

DISQUIET, PLEASE!

More Humor Writing from
The New Yorker

Edited by
David Remnick and Henry Finder



R A N D O M H O U S E



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RANDOM HOUSE / NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

BEFORE the folks at *The New Yorker* could reliably make anybody else laugh, the magazine specialized in entertaining themselves. The magazine was launched in February of 1925 and its early issues were, to be charitable, hit or miss. Harold Ross, the founding editor, figured that the only thing in the debut issue that really worked was Rea Irvin's cover portrait of Eustace Tilly, peering through his monocle at a butterfly.

But the workplace, by all accounts, was a riot. The irascible James Thurber caused a copy editor to faint when he burst in on him with a pistol in hand, yelling, "Are you the son of a bitch that keeps putting notes in red ink on the proofs of my Talk stories?" When Ross found Dorothy Parker at a speakeasy instead of at her desk, she had a ready—and, yes, often quoted—excuse: "Someone was using the pencil." Then there was the drunk-dialing incident when Ross had had too much Scotch and telephoned the great cartoonist Peter Arno in the middle of the night to tell him he was fired. (So much funnier the next day.) Rea Irvin, the magazine's art editor, drew a not-for-public-consumption takeoff of the Eustace Tilly cover for the boss's birthday: It featured a silhouette of Ross—an upward shock of hair, a limp cigarette dangling from his mouth—peering at a globular insect with a distinct resemblance to the drama critic Alexander Woollcott. A mannequin from Wanamaker's (E. B. White had used pictures of it in a series of ads he composed for a 1927 circulation campaign) stood in Ross's office, complete with a filthy hairpiece, for years after the joke was forgotten, which, for Ross, was exactly what made it funny.

The freshest stuff that appeared in the magazine back then was often self-parody, possibly more amusing to the staff than to anyone else. Much was made of the "vast organization" of *The New Yorker*; a picture of Grand Central Station was described in a caption as the magazine's "sumptuous waiting room." The truth is, the staff's most inspired work in those days never made it beyond the vast organization; the in-house editorial memos (we reprint one of them, by the editor and writer Wolcott Gibbs) regularly outstripped anything that actually appeared in print. And then—the magazine found its voice, or voices.

A handful of people competing to make one another laugh: It's not the worst way for an original comic enterprise to begin. Maybe it's the only way. If something you did got a laugh from your friends, you wouldn't be discouraged by the fact that most people didn't get it; you were on to something, plenty of those people would come around. More than anything, Ross wanted his magazine to be funny, but he didn't want it to be funny the way other magazines were funny. The debut issue of *The New Yorker* printed a lame Q&A-style joke which ended with the Q. Many assumed it was a typographical error; more likely, it was an absurdist, defiant assertion that the magazine wasn't in the business of serving up conventional humor. In the magazine Ross wanted to create, there would be no setup/punchline jokes—no knock-knocks, no "kids say the darnedest things" squibs, no after-dinner anecdotes, nothing about a priest and a rabbi walking into a bar.

It was one thing to avow what *New Yorker* humor wasn't; it took a little longer to establish what it *was*. That's where Thurber and White came in. In the Thumbelina realm of *New York*

history, Thurber and White were the framers of a comic constitution, our Adams and Jefferson, albeit without the cupping scars and slave children. They ranged widely in the forms they explored, and encouraged others to do so. Some of what the magazine published as it hit its stride, was parody—of radio monologues, of what Ross called “journalese,” of advertising copy, of etiquette manuals, of the mannerisms of the great novelists. There were depictions of the sad-sack sufferer, an updated version of the silent-movie schlemiel. There were stories of comic happenings, real or imagined. There were waggish commentaries that did figure eights on the line of irony. There were the rants, presented straight, of the wild, unhinged or the obliviously self-satisfied.

Needless to say, every good writer at the magazine had his or her own voice, and his or her own devils. Dorothy Parker’s depictions of drunken or hungover heroines were no doubt influenced by her own boozy ways; and you can glimpse Thurber’s blighted first marriage—it’s like opening a freezer—in tales of connubial misery like “Quiet, Please,” “Not Together,” and (included in this anthology) “The Breaking Up of the Winships.” Yet something distinctive arose from the juxtaposition of all these voices. The marriage, like the hangover, came to an end; the work has pretty much survived. Within a few years of the magazine’s launch, a contributor complained to a rejecting editor that a humor piece written for *The New Yorker* couldn’t be placed elsewhere: The magazine’s preferences were too idiosyncratic, too distant from what everyone else was up to. “We have evolved a system for the smooth operation of a literary bordello,” White later wrote. “The system is this: We write as we please, and the magazine publishes as it pleases. When the two pleasures coincide, something gets into print.”

