

Eternal Love

FROM GRANTA

AFTER LENA AND BOB were married in the Chapel of Eternal Love, Ella told them that new husbands and wives were not allowed to share a hotel bedroom. Married couples, she told her retarded daughter, learned to be married slowly, in separate rooms. For the first two days of the honeymoon, Ella shared her room at the El Tropicale with Lena, while her husband, Lou, slept in the other room with Bob. The four of them elbowed their way to the two-fifty, ninety-seven-item buffet table, piling their plates with fat-laced barbecued ribs; they lay, sun-doped, on a sparkling swath of concrete by a pale blue swimming pool. The sounds by the pool echoed, amplified by the water; even the children's shrieks were transformed into the caws of aroused, hysterical birds. Ella could pretend she didn't hear at first when Lena said very softly that she wanted to share a room with Bob.

Ella told Lena about sex in a quiet lounge off El Tropicale's main casino. Her thirty-year-old daughter sat patiently, twirling a pink vinyl coin purse embossed LAS VEGAS: CITY OF LUCK. "You're a wife," Ella began. Her daughter smiled. "There are certain things you can do."

"I'm called Mrs.!" squealed Lena.

A cocktail waitress holding an empty tray strode swiftly across the lounge, her nylon stockings an opalescent orange under the subdued light of the chandelier.

"First," began Ella, then stopped. "Well, how do you feel when Bob kisses you?"

"My mouth feels wet."

"Do you — like it?"

"I like it." Lena paused. "Sometimes he puts his tongue in too much. I don't like that."

A sign by the Canary Room said: EIGHT P.M. TONITE: HILO HATTIE AND THE HAWAIIANS. Loud tourists flowed eagerly through the lounge toward the casino, flashing slabs of sunburnt skin. "Married people — are naked in bed, Lena," Ella said.

"Naked!" Lena said with a tiny shriek.

Ella felt something very tall collapse slowly inside her. "Don't be scared," she said, trying to fit her voice around the immense gentleness that surged inside her. "It's just — skin."

"I liked it when he touched — here," Lena said, reaching up and squeezing her breast.

"Where did he do —"

"In the bathroom. At House of Pancakes." She giggled.

"No," said Ella. "You don't do that in House of Pancakes. You don't do that in any — public place. You do it in your bedroom. Nowhere else."

"In my bedroom," repeated Lena.

"After, you take a shower. You wash your hands with soap."

"It smelt like the ocean."

Ella let go of Lena's hand.

"When he put his hand in my panties. I liked that. He took his hand out and he smelt like me." She clapped her hand over her mouth and giggled, a guilty, thrilled sound.

"Lena," said Ella, "when did Bob do —"

"We came in through the back yard."

"You let him do that in my back yard?"

"I liked it."

"Soap," said Ella, a little desperately. "You use soap."

"Mother," said Lena, "what about when we're naked?"

Ella did not want to continue. Apparently Lena and Bob were doing well enough on their own.

"If he's ever not gentle with you, Lena, tell me."

"Tell what?"

Far away, Ella heard the distant clink of breakfast dishes being washed in the hotel coffee shop, the whirl of a vacuum being pushed across the lobby, the gentle sounds of maids and waiters cleaning the guests' messes of the day.

"If he ever does something you don't like."

"Mother," said Lena impatiently, "does everyone married sleep naked in a bedroom? Him?" She pointed to a porter leafing through a newspaper with the headline WAR OF THE BOSOMS CONTINUES. "Him?" A man pushed a rack of pink and peach feathered costumes toward the Lido de Paris show. "Her?" A tall showgirl, her hair in a rumpled bouffant, sipped a large glass of orange juice and blinked awake. Her feet were swollen in silver sandals, and her eyes were ringed with fatigue.

