

Sea Glass

A novel by Anita Shreve

A READING GROUP GUIDE



Anita Shreve on the Origins of
Sea Glass

I first saw the house in Biddeford Pool, Maine, about five years ago. We were renting a sad and pathetic cottage there for our summer vacation, and one of my favorite pastimes was to walk through the village and look at the houses. One day I took a side street I hadn't been down before, and at the end of it was one of the most beautiful houses I had ever seen. It was two stories high, white clapboard, and it had a mansard roof with dozens of dormer windows poking out of it. It was completely surrounded by a wraparound porch on which sat two wooden rockers looking out to sea. The house had a kind of graciousness and serenity that was exceptional, and I think it is fair to say that I fell in love with it. I wanted to live there.

Living in it was out of the question then, but that was all right, I thought — it was enough just to be able to look at it and fantasize about it. I've always been charmed by houses, and descriptions of them are prominent in my novels. So prominent, in fact, that my editor once pointed out to me that all of my early novels had houses on the covers.

A novel is a collision of ideas. Three or four threads may be floating around in the writer's consciousness, and at a single

moment in time, these ideas collide and produce a novel. Shortly after I had first seen the house, I overheard a conversation between a pilot and a woman at a party. Something he said lodged in my consciousness and wouldn't go away. The thing he said was: "When there's a crash, the union always gets there first." He meant that when there was a crash of a commercial airliner, a member of the pilot's union made it a point to get to the pilot's wife's house first. There are a lot of reasons for this, the most important of which is to keep her from talking to the press. And there was my collision of ideas. I decided to set the novel I was then beginning to write, *The Pilot's Wife*, in the house I had seen in Biddeford Pool. At the very least, the novel gave me a wonderful excuse to think about the house for a year and get paid for it.

So strong was the house's hold on me, however, that I was loath to let it go, even when I let go of the novel itself. I knew already I wanted to set my next novel in the nineteenth century because I had found writing in nineteenth-century language in *The Weight of Water* so pleasurable. At the same time, I was observing the process of having a daughter and two stepdaughters pass through that delicate age of fourteen to fifteen. Same house, I thought, but a hundred years earlier. Very different story, very different young woman.

A house with any kind of age will have dozens of stories to tell. I suppose if a novelist could live long enough, one could base an entire oeuvre on the lives that weave in and out of an antique house. Until recently, I lived in an old house of my own. It had sloping floors, no closets, no bathroom big enough in which to take an actual bath. Sometimes I felt awash in plastic toys, old newspapers, and milk cartons I thought I was recycling. But

occasionally, when there was a fire in the large kitchen hearth and I was sitting beside it at the table, I imagined the people who had gone before me: the young woman who gave birth in the room just off the kitchen that was known as the borning room; the middle-aged woman who cried at the inattentions of her husband in the room that was our bedroom; the child who died of diphtheria in the room that belonged to my son. Sometimes I would have to force myself to realize that they, too, lived their lives in Technicolor, that their experience of life was just as vivid and as immediate as mine. In that house there was a great deal of history — the history of accounts rendered, dresses falling, bitter accusations, and words of love. It was a house full of stories.

Last year, when I was on tour for the paperback edition of *Fortune's Rocks*, I was giving a reading at a bookstore in Nashville. A woman in the audience raised her hand and asked: "Why did you set both novels in the same house?" I answered that I had been thinking about the fact that an old house might have many stories to tell. Ten or eleven women, each with her own life, her own story, could be imagined to have lived in the house that was featured in *The Pilot's Wife* and *Fortune's Rocks*. For example, I said, you could write, say, a story about a woman who lived there during World War II, or during the Great Depression.

If I didn't actually pause in my answer, there was a heart-stopping pause in my head. There's an idea, I thought. Same house, absolutely derelict this time, very different kind of woman trying to make a go of it during a difficult era in our nation's history. I have no memory of the rest of the Q and A, or the signing, but I do remember moving immediately to the history section of the bookstore and searching for a book on the Great Depression.