There are no guns, toy or otherwise, at the magazine’s offices these days. The whole firing-while-drunk thing happens only rarely. That mannequin has long since disappeared (though we have our suspicions). Staff members have learned the hard way not to make fun of the boss’s coiffure, ever. But the bordello system that White described remains intact. It has functioned so well, in fact, that the magazine’s archives are full to bursting with humor, a goodly amount of it still humorous. Putting together an anthology of *New Yorker* humor writing is so much fun we’ve done it twice.

THE publication of our previous sampler, *Fierce Pajamas*, gave us pleasure; but also pain. For every piece we included, we left out two that we liked just as much. Between the anthology’s editors, second-guessing soon began in earnest. What could explain a blunder like (to name one of many) leaving out “Kimberley Solzhenitsyn’s Calendar”? Exactly which one of us was asleep at the wheel? Years of recrimination ensued. Styptic glances gave way to glowering stares and then long, wintry silences. If *Disquiet, Please!* is a follow-up, every follow-up is also, in certain respects, a do-over. In making our selections, we have therefore adhered to an especially rigorous methodology. First, we gathered pieces, not found in the previous anthology, that made us laugh, or beam, or both. Then, when those proved too numerous to fit into a book, we arranged the pieces in a circle and spun a bottle. Afterward, we recycled the bottle.

For all that, we could not escape the guilty knowledge that many of the funniest pieces that *The New Yorker* publishes aren’t exactly humor pieces. They are, rather, works of reporting, opinion, or criticism in which the comic eye and sensibility are fully engaged, and, as before,

we couldn't do them justice. Humor has never been segregated in the magazine that Ross founded. And yet the anthologist looks for density, for concentration—for an array of comic effects on display in a relatively small space. The difference between a humor piece and a humorous piece is the difference between attar of rose and actual roses. This is not to the discredit of roses, whose breeding and cultivation we hold in high esteem. It's just that humorists are generally less encumbered than reporters or reviewers by the task of explaining how a bill was passed or a bridge was built, or what an actual person or movie is actually like. The journalist's challenge is to paint an urn that must hold water. The humorist can turn a lump of clay into an urn that pointedly fails to.

In compiling this book, we also took full advantage of the fact that, since the last time around, we had almost a decade's worth of new pieces to choose from, and we helped ourselves to those recent harvests with two hands, or maybe four. It's what the founders would have done. Whether it was genius or dumb luck, Ross, White, Thurber, Gibbs, and the rest managed to do something that eluded even the incomparably gifted H. L. Mencken and George S. Nathan, who jointly piloted the long-defunct (and slightly *New Yorker-ish*) magazine *Smart Set*. They managed to create a magazine with an identity potent enough, yet capacious enough, to outlast them—a magazine that could be renewed and remade and remain recognizably itself. We thereby honor the Founders, in this collection, by giving them short shrift. (You'll find them more decently represented in *Fierce Pajamas*, which also boasts a section of comic verse sufficient to forgo supplementation here.) We've instead devoted the balance of our space to their successors, their legatees. Most of the more recent comic talents we've included are still living, or very nearly; some are even young. In *Disquiet, Please!* we've taken the opportunity to present late-vintage wine from old vines (not *old*; established really, or, let's say, *distinguished*). But we've also had the particular pleasure of introducing previously unpublished contributors, such as Yoni Brenner or Simon Rich, who, we understand, was not yet born when *Fierce Pajamas* came out, and is not old enough to drink that wine. We have erred on the side of newness.

AND yet the new is never so new as all that. Men and women still drive each other nuts, just as in olden days. Self-delusion still generates insight. The entertainment industry is still seductive and silly. Our children still bring out the best in us, and the worst. Puffed-up literary piety still invites piercing. In convention-bound prose—ad copy, class notes, Zagat reviews, drug disclaimers, popularizations of impenetrable science, tonight's specials, the gossip column—cliché is always just a few clicks away from preposterousness. Furry animals. You can never go wrong with them. And it's still the case that (as White learned long ago) you should never get into an argument with a libertarian. At the cutting edge of comedy, you'll find few moves that Thurber and White wouldn't have recognized, and few they didn't attempt.

