

## The Golden Madonna

Jonathan Lash

George Lane pulled up in front of 227 Canby Street and saw the doleful figure of Charlie Anakrios on the porch, short arms crossed over his belly, pearls of sweat gleaming on his round bald head. Charlie, George knew, was there in the heat of a September afternoon to welcome his new tenants, but his face was full of misery, not welcome. As George and his flat mate, Henry Ichiro, walked over to greet him, Charlie asked, “You gonna need a dolly to move your stuff?”

“No, thanks, Mr. Anakrios, it’s not much, only what’s in the station wagon. We’ll just schlep it up.”

Charlie watched, hands on hips, as they began to carry cardboard boxes up the steps and asked, “What are you gonna sleep on?”

“We have mattresses,” George said. “When I get a chance to get to the lumber store I’ll build a bed ... and a desk maybe.” He shook his head and added, “Henry’s going to scavenge stuff.”

Charlie winced. George read in his frown visions of saw dust and junk filling the house.

“This apartment’s not a workshop.”

“Got it, Mr. Anakrios. I’ll do all the cutting and sanding in the yard.”

George wedged the screen door open with a pair of boots and he and Henry carried a mattress up the stairs. Helen Anakrios, Charlie’s wife, stood blocking the landing, a scowling gargoyle leaning on her broom, watching their every move.

“You be careful. We just painted. I don’t want no scratches.”

Henry turned to her with a warm smile. “We’ll be very careful, Mrs. Anakrios.”

An enormous bead of sweat ran down his nose and splashed on the stair. For a moment, he thought she would clobber him with her broom, but she sighed deeply and turned to get a mop and a bucket of disinfectant. He fled up the stairs.

It was 1966. When George and Henry had come to ask to rent the apartment, Charlie had explained that he had worked two jobs almost since the day he had arrived in America from Greece twenty years earlier. He and Helen had gotten by on almost nothing since they married. Now they owned this little three-story apartment building. They were landlords. The building was their pride, their savings, and their security. It produced income. It appreciated in value. It was a dream. He reported that his wife had told him he was a fool to rent to college students. They were going to turn his building into a slum. But he would trust them, he said (and charge them twice the market rate, George guessed).

The door to the second floor apartment flew open and the building shook as they leapt down the stairs, the screen door slammed, and the two young men drove off in the red station wagon. An hour later they returned, loaded with bags of groceries, and boxes from Woolworths: a table, a pan, a pot and cheap plastic plates and glasses. A fit-looking man carrying a briefcase, a suit coat over his shoulder, his white shirt stained with sweat, came down the street from Massachusetts Avenue. He stopped by the front stoop, looking amused, as the two young men retrieved various disreputable furnishings from the station wagon.

“You must be the new second floor tenants?”

Henry struggled to free his right hand to offer it. “Yeah, hello, I’m Henry Ichiro.”

George just smiled and said, “George Lane.”

“I’m Robert White, your upstairs neighbor. My wife, Lucy, and I live on the third floor. C’mon up and have a beer later.”

As the sun sank behind the trees that lined the narrow street, the boys climbed the creaky stairs and knocked on the door of Apt 3. A young blond woman with a pretty, wide-eyed face and a girlish smile opened the door.

“Hi, I’m George and this is Henry, the new tenants on the second floor. Your husband invited us to stop by for a beer, and we brought some.” He handed her a six pack and a bag of chips.

“Well, come in, I’m Lucy. Bobby! The boys from downstairs are here with some beer!”

The Whites’ apartment was full of the light of the setting sun. Lucy led them into a living room identical to theirs, except it was furnished: tan sofa, a wingback armchair, an end table, a rug, and a fan humming quietly in the corner on top of a gleaming upright piano. Lucy brought glasses and a bowl for the chips and asked, “You just got here? Where from?”

“I’m from Northern California,” Henry said. “My family is Japanese. Nisei. George is a hip preppie from New York.”

She looked at them with a wry smile. “How did you ever persuade Charlie to rent to you? He and Helen are pretty obsessive about this place.”

George’s face stretched into a look of comic terror. “Whoosh, I thought she was going to swat me with her broom when I was carrying stuff upstairs. Does it get better? How long have you been here?”

Bobby emerged from the bedroom in shorts and a madras shirt. He reached for a beer, put a hand on his wife’s shoulder and said, “We’ve been here just a year, since I started at the firm.”

They'd probably been high school sweethearts, George thought. From Iowa? Bobby looked All-American. He was broad-shouldered, clean-cut, and had the open, confident manner of a guy who'd done well at everything. Lucy seemed almost angelic. They appeared ridiculously straight, at a time when the culture was breaking loose from the monochrome expectations of the fifties. George asked where Bobby had gone to law school.

“Just down the street at Harvard. Are you thinking about law school?”

