Appendix
“CLICK?”

So reads their computer monitor when, in time, “Fred” and “Irma” haul themselves out of bed, wash up a bit, slip back into their undies, and—still nuzzling, patting, chuckling, sighing—go to check their e-mail on Fred’s already booted-up machine. Just that single uppercase imperative verb or sound-noun floating mid-screen, where normally the “desktop” would appear with its icons of their several files: HERS, HIS, SYSTEM, APPLICATIONS, FINANCES, HOUSE STUFF, INTERNET, ETC (their catch-all file). Surprised Irma, having pressed a key to disperse the screen-saver program and repeated aloud the word that oddly then appeared, calls Fred over to check it out, but the house cybercoach is as puzzled thereby as she. Since the thing’s onscreen, however, and framed moreover in a bordered box, they take it to be a command or an invitation—anyhow an option button, like SAVE or CANCEL, not merely the name of the sound that their computer mouse makes when . . . well, when clicked.

So they click (Irma does) on CLICK, and up comes a familiar title, or in this case maybe subtitle—The Hypertextuality of Everyday Life—followed this time by a parenthesized and italicized instruction: (Click on any word of the above).

“Your turn,” declares our Irma. That’s not the woman’s real
name, any more than the man’s is Fred; those are their “online” names, in a manner of speaking, for reasons presently to be made clear. Never mind, just now, their “real” names: They would involve us in too much background, personal history, all the stuff that real names import; we would never get on with the story. Sufficient to say that although these two are unmarried, they’re coupled housemates of some years’ standing, a pair of Baby-Boomer TINKs (Two Incomes, No Kids) of some ethnicity or other, not necessarily the same, and profession ditto—but never mind those, either. Sufficient to say that what they’ve just rolled out of the sack from (one of them perhaps more reluctantly than the other) is an extended session of makeup sex after an extended lovers’ quarrel, the most serious of their coupleship: a quarrel currently truced but by no means yet resolved and maybe inherently unresolvable, although they’re really working on it, fingers crossed.

A bit of background—here, perhaps? That’s Fred’s uncharacteristic suggestion, to which Irma, uncharacteristically, forces herself to reply “Nope: Your turn is your turn. On with the story.”

And so her friend—partner, mate, whatever—reaches from behind her to the mouse and, kissing her (glossy auburn) hair, clicks on Hypertextuality. (This parenthesized matter, they agree, is stuff that might be left out of or cut from The Fred and Irma Story — see below—but that they’ve agreed to put or leave in, at least for the present.) (In the opinion of one of them, there could be much more of it.) (In the opinion of the other, much less—but never mind.)

No surprise, Fred’s selection: Hypertextuality is that (sub)title’s obvious topic word, modified by the innocuous-seeming article before it and the homely prepositional phrase after (containing its own unexotic substantive [Life] with adjectival modifier [Everyday]). The man of them, one infers correctly, is the sort who gets right down to business, to the meat of the matter. Everybody knows, after all (or believes that he/she knows), what “everyday life” is, different as may be the everyday lives of Kuwaiti oil sheiks and of American felons serving life sentences
in maximum-security prisons without possibility of parole (different, for that matter, as may be the everyday lives of FWFs [Friends Who Fornicate] when they’re at their separate businesses). The term “hypertextuality” itself may or may not interest our Fred; he’s computer-knowledgeable, but not computer-addicted. The phrase “everyday life,” however, most certainly doesn’t, in itself. The fellow’s too busy leading (perhaps being led by?) his everyday life to be attracted to it as a subject. With the woman it’s another story (possibly to come).

But precisely because he hasn’t associated something as fancy-sounding as “hypertextuality” with something as ordinary as “everyday life,” the juxtaposition of the two piques Fred’s curiosity. Not impossibly, for the man’s no ignoramus (nor is his companion), he hears in it an echo of Sigmund Freud’s provocatively titled 1904 essay The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. Everyday life psychopathological? (Try asking Irma, Fred.) (He will—another time.) Everyday life hypertextual? How so? In what sense? To find out, Fred has clicked on the implied proposition’s most prominent but least certain term.

There are those (the computer script now declares in effect, along with most of the paragraph above) who out of mere orneriness will select one of the phrase’s apparently insignificant elements—the The, for example, or the of—as if to say, “Gotcha! You said ‘Click on any word . . .’” The joke, however, if any, is on them: A good desk dictionary will list at least eight several senses of the homely word “the” in its adjectival function plus a ninth in its adverbial (“the sooner the better,” etc.): twenty lines of fine-print definition in all, whereas the comparatively technical term just after it, “theanthropic,” is nailed down in a mere three and a half. As for “of”: no fewer than nineteen several definitions, in twenty-five lines of text, whereas the fancy word “oeuvre,” just before it, is dispatched in a line and a half. Try “as,” Fred, as in “As for ‘of’”; try “for,” Irma, or “or”: The “simple” words you’ll find hardest to define, while such technoglossy ones as “hypertextuality” . . .

Well. F and friend have just been shown an example of it, no? The further texts that lie behind any presenting text. Look
up (that is, click on) the innocent word “of,” and you get a
couple hundred words of explanation. Click on any one of
those or any one of their several phrases and clauses, such as
“phrases and clauses,” and get hundreds more. Click on any of
those, etc. etc.—until, given time and clicks enough, you will
have “accessed” virtually the sum of language, the entire ex­
pressible world. That’s hypertext, guys, in the sense meant here
(there are other senses; see Hypertext): not the literal menus­
of-menus and texts-behind-texts that one finds on CD-ROMs
and other computer applications, but rather the all-but-infinite
array of potential explanations, illustrations, associations,
glosses and exempla, even stories, that may be said to lie not
only behind any verbal formulation but behind any real-world
image, scene, action, interaction. Enough said?

(If so, click EXIT; otherwise select any one of the four
foregoing— image, scene, etc.—for further amplification.)

