let out the smoke, descending.

I probed her past. Sarah was far more experienced than I was sexually. She told me she had slept with two men at the same time.

“Two men?” I said in wonder.

“Yes.”

“What did . . . you do?”

“It was mostly a lot of hands.”

“But, I mean how—two men?”

“It just happened.”

I also learned that she'd had an affair with a married professor.

“What was that like?” I asked.

“Lots of waiting in hotel rooms,” she said.

Her experience intimidated me and made me jealous. Yes, more jealousy! Back then, it was all pure adolescent insecurity on my part. Later, Sarah and I would argue about all her experience, but not then. Now was the time when we were falling in love.

Sarah and I spent the rest of the afternoon in bed. She had brought a short dark blue nightgown with her, and she put that on. I watched voyeuristically as she slid it over her head. As I said, it had rained all Saturday afternoon, and it kept raining. We lay in bed listening to the sound of the millions of drops slapping the sodden leaves and smelled the cool rain scent as it came into the window. That lovely pat-pat-pat-pat sound. We made love again, thirsting for one another. We briefly left the room to devour some food, ravenous amorous athletes that we were, and then returned, replenished, to each other’s arms. We fell asleep, exhausted, sated, bodies close, slowly rising and falling.

In the morning, there she was, a blonde vision, in her azure nightgown that went just to mid-thigh. What can I say to you, now, to summon up that moment in the morning, seeing that languid face, eyes barely opened, stormy blond hair, my hand gliding downward, awakening her, a cry of soft pain coming from the back of her throat, and then hearing her moan?

Now that I look back on it, Sarah had a skill in sex that seemed acquired not from love but from pure joyless experience. It was an aptitude that might later be used, like the sirens’ song, to lure a man onto the rocks, to make him a captive. Some women are dexterous at sex and will thrill you, but they won’t give you even an iota of their soul. I could feel with Sarah something of this purposeful proficiency. But the lovemaking was still so new and wonderful as to make me incapable of noticing this. Later, I did. I could also sense, though, that slowly but very surely she was giving herself to me. You can tell when sex becomes personal, for you only. It’s irrefutable. When I began to see a wounded look in Sarah’s eyes, I knew she was relinquishing her power.

Sarah could be cold and hard, and sometimes would cut me down to size, *chop*. I remember once I was talking to her about how difficult

it was for me to write something I was trying to write. “Stop complaining,” she said. “You’re lucky you can write. You sound like a little boy when you start talking about how *hard* it is.” She hated anyone complaining. She’d been through a lot herself, and she didn’t complain, and she looked with disdain at anyone who did. She could be quite good at disdain.

Then Sarah had to go. The weekend was over. When she went back to Vassar on Sunday, I was downcast. That night I began composing a letter. It was the first of many long, passion-filled letters I would send her over the months. I would sit in that room where we had made love and afterwards talked so sweetly to one another, and I would write her five, six, seven page letters. I would pour out every ounce of me, giving her my self and soul on paper. I had decided at that point I wanted to be a writer, and this was my chance to write. She inspired me. *We* inspired me. I would stop writing when I was completely exhausted, like a runner at the end of a long race, when I couldn’t write another word. I’d stick the letter into an envelope, Falstaffian in its bulk, and walk outside and put it in the mailbox. Years later, when she told me how much she loved my letters, she added, “I would read your letters to my girlfriends.”

“What? Everything?”

“No, not the parts about our lovemaking. But the other things you wrote about—everything. They were so jealous.”

She told me this some ten years after. Said these words to me even after I had abandoned our love. That was when I felt the first aches of regret, of genuine loss. I was still too young then to comprehend the uniqueness of the loss. I thought there would be another Sarah.

I discovered that I wanted to tell her everything. Yes, I confess I wanted to impress her, too, woo her with words—as you can see!—but I also felt an enormous freedom to be myself. This was new to me. Sarah wrote me back from Vassar, that school that intimidated me so. She would write to me of Hegel and Kant and try to explain *empirical* and *determinism* and *existential*, but I was too slow. I only cared about literature and writing and Michigan’s football team and smoking pot and parties. It frustrated and humiliated me that I couldn’t grasp these

matters of the mind. Oh, I knew there were great things going on at the University of Michigan then—things that would influence Washington, even. The Vietnam War loomed over everything. The first sit-ins were at Michigan. I wasn't part of that larger world, though. My world was narrow.