My escort found me and said, “You know, they want to give you a book for doing the reading.” “Wonderful,” I said. “I want this one.” She glanced down at the book and narrowed her eyes at what looked to be a very dry history text. “Are you sure?” she asked. “I’m very sure,” I said.

The novel that resulted is *Sea Glass*. I often think that sea glass itself is not unlike old houses in that it, too, suggests stories of previous lives. Sea glass is essentially trash — bits of glass from ships that have gone down or garbage that has been tossed overboard. The glass breaks and then is weathered by the sea and washes up onto shore. The shards take on a lovely patina and come in many subdued colors. Sea glass will not break. I have spent many hours on the beach collecting sea glass, and I almost always wonder, as I bend to pick up a chunk of bottle green or a shard of meringue white, what the history of the glass is. Who used it? Was it a medicine bottle? A bit of a ship’s lantern? Is that bubbled piece of glass with the charred bits inside it from a fire?

The pull of history has been a strong theme in my life as a novelist. I don’t know that I will write any more novels set in that particular house on Fortune’s Rocks beach, because I have to wait for that collision of ideas. But I suspect the house has many stories left to tell. I know that dwelling very well now. I feel an odd sort of bond with it, a unique kind of loyalty.

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Consider Honora and Sexton's relatively brief courtship. Why did they fall in love with each other — or did they even fall in love at all? Do you think they hurried into marriage?
2. The story in *Sea Glass* is told from the perspective of several different characters. Did you find yourself empathizing with one character more than the others? If so, which character and why?
3. The house into which Honora and Sexton move as the novel opens — a house that seems, by anyone's standards, too large for just two people — functions almost as a character in its own right in *Sea Glass*. Discuss the various roles the house plays in the story — the importance of its size, its location, etc. If you've also read *The Pilot's Wife* or *Fortune's Rocks*, did you recognize the house from those novels?
4. Discuss the relationship that develops between Alphonse and McDermott. In what ways is their friendship important to each of them?
5. Everyone keeps secrets. Most husbands and wives keep secrets from each other. Do you blame Sexton for his deviousness in securing a down payment for the house? Do you

blame him for his failure to be entirely honest with Honora? Were his actions innocent? Criminal? Somewhere in between?

6. To what extent does it matter that the novel is set at the dawn of the Great Depression? Imagine a similar story unfolding today. In what significant ways might the characters' lives be different?
7. What are Vivian's motives for supporting the striking mill workers? In view of her temperament and her wealth, are her motives plausible?
8. At what point in the novel does Honora fall in love with McDermott? At what point does she realize that she's in love with him?
9. In reviewing *Sea Glass*, many literary critics remarked on the appropriateness of the novel's title. What do the words *sea glass* connote in your mind? In what ways does the phrase function metaphorically as a description of the novel?
10. Allow yourself to play novelist for a moment and imagine Honora's life in the years beyond the events of the novel. What does the future hold for Honora? How would you want her life to unfold? Chart the future lives of the novel's other major characters as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anita Shreve is the author of several internationally bestselling novels, among them *The Pilot's Wife*, which was a selection of Oprah's Book Club; *Eden Close*; *Strange Fits of Passion*; *Where or When*; *Resistance*; *The Weight of Water*, which was a finalist for England's prestigious Orange Prize; *Fortune's Rocks*; *The Last Time They Met*; and *Sea Glass*. Her award-winning stories and nonfiction have appeared in many publications, including the *New York Times Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Esquire*. She is a recipient of the PEN/L. L. Winship Award and the New England Book Award for fiction.

. . . AND HER MOST RECENT NOVEL

In April 2003, Little, Brown and Company will publish

All He Ever Wanted.

Following is a preview
from the novel's opening pages.

The fire began in the kitchen and spread to the hotel dining room. Without warning, or perhaps just the one muffled cry of alarm, a ball of fire (yes, actually a ball) rolled through the arched and shuttered entryway from the kitchen, a sphere of moving color so remarkable, it was as though it had life and menace, when, of course, it did not; when, of course, it was simply a fact of science or of nature and not of God. For a moment, I felt paralyzed, and I remember in the greatest detail the way the flame climbed the long vermilion drapes with a squirrel's speed and agility and how the fire actually leapt from valence to valence, disintegrating the fabric and causing it to fall as pieces of ash onto the diners below. It was nearly impossible to witness such an event and not think a cataclysm had been visited upon the diners for their sins, past or future.