Restless Fred moves to click on action but defers to Irma
(their joint mood is, as mentioned, still tentative just now; he’s
being more deferential than is his wont), who clicks on scene
and sees what the Author/Narrator sees as he pens this: a
(white adult male right) hand moving a (black MontBlanc
Meisterst"uck 146 fountain) pen (left to right) across the (blue)
lines of (three-ring looseleaf) paper in a (battered old) binder
on a (large wooden former grade-school) worktable all but
covered with the implements and detritus of the writer’s trade.
(Parenthesized elements in this case = amplifications that
might indeed be cut but might instead well be “hypertexted”
behind the bare-bones description, to be accessed on demand,
just as yet further amplifications [not given, but perhaps hyper­
texted] might lie behind “white” “adult male,” “MontBlanc”
“Meisterst"uck,” etc.) For example, to mention only some of
the more conspicuous items: miscellaneous printed and manu­
script pages, (thermal) coffee mug (of a certain design) on (cork)
coaster, (annotated) desk calendar (displaying MAY), notebooks
and notepads, the aforeconsulted (American Heritage) desk dic-
tionary open to the “the” page (1333) on its (intricately hand-carved Indian) table-stand, (Panasonic auto-stop electric) pencil sharpener (in need of emptying), (Sunbeam digital) clock (reading 9:47 A.M.), (AT&T 5500 cordless) telephone (in place on base unit), Kleenex box (Scott tissues, actually) half full (half empty?) . . . et cetera. Beyond the table one sees the workroom’s farther wall: two (curtained and venetian-blinded double-hung) windows, between them a (three-shelf) bookcase (not quite filled with books, framed photos, and knickknacks and) topped by a wall mirror. The mirror (left of center) gives back a view not of the viewer—fortunately, or we’d never get out of the loop and on with the story—but of the workroom door (presently closed against interruption) in the wall behind. (The two windows are closed, their figured curtains tied back, their blinds raised. Through them one sees first the green tops of foundation shrubbery [from which Irm infers, correctly, that it’s a ground-floor room], then assorted trees [L] and a sward of lawn [R] in the middle distance, beyond which lies a substantial body of water, currently gray. Two wooded points of land can be seen extending into this waterway from the right-hand window’s right-hand side, the first perhaps half a mile distant, an uncamouflaged gooseblind at its outboard end, the second perhaps a mile distant and all but obscured now by a light drizzle that also blurs the yet-more-distant horizontal where [gray] water meets [gray] sky.)

(Click on any of these items, including those in brackets.)

But “Enough already,” says nudgy Fred, and commandeers the mouse to click action, whereupon some of the leaves on some of those trees move slightly in some breeze from some direction, the water-surface ripples, and across it a large waterfowl flaps languidly left to right, just clearing some sort of orange marker-float out there on his/her way . . . upstream, one reasonably supposes, given that the stretch beyond that bird and those two points seems open water.

“That’s action?” Fred scoffs, and moves to click again, but determined Irma stays his mouse-hand with her free right
(Irm’s a southpaw) while she registers yet a few further details. Atop that bookcase, for example (and therefore doubled in the mirror), are (L to R:) a (ceramic-based) lamp, the carapace of a (medium-size horseshoe) crab, and a (Lucite-box-framed) photograph of three (well-dressed) people (L to R: an elderly man, a middle-aged man, and a younger woman) in (animated) conversation (at some sort of social function).

(Click on any detail, parenthesized or non-, in this scene.)

Irma springs for well-dressed—not nearly specific enough, by her lights, as a description of three people “at some sort of social function” in the photograph on the bookcase in the not-yet-fully-identified scene on their computer’s video display terminal. With a really quite commendable effort of will, “Fred” restrains his impulse to utter some exasperated imprecation and snatch the freaking mouse from his freaking partner to freaking click Fast Freaking Forward, On with the Story, EXIT, QUIT, Whatever. Instead, he busses again his lover’s (glossy) (auburn) hair, bids her “Have fun; I’ll be futzing around outside, okay?,” and (having slipped into jeans and T-shirt) clicks with his feet, so to speak, on the scene beyond his own workroom window.

Which twilit scene happens to be a small suburban back yard near the edge of the nation’s troubled capital city, where this occasionally dysfunctional pair pursue their separate occupations: Mark the Expediter, as he has lately come to call himself; Valerie the Enhancer, ditto. Those are their “real” given names, if not really the real names of their jobs, and with the reader’s permission (because all these digressions, suspensions, parentheses, and brackets are setting this Narrator’s teeth on edge as well as Mark’s) we’ll just follow him out there for a bit while Val explores to her still-bruised heart’s content the hypertextuality of everyday life.

Okay. How they got into that “Fred and Irma” business (Mark and I can reconstruct less distractedly now as he waves to a neighbor-lady and idly deadheads a few finished rhododendron
blooms along their open side-porch) was as follows: They having pretty well burned out, through this late-May Sunday, their scorching quarrel of the day before—enough anyhow to make and eat together a weary but entirely civil dinner—after clean-up Mark had volunteered to show Valerie, as he had several times previously promised, some things he'd lately learned about accessing the Internet for purposes other than e-mail; more specifically, about navigating the World Wide Web, and in particular (Valerie being Valerie, Mark Mark) about the deployment of "bookmarks" as shortcuts through that electronic labyrinth, the black hole of leisure and very antidote to spare time. Mark is, as aforenoted, no computer freak; the PC in his Expediter's office, their Macintosh at home, are tools, not toys, more versatile than fax machine and phone but more time-expensive, too, and—like dictionaries, encyclopedias, and hardware stores (this last in Mark's case; substitute department stores and supermarkets in Val's)—easier to get into than out of. Tactfully, tactfully (by his lights, anyhow) (the only lights he can finally steer by)—for they really were and are still burned, and their armistice is as fragile as it is heartfelt—he led her through the flashy homepage of their Internet service provider's program, actually encouraging her to sidetrack here and there in the What's New? and What's Cool? departments (she trying just as determinedly to blind her peripheral vision, as it were, and walk straight down the aisles, as it were, of those enticing menus) and then sampling a curious Web site that he had "bookmarked" two days earlier, before their disastrous Saturday excursion to the National Aquarium in Baltimore.

