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Women's Tissues

THE MINI-SKIRTED WAITRESS keeps insinuating herself into the knot of people in which my husband holds court, tempting him to sample yet another Brie tartlet or slab of goose pâté. If Ben doesn't reach out to nab one, it's only because he knows I am monitoring his caloric intake. Also, he needs to keep his mouth free of food so he can entertain his listeners with an anecdote about the invasion of Iraq, which he covered for the *Wall Street Journal*.

"So here I am, in one of those Gomer Pyle helmets and Kevlar vests." Ben spreads his arms and bows to inspect the ludicrous bulk of his six-foot-four, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound self. "The guys in the unit have these cool night-vision goggles. But me?" He taps his glasses. "Even in broad daylight, I'm like..." He staggers about, taking advantage of his Mr. Magoo blindness to grope the attractive spouse of a colleague from CNN. "In the dark, with a layer of dust and sand..."

None of this is particularly funny. But the uphill tension and downhill swoop of his roller coaster of a voice, the mobile, fun-house features of his face, and the Ferris wheel swing of his giant arms makes you think you are at a carnival. And not one of the fly-by-night affairs

you might have found in Gary, Indiana, where I grew up. Ben's is the sort of carnival you would find in Central Park, if Central Park allowed carnivals. A lot of slick, sophisticated people enjoy spending time at my husband's carnival. I do, too. But I like it better when I get one of my rare, catastrophe-induced chances to peek behind the canvas and glimpse the sweating, Wizard of Oz schlemiel whose job is to keep the rides and attractions running.

My friends never understood how I ended up with such a narcissistic blowhard of a husband. When I told my college suitemate, Maya Landstower, that I intended to marry Ben, Maya said: "But you can't even have a conversation with the guy!" And she was right. You could get Ben to *pontificate* on a subject. He was such a first-class pontificator he could make the least interesting topic—literally, the price of tea in China, which Ben reported on when he worked for the *Journal's* Beijing bureau—as amusing as a three-ring circus. But you couldn't get the man to let down his façade, stop putting on a show, pack up the tents, and rein in the elephants.

We met at Yale, but we didn't start to date there. In the seventies, the very term "dated" was outdated. Young people lolled about each other's rooms, hoping to find the gumption to unbutton someone's button or unzip someone's fly. Even then, the two someones usually fell asleep in each other's arms, only to wake the next morning, laugh uncomfortably, and say, "Hey, that was nice. But I have Kagan's *Origins of War* at ten, and I ought to take a shower and read the assignment first."

Besides, Ben burned and flared at the center of his very own solar system, while I careened among the planets like some wobbly asteroid or eccentric comet. Everyone at Yale has a story to tell. But the only remotely interesting story about me was that I was the daughter of an Orthodox Jew who, as a young man, had won a Golden Gloves title and now owned three gas station/repair shops in the devastated downtown of Gary, having refused to sell and move when nearly every other white

family fled. After my mother died—from ovarian cancer, when I was twelve—my father was too dazed by grief to notice I had no real friends. The black kids liked me well enough to leave me alone at school, but they weren't about to invite me to their parties.

Ben Niederman was Manhattan Jewish royalty. Before the war, his father was a Warsaw lawyer. Aghast at the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks, he became obsessed by the possibility that an international tribunal might someday hold tyrants responsible for their orders to butcher civilians. In fact, there is considerable evidence that Emek Niederman was the first person to use the word “genocide” to describe such atrocities. Wounded in the siege of Warsaw, he made it to New York, only to return to Europe as chief advisor to the United States counsel at Nuremberg. After the war, he lectured at Columbia and founded a litigation firm so prestigious that half our class longed to work there, while the other half figured Ben would end up an editor at the *Times* and hire them as reporters.

By junior year, Ben was editor of the *Daily News* and I was one of the countless Woodward and Bernstein wannabes on his staff. Not that I covered politics. Having lost my mother at an early age, I had become fascinated by anything that might allay my curiosity as to what it meant to be a woman. While everyone else was clamoring to force the Provost to divulge whether Yale would divest its holdings in South Africa, I was investigating a tip that pelvic exams were being taught on patients who had been anesthetized for other procedures and had no idea that an entire class of first-year medical students were jamming their hands up their vaginas. The article won second prize in the college journalism contest to which Ben submitted it.

“I couldn't stop thinking about all those poor women,” he said. “I wondered what it would be like to have people see you that way, and touch you, all the way deep inside, and you didn't even know.”

Naturally, I was flattered. But when Ben asked if I wanted to take over the newly created Women's Issues beat, my first thought was: Not

on your life. As a motherless teen, I had appreciated the advice columns in the *Gary Post-Tribune*. But I didn't want my articles cordoned off from the serious sections of the paper on pages allotted to *women's issues*, which, to my ear, sounded like *women's tissues*.

"Come on, Rosie. No one cares about women's issues the way you do. And you would end up with some terrific clips."

Back then, Ben wasn't fat so much as he was imposing. Unlike the other male students, who slouched around campus in T-shirts and jeans, Ben wore button-down J. Press shirts, tailored pants, and ties. Standing before his desk, I felt as if I were arguing my case before the Supreme Court. "If women's issues are so damn interesting," I said, "why don't you cover them yourself?"