“I don't know. It doesn't sound like much fun.”

“Fun? No. Everybody is smart and competitive. I had to work like hell just to keep up.”

He looked at his wife. “Lucy may have begun to wonder why she married me.”

“No, Bobby. It was OK.” She turned to George. “We were at University of Indiana together, and he was a star. He just wasn't used to struggling to keep up.”

Lucy asked about their families. Did they have brothers or sisters?

Henry looked at her, paused, and said, “I'm the only son of a Nisei Japanese family in San Francisco. I was born behind barbed wire in an internment camp. My parents were there three years. They left with a bleak view of the world. They decided not to bring more kids into it.”

There was a silence. Lucy asked, “What had your parents done?”

“They were Japanese, and after Pearl Harbor people were afraid.”

“But how—”

Bobby broke in, “President Roosevelt signed an executive order confining West Coast Japanese to temporary camps. The Supreme Court refused to overrule it.”

“But,” Lucy asked, “did they get some sort of reparations after they were released?”

Henry looked at her levelly, and said, “Everything they owned was stolen. My dad’s business, their house, their car, art that had been in our family for hundreds of years. My life has been okay. I’m here. The country’s racist. That’s the way it is.”

Lucy stood up to clear the glasses. George caught a glimpse of her face. She was near tears. He thought of a weeping Madonna painting he’d seen in Florence. Beautiful.

George barely knew Henry. He wondered whether Henry’s cool demeanor was a cover for anger? They’d been thrown together by their desire to live outside the Harvard Houses for their senior year, a largely irrational decision to give up room cleaning and well-provided dining halls so they could live independently, free of dorm proctors and parietal rules. That evening, after leaving Bobby and Lucy’s, they sat around the metal and Formica kitchen table on the rickety chairs that Henry had scavenged from the curb across the street from his girlfriend’s dorm. They drank cans of Falstaff beer, and ate fried minute steaks, boiled corn, and supermarket coleslaw off plastic plates. It felt as if they had entered a new world. After they washed up, Henry grabbed his book bag and headed out.

“I’m going to meet Liz.”

“You want a lift?”

“I’ll bike.”

George sat on a pillow in the empty living room. He had every window open, but the air was stagnant. The street was quiet except for the crickets. He heard the barely audible sounds of the TV from below, and Lucy playing the piano above. He thought about calling around to find somebody to hang out with but decided instead to get his stereo set up. It was an elaborate, multi-speaker Sony system his father had given him when, having done particularly well at his

poker night, the old man went out and upgraded to the newest \$2000 Yamaha system just coming on the market. George got the speakers, pre-amp, amp, and exquisitely balanced turntable connected. He remembered his father's pride putting on Beethoven's Ninth three years ago. "Listen, George, it just fills the room. You can hear each section as if you were in the hall." Now *that* system was a hand-me-down. George looked at the Beatles' *Yesterday* album, just out in the States, shook his head and found a recording of Segovia playing gentle Spanish guitar solos. He opened another beer and returned to his pillow with a pad and pencil to design the bed he planned to build. His desk, he decided, would be a door laid across sawhorses.

Beer empty, drawings done, he stopped Segovia and got his cello out of its plush case. He loved the smell of the pine and striped maple the luthier had used to craft the instrument a hundred years ago, and the sweet violin polish he used to clean it. Neither talented nor disciplined he was just good enough to get occasional pleasure out of playing. Some days he persuaded himself that he *could* be good if he worked at it, but he never had. After half an hour of Bach suites and Vivaldi sonatas, he realized it was past ten and he should probably stop before someone knocked on the door to complain.

Actually, rather than a complaint, he got a compliment. He ran into Lucy on the stairs the next morning and she asked who had been playing the cello.

"That was me. I'm sorry, did it bother you?"

"Oh, no, not at all, it was nice. Vivaldi?"

"Yes, I can manage a couple of the concerti ... sort of."

"Do you have the piano score? We could play them together."

"That ... that would be fun. I'd love to do that."

"Just leave the score for me, so I can look it over."

The following morning by the time George got up Henry was gone. He took a quick shower, gulped a glass of juice and set off for the campus. He registered, collected reading lists, went to the Coop to buy books. He was a senior. His last year. He knew that he was supposed to choose a subject and write a thesis. Henry had decided what he wanted to write about the previous spring and had started his research over the summer. George shook his head. He didn't want to think about it. Not yet.

“Hey, man, it's what we're here for.”

Laden with course materials, books, and reprints, George was soaked with sweat when he climbed the steps onto the porch at Canby Street. He saw sticking out of the mailbox a packet marked “2nd Floor.” Amid the circulars and notices from the college there was a blue envelope he knew was from his father. He dropped his backpack and sat on the porch steps to read. The letter held his monthly check, a clipping of an article challenging McNamara's assertions about the growing capabilities of the South Vietnamese Army, (Yes, he thought, there was *that* to worry about), and an affectionate expression of hope that he would “buckle down” for his final year. A second envelope inside the first held a gift certificate to a furniture store with a note saying, “So you can buy a comfortable chair to sit in and study.”