http://www.epiphs.art, it was addressed: the homepage of an anonymous oddball (Net-named "CNG") who offered a shifting menu of what he/she called "electronic epiphanies," or "epiphs." On the Friday, that menu had comprised three entrees: (1) Infinite Regression v. All-but-Interminable Digression, (2) "Flower in the Crannied Wall," and (3) The Hypertextuality of Everyday Life. Mark had clicked on the curious-sounding second option and downloaded a spiel that at first interested but
soon bored him, having to do with the relation between a short poem by Tennyson—

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of your crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

—and the virtually endless reticulations of the World Wide Web. This time (that is, on this post-meridianal, post-prandial, post-quarrel but ante-makeup-sexual Sunday) the menu read (1) The Coastline Measurement Problem and the Web, (2) “The Marquise went out at five” (CNG seemed to favor quotations as second entries; this one was familiar to neither of our characters), and (3) The Hypertextuality of Everyday Life. That third item being the only carryover, M suggested they see what was what. V clicked on it—the entire title, as no option was then offered to select from among its component terms—and they found themselves involved in a bit of interactive “e-fiction” called “Fred and Irma Go Shopping,” of which I’ll make the same short work that they did:

Onscreen, the underlined items were “hot”: i.e., highlighted as hypertext links to be clicked on as the interacting reader chose. Methodical Mark would have started with Fred and worked his way L to R, but Valerie, left-handing the mouse, went straight for Irma:

Irma V., 43, art-school graduate, divorced, no children, currently employed as enhancer by small but thriving graphics firm in Annapolis MD while preparing show of her own computer-inspired fractal art for small but well-regarded gallery in Baltimore. Commutes to work from modest but comfortable and well-appointed rowhouse in latter city’s Bolton Hill neighborhood, 2 doors up from her latest lover, Fred M.
“My turn?” Mark had asked at this point, and clicked on Fred M. before Valerie could choose from among divorced, no children, enhancer, latest, well-appointed rowhouse, and more.

Fred M., software expediter and current lover of Irma V.

“That’s the ticket,” in Mark’s opinion: “Who cares how old the stud is or where he majored in what? On with their story already.”

“My friend the Expediter,” Val had murmured warningly, having raised her free hand at his “Who cares?” Whereat her friend the Expediter (it was from here that they borrowed those job-titles for themselves: Valerie in fact does interior design and decoration for a suburban D.C. housing developer; Mark, a not-yet-successful novelist, does capsule texts on everything under the sun for a CD-ROM operation in College Park, distilling masses of info into style-free paragraphs of a couple hundred words), duly warned, had replied, “Sorry there: Enhance, enhance.”

But she had humored him by clicking on on, whereupon the title reappeared with only its last term now highlighted: “Fred and Irma Go Shopping.”

“Off we go,” had invited M. But when the clicked link called up a three-option menu—Department Store, Supermarket, Other—V said “Uh-oh,” and even Mark had recognized the too-perilous analogy to their debacle of the day before. Expediter and Enhancer in Supermarket, he with grocery list in one hand, pencil in other, and eye on watch, she already examining the (unlisted) radicchio and improvising new menu plans down the line. . . .

“Unh-unh,” he had agreed, and kissed her mouse-hand, then her mouth, then her throat. By unspoken agreement, bedward they’d headed, leaving the Mac to its screen-saver program (tropical fish, with bubbly sound effects). Somewhat later
Valerie/Irma, re-undied, had returned to check for e-mail; the marine fauna dispersed into cyberspace; there floated CLICK in place of CNG’s unpursued interactive e-tale—and here we all are.

Rather, here’s Valerie at Mark’s workstation in their (detached suburban) house (V’s studio is across the hall; unlike those FWFs Irma and Fred, our couple are committed [though unsanctified and unlegalized] life-partners, each with half equity in their jointly owned [commodious, well-appointed, 1960s-vintage] split-level in Silver Spring [MD]), and here are Mark and I out on the dusky porch, deadheading the rhodos while thinking hard and more or less in synch about certain similarities among (1) the sore subject of their Saturday set-to, (2) a certain aspect of their recent makeup sex, (3) the so-called Coastline Measurement Problem afore-optioned by CNG, (4) an analogous problem or aspect of storytelling, and (5) how it is, after all, to be a Self, not on the World Wide Web but in the wide web of the world. Can M think hard about five things at once? He can, more or less expeditiously, when his attention’s engaged, plus (6) Zeno’s famous paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise, plus (7) the difference between Socrates’s trances and the Buddha’s. Our chap is nothing if not efficient—a phrase worth pondering—and I’m enhancing his efficiency as worst I can, by impeding it. Valerie, meanwhile (at my off-screen prodding), has reluctantly torn her attention away from that photograph on that bookshelf in that creekside workroom in that onscreen scene hypertexted behind the word “scene” in the definition hypertexted behind Hypertextuality in CNG’s menu-option (3) The Hypertextuality of Everyday Life, itself hypertexted the second time up behind the word CLICK. Twenty-year-old wedding-reception photo, she has learned it is, of (present) Narrator with (present) wife and (late) father at (post-)wedding do for (now-divorced) daughter and (then-) new son-in-law—and nothing accessible therebeyond. Interactivity is one thing, restless Reader; prying’s another. Having lingered briefly on the shrub outside the RH window (Virur-
num burkwoodii: grows to 6 ft [but here cropped to 4 for the sake of view and ventilation], clusters 3 in. wide, blooms in spring, zone 4, and it’s a lucky wonder her professional eye didn’t fix on those figured curtains, or we’d never have gotten her outside) and then on that waterfowl (great blue heron [Ardea herodias, not coerulea]) flapping languidly up-creek (off Chesapeake Bay, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, where Narrator pens these words as he has penned many others), she’s “progressing” unhurriedly toward those two intriguing points of land in the farther distance but can’t resist clicking en route on that orange marker-float out yonder near the creek channel:

Marks an eel pot, 1 of 50 deployed in this particular tidal creek at this particular season by waterman Travis Pritchett of nearby Rock Hall MD in pursuit, so to speak, of “elvers”: young eels born thousands of miles hence in the Sargasso Sea and now thronging instinctively back to the very same freshwater tributaries of the Chesapeake from which their parents migrated several years earlier to spawn them in mid-ocean: one of nature’s most mysterious and powerful reproductive phenomena. Pritchett’s catch will be processed locally for marketing either as seafood in Europe and Japan or as crab bait for Chesapeake watermen later in the season.