Sarah came back to Ann Arbor six or seven weeks later. No, I didn't go to Poughkeepsie. Didn't play fair. What can I say? I wish I had, but—I let her come to me. I guess that was pretty typical of me back then, the fully grown boy that I was. It was just as exciting to see her the second time as it was the first. She was as beautiful—more! I couldn't wait to put my arms around her, to hold her, kiss her, touch her, to breathe her.

It was during this weekend that the notorious dog downstairs went off on one of his endless barking jags, without inflection or variation in his barks. They were all exactly the same. *Whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof whoof.* He did this for up to twenty minutes. Sarah and I would gladly have shot him dead. We called him El Dog.

"That's the most boring dog I've ever met," Sarah said.

I remember I showed her some of the things I was trying to write. I asked her to read a story, a thinly disguised account of a trauma from my childhood. I can still see her, sitting on the bed, quietly reading, putting page after page aside, and then, when she was finished, looking up at me, and saying, "This is good, Richie. I'm impressed. You can write."

"Really?"

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

Yes. I was so proud then, and I basked in the moment.

Then, there was a time—was it that weekend? Was it the next time she came to visit? There was the time when I told her I loved her. And she told me she loved me. I was in love with Sarah Wills. I was in love! In her letters she would write, "My girlfriends are even more jealous now that I have found my one true love." I had only read those words in books before—my one true love. Now I was reading them in a letter to me.

This next part of it all still disturbs me, forty years later. Rattles me. Makes me doubt myself. Makes me wonder who I really am. Sarah had

flown in again to Ann Arbor for the weekend. She was always an apparition. I said she was a Titian, but it was really Titian channeling Vermeer. She had the carnal voluptuousness of a Titian female with the delicate luminosity of a Vermeer woman. We were in bed that evening when, from below, from the first floor where my landlady lived, we heard sounds of an argument. It was fierce and deadly. I could hear my landlady scream:

“Put that knife away! Don’t you come near me! I’ll call the police! Put it away!”

I was terrified. Sarah was aghast.

“Should we call the police?” she said.

“I don’t know!” I whispered urgently. “Let’s wait a minute and . . .”

“I’ll get a gun on you!” my landlady screamed.

I got up and called the police. They came about ten minutes later. Sarah and I listened as they knocked on the door below. Somebody answered. We tried to overhear the talk, but now that the voices were at a normal level, all we could hear were muffled sounds. Then the police left. After that, we didn’t hear anything from below.

After that, I began to draw away from Sarah.

I know. I know. What in God’s name does that have to do with it? I didn’t know at first that this argument we heard that night was the “reason” I began receding from Sarah. I just knew that the next day I no longer had the same unequivocal feelings toward her. It hit me like a door slamming in my face. I couldn’t figure it out. I tried to hide this from Sarah, but you can only hide these things so long. They will out.

She could tell. She said something.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong. Why do you think that?”

“You seem different. You seem distant.”

“No. I’m not.”

“Are you sure there isn’t something wrong?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

There was.

It was only months later, after we had split up for real, that I sat in my apartment and tried to figure out what had made me stop loving Sarah. I traced it back to that argument we heard below my bedroom.

That was the moment. I knew that I loved her before that, and after that I didn't.

Now, I know it wasn't that the violent scene below mimicked, in reverse, Sarah's mother's knife attack on her father. I had no fear of Sarah. It was the knife of intimacy that terrified me that night, the threat of complete emotional surrender. I was made aware in the screaming I heard below where a relationship between two people could go—not to physical danger but, for me, something far worse: to the danger of complete exposure. I was scared of baring my heart, of letting Sarah know who I really was. Fear gripped me by the throat. I let it have its way. I put myself behind a soundproof door. I know that Sarah was there, ready to accept me, ready to love me with all her heart, but I turned my back on her that night in Ann Arbor. As for being haunted, I've learned too well since then that nothing will haunt your days and nights like turning your back on love. Especially a love of the kind offered by Sarah.