If the fact of the fire did not immediately penetrate my consciousness, the heat of the blast did and soon propelled me from my seat. All around me, there was a confusion of upended tables, overturned chairs, bodies pitched toward the door of the dining room, and the sounds of broken glass and crockery. Fortunately, the windows toward the street — large windows through which a body might pass — had been thrown open by an enterprising diner. I remember that I rolled sideways through one of these window frames and fell onto the snow and was immediately aware that I should move aside to allow others to land as I had; and it was in that moment that my altruism was finally triggered. I rose to my feet and began to assist those who had sustained cuts and bruises and even broken bones, or who had been mildly crushed in the chaos, or who

had inhaled too much smoke. The blaze lit up the escaped diners with a light greater than any other that could be produced in the night, so that I was able to see clearly the dazed expressions of those near to me. Many people were coughing, and some were crying, and all looked as though they had been struck by a blow to the head. A few men attempted heroics and tried to go back into the building to save those who remained behind, and I think one student did actually rescue an elderly woman who had succumbed to paralysis beside the buffet table; but generally there was no thought of reentering the burning building once one had escaped. Indeed, so great was the heat that we in the crowd had to move farther and farther across the street until we all stood in the college quadrangle, surrounded by bare oaks and elms and stately sycamores.

Later we would learn that the fire had begun with a few drops of oil spilled onto a kitchen fire, and that the undercook, who stood near to the stove, had felt compelled to extinguish the fire by throwing upon it a pitcher of water and then, in her excitement, fanning the flames with a cloth she was holding. Some twenty persons in the upper stories of the hotel were trapped in their rooms and burned to death (one of these Myles Chapin from the Chemistry faculty, and what he was doing in a hotel room when his wife and child were safely at home on Wheelock Street I should not like to speculate; perhaps it was his compromised circumstances that made the man hesitate just a second when he should not have), but surprisingly only one of the kitchen staff perished, owing to the fact that the back door had been left open, and the fire, moving with the particular drafts between door and windows, sped toward the dining room and thus allowed most of the staff to escape unharmed, including the hapless undercook who had started it all with her fluster.

The hotel was situated directly across from Thrupp College, where I was then engaged as the Cornish Professor of English Liter-

ature and Rhetoric. Thrupp was, and is (even now, as I set down my story), a men's school of, shall we say, modest reputation. Its buildings are a motley collection, some of them truly hideous, erected at the beginning of the last century by men who envisioned a seminary but later contented themselves with a small enclave of intellectual inquiry and classical education. There was one impressive Georgian building that housed the administration, but it was surrounded by altogether too many dark brick structures with small windows and oddly placed turrets that were emblematic of perhaps the most dismal period of American architecture, which is to say early Victorian Gothic. Some of these edifices surrounded the quadrangle; the rest spilled along the streets of a town that was all but dominated by the college. Because the school had elected to retain the flavor of a small New England village, however, the colonial clapboard houses that lined Wheelock Street had been left intact and served as residences for the more eminent figures in the various faculties. At the outskirts of town, before the granite hills began, lay the farms: struggling enterprises that had been witness to generations of men trying to eke out a living from the rocky soil, soil that always put me in mind of thin, elderly women.

We ousted, and therefore fortunate, diners stood at the center of this universe, too stunned yet to begin to shiver in earnest from the cold and the snow that soaked our boots. Many people were squinting at the blaze or had thrown their arms over their eyes and were staggering backward from the heat. Somewhat bewildered myself, I moved aimlessly through the throng, not having the wits to walk across the quadrangle to Woram Hall, where I might have attained my bed; and so it was that my eyes were caught, in the midst of this chaos, by the sight of a woman who was standing near a lamppost.