"They use soap," said Ella. She tried to think of one more crucial rule to tell her daughter, but her mind was filled with only this — in the deep green of her back yard, somewhere amid the walnut and lemon trees, Bob had plunged his hand into Lena's panties. Now everyone flowing through the lounge seemed profoundly tainted. Ella noticed the raw nubbinness of the bandleader's ruby velvet jacket, the too proud grip a tourist had on his white-blond wife, the obsessive way a waitress counted her tips, turning all the green bills in the same direction, before she vanished into the dim, clockless casino again.

Bob had first called six months ago, an April day in 1961. Ella had picked up the phone and heard a male voice whisper, almost plead, "Lena. Lena. Lena there?"

It was a question she rarely heard. "Who may I say is calling?" Ella asked.

"Bob. Goodwill. I drive trucks — Bob —"

She knocked on Lena's door. "Lena. There's a . . . Bob on the phone for you."

Lena burst out of her room with a nakedly joyous expression on her face. "Tell him to wait," she exclaimed.

She was wearing a little rouge and perfume when, five minutes later, she deigned to pick up the phone. At first Ella couldn't figure out why her daughter smelt familiar. Then she knew. Lena had put on some of her Chanel; Lena smelt like her.

Lena had been working at the Van Nuys Goodwill for five years. Her job was to sit at a long table and sort socks and blouses that no one else wanted to own. Ella called Dolores, the coordinator of Goodwill's disabled employees, to check Bob out.

"Bob. Bob," muttered Dolores. "Why?"

"A Bob called Lena on the phone."

"This is so nice!" said Dolores. "We have five Bobs. Bob Winters is considerate, but a drooler. Bob Lanard I wouldn't let in my house, not if you care about your china surviving the night." She paused. "Are you sure it's not a Rob? We have a Rob who's — well — a former convict, but I think he's very nice, too."

"It was Bob. He said he drove trucks."

"Trucks," muttered Dolores. "Bob Silver."

"Tell me about him."

"A sweetie. Short, quiet, brown hair, good driver."

Ella tried to feel relieved but didn't honestly know what she felt. Bob Silver. It was just a name, but it seemed ferocious as a comet, hurtling toward her home to do some new damage.

Bob called again that night. "Is Lena there?"

"Lena who?" Ella said.

She was sorry she said it; she could actually hear the terror mount in his breath. "Lena Rose."

"Who may I say is calling?"

"Bob."

"Why?"

Now he was dying. She heard his breath, everything slow on his end as he struggled not to tell her why he was calling.

"I just want to talk to her," said Bob.

Bob was half an hour early for their first date. He pulled up in an old, candy-apple red Ford that gleamed dully in the afternoon. While Lena sprayed her hair upstairs, Ella and Lou huddled in the sheer-curtained window by the door and watched him come toward them. Bob rushed up the walkway, his hands plunged deep into his pockets, head down as though he was walking into a wind.

Lou opened the door. "Glad to meet you," he boomed.

Bob kept his hands in his pockets, not lifting them to shake with Lou. The part in his hair was crooked.

"Bob, Lena's not ready," Ella lied, touching his arm; she wanted to see how normal he felt. His shoulder was a little damp and surprisingly muscular. Quickly, she removed her hand.

Bob glided deftly past her into the den and plucked up the TV

Guide. He flipped wildly through its pages for a moment, then stumbled across the room and clicked the channels until he found *GunsSmoke*.

Bob propped his feet on Lou's green vinyl footstool, sunk down into the couch and thoughtfully eyed the action in *GunsSmoke*. He looked about forty. His short, bristly hair was gray, but his feet, in blue sneakers, bounced on the footstool with the blunt, coarse merriment of a boy. Ella was used to Lena's stubbiness, the way she seemed to bump up unsuccessfully against adulthood. But it seemed strange in Bob, and she could not help thinking that, even though he was taller than she, he resembled an aging dwarf.

Lou sat on the couch and rubbed his palms rapidly against his knees. His face looked as though it had been sculpted hurriedly into an expression of calm — the cheeks were uneven, the smile was off. He surveyed Bob as he did any stranger — as though deciding whether he would hire him. "You like *GunsSmoke*?"