An hour later George was in the kitchen foraging for lunch. Henry and Liz arrived gagging with suppressed laughter.

“She saw us coming in and she looked so horrified ...”

“Who did?”

“Charlie's wife Helen.”

“Do you think she'll call the Vice Squad every time we bring women to the apartment?”

“Maybe President Pusey?”

There was a knock at the door. George opened the door, and there she was, panting from the climb, her face tense, as if suppressing a scream. He smiled and said, “Mrs. Anakrios! Hello, how are you? Would you like to come in?”

Caught off guard, she shook her head, and said, “That girl”—she pointed accusingly—“that girl, she’s got spikey heels. I don’ want her marking up our nice floors.”

“Oh, OK, thanks for the warning, we’ll be careful. Was that all? Are you sure you don’t want to come in?”

“I know all about girls like that!”

As he closed the door, he heard Liz in the background saying, “Girls like what? I’m going down to ask her, like what?”

Afternoon. The apartment was stuffy. Helen was vacuuming downstairs. An odor of ammonia drifted in from the stairwell. There was no place to sit. George started to gather books to head for the library but dropped them on his mattress. He’d get a bed and desk built and buy the armchair his father had sent the money for. Then he could study.

A few hours later he pulled out of a lumberyard in South Boston, a door, two sheets of plywood , some 2x4’s and two sawhorses strapped to the top of the station wagon. The air was thick and the sky had darkened. The dingy warehouses and low concrete buildings that lined the street took on a look of grim menace. Inauspicious. A full-on thunder squall was breaking by the time he reached the apartment. He was surprised and touched when Charlie emerged with a sheet of plastic to cover the wood.

“You can’t build nothing with wet wood.”

“Thanks, Charlie, you’re right.”



They stood on the porch as the rain pelted down and discussed George's design, which Charlie thought both too heavy and not strong enough.

"She gonna twist. You need angle braces, then not so much wood, see, just a couple these cross braces. That plywood is plenty strong."

George frowned, and Charlie added, "I'm gonna help you so you won't be sleeping on the floor. I got my chop saw in the basement. We can cut some braces."

The sun emerged, and the two of them happily measured, cut, sanded and drilled. They agreed it would be better to leave assembling the bed until it was inside.

Charlie looked around furtively. "You better not tell Helen I say inside, but if I help you, they gonna be less mess."

The desk was soon set up on its sawhorses. The bed frame was assembled. Charlie appeared with pads to put on the legs so bed, chair, and desk would not scratch the floor. He laid a tarp before they stained the frame.

"You wear these gloves and put on stain real careful. If she splatters we never get it clean."

"Charlie, you're amazing. This looks great."

"Yeah, it work out OK. The desk, she's good too. Real simple."

"Can I offer you a beer?"

A look of longing crossed Charlie's face, but he glanced down at the floor ... and perhaps thought about who waited below, and demurred.

The following morning—the first day of classes—Henry yelled "Ciao!" as he headed out before seven. He was singing, for chrissake, singing! George set off an hour later. The air had cleared. Leaves had begun to float down from the sycamores and gingkoes. He breathed deeply

and thought it was crazy to go to a class he didn't care about on a day like this. But he went. The American Revolution. Professor Chance was young, hip and a performer. George sat staring out the tall windows that looked onto the Yard. He watched a guy with a ponytail, a baggy Red Sox jacket and Caterpillar hat saunter over to a bike rack, pull a small bolt cutter from his book bag, cut the lock on a ten-speed, and ride off. George looked around. Other students were paying rapt attention to Prof. Chance. Should he leap up yelling, "Stop thief?" He'd look like an idiot, and thief and bike would be—were already—gone anyway. He looked at the woman sitting next to him. She was taking beautiful notes. He shrugged, turned his attention to Professor Chance and then to his notebook. He doodled a picture of a bike with a frightened face on its handlebar basket shouting, "Help!" The woman with the beautiful notes glanced over, saw his doodle and smiled. Really? He thought of Lucy's look of sadness the evening they'd met.

Professor Chance had stepped into the fiery persona of John Adams and was regaling the class with his scornful account of John Dickinson's efforts to avoid war. He got his accustomed ovation.

OK, new regime. Which library? He lasted a few restless hours in the main reading room in Widener. It was time for lunch, and he did, after all, need to get his desk set up. He headed for the apartment. Compared to the bustle of the Yard the apartment was seemed empty and still. He got his cello from its plush case, rosined the bow, tuned, forced himself to work on a few exercises and then set out to work on the Vivaldi. An hour later he stopped in frustration. Not beautiful. Squeaky and out of tune. An old dialogue in his head: "What's the point?" He heard the answer: "You idiot, the point is to play the piece with Lucy."