Surveying the contributors to this anthology, across four generations, we've noticed other continuities, other patterns. We can now start to puzzle through a question we're often asked: What makes a *New Yorker* humor writer? Is there a particular course of study, some people have even wondered, that can actually produce a *New Yorker* humorist? (The answer is yes, but Hunter College no longer offers it.) What sort of career experiences are helpful? Having researched this matter, we can offer a few pointers. Peter De Vries, as a young man, once

played a wounded gorilla on a radio drama, and we can think of no better preparation for *The New Yorker's* editorial process. Granted, there are other contenders. The world of advertising seems to be a pretty good incubator for wisenheimers. White himself served time writing a copy (one of his first *New Yorker* pieces imagined what would happen if spring, the seasons were an advertising account), and it's a résumé he shares with such current contributors as Bruce McCall and John Kenney, who likewise know from the inside the codes and cadences they send up. Other humor writers have emerged from the world of newspapers (as Thurber did); a few from the underbelly of *The New Yorker* itself. So if you are unable to land a wounded-gorilla role, you might seek employment as a writer. And you needn't restrict yourself to print. A number of classic *New Yorker* humorists—such as Benchley, Parke Perelman, and later, in an unexampled way, Woody Allen—spent time writing for movies and television. That's true, as well, about many more recent contributors, such as Paul Rudnick, Patricia Marx, Andy Borowitz, Larry Doyle, Paul Simms, and Yoni Brenner. For them, having suckled at the golden teat and grown rich off *The New Yorker*, working in Hollywood is a way of giving back to the community. It's a heartening tradition, and we salute their generosity.

We salute, as well, the generosity of all those who helped us assemble this collection with their unstinting, if at times heated, advice (in a few instances, to be honest, "advice" is the word only if you stipulate that General MacArthur advised Tojo to surrender). We cannot list every counselor, but we're particularly grateful to Leo Carey, whose comic sensibility is as finely tuned as a cello (a finely tuned cello, that is to say), and who has, rather precociously, become a redoubt of institutional memory; Susan Morrison, who has culled and edited the magazine's Shouts and Murmurs—and nurtured its writers—for more than a decade; and Adam Gopnik, who conveyed the dire threats of an Old Testament prophet should a certain Thurber piece be left out (we chose not to discover whether his omniscience is matched by omnipotence). Andrea Walker gamely foraged through *The New Yorker's* half-a-billion-word archives, searching, sorting, reading, organizing, and juggling logistical challenges with an agility that would do NASA proud. We're grateful, as well, to the magazine's deputy editor Pamela Maffei McCarthy, not least for arranging this book's publication, cunningly persuading Random House that, in return, it should pay *The New Yorker* a little something rather than the other way around. Lynn Oberlander and Andrew Avery sorted through rights and permissions; Jon Michaud and Erin Overbey helped keep everything on track; Greg Caplan lent a hand with the cover image. At Random House, Jennifer Hershey, Julie Cheiffetz, Millicent Bennett, and Evan Camfield helped turn a big messy stack of wrinkled coffee-ringed photocopies into a tidily bound volume with a cover and everything, shipped to bookstores across the land. All these men and women did their part. Now it's your turn.

There's a story, possibly true, about the producer of a sitcom who once summoned a pair of staff writers to berate them about a script they'd just handed in. "The show's supposed to be funny, and this just isn't funny," the producer said. "There's not a laugh in it." The writers taken aback, protested that the script had some of the funniest writing they'd done. With the producer's sufferance, they started to read it out loud. A page into it, the producer was convulsed with laughter. By the end of the first scene, he had fallen out of his chair and onto the floor, in helpless paroxysms, wildly signaling the writers to stop. At last, the producer recovered his breath, heaved himself back onto his chair, and grumbled, "Well, sure, if you're going to read it like *that*." Aside from begging your indulgence for this volume's inexplicable

omissions, casualties of the spinning bottle, we have very few requests to make of you, the reader. You should feel free to dip into this anthology randomly, to read it backward, to give it a home next to a porcelain commode. (Better there than on a high shelf.) All we ask is that you read it like *that*.