Bob clasped his hands on his lap. "I like the man in the hat," he said.

Lou began to lean into another question; Ella felt he would ask the wrong ones. "How is the job?" Ella asked.

Bob arranged his hands around an invisible steering wheel and twisted it to the right until the wheel came to an abrupt stop. "I drive," he said. "I like to drive."

"Do you like — big trucks or small ones?" Ella asked.

"I just drive big ones," he said, as though insulted.

Cowboys galloped, yelling, across a desert. Ella kept glancing at her aquamarine vase right by his elbow, pretending not to stare at him. There had to be reasons to like him. His fingernails shone. He had tied his shoes neatly. He had blue eyes. And the main point — he wanted Lena. "How long have you worked for Goodwill?" she asked.

"Awhile."

"And you live?"

"On a cot."

"Excuse me?"

"With the Ensons."

"And they are?"

"A man and a wife."

Before she could inquire more, Lena appeared. Ella had helped

her match her yellow rhinestone earrings and scarf with a yellow shift, the one she'd worn when she'd gotten the Goodwill job. It seemed lucky. Bob lifted his eyes from the TV. Ella had never looked at Lena the way a man would. Dressing her was like adorning a child — for a specific, decorative purpose, but not for men. Now, creamy lavender eye shadow gleamed iridescent on her eyelids, and her hair was expansive with spray. Bob gazed at her frankly, as though he had a right to her.

Lena whisked past Ella, bumping her with her purse. "I've been talking to your guest," Ella began, "and —"

"Hi, Bob," said Lena.

Bob smiled. "Finish your socks?"

"Shut up!" squealed Lena, clapping her hand over her mouth.

"Excuse me?" asked Ella.

"Learn to park!" Lena said.

"I'm the best parker," Bob said. "I'm the number-one parker. And you know it."

Lena screeched with giggles. "Liar!" She rushed to the door with an exuberant haughtiness. Bob ran after her, as though afraid she would disappear.

"Where are you going?"

"We're going to walk down to House of Pancakes," said Lena.

"House of — it's going to be crowded," said Ella, feeling vaguely hysterical. "There'll be a long wait —"

"I'm hungry," said Bob, tugging Lena.

"Do you have enough money? Let me give you some —"

"Bob has money."

Bob gazed at Lena. His eyes were clear and intelligent with desire. He put his hand on her arm.

"Bye!" Lena said, waving tentatively.

Ella could not speak.

"Bye!" said Lena. "You — you look very pretty."

And they left.

She watched them bound across the lawn. Lena's yellow dress seemed to flutter in slow motion as she ran, as though governed by new physical laws.

Lou sprang back from the window, like a child embarrassed by what he had just seen. He pushed his hand into his glossy gray hair.

"Well," he said, "we're not losing a daughter — we're just gaining another mouth to feed."

Lou had never owned Lena the way she had. For thirty years he had tried hard not to look too closely at their daughter, instead cultivating a relentless optimism that Ella had found incomprehensible, yet also necessary. Now it made her feel alone.

"We're not gaining anything," said Ella. She grabbed her sweater and followed the two figures walking down the street.

She walked briskly, but casually, keeping a block between herself and her daughter. When Lena and Bob turned into a shopping center at the corner, Ella stopped beside a hefty Buick that was parked at one end of the lot.

They walked through the empty parking lot. It spread, like a dark lake, between House of Pancakes and a Hallmark, an ice cream parlor, a laundromat and a pet store. It was Sunday, and all the stores were closed, but Bob and Lena stared hard at the windows as though willing them to open. Ella waited for something to go wrong. Bob went over to cars, rubbed their dusty tops, nodded like an expert, returned to Lena. She put coins into a newspaper rack, removed a paper and handed it to him; he rolled it up and tapped it against his leg.