Henry knocked on his bedroom door, stuck his head in and said, "Sounds good."

"I didn't know you'd come back. Sorry if I bothered you."

“I said, ‘hi,’ but you were completely focused.”

“Focused, maybe, but playing the same passages over and over and never getting any better.”

“Doesn’t that go with the process?”

“Lucy said she’d play the piano part with me, and I’d like to be able to play roughly what Vivaldi wrote.”

“Oh, she came in when I did. Why don’t you go knock?”

Now? But Henry goaded him into it.

Lucy smiled when she opened the door. “Sure bring your cello up.”

And they played. She seemed entirely undeterred by his stumbles and laughed at her own. The music actually sounded like Vivaldi. Bobby arrived from work and gave his wife a kiss.

“Ready for performance?”

“No,” she answered, “but a lot of fun. George, do you have some other pieces we could work on?”

He took a deep breath. “There is a Brahms Sonata for cello and piano. It’s a challenge, but it has a wonderful piano part. I’ve just started to work on it.”

“Brahms?” She stared at him, wide-eyed. “That would take some work.”

“I’ll bring you the score. I’m nowhere near ready to play it either.”

He did work. New England fall drove out the last of the muggy heat. The maples had begun to turn. The slanted light of the lowering sun set the golds and reds aglow. George hummed as he lugged his cello down the stairs to his car. He could smell burning leaves. It was a fifteen-minute drive to his teacher’s apartment in a dingy old brownstone that looked out on the world through

sad gray windows. The place usually depressed him. The stairwell was thick with the smell of pot roast, simmering chicken, and something garlicky. Today the aromas just made him hungry.

He knocked and she shouted that it was open. She was seated with her cello next to the student chair, playing a passage from a Haydn concerto. She nodded hello—perhaps, he thought, not wholly pleased to see him. He sensed she'd grown accustomed to dreary hours spent listening as he made the same mistakes week after week. He never worked. She had once asked him why he kept coming to lessons. He had shrugged. He didn't want to give up this part of who he was, no matter its tenuousness.

She stopped playing and watched as he unpacked his cello, leaned it against the chair. "You know," he said with a chuckle, "you could breathe a three-course meal climbing the stairs to your apartment this time of day."

She smiled. "It's nauseating some of the time, especially on Fridays."

She asked what he wanted to work on, and when he said, "The Brahms," he saw her wince.

"OK, let's hear how you're doing."

He played something that sounded like Brahms, obviously from memory.

"George, that's good. You've been working on it."

"Yes."

What got you going?"

"It's beautiful music and ... and I've found someone to play the piano part with me."

They worked the entire hour on the first twenty-four measures, a gorgeous, sensuous melody rising from the melancholic bottom of the cello's range up to three urgent high Cs, and then ebbing all the way down again.

He left exhilarated, the music singing in his head. Not a mediocre college student, a cellist. He parked up the street from the apartment and, getting out of the station wagon, took a deep breath. The last of the light was fading in the west, a chill settling on the day with the twilight. A honking vee of Canada geese passed over and he imagined himself among them out-pacing the shadows crossing the city.

Lucy and Bobby were unloading groceries. Bobby gently pushed her away from the trunk of their car. “No, I’m not letting you carry this stuff up those stairs.”

“Oh, Bobby, I’m fine.”

“Yeah,” he said. “All the same, I’ll carry the groceries.”

George said hello and thought again how square Bobby was. His wife, however, seemed to glow as if she had caught a last ray of sunshine.

Midterms came, as did the deadline for submitting his thesis topic. His tutor told him that he needed to focus. The thesis, she told George, was the culmination of his work at Harvard, a chance to explore a question that mattered, to do original research, to demonstrate the scholarly skills he had mastered. George knew he had no scholarly skills and had no aspiration to acquire them. He had spent three years doing what was required and no more. Sliding by. He didn’t care. And the college didn’t care about him. His tutor was a humorless and desperate woman trying to finish her own PhD dissertation under the guidance of a brilliant solipsistic scholar who treasured his power to make or destroy the careers of his graduate students. George furrowed his brow and promised to return with a proposed topic. When he worked hard on a piece of music he could create beauty, however ephemeral. He and Lucy shared the joy. How could his tutor take scholarship so seriously? No one but his tutor and, perhaps, his father would ever read what he wrote. But he set off dutifully to study.

The reading room at Widener was heavy with history, but by late afternoon it was more a pickup bar than a place to study. Lamont was better lit and had comfortable chairs. He looked at his watch. Five thirty. The hell with it. He headed back to the apartment.