"I'm the *editor*," Ben said. "I'm interested in the Harvard-Yale game. But I don't go down on the field and interview the quarterback."

I hate to think how much men's opinions still mattered to me back then, as if the whole reason for admitting women to Yale was that we could avail ourselves of the opportunity to be judged by superior men like Ben Niederman. I accepted the position. My orbit zoomed closer to Ben's. I found myself attending parties where Ben was the main attraction. He came over to chat, but he kept glancing above my head—not a noticeable maneuver, given the fourteen-inch difference in our heights, but a habit I found intolerable. "Good luck with that story on, what was it, women's math anxiety?" Ben might say. And the next thing I knew, he would be regaling Melinda Treadwell with anecdotes about his father—Ben could make even the Warsaw uprising seem amusing—or performing his imitation of balding, jowly Professor Bloom in such a convincing way that the otherwise unflappable Sybil Chase spit out her drink.

"Oh, Ben," Sybil gasped, dabbing at her now-stained silk dress. "It's one thing to *sound* like Harold Bloom. But how on earth do you make yourself *look* like Harold Bloom?"

One night, egged on by a tall, jaded Mississippian named Jefferson Morse, Ben agreed to perform his *Citizen Kane* routine, throwing his

voice to assume not only the role of Kane, but also his upright, upright friend, Joseph Cotten, and the bespectacled Jewish yes-man, Bernstein, and Kane's bimbo mistress, Susan. "I am the publisher of the *Enquirer!*" the ersatz Kane boomed. "As such, it is my duty—I will let you in on a little secret, it is also my *pleasure*—to see to it that decent, hardworking people of this city are not robbed blind by a group of money-mad pirates because, God help them, they have no one to look after their interests!"

Ben's roommate, Francisco, sidled up and whispered: "Look at that. A young man who is imitating an actor who was imitating a son-of-a-bitch robber baron who spent his life stirring up phony wars so the newspapers he owned could cover them." Usually, I accepted Cisco's evaluations of his roommate's character. Cisco wasn't jealous of Ben. He didn't want to be Ben, didn't want anything Ben had—the effortless success, the editorship of the *News*, the attention of the attractive, intelligent young women who hung out in their suite. Nor did Cisco feel the need to impress his roommate's father. Cisco had a famous father of his own—the chief of the secret police for a rather large and notorious South American dictatorship.

But this time, I couldn't share Cisco's assessment. Ben might have been performing, but this particular performance seemed designed to mask how utterly sincere he was. Most people saw Ben clowning around the newsroom, leaning over the shoulder of Theresa Carter or Jane Morgenstern to provide advice on whatever stories they might be revising, and they thought Ben had taken on the editorship of the *News* for the same reasons his predecessors had taken it on—to impress whatever young women might be impressed, to get a good job after college. What no one understood was that Ben also desperately wanted to run a newspaper.

One afternoon, I was waiting for the editors to finish their meeting when I heard Blake Lewis, the editorial page editor, voice the opinion that the *News* was being too hard on the campus cops who had

been stopping black students and demanding to see their IDs. “You have to admit, most of the crimes committed on this campus are, in fact, committed by young black men. And there are very few black male students at Yale. So the police are simply using statistics to assist them in lowering the crime rate. Which is precisely what they are being paid to accomplish.”

Ben puffed up dangerously. “You racist fuck. Do you have any idea what it must feel like to get stopped by the police for walking across your own campus? Especially when you already feel that you don’t belong? Why don’t you write an editorial suggesting that the black students sew yellow stars on their clothing and never be seen without them?”

The other editors chuckled nervously, the way an audience will laugh at whatever a standup comic says, even if he announces that the auditorium is on fire.

“Shut up,” Ben said. “No one is going to be treated that way on my campus.”

Shaken as he was, Blake managed to lift an eyebrow. “*Your* campus? Sadly, I do believe you are right. This campus now belongs to the Benjamin Niedermans of the world. That was our first mistake. Our second will be allowing the number of black matriculants to rise until the presence of the few no longer is such a statistical anomaly that the campus security officers can distinguish a Yale undergraduate from a townie thug.”

The incident was much remarked-upon, especially when Blake Lewis tendered his resignation. The staff bestowed their accolades on the editorial Ben wrote calling for the administration to prohibit campus officers from demanding to see a student’s ID unless there was evidence—other than the color of the student’s skin—that he or she did not belong. (I had the impression they would have bestowed the same accolades on Blake Lewis if he had been allowed to write the editorial he wanted to write in defense of the officers’ use of statistics to do their

jobs.) And yet, I withheld my praise. My refusal to provide an audience for Ben's performances prevented me from belonging to his crowd of sycophants. But it created what passed for honesty between us.

"Ben," I said one night after Cisco had told me that yet another freshman heeler had shared his roommate's bed, "you can't keep going through women as if they were, I don't know, sheets of typewriter paper. Don't you want to get serious about someone? Not now, I mean, but someday?"

Ben leaned back and locked his fingers, exposing twin sweat-stains I found both repellent and erotic. It was three in the morning. The newsroom was empty except for the ink-smudged art and design major who was using an Exacto knife to lay out the paper. "I'm not worried," Ben said. "Wherever I end up, there's sure to be some dewy-eyed copyeditor who will be happy to keep me company."