COUPLES

THE BREAKING UP OF THE WINSHIPS

THE trouble that broke up the Gordon Winships seemed to me, at first, as minor a problem as frost on a windowpane. Another day, a touch of sun, and it would be gone. I was inclined to laugh it off, and, indeed, as a friend of both Gordon and Marcia, I spent a great deal of time with each of them, separately, trying to get them to laugh it off, too—with him at his club, where he sat drinking Scotch and smoking too much, and with her in the apartment, that seemed so large and lonely without Gordon and his restless moving around and his quick laughter. But it was no good; they were both adamant. Their separation has lasted now more than two months. I doubt very much that they will ever go back together again.

It all started one night at Leonardo's, after dinner, over their Bénédictine. It started innocently enough, amiably even, with laughter from both of them, laughter that froze finally as the clock ran on and their words came out sharp and flat and stinging. They had been talking about seeing *Anna Karenina*. Gordon hadn't liked it very much: He said that Fredric March's hair curls made the whole thing seem silly. Marcia had been crazy about it because she is crazy about Greta Garbo. She belongs to that considerable army of Garbo admirers whose enchantment borders almost on fanaticism and sometimes even touches the edges of frenzy. I think that before everything happened, Gordon admired Garbo, too, but the depth of his wife's conviction that here was the greatest figure ever seen in our generation on sea or land, on screen or stage, exasperated him that night. Gordon hates (or used to) exaggeration, and he respects (or once did) detachment. It was his feeling that detachment is a necessary thread in the fabric of a woman's charm. He didn't like to see his wife get herself "into a sweat" over anything and, that night at Leonardo's, he unfortunately used that expression and made the accusation.

Marcia responded, as I get it, by saying, a little loudly (they had gone on to Scotch and soda), that a man who had no abandon of feeling and no passion for anything was not altogether a man, and that his so-called love of detachment simply covered up a lack of critical appreciation and understanding of the arts in general. Her sentences were becoming long and wavy, and her words formal. Gordon suddenly began to pooh-pooh her; he kept saying "Pooh!" (an annoying mannerism of his, I have always thought). He wouldn't answer her arguments or even listen to them. That, of course, infuriated her. "Oh, pooh to you, too," she finally more or less shouted. He snapped at her, "Quiet, for God's sake! You're yelling like a losing prizefight manager!" Enraged at that, she had recourse to her eyes as weapons and looked steadily at him for a while with the expression of one who is viewing a small and horrible animal, such as a horned toad. They then sat in moody and brooding silence for a long time, without moving a muscle, at the end of which, getting a hold on herself, Marcia asked him, quietly enough, just exactly what actor on the screen or on the stage, living or dead, he considered greater than Garbo. Gordon thought a moment and then said, as quietly as she had put the question, "Donald Duck." I don't believe that he meant it at the time, or even thought that he meant it. However that may have been, she looked at him scornful.

and said that that speech just about perfectly represented the shallowness of his intellect and the small range of his imagination. Gordon asked her not to make a spectacle of herself—she had raised her voice slightly—and went on to say that her failure to see the genius of Donald Duck proved conclusively to him that she was a woman without humor. That, he said, he had always suspected; now, he said, he knew it. She had a great desire to hit him, but instead she sat back and looked at him with her special Mona Lisa smile, a smile rather more of contempt than, as in the original, of mystery. Gordon hated that smile, so he said that Donald Duck happened to be exactly ten times as great as Garbo would ever be and that anybody with a brain in his head would admit it instantly. Thus the Winships went on and on, the resentment swelling, their sense of values blurring, until it ended up with her taking a taxi home alone (leaving her vanity bag and one glove behind her in the restaurant) and with him making the rounds of the late places and rolling up to his club around dawn. There, as he got out, he asked his taxi-driver which he liked better, Greta Garbo or Donald Duck, and the driver said he liked Greta Garbo best. Gordon said to him, bitterly, “Pooh to you, too, my good friend!” and went to bed.