He found a querulous letter from his father with his November check. What, the letter asked, was he up to? "I am looking forward," he wrote, "to the chance to hear what you are doing when you're home for Thanksgiving."

Days fell away. He practiced for hours. He had never worked so hard on anything. The music drove everything else out of his head. He was broke. And he was in academic trouble. The Secretary of the Government Department, Mrs. Grim, called to say that if he did not submit a thesis topic by the end of the week he'd be transferred to General Studies.

"What is General Studies?" he asked.

"It is how students who fail to fulfill their departments' honors requirements graduate."

"That's possible?"

"In your case, Mr. Lane, I should say it is probable."

"Oh, I see. I appreciate your call, and I think you are right."

"I know I'm right, but what do you mean?"

"You're right that I should transfer to General Studies."

A friend invited him to come to New Hampshire for Thanksgiving. Snow had fallen early that winter and they could ski. He accepted with relief and wrote to his parents to say he wouldn't be home. There was no response.

The day before he left for the Granite State, he and Lucy tried for the first time to play the Brahms together. They stumbled badly. George repeatedly missed entrances, mumbling to himself, “Count you idiot.”

Lucy stopped playing, looking hurt. “Did I get that wrong?”

“Oh, no, no, no, it’s me. I thought I had the whole thing memorized, but I’ve never played it with the accompaniment. I didn’t learn to count the rests. You were playing beautifully.”

“So were you, George.” He saw a look of gentle warmth and wanted to throw down his cello and hold her, but she turned back to the piano.

“Let’s try again,” she said. “I have your part above the piano score. I’ll try to follow you.”

They started. He miscounted a rest.

Lucy laughed, and said, “Once more.”

He stumbled again and stopped. “Shit, I’m sorry. I worked on that for weeks.”

Lucy closed her score. “Let’s take a break. A cup of tea?”

As they sat at the kitchen table and she poured the dark smokey smelling tea, she asked what he had planned for the Thanksgiving break. He told her he was thinking of going to New Hampshire.

“Does your family have a place there?”

“No. I’m going to stay with a friend and his family.”

“What about your parents? Won’t they be sad?”

George looked down at his teacup. Yes, sad, he thought, and puzzled. He asked, “Are you and Bobby going back to Indiana?”

“We can’t afford it right now. We’re, you know, saving, but,” she added, “we’re doing a potluck dinner together with some friends from the Law School. You can join us if you change your mind about New Hampshire.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, looked at him, turned away and said, “We could play the Vivaldi for them.”

No, he thought, that would be awkward. His relationship with Lucy was precious and he didn’t want it submerged in a raucous gathering of young lawyers. He politely declined.

He drove to New Hampshire Wednesday evening and then left abruptly Thursday evening while the family was sprawled in front of the TV watching football, saying he needed to study.

The following morning, he woke late, full of self-indulgent melancholy. Went for a run. Walked to the Square and spent an hour over a coffee and the Times. Back at the apartment he was going to practice but worried Lucy would hear and wonder why he had said he’d be away. He grabbed a notebook and a couple of reprints and headed for the Widener reading room.

He spotted the woman from Chance’s class. Small, dark-haired, even more attractive than he remembered. He sat down opposite her and watched until she looked up. They exchanged glances and then she returned to her book. He got up, wandered to the reference desk, found a book on Brahms and returned to his seat. She turned her head to see the book’s title and looked at him quizzically. He got up again and silently mouthed “coffee?” She shrugged, smiled. They pranced down the wide stone steps as if they were perpetrating a splendid joke. He introduced himself and said he thought he’d seen her in Chance’s class.

“Yeah, you’re the doodler, aren’t you?”

“I’d just seen a guy in the Yard take out a bolt cutter and steal a bike. Completely brazen. I guess I was distracted.”



“I’m Diana, by the way. Where do you want to go?”

“How about the Hayes-Bick,” George said, “I’m pretty broke until the end of the month.”

“No way. It’s a grubby haunt for cops and drunks. Why don’t you come to my place and have a glass of wine? My roommate’s not back from Thanksgiving.” She took his arm and guided him out Mt. Auburn Street to a stolid old brick apartment building. He felt as if he’d drifted into a romantic French movie. They rode a creaking elevator to a third-floor apartment with rugs on the floor, framed posters on the walls, and Marimekko cushions on the sofa.

“This is really nice,” he said, thinking it didn’t look like a student apartment.

“My roommate is a design student. Red wine ok?”

It was good wine. Diana was funny and smart and sexy. Yet he felt oddly removed – more observer than participant - and found himself thinking of excuses to leave. He saw her watching him. Was she one of those people who could read minds? She swished her wine in its glass and asked, “What are you thinking?”

“About you without clothes,” he lied.

“An intriguing thought.” She stood and wriggled slowly out of her jacket, blouse, and jeans. His stomach tightened. He wondered whether she could hear his heart thumping. He reached a hand behind the smooth curve of her back and kissed her.