Travel-loving Val goes for Sargasso Sea, and there we’ll leave her to circulate indefinitely with the spawning eels and other denizens of the sargassum while we click on item (r) some distance above: the sore subject of their Saturday set-to:

They love and cherish each other, this pair. Although neither is a physical knockout, each regards the other and her- or himself as satisfactorily attractive in face and form. Although neither can be called outstanding in his or her profession, both are entirely competent, and neither is particularly career-ambitious in her or his salaried job. Both enjoy their work and take an interest in their partner’s. Most important, perhaps, although neither has a history of successful long-term relations with sig-
nificant others, both have enough experience, insight, and un-
 arrogance to have smoothed their rougher edges, tempered
 their temperaments, developed their reciprocal forbearance,
 and in general recognized that at their ages and stages neither
 is likely to do better than they’ve currently done in the mate-
 finding way; indeed, that despite their sundry differences (at
 least some of which they’ve learned to regard as compensations
 for each other’s shortcomings: See below), they are fortunately
 well matched in disposition, taste, and values. Neither drinks
 more than an occasional glass of wine at dinner, or smokes
 tobacco, or sleeps around, or fancies house-pets; both are
 borderline vegetarian, environmentally concerned, morally se-
 rious but unsanctimonious secular unenthusiastic Democrats.
 Mark has perhaps the quicker intelligence, the duller sensibil-
 ity, the more various knowledge; Valerie perhaps the deeper
 understanding, the readier human insight, the sounder educa-
 tion. They’ve never quarreled over sex or money. Both wish
 they had children, but neither finally wants them. (Etc.—
 though that’s really enough background for their Saturday set-
to, no?)

They do have differences, of course: M enjoys socializing
 with others more than V does; she enjoys traveling more than
 he. He’s the more liberal (or less frugal) with money; she’s the
 more generous in the good-works way. He’s less ready to
 take offense but also slower to put their occasional tiffs behind
 him. She leaves closet and cabinet doors ajar and will not learn
 how to load their dishwasher properly (by his standards) (and
 the user’s manual’s); he wears his socks and underwear for two
 days before changing (turning his briefs inside out the second
day!) and often makes no effort to stifle his burps and farts
 when it’s just the two of them. (Etc., although [etc.]!) These
 lapses or anyhow disharmonies they’ve learned to live with,
 by and large. The difference that really drives each up her or
 his wall is the one herein amply hinted at already, if scarcely
 yet demonstrated: at its mildest, a tease- or sigh-provoker, a
 prompter of rolled eyes and of fingertips drummed on dash-
 board, chair arm, desk- or thigh-top; at its sorest . . .
Saturday. Their week’s official work done and essential house-chores attended to, they had planned a drive up to nearby Baltimore to tour that city’s Inner Harbor development, which they hadn’t done in a while, and in particular the National Aquarium, which they’d never. After a not unreasonable detour to an upscale dry-goods emporium in the vast shopping complex at Four Corners, a quick shot from their house—where Val really did need to check patterns and prices of a certain sort of figured drapery material for a job-in-the-works (and, having done so, pointed out to Mark that there across the mall was a Radio Shack outlet where he could conveniently pick up the whatchacallit-adapter that he, not she, insisted they needed for their sound system’s FM antenna [while she popped into the next-door Hallmark place for just a sec to replenish their supply of oddball greeting cards, which was running low])—they zipped from the D.C. Beltway up I-95 to Baltimore and reached Harbor Place in time for a pickup lunch about an hour past noon (no matter, as they’d had a latish breakfast)—hour and a half past noon, more like, since the main parking lots were full by that time, as Mark had fretsomely predicted, and so they had to park (quite) a few blocks away, and it wouldn’t’ve made sense not to take a quick looksee at the new Oriole Park at Camden Yards that was such a hit with baseball fans and civic-architecture buffs alike, inasmuch as there it stood between their parking garage and the harbor and since their objective, after all (she reminded him when he put on his Fidget Face), wasn’t to grab a sandwich, see a fish, and bolt for home, but to tour Harbor Place, right? Which really meant the city’s harbor area, which surely included the erstwhile haunts of Babe Ruth and Edgar Allan Poe. They were on no timetable, for pity’s sake!

Agreed, agreed—but he was a touch hungry, was Mr. Mark, and therefore maybe a touch off his feed, as it were, especially after that unscheduled and extended stop at Four Corners; and it was to be expected that the ticket line at the Aquarium might well be considerable, the day being both so fine and so advanced...
“So we’ll catch the flight-flick at the IMAX theater in the Science Center instead,” Val verbally shrugged; “or I’ll stand in the Aquarium line while you fetch us something from the food pavilion, and then you stand while I do The Nature Company. What’s the problem?”

The problem, in Mark’s ever-warmer opinion, was—rather, the problems were—that (a) this constant sidetracking, this what’s-the-rush digression, can take the edge off the main event by the time one gets to it, the way some restaurants lay on so many introductory courses and side dishes that one has no appetite for the entrée, or the way foreplay can sometimes be so protracted that (etc.). Having no timetable or deadlines doesn’t mean having no agenda or priorities, wouldn’t she agree? And (b) it wasn’t as if this were just something that happened to happen today, or he’d have no grounds to grouse; it was the way certain people went at everything, from leaving for work in the morning to telling an anecdote. How often had he waited in their Volvo wagon to get going in time to drop her off at her Metro stop on the way to his office and finally gone back into the house and found her with one earring and one shoe on, making an impulsive last-minute phone call while simultaneously revising her do list with one hand and rummaging in her purse with the other? (Valerie is a whiz at cradling the phone between ear and shoulder, a trick Mark can’t manage even with one of those gizmos designed for the purpose.) How often had he been obliged to remind her, or to fight the urge to remind her, in mid-narrative in mid-dinner party, that the point of her story-in-regress was their little niece’s response to what Val’s sister’s husband’s mother had said when the tot had walked in on her in the guest-bath shower stall, not what that widow-lady’s new Cuban-American boyfriend (whom she hadn’t even met yet at the time of the incident) apparently does for a living? And (c) . . .