I'm writing this many years later, and I'm still flummoxed by this, still bothered and confused. At the core of it all, I can't help but think that had I faced it head on, with courage and resolution, I could have defeated this fear, overcome it. Now that I look back on it all, I realize I wasn't really a man yet. I was still a boy. I was a boy with a woman. Sarah had done all she could to raise me into manhood. Without her, I'd probably still be a boy. She taught me what it means to be with a woman, and she tried to teach me what it means to be a man. But she was braver than I was then, and in many ways always was. She couldn't do it all.

That doesn't explain everything. I'm not sure it explains anything at all. It's the best I can do.

It was horrible breaking up. I felt like a fool. Sarah had done nothing wrong—nothing! She was angry, and bitter, and confused. Who could blame her? Understandably, she wanted nothing to do with me. I apologized, but that was really an absurdity. It usually is when you're the one doing the breaking up.

So what happened next? A great absence. I went on with my life: finished college, went to graduate school, started my first job, in Detroit. I moved to Chicago, and then to New York City. I had new

girlfriends; I even lived with one. I lost touch with Sarah for about ten years. I carried her beauty, her lusciousness, with me, though. Then, out of the blue, she sent me a Christmas card to my father's house in Virginia Beach. She had married and was living in Chicago. There was a return address on the card, somewhere near the University of Chicago. One night, after a few glasses of wine, I dialed information in Chicago. Sarah was listed—under her maiden name. I called her. Later, she said to me that she did that on purpose—kept herself listed under her maiden name—“because I wanted people who were looking for me to be able to find me.” So there we were talking, after ten years, on the telephone. She was glad to hear from me, but she was cautious, too. She was guarded. She had long gotten over the wound of my inexplicable rejection of her. She had gotten married three years earlier. *She* wasn't afraid to expose her heart. Her husband was a teacher at the University of Chicago, and she worked there, too, in the young computer department.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I'm sorry for treating you so badly.”

“Yes, you did treat me badly,” she said without rancor. “We had a good thing.”

“I know. I know. I was an idiot.”

“You were. A complete idiot.”

I was getting some relief from my guilt by letting her go at me, and I hoped it helped her. The truth was that I wanted her back now, but it was far too late. Now—now, I could begin to see that when you're young, you think life, or the future, will provide you with an unlimited supply of these chances. If you squander one, or abandon one, you have the sense that it's all right. Even though you experience some heartache—and, yes, regret—you're certain you can have similar moments and chances, that kind of exhilaration, that kind of love, again. Then, as you grow older, you realize that each of us is granted only a certain number of Sarahs—and probably just one. If you squander that chance, you've squandered it forever. That moment when you could have made something of it has vanished, and then, and only then, do you understand the true meaning of that wrong decision. It is the uniqueness of it that makes it so hard to live with.

Sarah seemed relatively happy, but as I spoke to her I once again heard the traces of melancholy in her voice. Not self-pity—no, there was never any self-pity with Sarah Wills. Leave that emotion to me! It was just that life seemed to her to be predestined to be sad, and there was nothing she or anyone could do about that. It was just the way it was. I said to her that I hoped one day I could see her again. That I would understand if she didn't want that.

“That might be possible,” she said. We wished each other good luck.

More years passed. I received a Christmas card from her every year. How many embers of the fires of old loves are kept barely alive—but still alive!—by Christmas cards? You recognize the handwriting on the envelope, and your heart quickens. It's her! You can sense her in the handwriting. Then one Christmas—this would be about 1980, some fifteen years after our romance—the return address of her card was Roanoke, Virginia, not Chicago. Inside was just this brief message: “New husband. New child. Life is good. Love, Sarah.” Then and thereafter, the Christmas cards included a snapshot of her child, a boy—never photos of her, or of her husband! A few years later, she had a second child, a girl. I decided to write her a letter. It wasn't anything profound. I just wanted to make a more solid contact than the terse stylized messages on these annual holiday cards. I told her what I'd been doing. I was living in New York, unmarried, and loving the city. I was struggling to be a writer, but, in reality, selling out and working as a copywriter in an ad agency. I had been for a while now. Yes, instead of short stories, I was writing advertising copy.