“As you imagined?”

“Better. Exquisite.”

He left too quickly in the morning, walking fast in the raw November cold, trying to turn his thoughts away from the night before. He would have stopped for coffee if he weren’t broke. Ha, he thought happily, I’ve become a starving artist. He imagined the little Fauré piece, “Après un

rêve,” that he and Lucy were working on as a break from the challenges of the Brahms. A moody and romantic piece. Playing it together was richly intimate, but chaste. He could not think of Lucy, his Madonna, as a lover.

George went home for Christmas break. A joyful time when he was a child, but now a stretch of lonely and restless days and heavy evenings with his parents. He skated around difficult conversations and gently turned aside their questions. He told them he’d decided to graduate in General Studies and explained that he wasn’t really sure what he wanted to do, and he didn’t want to commit himself to a department. His father looked as if he were going to say something and then just turned away. George returned to Cambridge before New Year relieved that he had not been drawn into saying what he was thinking or feeling. His life still belonged to him.

It started to snow on New Year’s Day and continued into the night. George tried to study but couldn’t sit still. He stared out at the luminous ball of falling snow surrounding the streetlight outside the apartment. He couldn’t bear to be inside. The books spread on his desk would remain, and the fresh snow would succumb to the sand and salt and traffic in a few hours. Transience as always trumped permanence. He donned sweater, parka, and hat, grabbed cross-country skis and pranced out the door. A night of cold, dry flakes rapidly erasing streets and sidewalks. Even the Mass Avenue thoroughfare was soft and silent. Nothing was moving other than swirling flakes. There was no sound but the swish of his skis. The fragmented landscape of buildings, streets and trees was simplified by the smooth fabric of snow. A plow rumbled by and disappeared into the night, its flashing light and scraping blade muffled by encompassing snow.

It was after two a.m. when he got back to the apartment. The storm was letting up, but he still didn't want to go in. It was too beautiful. He stood looking up at the third floor, thinking of Marlon Brando calling Vivien Leigh. "Hey, Stella!" He wanted to howl, "Lucy!" But, no, she was the Madonna, not a steamy Vivien Leigh.

He found Charlie's snow shovel on the porch, cleared the steps and the path, his car, Bobby and Lucy's car, and then, doffing parka and hat, he cleared the driveway and the Anakrioses' car. It was four a.m. He was tired at last. His clothes were soaked. He went to bed.

When he woke, the sun was bright on the snow. He saw Charlie, Lucy, and Bobby standing in the street talking. He dressed and went down to join them. Charlie was gesticulating, saying, "I no do it. I gonna do the porch and the sidewalk and my car this morning. I come out an' it's all clean. Now I thinking some kid he come and ask me to pay him."

Bobby shrugged and said, "Well, I sure didn't do it, Charlie."

Lucy stood there staring at George. "There's the culprit." She laughed and pointed at him. "I saw him out the window at about three a.m."

Charlie turned toward George. "This is true?"

George nodded.

Charlie said, "I go get Helen and show her what you do. She always worrying I gonna have a heart attack when I shovel."

They watched him scurry inside and Lucy said, "That was really nice, George. You have a good heart."

If he did have a good heart, it was hers.

He dragged himself through reading period and exams. To his surprise, despite his churlish morning departure, he and Diana saw each other from time to time. And then she

completely flabbergasted him by inviting him to Cancun, where her parents had rented a small villa for semester break. Diana wanted, she said, to be protected from their endless inquisitions.

“You’ll be a distraction. They’ll be frantic to figure out what’s going on.”

He accepted. The beach and the margaritas were fabulous, but her parents’ seriousness made him uneasy. One afternoon her father, Ted, a silver-haired banker, pulled him aside to sit in the shade of a grove of palms. Ted took a long black cigar from a case and, after George declined to join him, lit it lovingly and said, “Real Cubans. Marvelous.” He drew a long breath and exhaled slowly. The warm afternoon breeze swept the smoke into a bougainvillea bush and out to sea. “So, what’s next for you, George?”

Oh God, George thought, he’s going to ask me about my intentions. Does coming down here make me a suitor? Had Diana put her father up to this? “I’m not sure, Mr. Bryant. It’s hard to make plans with President Johnson escalating the war.”

Ted released another fragrant cloud of smoke. “Diana’s determined to go to graduate school. Graduate school would get you a deferment, wouldn’t it? Or law school?”

George wondered what the etiquette was. Could he escape before Ted smoked the long Robusto down to the end? He reached out and patted George on the knee. “You go on and enjoy yourself.” He waved to Diana’s mother and shouted. “Time for the beach and a drink.”

“Not until you get rid of that smelly cigar.”

Diana took George’s arm and whispered, “What was that about?”