I have always been a man who, when glancing at a woman, looks first at the face, and then at the waist (those shallow curves that so

signal youth and vitality), and then thirdly at the hair, assessing in an instant its gloss and length. I know that there are men for whom the reverse is true, and men whose eyes fix inevitably upon the bodice of a dress and then hope for a glimpse of calf. But on that night, I was incapable of parsing the woman in question in such a calculated manner simply because I was too riveted by the whole.

I will not say *plain*, for who of us is entirely plain in youth? But neither will I say *beautiful*, for there was about her face and person a strength of color and of feature that rendered her not delicate or pliant, attributes I had previously thought necessary for any consideration of true feminine beauty. She had immoderate height as well, which is often off-putting in a woman. But there was about her a quality of stillness that was undeniably arresting; and if I close my eyes now, here in this racketing compartment, I can travel back in time more than three decades and see her unmoving form amidst the nearly hysterical crowd. And even, as I moved closer to the place where she stood under the lantern, the golden brown of her eyes, a color in perfect complement to the topaz of her dress, an inspired choice of fabric (and as it happened, this was a skill at which Etna had no peer — that of matching her clothing and jewels to her own idiosyncratic charms). She had almond-shaped eyes and an abundance of dark brown lashes. Her nostrils and her cheekbones were prominent, as if there were a foreign element to her blood, and her acorn-colored hair, I guessed, would unwind to her waist. She was holding a child in her arms, which I took to be her own. My desire for this unknown woman was so immediate and keen and inappropriate that it quite startled me; and I have often wondered if that punishing desire, that sense of fire within the body, that craven need to touch the skin, was not simply the result of the heightened circumstances of the fire itself. Would I have been so ravished had I seen Etna Bliss across the dining room, or turned and noted her

standing behind me on a street corner? And I answer myself, as I inevitably do, with the knowledge that it would not have mattered in what place or on what date I first saw the woman — my reaction would have been just as swift and as terrifying.

(In a further aside, I should just like to add here that I have observed in my sixty-four years that passion both erodes and enhances character in equal measure, and not slowly but instantly, and in such a manner that what is left is not in balance but is thrown desperately out of kilter in both directions. The erosion the result of the willingness to do whatever is necessary to obtain the object of one's desire, even if it means engaging in lies or deception or debasing what was once treasured. The enhancement a result of the knowledge that one is capable of loving greatly, an understanding that leaves one, paradoxically, with a feeling of gratitude and pride in spite of all the carnage. But, of course, I knew none of this at the time.)

When I had attended with some impatience and distraction to a man who had attached himself to my arm, an elderly gentleman with rheumy eyes looking for his wife, and I turned back to the place where the woman and child had stood, I saw that they were gone. With a sense of panic I can only describe as wholly uncharacteristic and quite possibly deranged — fortunately such agitation was hardly noticeable in that crowd — I searched the quadrangle as a father will for a lost child. Many people were already dispersing to their homes and to cabs, a fact that did little to ease my anxiety, while others had emerged from the surrounding houses with blankets and coats and water and cocoa and even spirits for the victims of the blaze. Some of those who had been in the dining room were now huddled in garments that were either too big or too small for them; they looked like refugees who had beached themselves upon the quadrangle. By now the fire brigade had arrived and were turning

their hoses on the hotel. I am not aware that they saved a single soul that night, though they did drench the charred building with water that turned to icicles before morning.

I wiped at my cheeks and forehead with my handkerchief. Strangely, I do not remember feeling cold. I walked amongst the thinning crowd, my thoughts undisciplined. How was it that this woman had escaped my notice all the time I had been at Thrupp? After all, the village was not so large as to produce general anonymity. And why had she been dining at the hotel? Had she been sitting behind me as I had eaten my poached sole in solitude? Had the child been with her then?

I went on in this manner for some time until I began to slow my pace. It was not that desire had ebbed, but rather that fatigue was overwhelming me. I became aware that I had suffered a terrific shock: my knees grew shaky, and my hands began to tremble. I had finally noticed the cold as well; it cannot have been more than twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit on that night. I decided to seek refuge and was recrossing the quadrangle for perhaps the fifth time when I heard a child's cry. I turned in the direction of the sound and saw two women standing in the darkness. The taller of the two was half hidden beneath a rug thrown over her shoulders and in which she had wrapped the child. Next to her, and clinging to her arm, was an older woman who seemed in some distress. She was coughing roughly.