Sarah wrote me back. There it was—that handwriting of hers I knew so well from years ago at Ann Arbor. Somehow, the sight of those written words set my heart off on a binge of soaked nostalgia. Nowadays, so few people will experience the pangs of seeing someone on the page of a letter, seeing their singular handwriting that is so intimate and—whether the writer wants it or not—revealing of the person who wrote the letter. I read the words written in Sarah's unmistakable big inky script. She said that her husband was a fireman. She worked at a local college in the anthropology department, and was in a con-

stant battle to give up smoking. Her children were a delight to her. She hoped I was doing well. Then she wrote me something so beautiful, so—inspiring: “You are a wonderful writer. This is what you were meant to do. Don’t ever give it up. Love, Sarah.”

She whose opinion and judgment and brain I valued so highly believed in me. Something like this can renew your faith in yourself, a faith that can often diminish. And it did renew my faith in myself. Sarah, who, in just a brief period of time, grew to know me so well, knew that I wasn’t a poseur, that I was for real, that I was *trying*, despite selling out. How had it come that her eighteen words after twenty years were so inspiring? I had always wanted to come out from behind that soundproof door. I let her open it. I believed her. I joined a writer’s group a few weeks later. I started writing again. I kept at it. Whenever I faltered—and I did, often—I thought of the eighteen words in her letter.

In the late 1980s I was living in Greenwich Village in New York City. One fall afternoon, I got a phone call from Sarah.

“I’m coming to New York,” she said. “It’s a conference for work. I’d like to see you.”

Of course, I told her that would be lovely, in a calm and measured voice. Inside, I was a wreck. Sarah Wills! I hadn’t seen her in twenty years. We arranged to meet for dinner at a place in the Village. She was a married woman, I reminded myself. Yet the pull of our past was fierce. We have so few uncontrollable fires in our lives. Would I try to make love to her if I could?

Yes, I would.

It was a late fall evening when I went to meet her. I walked from my apartment on Twelfth Street along West Fourth Street toward Seventh Avenue. The New York evening air enlivened me as I passed by the old brownstone apartment buildings, one by one. They were lit from within and each contained the small singular beauty of people’s lives. How much I learned in this city. How much I loved it. This is where I became a writer, stumbled, but got my balance again. This is where I realized the faith Sarah had in me. She helped me become who I was meant to be in this city.

I walked into the restaurant off Bank Street and there, near the door, was Sarah seated at a table. I wasn't late. She was early. Yes, there was that shock of seeing twenty years go by in a second, but the fear of not recognizing her after all these years vanished. She was *Sarah*—unmistakable. She was thinner, even a little gaunt, and older, of course—I was, too!—but she had the same soft sadness, lush blonde hair, and dreamy look. She had a casual cigarette in her hand. She was still smoking! She put it to her mouth and took a long, sustained drag as I sat down. She blew the smoke out of the side of her mouth. I'd seen her do that so many times before.

“Hello, Sarah,” I said.

“Hello, Richie.”

It seemed as if two ghosts were speaking to one another.

The restaurant was small and personal. Like the best of the restaurants in Greenwich Village, it seemed like an eccentric, friendly person. It had no more than twenty tables, and ours looked out on a narrow street with brownstones illuminated by lamplight.

What to say? Of course, I said, “So nice to see you,” and “It's been a long time,” and “You look great.” But what I yearned to say was “You were the first, deepest, greatest, most exciting love of my life. I was a *fool* to abandon your love. I still think about you almost every day, and of our lovemaking and your beautiful lips I kissed, and those gorgeous eyes, and your sleek body . . .”

“You look good, too,” she said.

“Surgery,” I said.

Small half-smile. So Sarah!

So we talked of her children and of her life as a wife and mother and of her husband. She said, “He drives me crazy, but I love him deeply.”

On the one hand, I didn't want to tamper with that bond between two people. On the other hand, I wanted to kiss her madly and make love to her. I felt that might be what she wanted, but I remained silent. I was envious of her family. By then, from being around others, I knew how hard it was to keep a family intact. But, until a few years later, I never tried to have my own.

I told how meaningful her words of encouragement about my writing were to me.

“You don’t know how important what you wrote was to me,” I said. “I don’t think I would have started writing again if you hadn’t said what you did.”

“I meant it,” she said.

“I know. That’s what made it so powerful for me, Sarah.”

“I’m glad it helped.”