"That's disgusting," I said. But I was surprised to find another reaction simmering beneath the first. Who doesn't want to be the one woman who can prove to a man that there's more to life than the next fawning copyeditor at whatever foreign bureau he is directing?

A month later, when Ben and I received our degrees, I needed to tamp down the same sort of secondhand egotism at being able to tell my father that I knew the class speaker. Ben was up there on the stage, the June sun shining down on him with the intensity of an X-ray as he intoned some theatrical but heartfelt oration about the role of the press in exposing to view—in making *transparent*—the workings of the government. *Transparent*, Ben repeated, and I imagined I could see straight through his billowing, tent-like gown to the milky, glassine skin beneath, and, beneath that, the meaty, pumping purple of his heart, which, when you got right down to it, couldn't be all that much different from anyone else's heart. Could it?

My father wasn't crazy about the speech—he worshipped the United States and couldn't bear to hear its government portrayed as malevolent

or misguided. But he loved seeing a Jew on the dais beside such genteel high priests as the Reverend Sloane Coffin and Kingman Brewster. He wiped his hand before offering it to Ben to shake, then bowed stiffly to Ben's mother, who was as graceful as a forties starlet, with a fetching Zsa Zsa Gabor accent.

What I didn't expect was that Ben's father, whom I had imagined to be a distant, cold, East European intellectual, greeted me with a warmth that might have been more appropriate if I had rescued him from the Nazis. "Miss Rosalie Glass! So wery, wery pleased!" He was nearly Ben's height, but emaciated in comparison. His voice was thin and high, and, unlike his son's, untinged by irony. "I must compliment you on your article about the ethics of experimentation by Professor Stanley Milgram!"

While Ben's father and I chatted about the surprising capacity of one human being to inflict pain on his fellows, Ben made overly ebullient small talk with my dad. "Do you think cars manufactured in Japan will ever gain a significant share of the American market?" Ben asked solemnly, even though he didn't know how to drive, let alone distinguish a four-stroke engine from a four-stroke lead at golf. After my father had delivered his usual rant about the unreliability of Japanese "shit-cans," Ben asked him about his boxing career, taking obvious pride in his ability to converse with a poorly educated automobile mechanic from Indiana.

Usually, my father had no patience with insincerity. *Quit the bullshit* was his motto. So I was amazed when he broke his rule of never interfering in my personal life by demanding to know if there was anything between me and that nice, smart Niederman fella. "Impressive build," he said. "The handshake wasn't all it might be. But you can see he has top-rate *yichus*."

Horried that anyone could see anything between me and that Niederman fella, I blurted: "He isn't a good person," the only complaint

that would have shut my father up, which meant that when Ben and I did start going out, I needed to keep our affair a secret. As much as I grieved when my father died—a few months after graduation, he suffered an aneurysm while working beneath a customer’s Impala, so that several hours passed before one of the mechanics grew suspicious and rolled him out—I found solace in the fact that I would never need to explain why I had ended up marrying a man who wasn’t good.

I felt sorry for him, I might have said. But the truth was, I got off on being the only woman to whom Benjamin Niederman bared his soul. On the night Ben and I graduated, I tucked my father into the cheap motel on the outskirts of New Haven where he had insisted on renting a room, then stopped at the champagne-and-strawberries soiree Ben was throwing on the turreted roof of his residential college. I noticed him at the center of a crowd of *Daily* staffers congratulating him on the internship he had been awarded, and I thought: *Not a single one of them would show up at his funeral.*

Ben must have felt that way, too. Staring mournfully over a parapet, he confided that he didn’t have any real friends but me. “The rest of them can’t wait for me to take a fall,” Ben said. “And someday I *will* fall, Rosie. Doesn’t everyone? Your father could take a punch and get back up. But I don’t know how, Rosie. Please, if I ever do take that fall, promise, you’ll help me to get back up.”

As is true of most big men, drunken self-pity didn’t become him. “Oh, come on,” I said. “Any of the women here—”

“No,” Ben said. “If I fell, they wouldn’t have a thing to do with me.”

Ben’s fears, however unreal to me, seemed real to him. “Sure,” I said. “If you want me to come, I’ll come.”

“Even if you’re far away?”

I shrugged. “You might need to pay airfare. But if I can get there, I’ll come.”

After that, Ben flew off to China, and other than the postcard he sent me showing the Great Wall with a cartoon version of Humpty

Dumpty sketched precariously at the top, he and I fell out of touch. From Jeff Morse, I heard a rumor that Ben was spying for the CIA. From Jane Morgenstern, that he had developed a fetish for Chinese women. From Cisco, that Ben had fallen deeply in love with one of the translators at the paper, then discovered from reading her diary—Ben knew more Mandarin than she thought—that she was marrying him not for love but a chance to immigrate.

I might never have learned the truth if, a few years later, I hadn't been researching an article about the incidence of STDs in the porn industry when Ben, who was now working for the *Journal's* LA bureau, spotted me crossing Wilshire Boulevard. He honked and swerved and scared me half to death.

