

Where Have You Been?

During the first few minutes of their phone conversation—Leonard in California, Sam in New Hampshire—Leonard uses the words *sudden* and *unexpected* several times, but a little while later Sam says, “So, really, this wasn’t sudden *or* unexpected. It was inevitable.”

“Yes,” says Leonard, gazing out his living room window at the deer gathering on the meadow as they do at the close of each day—a big battle-scarred stag presiding over a harem of four does and two yearlings, one of those yearlings a promising buck. “How we stayed married for five years is...I don’t know.”

“You must not have been paying attention,” says Sam, who has a knack for cutting to the chase.

“I don’t think I’ve really been here to pay attention.”

“Where have you been?”

“Going through the motions,” says Leonard, his fit of outrage over. “I, robot.”

“I didn’t ask *what* you’ve been doing,” says Sam, quietly. “I asked *where* have you been?”

The second of three children, his mother Jewish, his father a devout atheist, Leonard is sixty-years-old, six-feet-tall, sturdy and unbent, with olive skin, big brown eyes, a large straight nose, voluptuous lips, and longish black hair turning gray. He loved ten things in childhood that carried him into adulthood: music, friends, sports, books, girls, food, bicycles, movies, camping, and anything British.

An English teacher for the last twenty-six years at the high school and community college in Fort Orford, a town of four thousand hearty souls on the far north coast of California,

Leonard lives on Horse Creek Road, four miles from town in a rambling one-story house surrounded by pines and firs and oaks and redwoods.

For the seven years before he moved to Fort Orford, Leonard lived in Berkeley, California where he worked as an editor, ghostwriter, and tutor to wealthy teenagers desperate to get into prestigious universities. For the nine years before moving to Berkeley, he lived in Santa Cruz, California where he attended college and was a bartender, guitarist, singer, and one of four members of Magenta, a band of singer-songwriters. And for the first eighteen years of his life, he lived in San Carlos, California, a suburb of San Francisco.

This telephone conversation with Sam—fifty-eight, font designer, musician, carpenter—is mostly about what happened to Leonard yesterday, Saturday, October fifth, Leonard's sixtieth birthday.

Having stayed in bed until eight as he likes to do on weekends when he doesn't have to be at the high school by seven-thirty, Leonard made himself a zucchini omelet, had two cups of coffee, and decided it was high time he got in better shape, aerobically speaking. A zealous playground basketball player when he was in his teens and twenties, Leonard thought shooting hoops might be a good way to invigorate his cardiovascular system. So after breakfast he went to look for his basketball in the storage shed he hadn't opened in five years, not since Paula moved in—Paula being Leonard's wife.

The first thing he saw upon entering the little building was his guitar, a beautiful cherry-red 1968 Gibson acoustic, sans strings. He had not seen his guitar in thirty-two years, though on several occasions during those years he handled the case in which he kept the exquisite instrument—the centerpiece of his long-ago life.

Leonard's first thought upon seeing his old guitar was *Who took her out of her case?* His next thoughts were: *How long has she been leaning against the wall of this moldy shed? Is she warped beyond*

repair? Where is the guitar case? Why is this happening to me on my sixtieth birthday?

Carrying his guitar into the house he has owned for twenty-five years—the guitar not warped—Leonard stood in the middle of the living room until he began to shiver from anger and cold. Paula was not home, which was not surprising because she was rarely home.

Paula is twenty years younger than Leonard, works five nights a week as a bartender at Red's Bar & Grill, and leads a complicated life Leonard knows nothing about.

"So I brought the guitar inside," says Leonard to Sam, "and stood in my living room where I'm standing now, my very dusty cold pathetic living room, and I realized it could only be Paula who took my case and left my guitar leaning against the wall of the shed. Had to be. And she did that so I would find the guitar and confront her so she could say, 'Yes, I took your guitar case and gave it to someone who actually plays the guitar, unlike you, you pathetic loser. I'm outta here.'"

"Hold on," says Sam, sounding crystal clear from three thousand miles away. "I'm confused. Is that what you *thought* she would say or what she actually said?"

"What I thought she would say," says Leonard, watching the battle-scarred stag take a few menacing steps toward the yearling buck—October the month when alpha males impregnate their does and want no interference from upstart rivals.

"What did she *actually* say?"

"She was surprisingly nice. Said, 'Oops. Busted. Sorry, Leo. I just...you know...a girl likes to have fun, so...yeah, I've been...yeah, Alvin Diderot and some other guys. Alvin's case was falling apart, so...yeah, I didn't think your old guitar was worth anything. Sorry. Doesn't even have any strings and you never play it, so...hey, won't take me long to get the rest of my stuff out of here. I haven't actually been living here for a long time, you know. You want to get the divorce thing going or

should I?”

“Is that how she talks?” asks Sam, who has never met Paula and hasn’t seen Leonard in thirty years. “You make her sound like a teenager.”

“That’s exactly how she talks.”

“So is she gone now?”

“As of an hour ago,” says Leonard, looking around his dusty living room. “She and her friend Marla came with a truck and spent about ten minutes separating Paula’s silverware and mugs from mine, and then they took the television off the wall in her bedroom and...”

“Slow down. You had separate bedrooms?”

“At first we called it her television room because I don’t watch television, but not long after the wedding she started sleeping in there when she’d come home—the sofa opens into a bed—so, yes, we had separate bedrooms, though she rarely came home. Didn’t see much of each other.”

“You never told me that.”

“I was numb. I, robot.”

“You’ve said ‘I, robot,’ twice now. Robots are machines. Do you feel like a machine?”

“I feel like an old wind-up clock about to run down and stop. A heartless machine since the moment I took the strings off my guitar and put her in the coffin thirty-two years ago.”

“You were happy your first few years in Fort Orford,” says Sam, who was a huge fan of Leonard’s band Magenta. “Or so you told me.”

“I’ve had bouts of happiness,” says Leonard, watching the deer raise their heads and gaze fixedly toward the south. “Momentary breezes on the surface of a big lake of sorrow. An ocean.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

Leonard thinks *kill myself* and says, “Take the guitar to a luthier and...”

Sam waits for Leonard to say more, but hears only silence. “Leo? You there?”

“I’m here,” says Leonard, his eyes filling with tears as he remembers standing on the stage at the Catalyst in Santa Cruz and looking out at the jubilant audience where Sam was grooving to the heavenly sounds of Magenta. “I’m so grateful you stayed my friend all these years.”

“As you have stayed mine,” says Sam, touched by Leonard’s gratitude. “Let me know how things go with the luthier. Maybe you’ll write a story about it. I love your stories. And maybe the story could end with an answer to your question of why, metaphysically speaking, you found your guitar free of her case on your sixtieth birthday?”

“I like that idea, Sam,” says Leonard, smiling into the phone. “Give Etta a hug for me, would you?”

“I will. Call me any time, Leo. Any time you need to talk.”