At one point a small jazz trio set up and began to play. Piano, guitar, and sax. From our table we could look outside at the array of Villagers walking by in the evening on West Fourth Street as we listened to the undulating jazz, music that always makes me feel New York is the only place to be in the world. As the musicians played, I looked at Sarah, and I could see she was crying. Not in sobs, but quietly, one tear at a time, each one sliding dolefully down her cheek. A thrill went through me. Whether she was crying because she couldn’t have us, the us of Ann Arbor years ago in that small bed with the rain pat-pat-patting outside the window, or because of some raw flaw in her marriage, or because we were all growing older, I don’t know. But I was secretly exuberant because of her tears. And moved by this beautiful, sad woman.

“What’s wrong, Sarah?” I said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said.

Getting older. It has very few advantages, none of them physical. It’s all a diminishing. A weakening. The advantage? If there is one—a panoramic view, a mountaintop perspective comes to you. You can see your life like a landscape from high above and observe what you have created. This evokes wistfulness and melancholy and regret, emotions not accorded to youth. They must be earned over the years. They are emotions of looking backward. You cannot be melancholy when you’re young. That is simply ridiculous. You have to earn melancholy. Unless, like Sarah, you seem born with it.

Sarah continued to cry soundlessly as we sat there together. I took her hand from across the table, and she let me. I held it. Her tears kept coming, sliding down easily, as we both, I suppose, dreamed of a life together that never was, or could be. We didn’t speak much at all.

After dinner, I put her in a taxi, without so much as a kiss goodbye. She belonged to someone else.

We kept in touch with infrequent letters, and then, like everyone else, submitted to the ease of e-mail, to its bloodlessness.

A few years later, I left New York and went, with my new girlfriend, to live in the South of France for a year. This was to be my formal, final break with advertising. And it was. After that year, I returned to New York, sat down in my apartment, and wrote a book about my experience in France. Everything I ever believed about words and writing that had been pent up inside me poured out onto the pages I wrote furiously day after day. I wrote for a year. Then I was finished. Miraculously, the book was accepted for publication. I was forty-five when this happened. I was in a state of wonder. I had written a book. I had done it. I had done it after all these years. One of the first copies I received from my publisher I sent to Sarah. I wanted her to know that her faith in me had been justified. I wrote in her copy, “Dear Sarah, without you, I never would have written this. Your spirit is in every line. You were the one who told me I could do it, and, as always, you were right. Thank you with all my heart.”

After she received the book, she wrote me a letter. “It’s such a lovely book,” she wrote. “I enjoyed it so much. It’s *you* with all your boyishness and charm I know so well. I’m so proud of you!”

I never saw her again. We did keep in touch—now, solely by e-mail. No more letters in her inimitable inky script. But, still, contact. Whenever I had something published, an article or essay, I let her know. Sometimes I would send her a copy. She e-mailed me about her children who were now grown. She took up marathon running. She completed her first race in Chicago, and was very proud of herself. “Twenty-six miles! That’s pretty damn good for a woman my age, don’t you think?”

Then, about a year ago, she told me she had lung cancer. Oh, God, I thought—just like her mother! All those cigarettes she smoked! She e-mailed me, “I wanted to tell you because you have been so important in my life. I’m feeling pretty good, and I have excellent medical care. I’m trying to live one day at a time.”

A year ago, last March, she died.

I still have Sarah's e-mail address on my computer. When I scroll down looking for someone's address, I see it, "Sarah Wills." It always gives me a small shock. I can't make myself take it off. I can't acknowledge that she's not here. I want to be reminded of Sarah. When I see her name, for the briefest instant, I think, she's still alive. I think, I'll write her now and tell her some of the things I've always wanted to tell her. I'll tell her that I never want to forget those days in Ann Arbor when we were young and in love and happy before I turned away from the gift she gave me. I don't ever want to stop thinking about her. This is why I've written these words. I wrote them because I wanted anyone who reads this to know something about Sarah's qualities, about how fortunate I was, and about the mistake I made in losing her. When we no longer talk about someone, when we no longer conjure their beauty and the good things they did—their laughter, the way they walked, held their fork, brushed their hand through their hair, the way they drove a car, sat and read a book, argued with us, kissed us, held us, cried tears, and slept—then we are co-conspirators in their vanishing.