"I saw you from the corner of my eye," he said, "and I thought, 'Wow, there's the sort of unpretentious, intelligent woman you don't usually see in LA.'"

I figured what he meant was you didn't usually see a woman in LA who took so few pains with how she looked. And yet, I couldn't resist the compliment. Ben had only recently learned to drive, and he still was so bipolar about the activity ("Whee!" he would yell, flooring the gas. Then: "Yikes! Oh, no! Oh no!") that I was relieved we were driving only a few miles to a sushi place he knew in Santa Monica. I had heard of sushi, of course. But I had the timid palate of a girl who had grown up eating her father's bland, overcooked kosher food, and the cold, slick, fishy substances made me gag. Unwilling to admit this, I gobbled everything Ben set before me, moaning with feigned pleasure.

Afterwards, he took me to a disco. I loved to dance, and I had picked up enough moves from my classmates in Gary to feel confident on the floor. But I could barely keep up with Ben. Beneath the dizzyingly colored lights, with Ben as the center about whom I kept revolving—once, he lifted me from the floor and passed me effortlessly across his shoulders—I felt giddy with reflected glory. Everything about the place was cheesy. We weren't dancing at a disco; we were "dancing at a disco." And

yet, when the music slowed and Ben cradled me against his chest, the longing I saw in his eyes seemed real. *More than a woman, more than a woman to me*, he crooned, as if women in general were nothing much, but I was more than a woman, more than any of the other women he had danced or slept with.

I was too tired to drive back to Long Beach, where I was mooching off a friend, so I agreed to stay at Ben's. I didn't even have an apartment—that was how I could afford to freelance—and I was stunned to see the ornate lacquered furniture he had brought back from China. He fixed me up on his futon—the first I had ever seen—and I immediately fell asleep.

Only to awaken with the most intense nausea I ever had experienced. I spent hours vomiting in Ben's pristine bathroom, where the towels, washcloths, curtains, and bathmat matched. It wasn't food poisoning. Ben had eaten the same foods I had. My orgy of vomiting was more like a repressed response to ingredients I had found revolting but moaned over in phony ecstasy. It was like coming down with gonorrhea from simulated sex. Which, come to think about it, was what my exposé of the porn industry was about.

Luckily, I didn't have any interviews the next day, so I could take advantage of Ben's offer that I recuperate in his bed. After work, he returned bearing containers of some exquisitely healing Thai soup. By the time I emerged from the hot, fragrant bath he had drawn for me and wrapped myself in the plush towel he had laid at the foot of the tub, I decided I would go to him that way, wrapped in the towel, not from lust or love, but because I wanted to be the one who made things happen. My ability to cause a man as large and imposing as Ben Niederman to gasp and cry out and plead, *Don't stop, Rosie, oh God, please don't ever stop* made me feel as big and consequential as he was. When I gave Ben a blowjob, his legs shook, the way a dog's legs shake when you rub his belly.

The outlandishness of his gratitude made me wonder if all those elegant, aristocratic classmates of ours at Yale had assumed they were doing Ben a favor by letting him share their beds. I would have thought the Chinese girl who had seen Ben as her ticket to America would have tried to please him. But maybe that was a *Madame Butterfly* one-sided kind of thing. For all that Ben considered himself a top-notch investigative journalist, he seemed never to have discovered what made a woman come. He was so pleased with himself for conquering the techniques I taught him that he performed them again and again. “Whee!” he cried, like a kid who has been shown how to crank a jack-in-the-box to make the clown pop out.

I finished the article on STDs. When it came out in *Vanity Fair*, Ben took me to a funky retro surfing joint in Malibu to celebrate. Mostly, he covered politics. But he also wrote about certain aspects of the filmmaking industry, and I accompanied him to a fair helping of Hollywood parties. Even in a room of professional actors, Ben held his own, telling stories, mimicking famous people—already he had interviewed Henry Kissinger, Jerry Falwell, Barbra Streisand, and Jimmy Carter—while I stood around feeling like a short, flat-chested nobody. I might have broken things off, but Ben claimed he hated LA and swore he had put in for a transfer. “I love you,” he said. Then, in his ethereal Bee Gees voice: *Here in your arms I found my paradise, my only chance for happiness...*

“All right!” I surrendered, laughing. I had gotten an assignment from the *Boston Globe* to do a series about the right-wing campaign to close abortion clinics throughout New England. If Ben wanted to come out to see me, I would be happy to put him up.

“Of course I want to see you!” He pushed me to plan a getaway to Vermont, where we could curl up in front of a fire and drink hot toddies. Charmed into believing him, I began to knit a gift of heavy wool socks. But a week before he was due to fly out, Ben called to confess that he had fallen in love with a famous director’s wife whom he had interviewed for

her campaign against the death squads in El Salvador. “I am so, so sorry,” Ben said. But he didn’t sound sorry. He sounded like a man who was using the voice he thought appropriate to imitate a man who was sorry that he had slept with a director’s wife, pleasuring her with the same techniques I had taught him to pleasure me. I hung up, then took the socks and stuffed them in a shoebox with the needles still in the yarn and a notecard that read: “One of these socks is missing a heel, but you can supply that” and mailed it off.