The next day, as is usual with married couples, they were both contrite, but behind the contrition lay sleeping the ugly words each had used and the cold glances and the bitter gestures. She phoned him, because she was worried. She didn't want to be, but she was. When he hadn't come home, she was convinced he had gone to his club, but visions of him lying in a gutter or under a table, somehow horribly mangled, haunted her, and so at eight o'clock she called him up. Her heart lightened when he said, “Hullo,” gruffly: He was alive! Thank God! His heart may have lightened a little, too, but not very much, because he felt terrible. He felt terrible and he felt that it was her fault that he felt terrible. She said that she was sorry and that they had both been very silly, and he growled something about he was glad she realized *she'd* been silly, anyway. That attitude put a slight edge on the rest of her words. She asked him shortly if he was coming home. He said sure he was coming home; his home, wasn't it? She told him to go back to bed and not be such an old bear, and hung up.

THE next incident occurred at the Clarkes' party a few days later. The Winships had arrived in fairly good spirits to find themselves in a buzzing group of cocktail-drinkers that more or less revolved around the tall and languid figure of the guest of honor, an eminent lady novelist. Gordon late in the evening won her attention and drew her apart for one drink together and, feeling a little high and happy at that time, as is the way with husbands, mentioned, lightly enough (he wanted to get it out of his subconscious), the argument that he and his wife had had about the relative merits of Garbo and Duck. The tall lady, lowering her cigarette-holder, said, in the spirit of his own gaiety, that he could count her in on his side. Unfortunately Marcia Winship, standing some ten feet away, talking to a man with a beard, caught not the spirit but only a few of the words of the conversation, and jumped to the conclusion that her husband was deliberately reopening the old wound, for the purpose of humiliating her in public. I think that in another moment Gordon might have brought her over, and put his arm around her, and admitted his “defeat”—he was feeling pretty fine. But when he caught her eye, she gazed through him, freezingly, and his heart went down. And then his anger rose.

Their fight, naturally enough, blazed out again in the taxi they took to go home from the

party. Marcia wildly attacked the woman novelist (Marcia had had quite a few cocktails defended Garbo, excoriated Gordon, and laid into Donald Duck. Gordon tried for a while to explain exactly what had happened, and then he met her resentment with a resentment that mounted even higher, the resentment of the misunderstood husband. In the midst of it all she slapped him. He looked at her for a second under lowered eyelids and then said, coldly, if a bit fuzzily, "This is the end, but I want you to go to your grave knowing that Donald Duck is *twenty times* the artist Garbo will ever be, the longest day you, or she, ever live, if you do—and I can't understand, with so little to live for, why you should!" Then he asked the driver to stop the car, and he got out, in wavering dignity. "Caricature! Cartoon!" she screamed after him. "You and Donald Duck both, you——" The driver drove on.

The last time I saw Gordon—he moved his things to the club the next day, forgetting the trousers to his evening clothes and his razor—he had convinced himself that the point at issue between him and Marcia was one of extreme importance involving both his honor and his integrity. He said that now it could never be wiped out and forgotten. He said that he sincerely believed Donald Duck was as great a creation as any animal in all the works of Lewis Carroll, probably even greater, perhaps much greater. He was drinking and there was a wild light in his eye. I reminded him of his old love of detachment, and he said to the hostess with detachment. I laughed at him, but he wouldn't laugh. "If," he said, grimly, "Marcia persists in her silly belief that that Swede is great and that Donald Duck is merely a caricature, I cannot conscientiously live with her again. I believe that he is great, that the man who created him is a genius, probably our only genius. I believe, further, that Greer Garbo is just another actress. As God is my judge, I believe that! What does she expect me to do, go whining back to her and pretend that I think Garbo is wonderful and that Donald Duck is simply a cartoon? Never!" He gulped down some Scotch straight. "Never!" I could not ridicule him out of his obsession. I left him and went over to see Marcia.

I found Marcia pale, but calm, and as firm in her stand as Gordon was in his. She insisted that he had deliberately tried to humiliate her before that gawky so-called novelist, whose clothes were the dowdiest she had ever seen and whose affectations obviously covered up a complete lack of individuality and intelligence. I tried to convince her that she was wrong about Gordon's attitude at the Clarkes' party, but she said she knew him like a book. Let him get a divorce and marry that creature if he wanted to. They can sit around all day, she said, and all night, too, for all I care, and talk about their precious Donald Duck, the damn comic strip! I told Marcia that she shouldn't allow herself to get so worked up about a trivial and nonsensical matter. She said it was not silly and nonsensical to her. It might have been once yes, but it wasn't now. It had made her see Gordon clearly for what he was, a cheap, egotistical, resentful cad who would descend to ridiculing his wife in front of a scrawny, horrible stranger who could not write and never would be able to write. Furthermore, her belief in Garbo's greatness was a thing she could not deny and would not deny, simply for the sake of living under the same roof with Gordon Winship. The whole thing was part and parcel of her integrity as a woman and as an—an, well, as a woman. She could go to work again, he would find out.