When I drew closer to the threesome, I saw that the stillness I had observed in the woman with the golden brown eyes had now been replaced with concern.

"Madam," I said, approaching swiftly (as swiftly as the fire itself?), "are you in need of assistance?"

And whether Etna Bliss actually saw me then, or not until the following day, I cannot say, for she was understandably distracted.

“I must get my aunt and cousin’s daughter home,” she said. “I’d be grateful if you could find us transportation, for my aunt has inhaled a great deal of smoke and cannot walk the necessary distance to her house even under the best of circumstances.”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “Will you stay put?”

“Yes,” she said simply, thus placing the utmost trust, and perhaps even the well-being of her aunt, in my person.

I discovered that night that a man is never so capable and alert as when in the service of a woman he hopes to please. Almost at once, I was in the street with paper dollars in my hand, which caught the eye of a cabdriver who already had a fare, but who doubtless saw an opportunity to squeeze more bodies onto his frayed upholstered seats. I completed his calculation by leaping onto the carriage and giving immediate instructions.

“Sir, this is irregular,” he said, looking for the extra tip.

But I, and rightly so, dressed him down. “A disaster has occurred of the most serious proportions, and people all about are in dire need. You should be lending your aid for no pennies at all,” I said.

Astonishingly, for I had in the interim begun to doubt the reality of my encounter with the woman (and, more to the point, had begun to doubt that such an arresting woman could remain unassisted for very long), the two women with the child were where I had left them. I helped the older woman, who was by now shivering badly, into the carriage first, and then gave my hand to the woman with the child, her hand surprisingly warm in my frozen one. The other passengers could barely suppress their annoyance at being delayed to their hot baths, but they nevertheless moved so that my party could fit.

“Madam, I shall need an address,” I said.

The ride cannot have lasted half an hour, even though the driver took the other fare home first. I sat across from the aunt, who was still

coughing, and from the couple, who might have been thinking of their lost possessions in the cloakroom (a dyed fox coat? an alligator case?), but I was aware only of a slight pressure against my elbow, a pressure that increased or decreased as the woman beside me attended to the child or leaned forward to put a hand upon her elderly aunt's arm. And just that slight pressure, of which the woman beside me was doubtless completely unaware, was, I believe, the most intensely physical moment of my life to date — so much so that I can re-create its delicate promise and, yes, its eroticism merely by closing my eyes here in my moving compartment, even with all that came after, all that might reasonably have blotted out such a tender memory.

We traveled the length of Wheelock Street until we came to an antique house of beeswax-colored clapboards. It was an unadorned residence, like so many of the houses of that street. These I much preferred to the frippery that passed for architecture on adjacent Gill Street: large, rambling structures with gables and porches and seemingly no symmetry, although these newer houses did have better accommodations for indoor plumbing, for which one might have been willing to trade aesthetics. The Bliss house had seven bedrooms, not counting attic rooms for servants, and two parlors, a dining room, and a study. It also had, as of a year previous, steam heat, which hissed and bubbled up in silver radiators, so much so that I sometimes used to think the appliances might explode and scald us to death as we played backgammon or took tea or dined of an evening in those overly furnished and fussily papered rooms.

“But, madam, I know this house,” I said. “It is the home of William Bliss.”

“My uncle.”

I then realized that the woman sitting across from me was not elderly at all, but rather was the middle-aged wife of the Physics

Professor, a woman I had met on at least three occasions at the college.

“Mrs. Bliss,” I said, addressing her, “forgive me. I did not realize . . .”

But she, unable to speak, waved my apology away with a flutter of her hand.

I walked the two women to the front door, which was almost immediately opened by William Bliss himself.

“Van Tassel, what is this?” he asked.

“A fire at the hotel,” I explained quickly. “We are all lucky to have escaped with our lives.”

“Dear God,” he said, embracing his wife and leading her farther into the house. “We wondered what all the bells and horns were for.”