Lena and Bob walked around the parking lot slowly, once, twice, three times. The orange flanks of House of Pancakes loomed, unreal, candied in the pale light. Customers left the restaurant and walked toward their cars with a casual confidence; Bob and Lena watched them walk. As the two of them finally went through the coffee shop's glass doors, Bob touched Lena's back, just for a moment; his hand reached for the yellow fabric, trying, gently, to hold on.

Bob began to come to the house once a week. Lena was always dressed and ready an hour beforehand; she sat absolutely still on her bed, as though the fact of his imminent arrival was so fragile she had to take care not to disturb even the air. But she always made him wait. One night, while Bob installed himself in the den and waited for Lena to join him, Ella swept in to quiz him about his life. "Where is your cot?" she asked.

"Near the garage."

"Who are the Ensons?"

"A man and a wife."

She dragged out of him the following scintillating facts: he preferred lamb chops to chicken, and peas to potatoes.

Ella ruled that Lena and Bob had to spend part of the date somewhere in the house. They sat on the patio while Ella washed the dishes, observing them through the kitchen window. Toward nine o'clock, when the sky had turned dark, Ella heard a jump and rustle and the sound of running; she looked out a window onto the shining, moon-silver lawn. Lena and Bob were not kissing or touching but just chasing each other, endlessly, like large, slow bears. Their sound was of the purest joy, a soft, hushed giggling as they followed each other through the dark yard.

Dolores told her that Bob lived with the Ensons — a couple — in Sherman Oaks, and had a brother in Chicago, Hugh, who paid them rent. Ella got Hugh's number and called him up.

When she told him that Bob was dating her daughter, there was a silence so hostile she wondered what she had actually said.

"I'm sending money," Hugh said irritably. "I'm sending money."

"I'm not asking —"

"It's not easy, lady. Do you think it's easy sending —"

"Sir," she said, "I'm not asking for money. I just want to know what he's like."

Another silence. "Well, you see what he's like."

"For the last few months. What about before?"

"What is there to know? He's forty-one. Three years older than me."

"Where has he lived?"

"The folks had him at an institution for a while. They didn't know what the hell to do with him. He's been at the Ensons' six years, since the folks died. They got him to Goodwill. He likes driving, I hear."

"What else?"

"You might want to know this. He had a vasectomy."

She pressed the phone more firmly to her ear.

"They did that early. When he was sixteen, seventeen. No little Bobs running around."

Ella did not know how to digest this fact, so she decided to move on. "Anything else? Health problems, disorders, anything?"

"No, he's just real slow."

"And you?" she asked, in spite of herself.

"Me?"

"You, what do you do?"

"I'm in insurance. Life and homes. I just got married two years ago. I've got a son now," he said, his voice suddenly soft and eager to please.

"How nice," she said coolly.

"I hope he and your daughter get along real well," he said, his voice high-pitched with false sincerity. "I'll call back to see how he is —" He hung up. She never heard from him again.

One night, as Ella put on her sweater, preparing for her usual reconnaissance mission to House of Pancakes, she felt Lou's hands on her shoulders. He turned her around.

"I have to go," she said.

"Have dinner with me."

"Dinner?" she asked. "But they're —"

"They're just going to House of Pancakes." He looked away from her. "Who else is going to marry her?" he asked.

He was wearing an undershirt, and his shoulders were thinner now, at sixty-two, almost girlish. She followed him to the kitchen. Lena had recently discovered her own perfume, a chirpy lavender scent from Sav-On, and it floated through the hall. In the kitchen the shiny appliances hummed.

Lou paced around while Ella heated chicken with mushrooms. "What do you think they're doing?" she asked him.

"Eating," he said.

"They'll forget to pay," she said.

"Then they'll get arrested," he said. He folded his arms. They were caramel-colored, dusted with silver hair. His gaze stopped on her, held her. "Let's fool around," he said, a soft huskiness in his voice.