There was nothing more that I could say or do. I went home. That night, however, I found that I had not really dismissed the whole ridiculous affair, as I hoped I had, for I dreamed about it. I had tried to ignore the thing, but it had tunneled deeply into my subconscious.

dreamed that I was out hunting with the Winships and that, as we crossed a snowy field, Marcia spotted a rabbit and, taking quick aim, fired and brought it down. We all ran across the snow toward the rabbit, but I reached it first. It was quite dead, but that was not what struck horror into me as I picked it up. What struck horror into me was that it was a white rabbit and was wearing a vest and carrying a watch. I woke up with a start. I don't know whether that dream means that I am on Gordon's side or on Marcia's. I don't want to analyze it. I am trying to forget the whole miserable business.

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

THE collaboration known as marriage could, I think, be profitably extended from the domestic to the social sphere, where a man and wife might brighten their contribution to, say, the give-and-take of dinner-table conversation by preparing a few exchanges in advance. “It’s simply the principle of teamwork,” I told my wife in partially describing the idea to her one evening as we were dressing to go to dinner at the home of some friends named Anthem. “For instance, tonight, Sue Anthem being as hipped as she is on family trees, we’re bound to talk relatives at some point. Well, I’m going to tell about my seagoing grandfather who’s so wonderful. In the middle of it, I’ll pause and take up my napkin, and then I’d appreciate it if you’d ask me, ‘Was he on your mother’s side?’ ” (I planned to answer, “Yes, except in money matters, when he usually stuck up for my father.” This wasn’t much, but I was feeling my way around in the form, trying to get the hang of it before going on to something more nearly certifiable as wit.)

Dinner ran along the lines I had foreseen. Sue Anthem got off on kinship, and I launched my little account of this wonderful grandfather. I paused at the appointed moment and glancing at my wife, reached for my napkin.

“I keep forgetting,” she came in brightly. “Was he your maternal grandfather?”

“Yes, except in money matters, when he usually stuck up for my father,” I replied.

A circle of blank looks met my gaze. I coughed into my napkin, and Sue picked up the thread of the discussion while I reviewed in my mind a couple of other gambits I had worked out with my wife, on the way over. One of these concerned a female friend, not present that evening, whom I will cut corners by calling a gay divorcée. She had just announced her engagement to a man so staid that news of the match took everyone who knew her by surprise. “Now, if the thing comes up, as it probably will,” I had coached my wife, “say something about how you’ve only met him a few times but he seems a man of considerable reserve.” I intended then to adroitly add, “Which Monica will get her hands on in short order.” I expected that to go over big, the divorcée being a notorious gold-digger.

The gossip did get around to her soon after it left the subject of relatives, and my wife came in on cue punctually enough, but her exact words were “He’s such a quiet, unassuming chap.”

This time, I had the presence of mind to realize the quip was useless, and check myself. Another misfire followed almost immediately. In preparation for possible discussion of Italy, where Monica and her fiancé planned to honeymoon, I had primed my wife to tell about her own visit to the Gulf of Spezia, where the drowned Shelley had been washed up. “In a way, you know, he was lucky,” I had planned to comment. “Most poets are washed up *before* they’re dead.” She told her story, but used the words “where Shelley was found,” thus washing up *that* mot.

It was clear that I would have to explain the system to my wife in detail if I was ever to get the bugs out of it. I decided, in fact, that I had better reveal in each case what the cap was to be, so that she would realize the importance of delivering her line exactly as

prearranged. I did this while we were driving to our next party, several evenings later. I had ducked her questions about the failures at the Anthems', preferring to wait till I had some new material worked up to hammer my point home with before I laid the whole thing on the line.