Buckling down, I accepted an offer to work full-time at the *Globe*. I needed the benefits, and I was reminded how much I enjoyed working in a newsroom. I loved the way there was no newspaper, only a bunch of people talking on their phones or tapping at their bulky, balky terminals, and suddenly, there the newspaper was, thumping on all our desks. I just wished my colleagues hadn’t been given to such chilling displays of forced cynicism. The guy at the next desk liked to make a show of propping his *Topsiders* on a wastebasket and wising me up to the ways of the world, using phrases that made my skin crawl—*clusterfuck*, or *human turd*, or *had him by the shorts hairs*, this last to describe the ruin of a politician who had been caught having sex with a seventeen-year-old Congressional page.

No one seemed able to understand how I broke my stories. The anti-abortion activist who boasted over donuts in a church basement that he had helped design the bomb that destroyed the Planned Parenthood clinic in Concord couldn’t conceive that a *cute little thing* like me could be a reporter, even though I had introduced myself as exactly that. Like my sources, my editors didn’t take me seriously. When I spoke, they looked about in vague puzzlement, as if a breeze had blown through the room.

Nothing I cared about seemed able to compete with murder or war or politics. Oh, those sad, weak, weepy women and their tissues! Once, I was working on the long-term effects of child abuse by the clergy when

an editor demanded I take a break to cover an appearance by the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile in one of the tonier suburbs. After a few years, I gave up my health coverage and went back to freelancing. For a while, I shared an apartment in Jamaica Plain with a Brandeis philosophy professor who bared his psyche to anyone who would listen, but where was the challenge in that?

By then, the *Journal* had summoned Ben east to help cover the '88 primaries. Twice he called to ask if he could buy me dinner, but twice I refused to see him. Cisco said that Ben had bought a dilapidated brownstone in Brooklyn and was making the repairs himself, so I wasn't surprised to hear that he had fallen off his roof. What stunned me was that I was the second person he called after using his brand new mobile phone to dial 911.

"Rosie, I took my fall." I heard a siren, then a husky female voice saying, "We can do without the phone, sir." Then: "Rosie, I've been an asshole. I needed to get that off my chest. Please. You said you would come, and I'm asking you now, please come."

What was I supposed to do, jump in my rusted Volvo and drive to New York, then figure out how to get to the hospital in Brooklyn whose name the EMT had grunted into Ben's phone before clicking it off? If I did, his bed would be surrounded by twenty or thirty of his closest friends from Yale and his fellow reporters from the *Journal*. Even in traction, he would be acting out whatever idiotic misappraisal of his own abilities had brought a heavysset Jewish man with no experience using tools or climbing ladders to his roof.

But when I did find Ben in the ICU, no one was there. I had never seen him when he wasn't clean-shaven, and the dark scruff layering his face seemed like some primordial soul-truth oozing out against his will. "Hey," he said, with a goofy, drug-induced smile. He had put on weight, and every part of him was splinted or wrapped, so it seemed the Ben Niederman I had known in college had been used as the mold

to create a papier-mâché version of himself. Only one fleshy shoulder was exposed, and that's when I knew I was a goner. If you found yourself wanting to kiss a man's shoulder ...

"Rosie," he said. "I thought I was done for. I remember grabbing for the gutter. But that pulled off, and I must have blacked out. I don't know how long I was lying on those bricks, but I came to, and there was this pile of dog shit near my face, and I just lay there, assuming I would be paralyzed. And I kept thinking about you, Rosie. The way I had treated you. None of the girls at Yale... They didn't ... Not one of them would ... I was a virgin, Rosie. Did you know that? Well, not technically. But the one or two who said yes, they just lay there and closed their eyes."

I wouldn't have been surprised if, chastened by death, Ben had put on a convincing show of repentance. But this didn't *feel* like a show. It felt as if he were unwrapping all those bandages to show me how raw his wounds truly were.

"I'm a fool, Rosie. When I was in China, I actually believed that Dai-tai loved me." With his good arm, he reached out and took my hand and pressed it against his cheek. "You were the only woman who ever really cared for me, and what did I do? I needed to prove I could get some beautiful Hollywood airhead... I'm fat, Rosie. I'm fat, I have hair on my nose, and I can't say or do a single good or honest thing unless I know I'm going to get credit for saying or doing it."

I suspected that whatever painkillers he was on were acting as some kind of truth serum, but the effect was difficult to resist.

"Rosie, I'm going to be a better man. More like my father. Like you. I would have made a pass at you a long time ago, if I hadn't been afraid you would see me for what I am and run away screaming."

I shouldn't have been taken in, but after a few days of sitting by his bed, listening to such confessions, I agreed to move into his brownstone, rent free, in return for helping him convalesce. He was so banged up he could do little more than watch TV, shuffle to the bathroom, and

sleep sitting in a chair. I shopped for him, and cooked, and Ben cried and kissed my hand and asked what he had done to deserve a woman like me.

After he got back on his feet, he seemed too humbled to revert to his old ways. At parties, he wouldn't leave my side. He told all his old stories, but only when the telling seemed appropriate, and he didn't hog the stage. Once a week, we ate dinner with his parents. "Plis, darlink," Ben's mother said, "do not giff up on our Benhamin. Vit you, he iss much more like normal human beink." On weekends, Ben and I shared picnics in Prospect Park and compared other people's brownstones to our own. At night in bed, we watched Hitchcock videos, Ben acting out the best scenes along with Jimmy Stewart or Kim Novak.