She stopped; she wished she could feel interested. "If you want to," she said, a little hopefully, "then come over here."

She turned away from him and, gently, he wound her long hair into his hands. His after-shave smelt drugstore-blue and sharp. His breath was a hot current against her neck. His hands slid down her bare arms and gently cupped her breasts, and Ella tried to let herself go against him, but she couldn't.

Lou stopped, sensing her resistance. "She's fine," he said.

Delicately Ella disentangled herself from him.

"I need you too," Lou said. He lightly slapped her hip, as though she were a cow, and she heard him walk away from her.

Lena and Bob marched into the kitchen one evening, their fingers wound together tightly, as though they had been assigned to each other as buddies on a school trip. Lena held up their hands. A plastic yellow ring encircled her index finger.

"I'm married!" said Lena.

Bob swiped a bruised pear off the table and took a big, juicy bite.

"You're what?" Ella asked.

"He gave me a ring!"

"You're engaged," said Ella.

"I'm going to have a husband!" screeched Lena. She pulled Bob to her side, like a purse.

Ella slowly laid her dishtowel on the sink. She touched Lena's taut hand, the yellow ring; it was the type that fell, encased in a plastic bubble, out of a gumball machine. Bob's breath was loud and puppyish, and his bristly hair seemed a harder silver than before. Lena giggled. She said to Bob, "Say what I said to —"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

Bob slowly got to his knees in front of Ella. He rubbed his hands on the sides of his gray pants and looked at the floor.

"I forget," he said to Lena.

"You know," said Lena. She whispered loudly, "I want to —"

"I want to propose a marriage," Bob said, addressing Ella's knee.

"Lena," Ella said, "honey, he's supposed to kneel in front of you, not me."

"But he's asking you."

Ella looked down at the rosy, bald circle on Bob's scalp. He looked like a gardener sprawled across a patch of lawn, pressing seeds into a plot of dirt. He was inevitable, and perhaps because of that, she felt an unexpected rush of love for him.

"Lou," Ella called carefully. "Lou."

"I'm married!" Lena shrieked as her father came into the room, and then she rushed into his arms. It was something she rarely did; Lou was unsure how to hold her, and his arms curved awkwardly around her. He stepped away and looked at her, blinking.

"Married," Lou said.

"Stand up," Ella said. Bob rocked back onto his feet and stood slowly, grabbing Lena's hip for balance. He was standing up, one of them now.

"We have to have a toast," said Lou.

Ella lifted a pitcher of cranberry juice from the refrigerator and filled the glasses. Lou arranged Lena's and Bob's arms into the gesture of a toast. Lena and Bob clutched their glasses fiercely, as though expecting them to rise to the ceiling, pulling them, legs kicking, off the floor.

"*L'chayim*," Lou said.

It was Lou's idea that they get married in Las Vegas. They had a nine P.M. appointment at the Chapel of Eternal Love, at the other end of South Fifth, but Bob played the slots too long and almost made them late. Lena played right beside him, a little wobbly in her heels, her veil plopped on top of her machine.

The four of them walked down the Strip to the Chapel of Eternal Love, past the Stardust and the Thunderbird and the Riviera. The streets glowed with the hotels' gaudy pink and orange and white light. Lena wore a polyester puff-sleeved ivory dress, which they had purchased off a mannequin in the window of Treasureland, a discount emporium. The mannequin rose grimly out of a litter of golden ashtrays and inflatable palm trees. Lena had stopped by the window, pointed to the mannequin and said with great assurance, "Her."

Ella held Lena's hand in hers; with the other, she touched Lou's arm. "They do know we're coming?"

"Yes."

"What about flowers? Do they provide them?"

"Relax." He did not look at her. "It's going to be beautiful."

She wanted to ask him if love was truly good, if marriage made you safe, if the right man or woman would make anyone happy. She wanted to ask Lou if she had, in fact, given birth to Lena — if her daughter truly lived outside her body.