"At the Spiggetts' tonight," I said, "there's certain to be the usual talk about art. Here's a chance for you to get in those licks of yours about abstract painting—isn't it high time the painters got back to nature, and so on. The sort of thing you said at the Fentons'. You might cite a few of the more traditional paintings, like the portraits of Mrs. Jack Gardner and Henry Marquand. Then turn to me and ask—now, get this, it's important—ask, 'Why can't we have portraits like that any more?'"

"Then what will you say?" she asked.

I slowed to make a left turn, after glancing in the rear-view mirror to make sure nobody was behind me. " 'It's no time for Sargents, my dear.' "

My wife reached over and pushed in the dash lighter, then sat waiting for it to pop, cigarette in her hand.

"Of course I'll throw it away," I said. "Just sort of murmur it."

She lit the cigarette and put the lighter back in its socket. "Isn't this a little shabby?" she asked.

"Why? What's shabby about it? Isn't it better than the conversation you have to put up with normally—doesn't it make for something at least a cut above that?" I said. "What's wrong with trying to brighten life up? We can turn it around if you like. You can take the cappers while I feed you the straight lines—"

"Lord, no, leave it as it is."

"Can I count on you, then?"

"I suppose," she said, heaving a sigh. "But step on it. We're supposed to eat early and then go to that Shakespearean little theatre in Norwalk."

MY wife and I parted on entering the Spiggetts' house. I made off to where a new television comedienne, named Mary Cobble, was holding court with a dozen or so males. She was a small blonde, cute as a chipmunk and bright as a dollar. The men around her laughed heartily at everything she said. It was well known in Westport that her writers, of whom she kept a sizable stable, formed a loyal clique who followed her to every party, but it didn't seem to me that *all* the men around her could be writers. I knocked back a few quick Martinis and soon felt myself a gay part of the group. Once, I glanced around and saw my wife looking stonily my way over the shoulder of a man whose fame as a bore was so great that he was known around town as the Sandman. Matters weren't helped, I suppose, when, presently returning from the buffet with two plates of food, I carried one to Mary Cobble and sat down on the floor in front of her to eat the other. At the same time, I saw the Sandman fetching my wife a bite.

Midway through this lap dinner, there was one of those moments when all conversation suddenly stops at once. Lester Spiggett threw in a comment about a current show at a local art gallery. I saw my wife put down her fork and clear her throat. "Well, if there are any portraits in it, I hope the things on the canvases are faces," she said. She looked squarely at me. "Why is it we no longer have portraits that *portray*—that give you pictures of *people*?"

Like, oh, the *Mona Lisa*, or *The Man with the Hoe*, or even that *American Gothic* thing? Why that?”

Everybody turned to regard me, as the one to whom the query had obviously been put. “That’s a hard question for me to answer,” I said, frowning into my plate. I nibbled thoughtfully on a fragment of cold salmon. “Your basic point is, of course, well taken—the portraits we get are not deserving of the name. Look like somebody threw an egg at the canvas.”

Fuming, I became lost in the ensuing free-for-all. Not so my wife, whom annoyance rendered articulate. She more than held her own in the argument, which was cut short when Mary Cobble upset a glass of iced tea. She made some cheery remark to smooth over the incident. The remark wasn’t funny, nor was it intended to be funny, but to a man her retinue threw back their heads and laughed.

Meaning to be nice, I laughed, too, and said, “Well, it goes to show you. A good comedienne has her wits about her.”

“And pays them well,” my wife remarked, in her corner. (Luckily, Mary Cobble didn’t hear it, but two or three others did, and they repeated it until it achieved wide circulation, with the resulting increase in our dinner invitations. That, however, was later. The present problem was to get through the rest of the evening.)

We had to bolt our dessert and rush to the theatre, where they were doing *King Lear*. I wore Bermuda shorts, or something, and my wife and I took another couple in our car, so I didn’t get a chance to speak to her alone until after the show. Then I let her have it.

“That was a waspish remark,” I said. “And do you know why you made it? Resentment. A feeling of being out of the swim. It’s because you’re not good at repartee that you say things like that, and are bitter.”

“Things like what?” my wife asked.

I explained what, and repeated my charge.

In the wrangle, quite heated, that followed her denial of it, she gave me nothing but proof of its truth. I submitted that the idea of mine that had given rise to this hassle, and of which the hassle could safely be taken to be the corpse, had been a cozy and even a tender one: the idea that a man and wife could operate as a team in public. “What could be more domestic?” I said.