A housemaid took the child from the woman with the golden brown eyes, who then turned in my direction, simultaneously slipping the rug from her shoulders and giving it to me to wear.

“Please take this for your journey home,” she said. “My aunt and I are very much in your debt.”

“Nicholas Van Tassel,” I said.

“Etna Bliss.”

Once again, she put her warm hand in mine. “How cold you are!” she said, looking down and withdrawing her hand almost immediately. “Will you come in to warm up?”

And though I dearly wanted to enter that house, with its promise of warmth and its possibility of love (the mind leaps forward with hope in an instant, does it not?), one knew that such was not appropriate under the circumstances.

“Thank you very much, but no,” I said. “You must go inside now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Van Tassel,” she said, and I think already her mind was on her aunt and the child and the hot bath that would be waiting, for with that, she closed the door.

Perhaps a brief word here about my own circumstances at that time, which was December of 1899, for I believe it is important to pass on to subsequent generations the facts of one’s heritage, information that is often neglected in the need to attend to the day-to-day and, as a consequence, drifts off into the ether of time past. My father, Thomas Van Tassel, fought in the War Between the States with the Sixty-fourth Regiment of New York and sacrificed a leg to that conflict at Antietam, a calamity that in no way hindered his manhood, as I was but one of eleven children he subsequently sired off a succession of three wives. My mother, his first wife, perished in childbirth — my own — so that I never knew her, but only the other two. My father, clearly a productive man, was enterprising as well, and built three sizable businesses in his lifetime: a print shop, to which I was apprenticed at a young age; a carriage shop; and then, as horses quite thoroughly gave way to motors, an automobile showroom. My memories of my father exist primarily in the print shop, for I hardly knew him otherwise. I often sought refuge in those rooms of paper and ink and type from my overly populated house in Tarrytown, New York, with its second and third wives: one cold, the other melancholy, and in neither case well disposed to me, who had issued from the first wife, the only woman my father had ever loved, a fact he did not shrink from announcing at frequent intervals, despite the impolitic nature of the sentiment and the subsequent frigidity and sadness that resulted. I was not altogether bereft of feminine warmth during my childhood, however, for I was close

to one sibling, my sister Meritable, the very same sister whose funeral I am even now journeying toward.

Perhaps because I was so engaged in the world of ink and broadsides, I developed an early and passionate appetite for learning and was sent off to Dartmouth College at the age of sixteen. I can still remember the exquisite joy of discovering that I should have a room to myself, for I had always had to share a room with at least three of my siblings. The college has an estimable reputation and is widely known, so I shall not linger upon it here, except to say that it was there that I briefly entertained the ministry, later abandoning it for want of piety.

After obtaining my degree, by which time I was twenty, I traveled abroad for two years and then was offered and accepted the post of Associate Professor of English Literature and Rhetoric at Thrupp College, which is located some thirty-five miles southeast of my alma mater. I took this post with the idea that in a smaller and less well known institution I might rise more quickly and perhaps one day secure for myself the post of a Senior Professor or even of Dean of the Faculty, positions that might not have been open to me had I remained at Dartmouth. I had not thought of taking a post outside of New England, though there were opportunities to do so, the reason being that I had adopted the manners and customs of a New Englander so thoroughly that I no longer considered myself a New Yorker. Indeed, I had occasionally taken great pains to present myself as a New Englander, once even, I am a bit chagrined to admit, falsifying my history during my early months at Dartmouth, a pretense that was difficult in the extreme to maintain and hence was abandoned before I had completed my first year (it was at Dartmouth that I dropped the second *a* from *Nicholaas*).

