

GIVE ME YOUR HEART

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D

ear Dr. K——,

It's been a long time, hasn't it! Twenty-three years, nine months and eleven days.

Since we last saw each other. Since you last saw, "nude" on your naked knees, me.

Dr. K——! The formal salutation isn't meant as flattery, still less as mockery—please understand. I am not writing after so many years to beg an unreasonable favor of you (I hope), or to make demands, merely to inquire if, in your judgment, I should go through the formality, and the trouble, of applying to be the lucky recipient of your most precious organ, your heart. If I may expect to collect what is due to me, after so many years.

I've learned that you, the renowned Dr. K——, are one who has generously signed a "living will" donating his organs to those in need. Not for Dr. K——an old-fashioned, selfish funeral and burial in a cemetery, nor even cremation. Good for you, Dr. K——! But I want only your heart, not your kidneys, liver or eyes. These, I will waive, that others more needy will benefit.

Of course, I mean to make my application as others do, in medical situations similar to my own. I would not expect fa-vo-r-i-t-i-s-m. The actual application would be made through my cardiologist. *Caucasian female of youthful middle age, attrac-t-i-v-e, intelligent, optimistic though with a malfunctioning heart, otherwise in perfect health.* No acknowledgment would be made of our old relationship, on my part at least. Though you, dear Dr. K——, as the potential heart donor, could indicate your own preference, surely?

All this would transpire when you die, Dr. K——, I mean.

Of course! Not a moment before.

(I guess you might not be aware that you're destined to die soon? Within the year? In a "tragic"- "freak"-accident as it will be called? In an "ironic"- "unspeakably ugly" end to a "brilliant career"? I'm sorry that I can't be more specific about time, place, means; even whether you'll die alone, or with a family member or two. But that's the nature of *accident*, Dr. K——. It's a surprise.)

Dr. K——, don't frown so! You're a handsome man still, and still vain, despite your thinning gray hair which, like other vain men with hair loss, you've taken to combing slantwise over the shiny dome of your head; imagining that, since you can't see this ploy in the mirror, it can't be seen by others. *But I can see.*

Fumbling, you turn to the last page of this letter to see my signature-"Angel"-and you're forced to remember, sud-denly... With a pang of guilt.

Her! She's still... alive?

That's right, Dr. K——! More alive now than ever.

Naturally you'd come to imagine I had vanished. I had ceased to exist. Since you'd long ago ceased to think of me.

You're frightened. Your heart, that guilty organ, has begun to pound. At a second-floor window of your house on Rich-mond Street (expensively restored Victorian, pale gray shingles with dark blue trim, "quaint"- "dignified"-among others of its type in the exclusive old residential neighborhood east of the Theological Seminary) you stare out anxiously at-what?

Not me, obviously. I'm not there.

At any rate, I'm not in sight.

Yet, how the pale-glowing sky seems to throb with a sin-ister intensity! Like a great eye staring.

Dr. K——, I mean you no harm! Truly. This letter is in no way a demand for your (posthumous) heart, nor even a "ver-bal threat." If you decide, foolishly, to show it to police, they will assure you it's harmless, it isn't illegal, it's only a request for information: should I, the "love-of-your-life"

you have not seen in twenty-three years, apply to be the recipient of your heart? What are Angel's chances?

I only wish to collect what's mine. What was promised to me, so long ago. *I've been faithful to our love, Dr. K——!*

You laugh, harshly. Incredulously. How can you reply to "Angel," when "Angel" has included no last name, and no address? *You will have to seek me. To save yourself, seek me.*

You crumple this letter in your fist, throw it onto the floor.

You walk away, stumble away, you mean to forget, obviously you can't forget, the crumpled pages of my handwritten letter on the floor of-is it your study?-on the second floor of the dignified old Victorian house at 119 Richmond Street?- where someone might discover them, and pick them up to read what you wouldn't wish another living person to read, especially not someone "close" to you. (As if our families, especially our blood-kin, are "close" to us in the true intimacy of erotic love.) So naturally you return, with badly shaking fingers you pick up the scattered pages, smooth them out and continue to read.

Dear Dr. K——! Please understand: I am not bitter, I don't harbor obsessions. That is not my nature. I have my own life, and I have even had a (moderately successful) career. *I am a normal woman of my time and place.* I am like the exquisite black-and-silver diamond-headed spider, the so-called "happy" spider; the sole sub-species of *Araneida* that is said to be free to spin part-improvised webs, both oval and funnel, and to roam the world at will, equally at home in damp grasses and the dry, dark, protected interiors of man-made places; re-joining in (relative) free will within the inevitable restrictions of *Araneida* behavior; with a sharp venomous sting, some-times lethal to human beings, and especially to children.