“A man-to-man talk. I think he wanted to know my intentions, or maybe my prospects.”

“Christ, I’m sorry. He shouldn’t ...”

George shrugged and saw that beneath her sunburn she was blushing. He snatched her towel and ran for the water. She caught him as he entered the water and grabbed him from

behind as a churning wave tumbled them beneath the foaming sandy wash. They came up laughing and dove under the next wave and then swam slowly in the warm salty water. Diana put her arm around his shoulder and kissed him and asked, “What did you tell him?”

“Who?”

“My father. What did you say about your intentions?”

“I ... um ... pretended I didn't understand what he was asking. What should I have said?”

“He shouldn't have asked.” She let go and swam off.

Diana's parents had given them separate rooms, and each night there was a whispered conversation about who would sneak into whose room after her parents went to bed. The pretext seemed ridiculous, but also sexy. Even awakening at dawn to sneak back created a certain piquant longing. The last morning George lay on his bed amid the mussed-up sheets that smelled of Diana and wondered what he was doing. Was he somehow becoming obligated? Responsible for her? They had fun. They played. They argued. They teased. They made love (though they'd never spoken of love). He liked this life. He liked being with Diana. He didn't have to live up to anything.

They returned to a dreary city, streets and sidewalks treacherous with ice and narrowed by banks of dirty snow. When the cab delivered him home, the apartment on Canby Street was cold and silent. Dragging his bag upstairs he wondered where everyone was. There was no sign of Henry. No sound from the apartment above, no one peeking out of the Anakrioses' apartment. He heard the front door creak open and saw Lucy coming in from the porch with bags of groceries.

“Lucy! Hi. Let me help with those bags.”

“Thanks, George, that would be very nice.” She paused and said, “Well look at you, all tan. Where have you been, Florida?”

“Uhh, no, actually a friend of mine invited me to Cancun.”

“Oh, my, that sounds wonderful. I could really use a little time in the warm sun. Was it a girlfriend?” George blushed and mumbled, “She’s, well, you know, she’s a good friend. Her parents paid for everything.”

“Meeting the parents? That’s a big step. I need to hear more about this.”

No, he thought, you don’t.

They agreed to meet and play later in the day. “And,” Lucy said, “I want to hear more about this friend of yours. Cancun . . . my, my, my.”

When George lugged his cello up to Apartment three Lucy sat at the piano playing a few random chords. Lucy asked, “So what’s her name?”

“Who’s?”

“Your girlfriend’s.” She looked at him with mock severity, her eyes twinkling. “Why are you being so cagey, George?”

He fiddled with the music stand. He wanted to tell her that it wasn’t a serious relationship but found himself tongue-tied. Lucy raised her eyebrows. “Is it something illicit?” she asked. “Is she married?”

He looked down at his cello and mumbled, “Oh, no, not at all. It’s just . . .”

“I know. I know. We’re just music pals. I’m an old married lady from the Midwest and I wouldn’t get it.”

Oh hell, he thought, this is ridiculous. She turned to the piano, and then back to him. “Bobby and I would like to have you and your friend, and Henry and Liz to dinner. You and I could even play something.”

What mischievous god was indulging a twisted humor in creating so rich an opportunity for embarrassment? He had to demur. But by the time he left he had agreed to check with Diana and Henry and Liz about dinner the following Saturday. Diana was delighted. Henry looked at him with amusement and said he wouldn’t miss it.

George decided that his role should be “man of mystery.” Let them try to figure it out. He would be affectionate and charming and even flirtatious with Lucy, with Diana, and even with Liz. He was not going to be embarrassed.

On Saturday it was snowing again. They met at the Square and went to buy wine, creamy cheese, and two crusty baguettes, vainly trying to keep them dry and crisp on the twenty minute walk back to the apartment. They left their coats and boots in the boys’ apartment and crowded into the Whites’ little living room. Liz took a breath and said,

“Oh, wow, Lucy it smells luscious. Do you need some help?”

“No.” she said, “The kitchen is too small.”

At dinner, Henry told them about the group of black teens from Roxbury he was writing a play with, about a white girl falling in love with a black kid in her high school.

“The kids loved Romeo and Juliet and wanted to do a version that was about race instead of clan. I’ve recruited George to play the redneck father of the girl.”

“I’m a natural.”

“George had an encounter with my father when we were in Mexico,” Diana said, shaking her head. “My father tried to find out what George’s intentions are.”

George wondered whether he should spill his wine ... or perhaps stand up suddenly and sing a bawdy drinking song.

“And ... what happened?” Lucy asked.

“You know,” Diana responded, “I’m not exactly sure, but my parents ask me about ‘that charming young man’ every time they call.”

George saw Henry with his hand over his mouth and said, “Henry, maybe the dad in the play should smoke a cigar?”

“However you want to play it, George, my friend. However you want to play it.”