Ben, as Eva Marie Saint: *How do I know you aren't a murderer?*

Ben, as Cary Grant: *You don't.*

Ben, as Eva Marie Saint: *Maybe you are planning to murder me right here, tonight.*

Ben, as Cary Grant: *Shall I?*

Ben, as Eva Marie Saint: *Please do.*

Then, one of the regulars on *Washington Week in Review* came down with pancreatic cancer and the producers begged Ben to fill in. He bought an expensive new suit, shaved his beard, and cut his hair. He was smart enough not to overdo the shtick, but Ben Niederman being asked to be a pundit was like a recovering alcoholic being chosen as the poster boy for Dewar's Scotch. At parties, when Ben allowed himself to be goaded into providing the inside scoop on Iran-Contra, I tried to be understanding. The male members of any species seems programmed to partake in such displays. But who wants to be married to a wolf or moose?

I would have left him—I already had found a third-floor walk-up in Spanish Harlem—but Ben's father died, and I decided to wait until after the funeral. Ben bore up surprisingly well. On the ride back from the

cemetery, he told his mother all the right things—how it was a blessing that she and his father had been granted so many good years after the War, and how he, Ben, would see that she lacked for nothing. But the next morning, a cold downpour had started to fall and Ben couldn't stand to think of his father lying there in the rain. Before I could stop him, he went down and hailed a cab. I rode with him to Queens, where he sank to his knees atop the freshly filled grave and confessed—whether to God or to me—what a miserable failure he was. His father had ruined his health and destroyed his peace of mind obsessing about the fate of hundreds of thousands of people he had never even met, while he, Ben, didn't give a shit about the few people whose stories he had covered.

“That’s all they are to me. Stories. Bylines. A chance to get my name in the paper. My father hid in a coal chute for six months, and I can’t stand to be alone in my apartment for five minutes.” He looked up at me, his glasses streaked with mud. “I’m afraid of dying, Rosie. I think about it all the time. I see myself in my grave. I see myself decaying. Worse, I’m scared of dying a fraud. The only time I’m not a fraud is when you’re in the room. I know you’re thinking, ‘Cut the crap. Stop being such a show-off.’ And that makes me more honest. I want you to be in the room with me all the time. Will you marry me, Rosie? Will you marry me and keep me honest?”

I like to think that I said yes as much as a response to his request that I keep him honest as his proposal that I marry him. A few months later, we showed up before a justice of the peace, with only Cisco and Maya and Ben’s mother in attendance. Cisco laughed and said he found it hard to believe Ben would say his vows before such an insignificant audience. Maya pulled me aside and reminded me that I could still back out.

I scolded them both. “You don’t know the real Ben Niederman,” I said. “I’m the one who gets to see him as he really and truly is.”

Cisco sighed. “Oh, *chica*. That’s the best performance of all, to make the one special woman think that what she sees is the real, good man inside.”

I tried to calculate the odds that my two best friends were wrong. I looked at Ben's mother, standing before the justice of the peace in a pillbox hat and gloves, smiling and looking happy. I allowed Ben to take my hand. I said, "I do."

Then Shira was born, and neither her father nor I would have dreamed of hurting Shira. And what, really, did I have to complain about, except that I was married to a TV pundit who never stopped editorializing, interviewing people, telling stories, even when he was home with his wife and child? As for Shira, she loved when her father told stories, throwing his voice, mimicking all the characters. She loved when he took her skating at Rockefeller Center and made a big show of tottering around the ice, performing Oliver and Hardy pratfalls. She loved seeing him on TV—whenever the camera zoomed in for a close-up, she would squeal and plant a kiss. For Shira's sake, I overlooked her father's flaws; and for Shira's sake, I gave in to her father's pleas that we conceive a sibling.

But when Ilana was born, she had so many issues that I gave up writing. She was a timid child, easily startled, shy. Everything about her father—his size, the exaggerated faces he made, his ability to throw his voice and assume the gestures of people she didn't know, or, worse, people she did know—scared her to the point that she cowered and cried; once, she crawled under her crib to get away.

Ben seemed hurt that she didn't appreciate his attempts to mug for her or make her laugh. "What's wrong, sweetie?" he would say, and when she shook her head and screamed harder, he looked as if he might break into tears himself. I think he almost welcomed the horrors of September 11 for the opportunity they afforded to stop worrying about his daughter. When the administration invaded Iraq and his editors invited him to report from a position embedded in a battalion of Marines, Ben agreed to go.

"Really?" I said. "Weapons of Mass Destruction? That sounds like something Bush got out of a comic book?"

Ben twisted his mouth, the way he did when a fellow pundit made a comment so inane he didn't need to muster logic to dismiss it. "You're not going to think it's so comic if Saddam Hussein turns those weapons against us."

"He hasn't turned them against us until now," I said. "Why would he do it just because those nutcases from Al-Qaeda—who don't even like Saddam, by the way—knocked over the World Trade Center? Where's the evidence? Show me a single shred of evidence that Saddam Hussein has nuclear weapons."