“Domesticity begins at home,” she rather dryly returned.

I met this with a withering silence.

THE ZAGAT HISTORY OF MY LAST RELATIONSHIP

AASE'S

Bring a “first date” to this “postage stamp”-size bistro. Tables are so close you’re practically “sitting in the laps” of the couple next to you, but the lush décor is “the color of love.” Discuss your respective “dysfunctional families” and tell her one of your “fail-safe” stories about your father’s “cheapness” and you’re certain to “get a laugh.” After the “to die for” soufflés, expect a good-night kiss, but don’t push for more, because if you play your cards right there’s a second date “right around the corner.”

BRASSERIE PENELOPE

“Ambience and then some” at this Jamaican-Norwegian hybrid. Service might be a “tad cool” but the warmth you feel when you gaze into her baby blues will more than compensate for it. Conversation is “spicier than the jerk chicken,” and before you know it you’ll be back at her one-bedroom in the East Village, quite possibly “getting lucky.”

THE CHICK & HEN

Perfect for breakfast “after sleeping together,” with “killer coffee” that will “help cure your seven-beer/three-aquavit hangover.” Not that you need it—your “amplified high spirits” after having had sex for the first time in “eight months” should do the trick.

DESARCINA'S

So what if she thought the movie was “pretentious and contrived” and you felt it was a “masterpiece” and are dying to inform her that “she doesn’t know what she’s talking about”? Remember, you were looking for a woman who wouldn’t “yes” you all the time. And after one bite of chef Leonard Desarcina’s “duck manqué” and a sip of the “generous” green Margaritas you’ll start to see that she might have a point.

GORDY'S

Don’t be ashamed if you don’t know what wine to order with your seared minnow; the “incredibly knowledgeable” waiters will be more than pleased to assist. But if she makes fun of “the way you never make eye contact with people,” you might turn “snappish” and end up having your first “serious fight,” one where feelings are “hurt.”

“Bring your wallet,” say admirers of Louis Grenouille’s pan-Asian-Mexican-style fare, because it’s “so expensive you’ll start to wonder why she hasn’t yet picked up a tab.” The “celebrity meter is high,” and “Peter Jennings” at the table next to yours might spark an “inane political argument” where you find yourself “irrationally defending Enron” and finally saying aloud, “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Don’t let her “stuff herself,” as she might use that as an excuse to go to sleep “without doing it.”

RIGMAROLE

At this Wall Street old boys’ club, don’t be surprised if you run into one of her “ex-boyfriends” who works in “finance.” Be prepared for his “power play,” when he sends over a pitcher of “the freshest-tasting sangria this side of Barcelona,” prompting her to visit his table for “ten minutes” and to come back “laughing” and suddenly critical of your “cravat.” The room is “snug,” to say the least, and it’s not the best place to say, full voice, “What the fuck were you thinking dating him?” But don’t overlook the “best paella in town” and a din “so loud” you won’t notice that neither of you is saying anything.

TATI

Prices so “steep” you might feel you made a serious “career gaffe” by taking the “high road” and being an academic rather than “selling out” like “every other asshole she’s gone on with.” The “plush seats” come in handy if she’s forty-five minutes late and arrives looking a little “preoccupied” and wearing “a sly smile.”

VANDERWEI’S

Be careful not to combine “four dry sakes” with your “creeping feeling of insecurity and dread,” or you might find yourself saying, “Wipe that damn grin off your face!” The bathrooms are “big and glamorous,” so you won’t mind spending an hour with your cheeks pressed against the “cool tiled floor” after she “walks out.” And the hip East Village location can’t be beat, since her apartment is “within walking distance,” which makes it very convenient if you should choose to “lean on her buzzer for an hour” until she calls “the cops.”

ZACHARIA AND SONS & CO.

This “out of the way,” “dirt cheap,” “near impossible to find,” “innocuous” diner is ideal for “eating solo” and insuring that you “won’t run into your ex, who has gone back to the bond trader.” The “mediocre at best” burgers and “soggy fries” will make you wish you “never existed” and wonder why you’re so “frustrated with your life” and unable to sustain a “normal,” “healthy” “relationship.”

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