But he never reached (c) (click on it if you’re curious), because by this time V was giving as good as she got, right there on the promenade under the old USS Constellation’s bowsprit, where their progress toward the distant tail of the National Aquarium
ticket line caesura’d for this exchange. As for (a), damn it to hell, if in his (wrongheaded) opinion she was a Gemini who preferred appetizers to entrées both at table and (as he had more than once intimated) in bed, then he was a bullheaded whambamthankyouma’amer of a Taurus whose idea of foreplay was three minutes of heavyweight humping to ejaculation instead of two; and (b) who, because he himself had his hands full thinking and breathing simultaneously, couldn’t imagine anyone’s doing five things at once better than he could manage one; for the reason that (c) . . .

But she never reached (c), for the reason that (b) (now [b1]) reminded her that (b2) his idea of a joke was the punchline, his idea of a whodunit the last page, revealing who done it (no wonder he couldn’t place his Middle-less novels even with an agent, much less with a publisher); and (a2) if she might presume to back up a bit, now that it occurred to her, his idea of a full agenda was a single item, his top priority always and only the bottom line, his eternal (and infernal) Let’s get on with the story in fact a Let’s get done with the story, for the reason that—(b3), she guessed, or maybe (a3), who gave a damn?—his idea of living life was the same, Let’s get done with it, and every time she saw him ready and fidgeting in the car a full ten minutes earlier than he knew—well as she they needed to leave for work, she was tempted to suggest that they drive straight to the funeral parlor instead and get done with it (etc., okay? On to the freaking fish already!).

But they never reached the FF ticket line, far less the marine exhibits themselves, and that’s a pity, inasmuch as in the 2.5 million recirculating gallons of scrupulously monitored exhibit-water in the National Aquarium’s 130-odd tanks and pools are to be found some 10,000 specimens (eels included), concerning every one of which much of natural-historical interest might be said. Under the volatile circumstances, however, it is no doubt as well they didn’t, for how could they imaginably have moved and paused harmoniously through the exhibits (Valerie tranced at the very first of them, Mark glancing already to see what’s next, and next after that) without re-
opening their quarrel? Which quarrel, mind, was still in noisy progress, if that’s the right word, there under the Constellation’s mighty bowsprit—which bowsprit, at the time I tell of, extended halfway across the promenade from the vessel’s prow toward the second-floor Indian restaurant above the first-floor Greek one in Harbor Place’s Pratt Street pavilion, but which at the time of this telling is alas no longer there, nor are those restaurants, nor is the formidable frigate-of-war (sister ship of Boston’s legendary Old Ironsides) whose bow that bowsprit sprits, or spritted, said vessel having been removed indefinitely for much-needed, long-overdue, and staggeringly expensive major overhaul—to the glancing amusement of passersby (the lovers’ spectacular, hang-it-all-out quarrel, I mean, of course, not the Constellation’s shifting to some marine-repair Limbo) including Yours Truly, who happened just then to be passing by and sympathetically so saw and heard them, or a couple not unlike them, toe-to-toeing it, and who then or subsequently was inspired to imagine (etc.).

Embarrassed, wasted, desperate, and sore, tearfaced Valerie anon turned her back on the dear, congenitally blinkered bastard whom she so loves and just then despised and stomped off back toward the Light Street food pavilion and their parking garage, no objective in mind except breathing space and weeping room. Mark was damned if he’d go chasing after the beloved, indispensable, impossible, darling bitch, but he did so after all, sort of; anyhow trudged off in the same general direction, but made himself pause—Valerie-like, though in part to spite her—to half attend a juggling act in progress at the promenade’s central plaza. Although he was as aware as was V (and no less alarmed) that the heavy artillery just fired could never be unfired and that it had perilously, perhaps mortally, wounded their connection, he nonetheless registered with glum admiration the jugglers’ so-skillful routine: their incremental accumulation of difficulties and complications at a pace adroitly timed to maximize dramatic effect without straining audience attention past the point of diminishing returns, a business as tricky in its way as the juggling itself—and now he
couldn’t refind Valerie among the promenaders. Well, there was The Nature Company yonder; she had mentioned that. And beyond it were the food concessions; she must have been as hungry by then as he, but probably as appetiteless, too, from their wring-out. And somewhere beyond or among those concessions were the public restrooms, whereto she might have retreated to collect herself (V’s better than M at self-collection), and beyond them the parking ramp. Did she have her car keys? Probably, in her purse; anyhow there were spares in a magnetic holder under the rear bumper-brace. Would she drive off without him, for spite? He doubted it, although she seemed more hurt and angry than he’d ever known her to be; anyhow the ramp-ticket was in his wallet—not that she mightn’t pay the hefty lost-ticket fee just to strand him or, more likely, just to get out of there, with no thought of him either way. Most probably, however, she would just collapse in furious tears in the Volvo’s passenger seat, poor sweetheart, and then lay into him with more of her inexcusable even if not wholly off-the-mark insults when he tried to make peace with her, the bitch.