Like the diamond-head, I have many eyes. Like the diamond-head, I may be perceived as "happy"- "joyous"- "exulting"- in the eyes of others. For such is my role, my performance.

It's true, for years I was stoically reconciled to my loss, in fact to my losses. (Not that I blame you for these losses, Dr. K——. Though a neutral observer might conclude that my immune system has been damaged as a result of my physical and mental collapse following your abrupt dismissal of me from your life.) Then, last March, seeing your photograph in the paper-DISTINGUISHED THEOLOGIAN K——TO HEAD SEMINARY-and,

a few weeks later, when you were named to the President's Commission on Religion and Bioethics, I recon-sidered. *The time of anonymity and silence is over*, I thought. *Why not try, why not try to collect what he owes you.*

Do you remember Angel's name, now? That name that, for twenty-three years, nine months and eleven days you have not wished to utter.

Seek my name in any telephone directory, you won't find it. For possibly my number is unlisted, possibly I don't have a telephone. Possibly my name has been changed. (Legally.) Pos-sibly I live in a distant city in a distant region of the continent; or possibly, like the diamond-head spider (adult size, approxi-mately that of your right thumbnail, Dr. K——), I dwell qui-etly within your roof, spinning my exquisite webs amid the shadowy rafters of your basement, or in a niche between your handsome old mahogany desk and the wall, or, a delicious thought, in the airless cave beneath the four-poster brass an-tique bed you and the second Mrs. K——share in the dol-drums of late middle age.

So close am I, yet invisible!

Dear Dr. K——! Once you marveled at my "flawless Vermeer" skin and "spun gold" hair rippling down my back, which you stroked, and closed in your fist. Once I was your "Angel"-your "beloved." I basked in your love, for I did not question it. I was young, I was virginal in spirit as well as body, and would not have questioned the word of a distinguished elder. And in the paroxysm of lovemaking, when you gave yourself up utterly to me, or so it seemed, how could you have... deceived?

Dr. K—— of the Theological Seminary, biblical scholar and authority, protégé of Reinhold Niebuhr and author of "brilliant"- "revolutionary"-exegeses of the Dead Sea Scrolls, among other esoteric subjects.

But I had no idea, you are protesting. I'd given her no reason to believe, to expect...

(That I would believe your declarations of love? That I would "take you at your word"?)

My darling, you have my heart. Always, forever. Your promise!

* * * *

These days, Dr. K——, my skin is no longer “flawless.” It has become the frank, flawed skin of a middle-aged woman who makes no effort to disguise her age. My hair, once shimmering straw-berry-blond, is now faded, dry and brittle as broom sage; I keep it trimmed short, like a man’s, with a scissors, scarcely glancing into a mirror as I *snip! snip-snip!* away. My face, though reasonably attractive, I suppose, is, in fact, a blur to most observers, including especially middle-aged American men; you’ve glanced at me, and through me, dear Dr. K——, upon more than one recent occasion, no more recognizing your “Angel” than you would have recognized a plate heaped with food you’d devoured twenty-three years ago with a zestful appetite or an old, long-exhausted and dismissed sexual fantasy of adolescence.

For the record: I was the woman in a plain, khaki-colored trench coat and matching hat who waited patiently at the university bookstore as a line of admirers of yours moved slowly forward, for Dr. K—— to sign copies of *The Ethical Life: 21st Century Challenges*. (A slender theological treatise, not a mega-bestseller of course but a quite respectable bestseller, most popular in university and upscale suburban communities.) I knew your “brilliant” book would disappoint yet I purchased it and eagerly read to discover (yet another time) the puzzling fact: you, Dr. K——, the man, are not the individual who appears in your books; the books are clever pretenses, artificial structures you’ve created to inhabit temporarily, as a crippled, deformed individual might inhabit a structure of surpassing beauty, gazing out its windows, taking pride in posing as its owner, but only temporarily.

Yes? Isn’t this the clue to the renowned “Dr. K——”?