Because my father was, by the time I had returned from Europe,

modestly well-off, I could easily have afforded to have my own house in the village of Thrupp, but I chose instead to take rooms in Woram Hall, a Greek Revival structure affectionately known as Worms, for the reason that I did not particularly wish to live entirely alone. I had as well a somewhat misguided idea that boarding nearer to the students would allow me to come to know them better, and that this would, in turn, make me a better teacher. In fact, I rather think the reverse was true: more often than not, I discovered, close proximity gave birth to a thinly veiled antagonism that sometimes baffled me. My rooms consisted of a library, a bedroom, and a sitting room in which to receive guests and preside over tutorials. In adopting New England ways, born two centuries earlier in Calvinistic discipline, I had furnished these rooms with sturdy yet unadorned pieces — five ladder-back chairs, a four-poster bed, a dresser, a cedar chest, a tall stool, and a writing desk in which I kept my papers — eschewing the more ornate and oversized furnishings of the era that were so fashionable and so much in abundance elsewhere. (I think now of Moxon's rooms: one could hardly move for the settees and hassocks and English desks and velvet drapes and ornate marble clocks and firescreens and mahogany side tables.) And as form may dictate content, I fit my daily habits to suit my austere surroundings, rising early, taking exercise, arriving promptly to class, disciplining when necessary with a firm hand, and requiring much of my students in the way of intellectual progress. Though I should not like to think I was regarded as severe by my students and colleagues, I am quite certain I was considered stern. I think now, with the forgiveness that comes with reflection in later years, that I often tried too hard to show myself the spiritual if not the physical progeny of my adopted forebears, even though what I imagined to be the license of my New York heritage, as evidenced in my father's excessive procreativity, would occasionally

cause me to stray from this narrow and Spartan path, albeit seldom in public and never at Thrupp. For my parenthetical pleasure, I traveled down to Springfield, Massachusetts, as did many of my unmarried, and not a few married, colleagues. I remember well those furtive weekends, boarding the train at White River Junction and hoping one would not encounter a colleague in the dining car, either coming or going, but always ready with a fabricated excuse should an encounter present itself. Over time, as a result of such encounters, perhaps five or seven or ten, I had to develop a “sister” in Springfield whom I had twice monthly to visit, even though said “sister” actually resided in Virginia, prior to moving to Florida, and wrote to me upon occasion, the envelopes with the return address a source of some anxiety to me. I shall not here set forth in detail my activities while in Springfield, though I can say that even in that city I proved to be, during my visits to its less savory neighborhoods, as much a man of loyalty and habit as within the brick and granite halls of Thrupp.

More dazed than sensible, I took the cab back to the hotel, which was by now beginning to form its fantastical icicles as a result of the sprays of water from the fire hoses. I lingered only briefly, however, due to the combination of penetrating cold and shock, which had begun to make me shiver in earnest. I went back to my rooms at Worms, where I directed the head boy to make a good fire and to draw a hot bath.

Worms did not then, nor does it now, have private bathrooms within its suites, and so I locked the door to the common bath as I customarily did. The steam had made a cloud upon the cheval mirror, and I wiped away a circle of condensation so that I could just make out my own bewildered face. There was a bloody scratch on

my cheek I had not known about. I was not accustomed to spending any time in front of the glass, for I did not like to think myself vain, even in private, but that night I tried to imagine how I, as a man, might appear to a woman who had just met me. At that time — I was thirty — I had a considerable thicket of light brown hair, undistinguished in its color (this will surprise my son, for he has known me for a decade now as only bald), and what is commonly called a barrel chest. That is, I had strength in my body, a body quite out of keeping with my sedentary and intellectual occupations, a strength I could not refine but instead had learned to live with. I do not know that I had ever been called handsome, my excursions to Springfield notwithstanding, for my lips were thickish in the way of my Dutch forebears, and the bone structure of my face was all but lost within the stolid flesh bequeathed to me by generations of burghers. To dispel that somewhat unpleasant image, and to appear more academic, I had cultivated spectacles, though I did not actually need them.

After my inspection, which taught me nothing I did not already know, except perhaps that one cannot hide one's naked emotions as well as one might wish, I lowered myself into water so hot that my submerged skin immediately turned bright pink, as though I had been scalded. The boy, who I knew was angling for an A in Logic and Rhetoric, had set out a cup of hot cocoa, and I indulged in these innocent pleasures, all the while seeing in my mind's eye the form and face of Etna Bliss and feeling anew the exquisite pressure of her arm against my own. Happily, the bath, as a hot soak will often do, produced a drowsiness sufficient to send me off to my bed.

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