Well, she wasn’t in The Nature Company, where among the coruscating geodes and “Save the Rain Forest” stuff his attention was caught by one of those illuminated flat-projection earth-map clocks that show which parts of the planet are currently daylit and which in darkness (the East Coast of North America was just then correctly mid-afternoonish; darkness was racing already across Asia Minor, dawn approaching Kamchatka and Polynesia). What (momentarily) arrested him in this instance was not that vertiginous reminder of on-streaming time and the world’s all-at-onceness, but rather the profusion of continental coastlines, necessarily much stylized in so small-scale a rendering, but considerably articulated all the same. Chesapeake Bay, for example—180-some miles in straight-line length, but with upward of 9,600 miles of tidal shoreline in its forty major rivers and their all-but-innumerable creeks and coves—was a simple nick up there between Washington and Philadelphia, yet quite distinguishable in shape and position from Delaware Bay, just above it; even the Delmarva
Peninsula between them, no bigger here than a grain of rice, had overall its characteristic sand-flea shape. Framed nearby, as if to invite speculation on the contrast, was a large-scale, fine-grained aerial-photo map of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, every pier and building sharply resolved, including the no-longer-present-as-I-write-this Constellation: One could distinguish not only individual small watercraft paddling about or moored at the harbor bulkheads but their occupants as well, and strollers like varicolored sand-grains on the promenade.

One could not, however (Mark duly reflected, looking now for the exit to the food courts and/or for a glimpse of Valerie’s . . . yellow blouse, was it? Yes, he was almost certain: her yellow whatchacallit blouse with those thingamajigs on it and either a white skirt or white culottes; he couldn’t recall which and saw no sign of either), even with so fine a resolution, distinguish male from female, for example, or black from white from Asian; much less identify himself and Valerie having it out under the frigate’s bowsprit if they’d happened to be there doing that at that moment; much less yet see the thingumabobs on her whatchacallits and much less yet the individual whatsits on each thingumabob (etc.)—any more than the most finely drawn map of the Chesapeake could show every barnacle on every pile of every pier on every creeklet (etc.): the famous Coastline Measurement Problem afore-referred-to, in terms whereof the estuary’s shore-length could as well be put at 96,000,000 miles as 9,600 (etc.). Which-all led him to, but not yet across, the verge of recognizing . . .

Yellow blouse? Yes, out there by the Polish-sausage stand, but minus thingumajiggies and blousing a red-faced matron whose steatopygous buttocks were hugely sheathed in pink cotton warm-up pants (though there might, to be sure, he reminded himself, be a truly saintly spirit under all that [maybe helplessly genetic] grossness). No Middles to his novels, V had told him! His eye ever on the destination, not the getting there! Already figuring the server’s tip while she lingered over the appetizer! No greater evidence of the degree of Pal Val’s present pissed-offness than that she had been sidetracked neither in
The Nature Company, as even he had briefly been, nor in the food court (where she would normally have been provisioning the pair of them, bless her, with goodies both for present consumption and for future relishment at home), nor on the pedestrian overpass to the parking ramp, where in other circumstances she was entirely capable of dawdling to contemplate at length the vehicular traffic below, the cumulus formations overhead, the observation elevators up-and-downing the Hyatt Regency façade nearby. Unless she had indeed withdrawn into a women’s room (he had forgotten to locate the WCs; couldn’t’ve done anything in that precinct anyhow except dumbly stand by), she must have beelined for the car, as did he now finally too.

No Valerie. Well, she was more liable than he to forgetting the level- and pillar-number of their parking slot. Not impossibly, in her present turbled state, she was wandering the ramps in a weepy rage. Plenty turbled himself, he walked up one level and down one, gave up the search as counterproductive, leaned against the Volvo’s tailgate for some minutes, arms crossed, then trudged back, faute de mieux, toward the walkway/footbridge/overpass/whatever. Halfway across it he stopped, disconsolate, and simply stood—facing uptown, as it happened, but really seeing nothing beyond his distress.

Which let’s consider him with for just a paragraph. A physically healthy, mentally sound, well-educated, (usually) well-fed, comfortably housed and clothed, gainfully employed, not-unattractive early-fortyish middle-class male WASP American is at least temporarily on the outs with his housemate/girlfriend, a comparably advantaged and not-unattractive professional who has declared her opinion that he hasn’t the talent to achieve his heart-of-hearts career aim and that this deficit is of a piece with one general characteristic of his that she finds objectionable. So Mr. Mark’s pride is bruised, his self-respect ruffled, the future of his closest and most valued personal relationship uncertain indeed. So what? he has asked himself before any of us can ask him. The world comprises approximately 4.7 zillion more mattersome matters, from saving the tropical rain forests
to finding money enough in the chaotic post-Soviet Russian economy to bring their fiscally stranded cosmonauts back to earth. Not that love and loss, or commitment and (potential) estrangement, aren't serious even among Volvo-driving yuppies, but really, what of real consequence is at stake here? If this were fiction (the wannabe writer asked himself), a made-up story, why should anyone give a damn?

Well, it wasn't fiction, from Mark's perspective, although out of aspirant-professional habit he couldn't help considering (as he resumed his troubled path-retracement back to and through the Light Street pavilion in search of his dear damned Valerie) how, if it were, it ought properly to end. Reconciliation? On what terms? Uneasy armistice? Virtual divorce? In each case, signifying what of interest to a reader who presumes the characters and situation to be imaginary?

From our point of view, of course, they are imaginary, and so these questions immediately apply (in a proper story they would never have come up; bear in mind that it was heart-hurt Mark who raised them) and shall be duly though not immediately addressed. Even their allegedly Middle-challenged poser understood, however—as he rescanned in vain the food concessions and monitored for a fruitless while the traffic to and from the women's room after availing himself of the men's—that more's at stake here than the ups and downs of early-middle-aged Baby-Boomer love. Not until "tomorrow" (the Sun. following this sore Sat.) will CNG's interactive e-fiction serendipitously supply them the terms "Expediter" and "Enhancer" to shorthand the characterological differences that erupted under the Constellation's awesome bowsprit; but already back there on the footbridge Mark sensed that the conflict here is larger than any temperamental incompatibility between "Fred" and "Irma" or himself and Val: It's between fundamentally opposite views of and modes of dealing with the infinitely complex nature of reality.