"I have it on the best inside sources," Ben said. "He's planning to attack Tel Aviv."

"Are you serious?" I said. "If Saddam Hussein were planning to nuke Tel Aviv, Israel would already have leveled Baghdad."

But nothing I said dissuaded him. I told myself that my husband was too old and fat to see any real action, but soon I was reading his dispatches from cities whose names I had once been unable to pronounce but that now rolled off my tongue as easily as "Hoboken," "Bed-Stuy," or "Canarsie." Ilana might have been put off by her father's oversized personality, but after he left, she searched for him everywhere, and, when she couldn't find him, reverted to wetting her pants. Shira made fun of her sister, but she had taken to chewing her nails until the tips of her fingers bled. I assured both girls their father wasn't actually fighting in the war, he was only writing about the soldiers who were fighting in the war.

"But he's in bed with them!" Ilana cried. "If he's in bed with them, and a bomb falls where the soldiers are sleeping, Daddy will get blown up, too!"

"Dummy!" Shira laughed. "Dad is *embedded* with the soldiers! He's not *in bed* with them!" But when Ilana started to shriek, Shira was the one who pulled her on her lap to comfort her.

After Ben got home, I was so grateful that he hadn't been taken hostage or beheaded I almost didn't care that he insisted on turning his

part in the invasion into a source of amusement, as if he had traveled to Baghdad to collect the makings of his very own *Thousand and One Nights*. He was in greater demand than ever. Everyone from Bill O'Reilly to Keith Olbermann wanted him on his show. Somehow, in the middle of a war, my husband had put on weight, and his ego had grown proportionally. He talked; he ate; he went to parties. I stopped going with him, unwilling to watch as he spun his lies and stuffed his mouth. When I got the call that he had been admitted to the ER for what turned out to be a heart attack, I considered not going. Why would I want to see my husband lying in the ICU, acting out his heart attack in a strangled, high-pitched voice: *Benjamin? Hello? This is your heart. You know all those whipped lattes? All those tacos and Krispy Kremes? You know how you joke that running for an airplane is your only form of exercise? Well, buddy, I'm infarcted. And now I say, infarct you!* I had no intention of listening to this performance, my own heart infarcted with jealousy at being in the audience rather than backstage with him. If you have been intimate with a man, if you have seen him sobbing in the mud on his father's grave, if you are the one person to whom he has admitted puking out his guts beside the gruesome remains of a child incinerated beside a highway in Kuwait, then you know how painful it is to find yourself on the other side of the curtain, watching him put on his show.

But the only person at Ben's bedside was his editor, who had accompanied him to the ER. And even though Ben was narrating his heart attack in exactly the manner I expected, I could hear a quaver in his voice, as if a veteran Shakespearean actor was afraid he might forget his lines. When the editor left, Ben dropped his act and admitted he could have died. His arteries were blocked. He was scheduled to undergo a quadruple bypass. I braced myself for what was coming. The truth telling. The apologies. Did I care what he had to say? Did I really want to know what it had been like to be embedded with those Marines?

Yes, I thought. I did. I wanted to know what it was like to give the administration a free ride on those so-called Weapons of Mass Destruction, then get all gooeey about your chance to put on a helmet and Kevlar vest and play soldier with the Marines with whom you were in bed. He had been duped, Ben said. But the truth was, he had been willing to be duped. He wanted to win a Pulitzer for his war reporting. He wanted to be the Edward R. Murrow of his generation. He wanted to make his father proud. Instead, he had helped a corrupt administration launch an unnecessary war. All those courageous young Americans had gotten killed. All those innocent Iraqi civilians. And now this latest outrage at Abu Ghraib. "I went on a six-hour tour of that prison," Ben confided, "and I didn't notice a fucking thing wrong."

The next day, I stayed away. Easy to confess a crime after the victims no longer could be brought to life. When would he learn? When would any of them ever learn? If not for the one-in-a-million chance that Ben would die on the operating table and my daughters would hate me for not having taken them to see their father, I might never have gone back.

When I did, I was shocked at how old and unkempt my husband looked. He reminded me of the overweight kosher butcher my father and I used to visit in Chicago. The pre-op nurses came in, and Ilana cringed and hid. Shira saw them put a paper shower-cap on her father's head and laughed and ran to kiss him. Ben started to sob and told the girls how much he loved them. Shyly, Ilana stepped out and climbed on the gurney beside him, and I knew that no matter what, I could never deprive our daughters of their father.

After the surgery, I took Ben home and nursed him through the long period of depression that follows a procedure in which strangers spend hours rummaging in your chest and jerry-rigging hoses fashioned from the arteries they have ripped from your leg. Then I helped him take off the weight. On his own, Ben would never have found the willpower to resist all those French, Italian, and Chinese dishes he so loved, especially

when he went back to work and resumed eating out all the time. But I set up a reward system by which he earned a blowjob for every five pounds he lost, and the weight melted off. When the gloom lifted and Ben found the energy to trim his hair and put on a suit, he didn't shave his beard, which, threaded with gray, lent him a certain gravitas. Back on the cable news shows, he looked less like a butcher than an Old Testament prophet voicing his contrition for having failed to question the lies that inspired the invasion.