Outside the chapel, Ella took Lena to the far corner of the parking lot, drew Red Plum lipstick across her trembling lips. "Ready?"

Lena nodded.

"Scared?"

Lena shrugged.

Ella took her hand. She wanted to tell her something. Marriage, she thought, was not simply choosing your mate, but the person you wanted to be for the rest of your life. There were other wives Ella could have been. Ella's marriage had shaped her, firmly and precisely, but she could not see the marks of her own evolution; she could not see how the love she gave and took made her what she was.

And here was her daughter with one suitor, one choice.

"Do you understand what this means, Lena?"

"It means that Bob and I will be together and we will be happy."

Ella adjusted Lena's veil with trembling fingers. "Where's your bobby pin?" she asked. "Don't let this fall off. Don't keep touching it."

Lena swatted her hand away. "I want to get married now."

The justice of the peace looked worn down by all the eternal love he'd seen that day. His assistant, wearing a red-sequined dress and a sparkly name tag that said *WITNESS*, took the wedding fee of twenty dollars from Ella, then flung open the door to a large refrigerator. Rows of cold bouquets were lined up like a silent, aloof audience inside. She shivered. "What color roses, hon? Red, pink, white or silver?"

"I would like silver, please," Lena said.

Lena stood beside Bob, their elbows touching. She tugged her wedding dress straight and nodded obediently at the justice. Her hand gripped the refrigerated spray of silver roses, which were the color of a dull nickel. Her face had the alertness of true happiness.

Ella, the maid of honor, stood beside Lena; Lou removed his navy fedora and held it as he stood beside Bob.

"By the power invested in me by the state of Nevada, I pronounce you man and wife," said the justice. He coughed. He suddenly seemed uncomfortable, as though just realizing he was intruding upon a family gathering.

Lena moved first. She raised her hand to Bob's face with a great tenderness, her fingers spread as though to capture as much of him as she could. Ella stared at Lena's fingers, which looked eerie and

remote as a sea animal, and she did not know where Lena had learned to touch someone like that.

The witness hauled over a large, blue-sequined sack of free gifts for the newlyweds. "Something to start off your new home," she said. It was brimming with boxes of detergent, spatulas, colanders. The justice thrust his arm inside and brought out a box of Tide.

"Yuck," Lena said.

"This is your free gift," the assistant said.

"I don't want that one," Lena said, pouting.

"You don't want it?" asked the justice.

"Let them pick," Ella said.

The justice glared at Ella and checked his watch. "Lady, I'd like to stay here all night, but —"

"Let them pick," Ella hissed. She would not let them walk back into the streets of Las Vegas with a bad gift. Lena and Bob plunged their hands into the sack together. They began to bring out another box of Tide, pale detergent flowing out through a crack in the top. Ella pushed in front of Bob and Lena and slapped the box back into the bag. She grabbed hold of a spatula and pushed it into Lena's trembling hand.

"Congratulations," Ella said.

Out by the pool, the Las Vegas sun hammered down on their faces. Ella watched her daughter spread herself on a bright plastic chaise. Lena's eyes were masked by her horn-rimmed sunglasses, and her nipples were visibly erect under her lemon-yellow bathing suit. She lay on the chaise in an aloof silence, as though she were spinning quiet, magnificent thoughts.

"Do you want some lotion?" Ella asked.

Lena did not answer. She stood up regally and walked over to the pool. Standing a little unsteadily on its edge, she looked down at Bob in the water. Bob yanked her leg, and Lena crashed in.

Ella was not the only one who watched while Lena and Bob tumbled and splashed, cheerful, muffled bellows rising from their mouths. Their slick arms smacked the surface and swooped under the water, and their faces butted and kissed, but it was not exactly clear what they were doing to each other, and the crowd around the pool was riveted. Ella felt the backs of her knees tense. She got ready to stand up.