Valerie sensed that, too; she was, indeed, already deep into the pondering thereof when, almost simultaneously, she espied him approaching from the second-level fooderies and he her at
a railing-side table on the open deck out there overlooking the promenade. So far from roaming the ramps in a weepy blind rage or storming off alone in the Volvo (Val’s better than Mark, we remember, at shrugging off their infrequent blowups; he himself tends to forget that and to project from his own distress), our yellow-bloused Enhancer, her chair tipped back and feet propped on balcony rail, was finishing off a chocolate-chocolate-chip frozen-yogurt waffle cone while simultaneously (a) teaching her sumbitch lover a lesson by neither fleeing nor chasing after him; (b) facilitating their reunion by staying put, as her mother had taught her to do in little-girlhood if “lost” in, say, a department store or supermarket; and (c) calming her still-roused adrenaline with a spot of yogurt while keeping an eye out for friend M and at the same time considering, in a preliminary way, his criticisms of her and the differences, as she saw them, between Socrates’s famous occasional “trances,” the Buddha’s, and her own. They had in common, those trances, a self-forgetfulness, a putting of circumambient busyness on hold in favor of extraordinary concentration. But Buddha under the bo tree was transcendently meditating, thinking about nothing in particular while subsuming his ego-self into the cosmic “Buddha self”; Socrates, tranced in the agora or come upon by his protégés stock-still in some Athenian side street, was strenuously contemplating, presumably in finely honed logical terms, such uppercase concepts as Knowledge, Reality, Justice, and Virtue. Herself, however—beguiled indefinitely by . . . by the hypertextuality of everyday life, we might as well say, as encountered in the very first fish tank in the National Aquarium, or in the book beside the book up-shelf from the book that she had gone to fetch from the library stacks, or on the counter across from the counter in the department en route to the department that she had been vectored toward in the Walmart next door to the supermarket that she was finally aiming for—was not so much meditating or contemplating as fascinating: being bemused and fascinated by the contiguities, complexities, interscalar resonances, and virtually endless multifar-
iousness of the world, while at the same time often doing pretty
dammed efficiently several things at once.

“Damn,” said Mark, hands on hips on deck beside her.
“Damn and damn.”

“The same,” came back his unfazed friend. “That said, is it
on with our day or on with our spat?”

“Spat!” had all but spat more-than-ever-now-pissed-off M.

“Pity.” Val gave her (glossy auburn) hair a toss and licked a
drip from her (waffle) cone. “I thought you were the big mover­
onner and I was the overdweller-on-things. Lick?”

“No, thank you. There’s a difference between moving on
and hit-and-run driving, Val.”

“Shall we discuss that difference?” More a challenge than a
cordial invitation.

“No, thank you. Because what happened back there was no
accident.”

“So let’s discuss that: its non-accidentality.”

“No, thank you very much,” the fire gone out of him. “Be­
cause there’d be no bloody end to it. Let’s go the hell home.”

But “Not so fast, buster,” had countered Ms. Valerie, and al­
though they did in fact then go the hell home after all, they
ventilated reciprocally all the way, each charging the other now
with spoiling the day. Through that evening, too, they had kept
scarifyingly at it, heartick Mark from time to time declaring,
“What it all comes down to . . . ,” and tearful Valerie being
dammed if she’d let him shortcut to that bottom line before
he’d had his nose thoroughly rubbed en route in this, that, and
the other. Exhausted half-sleep, as far apart as manageable in
their king-size bed; then a grumpy, burned-out Sunday, both
parties by that time more saddened and alarmed than angry,
each therapeutically pursuing her or his separate business till
Happy Hour—which wasn’t, but which at least brought them
civilly together as was their custom for their (single) glass of
wine with a bit of an hors d’oeuvre, over which they exchanged
tentative, strained apologies, then apologies less strained and
tentative. Through dinner prep, each guardedly conceded a
measure of truth in the other’s bill of complaints; through dinner itself (with, uncharacteristically, a second glass of wine, much diluted with club soda), a measure less guarded and more generous. Thereafter, by way of goodwill respite from the subject, M had offered to show V that business he’d mentioned sometime earlier about navigating the World Wide Web. She had welcomed the diversion; they had booted up Mark’s Macintosh, shortcut to CNG’s e-piphanies homepage with its e-tale of Expediter Fred and Enhancer Irma; had aborted it early in favor of makeup sex (etc.)—and here they are.

Mm-hm. And where is that, exactly?

That exactly is in separate rooms of their (jointly owned, jointly tenanted) Silver Spring house and likewise in their extraordinarily strained but by no means severed connection. More exactly yet, it is (a) in Mark’s case, on their pleasant, now-dark side porch, where—having thought hard and efficiently about those five or seven interrelated matters aforelisted (Saturday set-to, makeup sex, Coastline Measurement Problem, analogous aspect of storytelling, selfhood in the world’s wide web, etc.)—in a sudden access of loving appreciation of his companion and their indispensable differences he turns from his idle rhododendron-tending to hurry herward with the aim of embracing her and ardently reaffirming that she is not only to him indispensable but by him treasured, and that he is determined to temper his maddening get-on-with-itness as much of her wait-let’s-explore-the-associationsness as his nature permits. And (b) in Valerie’s case, in Mark’s workroom, where—having floated a fascinated while in the Sargasso Sea of everyday life’s virtual hypertextuality (but at no time so bemused thereby as to lose sight of the subject of their Saturday set-to)—in a sudden access of loving etc. she bolts up from Mark’s Mac to hurry himward with corresponding intent. The physical halfway point thembetween happens to be the fourth-from-bottom step of the staircase connecting their house’s ground floor (living room, dining room, kitchen/breakfast room, lavatory, front and rear entry halls, side porch, at-
tached garage) and its second (main bedroom and bath, V's and M's separate workrooms with hallway and #2 bath between, library-loft [accessible from main BR] over garage) (additionally, in basement and thus irrelevant to their projectable rendezvous: TV/guestroom, workshop, utility room). Where they'll actually meet is another matter, perhaps suspensible while Narrator tidies a few loose ends. To wit:

- Any reasonable reader's suspicions to the contrary notwithstanding, "CNG" stands in this context not for Compressed Natural Gas, but rather for Center of Narrative Gravity: in a made-up story, the author's narrative viewpoint; in real life-in-the-world, however, the self itself, of which more presently, unless it's clicked on now. . . .
- Presently, then. Meanwhile, as to the aforedemonstrated essential difference between Ms. Valerie's sensibility and Mr. Mark's, it is nowhere more manifest than in the way each, in the other's opinion, tells a story. "Anna train squish" is how Val claims Mark would render Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina; indeed, given the man's Middle-challengedness, she suspects he might skip the train. She, on the other hand (claims he, whether teasingly or in their Saturday Set-To mode), would never get beyond Count Tolstoy's famous opening sentence—"Happy families are all alike," etc.—indeed, would never get through, much less past it, inasmuch as she would need to pause to explore such counter-evidence as that her family and Mark's, for example, while both prevailing quite "happy," are as different in nearly every other respect as aardvarks and zebras; and once having clicked on Mark's family, or equally on hers (or, for that matter, on aardvarks or zebras), she would most likely never get back to Tolstoy's proposition, not to mention on to its second half and the eight-part novel therebeyond.
- Myself, I'm on both their sides in this matter, not only because M and V seem equally reasonable, decent, harmless souls, but also because their tendencies represent contrary narrative impulses of equal validity and importance. A sat-
isyingly told story requires enough “Valerie”—that is, enough detail, amplification, and analysis—to give it clarity, texture, solidity, verisimilitude, and empathetic effect. It requires equally enough “Mark”—i.e., efficiently directed forward motion, “profluence,” on-with-the-storiness—for coherence, anti-tedium, and dramatic effect. In successful instances, a right balance is found for the purpose (and adjusted for alternative purposes). In unsuccessful instances...

Friend of Valerie and Mark’s: So, how’d your vacation go, guys?

M: Cool: Spain in ten days.

V: Really terrific, what little we got to see. The very first morning, for example, in Ávila—Do you know Ávila? Saint Teresa and all that?—we were in a Parador Nacional, just outside the old city wall. You’ve stayed in the Spanish paradores, right? So, anyhow, the one in Ávila’s this fifteenth-century palace called Piedras Albas (’cause that’s what it’s made of, white stones from [etc., never getting past the breakfast churros, inasmuch as “hypertexted” behind them, for Valerie, lies all of Spanish history, culture, geography, and the rest, inseparable from the rest of Europe’s and the world’s. Mark had had practically to drag the rapt, protesting woman out of that stern and splendid place, to get on with their itinerary])...

• So what? you ask, unless one happens to take some professional interest in storytelling, which you, for one, do not? Thanks for clicking on that Frequently Asked Question, reply CNG and I: The “so what” is that that same right-balance-for-the-purpose finding applies to the measurement of coastlines, the appropriate scaling of maps, and—hold that clicker—not only interpersonal relations, Q.E.D., but intrapersonal ones as well.

Intrapersonal relations?

Thanks again, and yes indeed. For what is Valerie, finally,
what is Mark, what are you and what am I—in short, what is the self itself, if not what has been aptly called a "posited center of narrative gravity" that, in order to function in and not be overwhelmed by the chaotically instreaming flood of sense-data, continuously notices, ignores, associates, distinguishes, categorizes, prioritizes, hypothesizes, and selectively remembers and forgets; that continuously spins trial scenarios, telling itself stories about who it is and what it's up to, who others are and what they're up to; that finally is, if it is anything, those continuously revised, continuously edited stories. In sum, what we're dealing with here is no trifling or merely academic matter, friends: Finding, maintaining, and forever adjusting from occasion to occasion an appropriate balance between the "Mark" in each of us and the "Valerie" ditto is of the very essence of our selfhood, our being in the world. We warmly therefore hope, do CNG & I (click on that & and see it turn into an =, + much more on intrapersonal relations), that that couple work things out, whenever and wherever they recouple.

When. One short paragraph from now, it will turn out, although given the infinite sub divisibility of time, space, and narrative (not to mention The Hypertextuality of Everyday Life), it could as readily be ten novels hence or never. See Zeno's paradoxes of time and motion; see swift Achilles close forever upon the tortoise; see Spot run . . .

Where. Not on that fourth-step-from-the-bottom Mittelpunkt, it turns out, but back where this story of them started. Mark (inescapably himself even when determined to be more Val-ish) is off the porch and through the dining room and up the staircase and into the upstairs hallway by the time Valerie (who, decidedly herself even after deciding to be more Mark-like, has stepped from M's workroom first into the #2 bathroom to do a thing to her hair or face before hurrying porchward, then into their bedroom to slip a thigh-length T-shirt over her undies in case the neighbor-lady's out there gardening by streetlight, then back into M's workroom to exit the Internet so that their access-meter won't run on while they finish mak-
ing up, which could take a happy while), hearing him hurrying herward, re-rises from Mark’s Macintosh to meet its open-armed owner with open arms.

To her (glossy) (auburn) hair he groans, “I love you so damned much!”

To his (right) collarbone she murmurs, “I love you more.”

They then vow (etc.), and one thing sweetly segues to another right there on the workroom’s (Berber) wall-to-wall, while the screen saver’s tropical fish and seahorses burble soothingly per program themabove.

• The Marquise Went Out at Five (La Marquise Sortit à Cinq Heures) is the title of a 1961 novel by the French writer Claude Mauriac and a refrain in the Chilean novelist José Donoso’s 1984 opus Casa de Campo (A House in the Country). The line comes from the French poet and critic Paul Valéry, who remarked in effect that he could never write a novel because of the arbitrariness, the vertiginous contingency, of such a “prosaic” but inescapable opening line as, say, “The Marquise went out at five”—for the rigorous M. Valéry, a paralyzing toe-dip into what might be called the hyper-textuality of everyday life.

Not too fast there, Mark. Not too slow there, Val. That’s got it, guys; that’s got it . . . (so “CNG” [= I/you/each/and/allof/us] encourages them from the hyperspatial wings, until agile Valerie lifts one [long] [lithe] [cinnamon-tan] leg up and with her [left] [great] toe gives the Mac’s master switch a