For the record: several Sundays ago, you and I passed closely by each other in the State Museum of Natural History; you were gripping the hand of your five-year-old granddaughter (“Lisle,” I believe?-lovely name) and took no more notice of me than you’d have taken of any stranger passing you on the steep marble steps, descending from the Hall of Dinosaurs on the gloomy fourth floor as you were ascending; you’d stooped to smilingly speak to Lisle, and it was at that moment I noted the silly, touching ploy of you hair-combing (over the spreading bald spot), I saw Lisle’s sweet, startled face (for the child, unlike her myopic granddaddy, had seen me and “knew” me in a flash); I felt a thrill of triumph: for how easily I might have killed you then, I might have pushed you down those hard marble steps, my hands firm on your now rather rounded shoulders, the force of my rage overcoming any resistance you, a puffy,

slack-bellied two-hundred-pound man of late middle age, might have mustered; immediately you'd have been thrown off balance, falling backward, with an expression of in-credulous terror, and still gripping your granddaughter's hand you'd have dragged the innocent child backward with you, toppling down the marble steps with a scream: concussion, skull fracture, brain hemorrhage, death!

Why not try, why not try to collect what he owes me.

Of course, Dr. K——, I didn't! Not that Sunday afternoon.

Dear Dr. K——! Are you surprised to learn that your lost love with the "spun gold" hair and the "soft-as-silk breasts" managed to recover from your cruelty, and by the age of twenty-nine had begun to do well in her career, in another part of the country?

Never would I be renowned in my field as you, Dr. K——, in yours, that goes without saying, but through diligence and in-dustry, through self-deprivation and cunning, I made my way in a field traditionally dominated by men and achieved what might be called a minor, local "success." That is, I have nothing to be ashamed of, and perhaps even something to be proud of, if I were capable of pride.

I won't be more specific, Dr. K——, but I will hint: my field is akin to yours though not scholarly or "intellectual." My salary is far less than yours, of course. I have no public iden-tity, no reputation and no great wish for such. I'm in a field of *service*, I've long known how to *serve*. Where the fantasies of others, primarily men, are involved, I've grown quite adept at *serv-ing*.

Yes, Dr. K——, it's possible that I've even served you. Indi-rectly, I mean. For instance: I might work in, or even oversee a medical laboratory to which your physician sends blood sam-ples, biopsy tissue samples, etcetera, and one day he sends our laboratory a specimen extracted from the body of the renowned Dr. K——. *Whose life may depend upon the accuracy and good faith of our laboratory findings.*

Just one example, Dr. K——, among many!

No, dear Dr. K——, this letter is no threat. How, stating my position so openly, and therefore innocently, could I be a *threat* ?

Are you shocked to learn that a woman can be a "profes-sional"-can

have a career that's fairly rewarding-yet still dream of justice after twenty-three years? Are you shocked to learn that a woman might be married, or might have been married, yet remain haunted still by her cruel, deceitful first love, who ravaged not only her virginity but her faith in humankind?

You'd like to imagine your cast-off "Angel" as a lonely em-bittered spinster, yes? Hiding away in the dark, spinning ugly sticky webs out of her own poisonous guts, yet the truth is the reverse: just as there are "happy" spiders, observed by ento-mologists as exhibiting a capacity for (relative) freedom, spin-ning webs of some variety and originality, so too there are "happy" women who dream of justice, and will make sure that they taste its sweetness, one day. Soon.

(Dr. K——! How lucky you are, to have a little grand-daughter like Lisle! So delicate, so pretty, so... angelic. I have not had a daughter, I confess. I will not have a granddaughter. If things were otherwise between us, "Jody," we might share Lisle.)

"Jody"-what a thrill it was for me, at the age of nineteen, to call you by that name! Where others addressed you for-mally, as Dr. K——. That it was secret, illicit, taboo-like call-ing one's own father by a lover's name-was part of the thrill, of course.

"Jody," I hope your first, anxious wife E---never discov-ered certain bits of incriminating evidence in your trouser pockets, wallet, briefcase where, daringly, I secreted them. Love notes, childlike in expression. *Love love love my Jody. My BIG JODY.*

You're not BIG JODY very often now, are you, Dr. K——?

"Jody" has faded with the years, I've learned. With the thick wiry gypsy-black hair, those shrewd clear eyes and proud pos-ture and the capacity of your stubby penis to rejuvenate, rein-vent itself with impressive frequency. (At the start of our affair, at least.) For any nineteen-year-old girl-student to call you "Jody" now would be obscene, laughable.

Now you most love being called "Granddaddy!"-in Lisle's voice.

Yet in my dreams sometimes I hear my own shameless whisper, *Jody please don't stop loving me, please forgive me, I want only to die, I deserve to die if you don't love me* as in the warm bath blood-tendrils seeped from my clumsily lacerated forearms; but it was Dr. K——, not

“Jody,” who spoke brusquely on the phone informing me *This is not the time. Good-bye.*

(You must have made inquiries, Dr. K——. You must have learned that I was found there in the bloody bathwater, un-conscious, nearing death, by a concerned woman friend who’d tried to call me. You must have known, but prudently kept your distance, Dr. K——! These many years.)