Maybe if the *Journal* hadn't transferred Ben to Washington to cover the waning years of the Bush White House, we might have maintained the queasy equilibrium we had established in New York. With Ilana older, I might even have gone back to writing. But in this town, nothing can compete with politics. Even the female reporters want to get asked to appear on *Hardball*. Politicians always have been performers. But now reporters are performers, too. They all want to be Jon Stewart. If they really cared about being reporters, they wouldn't smile and kid around with a president and vice president and secretary of state whose lies caused a war.

In a few minutes, we will grab our coats and head over to the Hilton ballroom, where Ben is due to give a speech at the Correspondents' Dinner. All he needs to do is to wrap up his anecdote about the night he and the Marines with whom he was embedded burst into the hovel of a suspected insurgent.

"We had some cockeyed intelligence that WMD were under someone's bed," Ben says, "so in we go. The husbands and sons take off out the back, and the Marines go storming after them. I'm not about to be left alone, but the next thing I know, I'm wedged in this teeny passage—" He indicates the narrowness between his finger and thumb. "All the mothers and wives come running, and they get jammed up behind me, pounding me with their fists." Ben imitates the women's falsetto Arabic. "You giant American pig! You *khirteet!* You rhinoceros! May a cannonball strike you

in your fat rhinoceros of a backside! May you get bitten by a snake! Two snakes, one on each cheek!” Such a flurry of high-pitched, Arab-accented voices coming from such an enormous man—his fists, the size of coconuts, pummel the air like a frustrated toddler’s—sets off a wave of laughter that rises to engulf my husband, as if he has just done a belly flop into someone’s backyard pool.

I step back, to avoid getting drenched. I miss the punch line, in which the women hurl themselves at my husband and send him popping from the passage like a gumball. What bothers me isn’t that Ben is embellishing the anecdote with so many flourishes. I’m not a performer, but some people are, and that’s what makes parties parties. What bothers me is that my husband will never admit to anyone but me—and even to me, he admitted it only once—how frightened he was that night. I don’t mean the cartoonish fright of a well-told story. In the version Ben told me, the women’s threats gave way to the shouts of unseen men. Ben couldn’t figure out whether to wriggle free of the vest, which would allow him to extricate himself from the passage but expose him to a bullet while he was fleeing, or remain and listen to the descriptions of what those invisible men and their knives might do to the parts of his body not protected by the vest. He cried out for help, but when the Marines didn’t return and the threats grew more graphic, he lost control of his bowels. In a frenzy of shame, Ben wrenched free of the vest, but the stench of his feces left him a target for the mocking jeers of the women and men behind him.

Hearing him tell the story as if this incident were a joke, I am disgusted with myself, as I am disgusted with the other women in the room. All of us, lying about why we married such egotistical braggarts. Talk about women’s issues! If our husbands were honest and vulnerable all the time, we would leave them. This way, we can have the best of both worlds. We can have the alpha bull-moose husband to impress all the other females in the room, and we can have the sweet,

wounded creature who curls up beside us at night, tears welling in his giant brown moosey eyes. We can pretend that we despise the power our husbands wield, even as we enjoy exerting our power over *them*. Cisco once said he didn't have nearly as much trouble understanding his father—a man who had dismembered some enemy of the state with a chain saw while the dictator he served listened approvingly on the phone—as he did making sense of his mother.

“My father was a monster,” Cisco said. “Even as a child, I could tell there was no human behind those eyes. What puzzled me was how my mother could be married to such a man and live off the money such evil brought her.”

My husband isn't guilty of dismembering anyone with a chain saw. But I've had enough of all this pretense. I've had enough of living in the bull-moose, bullshit capital of the world. As it turns out, bullshit can have some very real effects. Maya's son, Jerome, was wounded in Afghanistan. The grinning reporters who will be sitting in that ballroom, laughing at the president's jokes, have stained their hands with so much blood that not all of Neptune's seas can wash them clean. I love my husband too much to ever really leave him. My only choice is to kill off the Ben Niederman who, until recently, I only pretended to despise, but whom I now truly cannot bear to live with, without killing off the Ben Niederman who knelt, sobbing, on his father's muddy grave, the Ben Niederman who still cries “Whee!” when he makes me come, the Ben Niederman who secretly donates part of his salary to support a clinic for disabled children in Iraq (I discovered this because I found a letter from the clinic in his trash), the Ben Niederman who carries in his pocket a shred of the blanket in which each of his daughters was swaddled when we brought her home. My mission has little chance for success. Yet what choice do I have but to try?

I eye the tray of hors d'oeuvres the waitress left by the door. Ben, I see, is weakening. He is not used to going this late without dinner. He

has finished his story and stands tapping the pocket in which he has placed his speech. Taking the last clean plate, I select a few crackers slathered in pâté, a few Brie tartlets, and a tempting array of delicacies layered with triple-crème goat cheese and prosciutto, each elaborately constructed tidbit so loaded with fat it could clog an artery.

Here, I say, holding out the plate. I know you must be starving. And, when I see him hesitate: Don't worry, my love. I have only your best interests at heart. I am trying to keep you honest. I am trying to save our lives.