But after a minute Lena swung herself casually out of the pool. She glittered like an unearthly creature, with water shining on her arms, her hair. Lena came right to her chaise and sat beside her.

"I would like to share a room with Bob," Lena said.

That night the four of them stood in El Tropicale's dim hallway. Bob's arm circled Lena's shoulder with a brave attempt at propriety.

"Honey, may I have your key," Ella said.

Lena handed her mother the key. Lou was silent. Bob's fingers fluttered on Lena's shoulder, and Ella tasted fear, metallic, in her throat.

"Lena," Ella started, as her daughter took Bob's hand, "Lena, knock if you need anything." Lena whisked into her room and closed the door.

Lou had assumed a posture of odd, formal politeness. "Do we want to go sit at the piano bar?" he asked.

"I don't feel like it."

"Do we want to play the slots?"

"No," she said, opening the door to their own room next door.

They went inside, twitchy as a couple meeting each other illicitly for the first time. With a sharp, definite motion, Lou shrugged off his wine-colored jacket. His white shirt stuck to his shoulders in the heat.

"Have you noticed the footwear they sell here?" he asked.

"Footwear?"

He tossed his jacket over a chair. "People are on vacation, they lose their shopping sense." He took a deep, sharp breath. "Pink loafers. They take them home and they realize, where the hell am I going to wear pink loafers?"

"They're going to have to live with us," said Ella.

"They probably don't want to."

"She can't cook or clean," said Ella.

"I don't think he'd notice."

She thought she heard the TV's muffled garble start in the other room. "I hear them," she said.

The two of them froze, listening. "No," he said. "You don't hear them."

She put her hands on the wall dividing their room from Lena's. It

was strangely cool. She heard only a faint, staticky wave of audience laughter.

"Look!" said Lou. He knocked on the wall sharply, twice. "Hello!" he called. Breathless, they awaited an answer; there was none. "See?" he said. "They can't hear us." He turned abruptly and walked away from the wall. "Come away from there," he said.

She wanted, vaguely, to accuse him of something; she wanted to see pain on Lou's face, a sorrow she could recognize.

"Leave her alone," he said, not sounding entirely convinced. He sank wearily into the sofa and rubbed his hands vigorously over his face. "Let's have a drink."

She couldn't. Instead, Ella pulled the ice tray out of the refrigerator and, in a gesture that felt both normal and alien, shook out cubes of ice and dropped them into a glass. She sat on the bed and crunched the ice cubes slowly and deliberately, trying to listen only to the hard clink they made as they fell back into the glass.

At about one A.M. there was a sharp knocking. Ella opened the door to Lena, who was shivering in her nightgown. Bob was right behind her, naked, holding a white towel across his waist with only mid-dling success.

"What?" Ella demanded. "What's wrong?"

"I'm bleeding, Mother. There's blood —"

Ella yanked Lena into the room. Bob toddled in behind her, wearing the frozen, frightened smile of a child unsure what he was expected to do. Lou stood up. "What's —" he began, and she saw his face melt to alarm.

"I've got her," Ella announced. She pulled Lena into the bathroom. "Sit," she said. Ella wound a long ribbon of toilet paper around her hand. "Show me where."

Lena sat on the toilet and daintily flipped up her nightgown. Ella saw a smear of blood on Lena's large beige panties; she reached up, grapped the elastic and pulled the panties down to the floor. Ella dabbed Lena's vagina with the toilet paper; it came back pale red.

Ella knelt and peered critically between her daughter's legs. She had no idea what she was looking for; there was just a little blood. She held a towel under warm water and gently dabbed Lena's pubic hair.

"Am I okay, Mother?"

Ella didn't speak.

"Am I okay?"

"I don't know." Ella let Lena wonder a moment. "Answer me. Was he nice to you?"

"I think so."

"Does it still hurt?"

"I started bleeding."

"Do you feel better now?"

Lena touched her vagina tenderly, then stood up.

