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Maybe the new millennium caused the flurry. Maybe it was the opposite of lemmings, how people clung to each other out of fear of perishability. Whatever the cause, adultery was in air given the number of movies, books, articles, and shows. It was a worldwide trend with surprising participants and equally bewildering results. The Buttafucos and Clintons and Netanyahus stayed together. Josie's ex-friends Nancy and Stan didn't. Maybe because Stan's illness left him in a wheelchair for life. What about "in sickness and health," Josie wondered when she heard the circumstances of their separation.

And of course the development that should be concealed until much later in the story was that Nancy, who seemed as normal and wholesome as Betty Crocker, had had in leaving Stan a brief affair with Josie's husband. Maybe Josie had unconsciously urged Dan on. She had remembered watching Francois Mitterand's funeral and commenting positively about the mistress who stood at the side of the wife. She had lambasted Congress for invading Bill Clinton's privacy. Maybe that had been Dan's invitation to stray. Or midlife itself, that great chasm we stare into, each at our own moment of mortality.

Dan had been the crowbar that pried open Nancy's marriage. Josie liked the analogy. It made Dan seem strong and useful and civic-minded, like an appliance repairman or a Chicago alderman bringing a constituent a new garbage can. But it also made Josie an unwilling statistic. She and Dan were among the hordes who made up the numbers, sixty percent of all couples by one survey, eighty percent by another. Clerics, politicians, movie stars, electronics dealers, school teachers, landscape artists, jugglers, everyone was sleeping with someone other than a spouse. The high school baseball coach had sex with Josie's niece's friend. Tiny Eve at work, who had a downy moustache, was seeing Lew, who was

tall and skinny as a fledgling tree. Tall or short, ruddy or sallow, those with weak chins and mottled complexions, women whose cancers were eating their insides and men whose arteries were as clogged as old sewer lines, were busy in bed with people they called Sweetie, Teddy Bear, and Paris, after the place they would travel together some day.

Maybe Josie was the only one not screwing a near-stranger, she thought in the supermarket. It seemed that ever since she'd discovered what Dan had done, men leered at her. Everyone was a suspect. Everyone craved her short, muscular arms and her sagging post-post partum breasts. Johosephat, the amiable, pock-marked Indian man who bagged groceries, seemed to look at her a new way as did Pierce at the Peugeot dealer where her car was broken down forty-two percent of the time, a high number for a car but low on the scale for adultery. The principal's portly assistant smilingly showed her photos of antique furniture he had re-finished with his pudgy hands. The clerk at the drugstore told her of his anorexia, his bulimia, his two nervous breakdowns, and his advanced degree in psychology. Wherever she was in the store she frequented less and less, he'd find her and greet her by name. Her son's old basketball coach showed up at her door and asked to use the phone. His wife was out of town, Josie knew. When Josie tripped in her new summer clogs and blackened her right eye, even stranger men joined the group: truckers and rockers and head-bangers and loners whose initials were carved in their forearms. Rough trade, they must have thought, imagining the left hook someone had thrown her way. She must still be attractive, she presumed, so what was it about her that had led Dan into Nancy's bed? And where had that bed been?

And Nancy herself, why choose her old ex-friend with the rosy cheeks and cheerleader's enthusiasm for the most mundane things? Breathless, Nancy would inform Josie that she had found a new cleaner for the rug the dog soiled or a new plant food for her antique gold roses. They had been friends only briefly when their children were young. They'd eaten lunch while their daughters squabbled and played clap games and spilled their sticky Shirley Temples decades ago. Why have an affair with Dorsey Conners? Josie imagined Nancy cutting out items from women's magazines for Dan and her to try. "*Redbook* says we should play delivery man," she'd cheerfully tell Dan, reporting verbatim on the article, Nancy, for whom the song "Don't go changin'" could have been inspired.

"She has an original thought every decade or so," Josie told Dan, whose strategy with Josie was post-affair dignity. Maybe having an affair had been like ordering the newest blended wine, a Viognier. Maybe it was akin to eating yak stew at a Tibetan restaurant, an experience that was interesting and diverting but didn't essentially change one's life. Why was Josie so upset, Dan wondered, so desperate, so sad? Dan wasn't going to Tibet after all – his plan had never been to leave her.

During what Josie came to call The Year of Eating Yak Stew, Country and Western songs took on a new relevance. She turned her car stereo to 93.3 and wailed along with the yearning men and broken-hearted women whose lovers had done them wrong. Was it any different because she and Dan had never been in a bar-room brawl? Wasn't passion the same, betrayal the same? "Ruby, don't take your love to town," an oldie wailed. "And now it feels so empty/that this lonely house will never be the same," George Jones crooned.

But maybe Dan disagreed with Josie, supposing that being civilized was the very reason these things happened and got played out. For him, it had been a way to enrich the fabric of life, adding shiny new fibers. For him, perhaps, it was the expectation of their group, that someday one of them would stray and the other be civilized about it, perhaps even a little proud that their comfort level was so high. Dan was acting like the cultural attaché of a shameless empire. It was below him to discuss the sordid details with Josie, who was rather crass for wanting to know.

"You wanted to conquer but not divide," Josie offered. Dan looked at her face like it was the saddest dessert at a cafeteria display. He rumbled his brow. He frowned in puzzlement. It was an open and shut case, no more tears and accusations and bewilderment required. In his sudden calmness about the whole arrangement – "I was weak" was the best explanation he could muster – he reminded Josie more of Nancy, so assured in her simplicity, carrying like a mantle the broad conviction of those who don't think things through. Maybe the Stoics were simply uncontentplative. They could live in a barrel and drink wormwood because there was nothing to consider.

Josie, on the other hand, considered everything. "How could you have affection for someone who had dumped her husband because of a physical disability?"

"He was unkind to her," Dan explained. "When she wanted to be a dance therapist, he didn't support her decision."

"Tell me about unkindness," Josie thought as she imagined the plain, lanky, self-conscious woman swaying naked like a broken bush.

But more than rancor, Josie felt love for Dan. That was the essential problem, that she couldn't just extract herself from her life. She couldn't think of using someone as a crowbar to pry open her miserable marriage because she didn't have one. She and Dan were in it for life, she knew. It was the sentence that love had decreed, a life sentence.

"Do you believe in capital punishment?" she asked strangers, most of whom were against it. Should she change her political views, move to a more conservative region, request to witness executions, become a spokesperson for swift removals? No, it wasn't in her not to love him. Although she thought about it sometimes. How could I unlove him, she wondered as she drove to her therapist's office, where she wept and discussed how much she loved Dan, how close they were, how they had learned from this and were healing.

On the weekend of their thirtieth anniversary, they went to a place they had visited in their youth, a roomy B & B up the coast in windswept Mendocino. They stood on the balcony, staring down at the gray water slapping the rocks. What was Dan thinking, Josie wondered of him. Was he wondering how it had happened to him, this thing called a life? She was about to ask him when their attention was taken by something they saw at a distance, a whale surfacing and thrashing in its yearly pattern of migration that took it to Baja to deliver its two-ton baby.

"Look at that!" Dan shouted in breathless excitement.

"We're lucky to see that," Josie answered.

"We're lucky in lots of ways," Dan said softly, the hush in his voice a sweet and tender thing.