* * * *

Dr. K——, not only have you managed to erase me from your memory, but I would guess you’ve forgotten your anxious first wife E——, “Evie.” The rich man’s daughter. A woman two years older than you, lacking in self-confidence, rather plain, with no style. Loving me, you were concerned about making “Evie” suspicious, not because you cared for her but because you would have made the rich father suspicious, too. And you were very beholden to the rich father, yes? *Few members of the Seminary faculty can afford to live near the Seminary. In the el-egant old East End of our university town.* (So you boasted in your bemused way. As if contemplating an irony of fate, not a consequence of your own maneuvering. As, smiling, you kissed my mouth, and drew a forefinger along my breasts, across my shivery belly.)

Poor “Evie”! Her hit-and-run “accidental” death, a mysteri-ous vehicle swerving on a rain-lashed pavement, no wit-nesses... I would have helped you mourn, Dr. K——, and been a loving stepmother to your children, but by then you’d banished me from your life.

Or so you believed.

(For the record: I am not hinting that I had anything to do with the death of the first Mrs. K——. Don’t bother to read and reread these lines, to determine if there’s something “be-tween” them-there isn’t.)

And then, Dr. K——, a widower with two children, you went away, to Germany. A sabbatical year that stretched into two. I was left to mourn in your place. (Not luckless “Evie,” but you.) Your wife’s death was spoken of as a “tragedy” in certain circles, but I preferred to think of it as purely an accident: a conjunction of time, place, opportunity. *What is accident but a precision of timing?*

Dr. K——, I would not accuse you of blatant hypocrisy (would I?), still less of deceit, but I can’t comprehend why, in such craven terror of your

first wife's family (to whom you felt so intellectually superior), you nonetheless remarried, within eighteen months, a woman much younger than you, nearly as young as I, which must have shocked and infuriated your former in-laws. Yes? (Or did you cease caring about what they thought? Had you siphoned enough money from the father-in-law, by that time?)

Your second wife, V——, would be spared an accidental death, and will survive you by many years. I have never felt any rancor for voluptuous-now rather fattish—"Viola," who came into your life after I'd departed it. Maybe, in a way, I felt some sympathy for the young woman, guessing that, in time, you would betray her, too. (And haven't you? Numberless times?)

I have forgotten nothing, Dr. K——. While you, to your fatal disadvantage, have forgotten almost everything.

Dr. K——," Jody," shall I confess: I had secrets from you even then. Even when I seemed to you transparent, translucent. Deep in the marrow of my bones, a wish to bring our illicit love to an end. An end worthy of grand opera, not mere melodrama. When you sat me on your knees naked—"nude" was your preferred term—and gobbled me up with your eyes, "Beautiful! Aren't you a little beauty!"—even then, I exulted in my secret thoughts. You seemed at times drunken with love-lust?—for me, kissing, tonguing, nuzzling, sucking... sucking nourishment from me like a vampire. (The stress of fatherhood and maintaining a du-tiful son-in-law pose as well as the "renowned theologian" were exhausting you, maddening you in your masculine vanity. Of course, in my naiveté I had no idea.) Yet laying my hand on the hot-skinned nape of your neck I "saw" a razor blade clenched in my fingers, and the first astonished spurts of your blood, with such vividness I can "see" it now. I began to faint, my eyes rolled back in my head, you caught me in your arms... and for the first time (I assume it was the first time) you perceived your spun-gold angel as something of a concern, a liability, a burden not unlike the burden of a neurotic, anxiety-prone wife. *Darling, what's the matter with you? Are you playing, darling? Beautiful girl, it isn't amusing to frighten me when I adore you so.*

Gripping my chilled fingers in your hot, hard fingers and pressing my hand against your big powerfully beating heart.

Why not? why not try? try to collect?-that heart.

That's owed me.

How inspired I am, composing this letter, Dr. K——! I've been writing feverishly, scarcely pausing to draw breath. It's as if an angel is guiding my hand. (One of those tall leathery-winged angels of wrath, with fierce medieval faces, you see in German woodcuts!) I've reread certain of your published works, Dr. K——, including the heavily footnoted treatise on the Dead Sea Scrolls that established your reputation as an ambitious young scholar in his early thirties. Yet it all seems so quaint and long-ago, back in the twentieth century when "God" and "Satan" were somehow more real to us, like household objects... I've been reading of our primitive religious origins, how "God-Satan" were once conjoined but are now, in our Christian tradition, always separated. Fatally separated. For we Christians can believe no evil of our deity, we could not love Him then.