Ella knelt before her daughter and reached for her hands. "You've had" — Ella spoke slowly — "intercourse now, Lena."

Lena slapped Ella's hands away, impatient. "I have to go see my husband."

Bob was waiting in a chair, the towel arranged, like a large white napkin, across his lap. Lou was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room. They each had the alert demeanor of someone trying very hard not to speak.

"I stopped bleeding," Lena said proudly to Bob.

Bob folded the towel around his waist and jumped up; he hurried out of the room. Lena bounded after him, and Ella followed into the hallway. "The TV's still on," he called to Lena.

"Leave it on," said Lena.

As Lena began to follow him into their room, Ella saw Lena's nightgown sticking, indecent, over her hips; she reached forward to tug it down. But Lena pushed grandly past her mother. The pink door shut, and Ella was left standing in the corridor alone.

Back in the room, Lou looked at her. "Is she all right?"

Ella nodded.

He gingerly lifted Lena's beige lace panties off the floor. "She left these," he said.

She remembered when she had bought these panties for Lena — on sale at Henshey's, two for one. Lou folded them gently, barely touching the edges, then handed them to Ella. She was moved by the way he folded them. She went to the bathroom and threw them out.

She opened the refrigerator and took out a perfect, tiny bottle of Dewar's. She unscrewed the cap, swallowed half the bottle and handed it to her husband.

There was only one thing she could think to do.

She went to Lou and kissed him.

They kissed in the strange, clean room, surrounded by lampshades and bedspreads and dressers that were not their own.

Ella let her husband kiss her neck, her breasts, her knees, hard enough to erase Lena. Ella had not expected to feel abandoned. She had not expected that Lena's closing the door would make her turn to Lou. The kindest thing he could do was make her forget. And as Lou had been, since Lena's birth, second place to her daughter, Ella sensed, in the muscular trembling of his fingers, how much he wanted to make her forget. She felt the nakedness of their lips in the deep, cooling dark.

Long after Lou had fallen asleep, she sat awake beside him. Then she went to the window and looked down at the street. It was the street Lena had walked down to her wedding, and it burnt with the hotel's twenty-four-hour lights. She watched the lit messages — BINGO and POKER and WIN! — that flashed a brilliant display of pink and orange and yellow into the empty street. Ella believed, suddenly, absolutely, that Lena was also looking out her window. She saw her daughter leaning naked on the ledge, her hair streaming over her bare shoulders, gazing at the bright casino lights and their strange, insistent attempts to illuminate the sky.

LEONARD MICHAELS

A Girl with a Monkey

FROM PARTISAN REVIEW

IN THE SPRING of the year following his divorce, while traveling alone in Germany, Beard fell in love with a young prostitute named Inger and canceled his plans for further travel. They spent two days together, mainly in Beard's room. He took her to restaurants for lunch and dinner. The third day Inger told Beard she needed a break. She had had a life before Beard arrived. Now she had only Beard. She reminded him that the city was famous for its cathedral and zoo. "You should go look. There is more to see than Inger Stutz." Besides, she'd neglected her chores, and missed a dental appointment as well as classes in paper restoration at the local museum.

When she mentioned the classes, Beard thought to express interest, ask questions about paper restoration, but he wasn't interested. He said, "You could miss a few more." His tone was glum. He regretted it, but felt justified because she'd hurt his feelings. He'd spent a lot of money on Inger. He deserved better. He wasn't her life, but he'd canceled his plans, and he wouldn't be staying forever. She didn't have to remind him of the cathedral and zoo. Such things had been noted in his travel itinerary by the agent in San Francisco. He also had a travel guide.

Beard had in fact planned to do a lot of sightseeing, but moments after he checked into his hotel there was a knock at the door and he supposed it was a bellhop or chambermaid, and he saw the girl. She was very apologetic and apparently distressed. She'd come to the wrong room. Beard was charmed, not deceived. He invited her in.