The table cleared. Lucy suggested that they subject their friends to some music. When she was seated at the piano, she turned to the group and said, “It has been such a marvelous experience learning to play this music with George. Sometimes I feel that music speaks much more clearly than we can ourselves.”

They played ... beautifully.

As they went down the stairs, George looked at Diana with a shrug and raised eyebrows. “Oh let’s stay here.”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

They gathered in the living room, Liz and Henry on the elderly sofa, Diana on a beanbag seat that rustled and squeaked as she sat down. George asked whether he should go out and get another bottle of wine. Liz held up her hands. “No need, Georgie, I come prepared.” She stood, fetched her book bag from Henry’s room, took out a leather pouch, and extracted two neatly rolled joints. “Not long and Cuban, but they are very nice stuff from Mexico.” Diana squirmed on the beanbag.

“I ... uh ... I’m not a smoker.”



George got up. "I can easily go and get some wine. Portrello's is open until midnight."

Liz said nothing, lit one of the joints, took a toke, held her breath and passed it to Diana, who held it as if it might burst into flame, and took a shallow pull. George smiled, brushed her cheek with his hand, took his turn and passed the diminishing joint to Henry. By the time it had gone around one more time George was already hungry and went to find ice cream and spoons. Liz reached into her bag again and pulled out a large sack of Fritos, growled, ripped it open with her teeth, and offered it to Diana. "Nice stuff, huh? Fritos are the accepted *accompgnement*."

"Oooh, these are good." Henry laughed and shook his head, saying,

"Good food doesn't come out of plastic bags. You're just stoned. The dinner that Lucy cooked was good food."

"It was a lovely evening," Liz said. "They're nice people and Lucy is so sweet and innocent."

George was lying on the floor with his head on Diana's lap. He looked up dreamily and said, "When I first met her, I pictured her as a renaissance Madonna, you know one of those reverent Carvaggios."

Henry chuckled, leaned toward Diana and whispered loudly, "Georgie's got a crush on Lucy."

George sighed and Diana asked,

"Is that true?"

"No, no, no. Not at all. We play music together."

"It's so sweet, George."

"No," he said and started to explain, but Henry interrupted.

"What could be more intimate than playing music together?"

Liz lit the second joint. George grabbed a pillow and threw it at Henry, and then turned to Diana who was choking on a gale of giggles. He suggested they go get hamburgers at Charlie-O's. Liz looked at him disapprovingly.

“Young man, you are way too stoned to drive.”

Diana leaned down as if to whisper something and then licked his ear.

Just after St. Patrick's Day the weather turned. Glorious sun lit the world and warmed the earth and trees. Everything smelled of spring. Coming from class, walking across the yard, George was stopped by a spray of crocuses that had thrust up tiny flowers among the roots of a beech tree. Outside the Law School incautious forsythia had burst into bloom. He felt like prancing, or singing, or getting into some form of mischief. Diana, serious about graduating magna cum laude, sent him away so she could study. Henry, too, was deep in the throes of finishing his thesis and impatiently waved George off when he knocked and suggested a drive to Walden Pond. Frustrated, George called around, trying to find someone who wanted to play squash, or even tennis. It was no use. They were all infuriatingly serious about work. When he reached a friend from prep school and tried to talk him into driving to Vermont for some spring skiing, the friend responded impatiently, “George, we're seniors in our last semester at Harvard. This is real life. You used to be serious. How did you get to be such a fuck up?”

George laughed. “Oh, screw you. Since when have you been a dedicated student?”

He knew his friend was right, and he knew it was way too late to change. He was looking for any excuse not to study because studying made him face the fact that he'd messed up, achieved nothing, and become nobody. He had no idea what he was going to do after graduation, where he would go, or what he wanted. Maybe he'd just marry Diana. He got his cello out and

tried to practice but couldn't concentrate. He thought about Lucy, one floor above him, and a stab of longing hit his stomach. She was his meaning. The year had not been wasted. He had found her. Did she suffer spring fever? This was the day, he thought, when he would tell her what he was feeling.

He climbed the stairs and knocked. Bobby came to the door. George was speechless. What was he doing home at this time of the afternoon? Bobby was in jeans and a sweatshirt, and looked bleary-eyed, but elated.

“Hi George. What's up?”

George looked at him in utter confusion. What's up? I'm in love with Lucy. I am the one who can appreciate her. I am the one who brings out her passion. He looked past Bobby, hoping Lucy would appear, and said, “I was wondering whether Lucy wanted to play?”

“No, I doubt she'll be able to play with you again for a long time.”

George stared in confusion.

“She's in the hospital, George,” Bobby continued. “Our son was born late last night.”

George stared stupidly. He had known. He must have known, but he had not let himself comprehend. The Golden Madonna could not be pregnant. He turned and fled down the stairs.