Dr. K——, as I write this letter my malfunctioning heart with its mysterious "murmur" now speeds, now slows, now gives a lurch, in excited knowledge that you are reading these words with a mounting sense of their justice. A heavy rain has begun to fall, drumming against the roof and windows of the place in which I am living, the identical rain (is it?) that drums against the roof and windows of your house only a few (or is it many?) miles away; unless I live in a part of the country thousands of miles distant, and the rain is not identical. And yet *I can come to you at any time. I am free to come, and to go; to appear, and to disappear.* It may even be that I've contemplated the charming facade of your precious granddaughter's Busy Bee Nursery School even as I've shopped for shoes in the company of V——, though the jowly-faced, heavily made-up woman with the size ten feet was oblivious of my presence, of course.

And, just last Sunday: I revisited the Museum of Natural History, knowing there was a possibility that you might return. For it had seemed to me possible that you'd recognized me on the steps, and sent a signal to me with your eyes, without Lisle noticing; you were urging me to return to meet with you, alone. The deep erotic bond between us will never be broken, you know: you entered my virginal body, you took from me my innocence, my youth, my very soul. *My angel! Forgive me, return to me, I will make up to you the suffering you ve endured for my sake.*

I waited, but you failed to return.

I waited, and my sense of mission did not subside but grew more certain.

I found myself the sole visitor on the gloomy fourth floor, in the Hall of

Dinosaurs. My footsteps echoed faintly on the worn marble floor. A white-haired museum guard with a paunch like yours regarded me through drooping eyelids; he sat on a canvas chair, hands on his knees. Like a wax dummy. Like one of those trompe l'oeil mannequins. You know: those uncanny, lifelike figures you see in contemporary art collections, except this slouching figure wasn't bandaged in white. Silently I passed by him as a ghost might pass. My (gloved) hand in my bag, and my fingers clutching a razor blade I'd learned by this time to wield with skill, and courage.

Stealthily I circled the Hall of Dinosaurs looking for you, but in vain; stealthily I drew up behind the dozing guard, feeling my erratic heartbeat quicken with the thrill of the hunt... but of course I let the moment pass, it was no museum guard but the renowned Dr. K——for whom the razor blade was intended. (Though I had not the slightest doubt that I could have wielded my weapon against the old man, simply out of frustration at not finding you, and out of female rage at centuries of mistreatment, exploitation; I might have slashed his carotid artery and quickly retreated without a single blood drop splashed onto my clothing; even as the old man's life bled out onto the worn marble floor, I would have descended to the near-deserted third floor of the museum, and to the second, to mingle unnoticed with Sunday visitors crowded into a new computer graphics exhibit. So easy!) I found myself adrift amid rubbery dinosaur-replicas, some of them enormous as Tyrannosaurus Rex, some the size of oxen, and others fairly small, human-sized; I admired the flying reptiles, with their long beaks and clawed wings; in a reflecting surface over which one of these prehistoric creatures soared I admired my pale, hot-skinned face and floating ashy hair. *My darling, you whispered, I will always adore you. That angelic smile!*

Dr. K——, see? I'm smiling, still.

Dr. K——! Why are you standing there, so stiffly, at an upstairs window of your house? Why are you cringing, overcome by a sickening fear? *Nothing will happen to you that is not just. That you do not deserve.*

These pages in your shaking hand, you'd like to tear into shreds-but don't dare. Your heart pounds, in terror of being snatched from your chest! Desperately you're contemplating- but will decide against-showing my letter to police. (Ashamed of what the letter reveals of the renowned Dr. K——!) You are contemplating-but will decide against-showing my letter to your wife, for you've had exhausting sessions of soul-baring, confession, exoneration with her, numerous times; you've seen the disgust in her eyes. No more! And you haven't the stomach to contemplate yourself in the mirror, for you've had more than enough of your own face, those stricken

guilty eyes. While I, the venomous diamond-head, contentedly spin my gossamer web amid the rafters of your basement, or in the niche between your desk and the wall, or in the airless cave beneath your marital bed, or, most delicious prospect!-inside the very mattress of the child's bed in which, when she visits her grand-parents in the house on Richmond Street, beautiful little Lisle sleeps.

Invisible by day as by night, spinning my web, out of my guts, tireless and faithful-"happy."