My Last Duchess

'That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,' said Miss Bessie. No one would have called her Miss Bessie to her face, but that was her name among us. It was far more respectful than our names for some of the other teachers: the Gorilla, the Crip, the Hippo. 'Now, class. What does that single word, last, tell us right away?'

The windows of our brand-new schoolroom were high enough so we couldn't see anything out of them except the sky. Today the sky was a hazy blue, a warm, drowsy colour. I wasn't looking at it, but there it was, at the edge of eye-sight, huge and featureless and soothing, rolling on and on like the sea. One of the window panels was open and some flies had come in. They were buzzing around, bumbling against the glass, trying to get out. I could hear them, but I couldn't see them, I couldn't risk turning my head. I was supposed to be thinking about last.

Last, last, last. Last was so close to lost. Last Duchess. Duchess was an insinuating rustle, a whispering: taffeta brushing over a floor. On a day like this it was hard to resist dozing off, drifting down into reverie or half-sleep. It was afternoon, it was May, the trees outside were flowering, pollen was eddying everywhere. The classroom was too hot; it was filled with a vibration, the vibration of its newness - the blond wood of its curved, modern metal-framed desks, the greenness of its blackboards, the faint humming of its fluorescent lights, which seemed to hum even when they were turned off. But despite this newness there was an old smell in the room, an ancient, fermenting smell: an invisible steam was rising all around, oily, salty, given off by twenty-five adolescent bodies stewing gently in the humid spring-time air.

Last Duchess. There had to be more than one, then. A whole bunch of Duchesses, all in a row like a chorus line. No: it was last as in last year. The Duchess was back there in the past - gone, over with, left behind.

Quite frequently Miss Bessie didn't wait for anyone to stick up a hand: it could be a long wait, as being too quick to blurt stuff out was ridiculous in our eyes. We didn't want to make fools of ourselves by getting a thing wrong, or else - sometimes equally foolish - by getting it right. Miss Bessie was well aware of that, so nine times out of ten she simply answered her own questions. 'Last Duchess tells us,' she said, 'that this Duchess is no longer the wife of the Duke. It also implies that there may be a next Duchess. The first line of a poem is very important, class. It sets the tone. Let us proceed.'

Miss Bessie was sitting on top of her desk, as usual. She had good legs, not only for a woman of her age but for any woman, and she wore beautiful shoes - not the kind of shoes we ourselves would have worn, not penny loafers or sad-dle shoes or velveteen flats or stiletto heels for dancing, but we could tell they were in good taste and well taken care of. No spot or smear of dirt was ever to be seen on those softly gleaming shoes of Miss Bessie's.

Each pair of shoes went with its own outfit, and here too Miss Bessie was exceptional. The female teachers at our school wore tailored suits to do their teaching in. It was a kind of uniform - a skirt, straight or gored or pleated, a matching jacket, a blouse underneath, white or cream-coloured, often with a floppy bow tied at the neckline, and a brooch on the left-hand lapel - but Miss Bessie's suits had an elegance the others could not match. Her blouses were not cheesy, limp nylon but had a sheen and solidity to them, her brooches looked as if their semi-precious stones were real: her best one was amber and gold, in the shape of a bee. Her hair wasn't grey but silver, and expertly waved; her cheekbones were prominent, her jaw firm, her eyes piercing; her nose, discreetly powdered, was aquiline, a word we had learned from her.

We pitied the other female teachers in our school - hopeless, ill-groomed drudges, overwrought and easily distracted, shackled to a thankless task, namely teaching us - but we did not pity Miss Bessie.

It wasn't only her no-nonsense professional appearance the boys in the class respected: it was the fact that she had an M.A. Those two letters were a qualification: they stood for something important, like M.D. So the boys respected that, but they also respected the tight leash on which she kept them. 'Richard, do you have something amusing to say? If so, be so kind as to say it to all of us.' 'David, that observation is beneath you. You can do better than that. A man's reach should exceed his grasp.' 'Robert, was that a flimsy attempt at wit?' Sarcastic was the word we used, about such remarks. But Miss Bessie was never sarcastic about honest blunders. She was patient with those.

'Now then. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall," ' said Miss Bessie, "Looking as if she were alive." As if she were alive. Class, what does as if tell us?'

This time she did wait. I never knew - none of us knew - when one of her waits would set in. They always woke me up. It was the suspense, the looming danger - the threat of being pounced on, called by name, forced to speak. At such times my mouth would fill with words, too many of them, a glutinous pudding of syllables I would have to mould into speech while Miss Bessie's ironic narrowed eyes beamed their message at me: You can do better than that. During such waiting periods I found it best to look down - otherwise Miss Bessie might single me out - and so I busied myself by making notes in my notebook.

He bumped her off, I wrote. Bumped her off was not a thing I would ever have said out loud in class, as it was slang and Miss Bessie disapproved of such sloppy and vulgar talk. I'd picked up bumped off from the detective stories I was in the habit of reading as a way of evading my homework, or at least delaying it. Unfortunately, there were a lot of detective stories in the house, along with historical novels and books about World War One, and about monasteries in Tibet - a country where women could have two husbands at the same time - and about naval warfare in Napoleonic times, and about the form and function of the Fallopian tubes. If I wasn't in the mood for a whole book, I'd go through the stacks of old Lifes and Times and Chatelaines and Good Housekeepings - my parents were reluctant to throw anything out - and puzzle over the ads (what was a douche?) and the articles on fashion and personal problems (Teenage Rebellion: Five Antidotes. Halitosis: Your Silent Enemy. Can This Marriage Be Saved?). I'd learned quite a lot, over the years, by avoiding what I was supposed to be learning.

Bumped off, I wrote. The Duke had bumped off the Duchess. Cheap floozies often got bumped off, and so did hot tomatoes and dumb bunnies, and so did sleazy broads. Bumped suggested a blow to the head with a blunt instrument, such as a blackjack, but this was not likely the method the Duke had used on the Duchess. Nor had he buried her in the cellar and covered up the grave with wet cement, or cut her up into pieces and heaved the pieces into the lake or dropped them down a well or left them in a park, like the husbands in some of the more grisly narratives I'd encountered. I thought he'd most likely poisoned her: it was a well-known fact among the writers of historical romances that Dukes of that time were expert poisoners. They had rings with hollow stones on the fronts and they slid the stones open when nobody was looking and slipped the poison into people's flagons of wine, in powder form. Arsenic was a substance they favoured. The poor Duchess would have sickened gradually; a doctor would have been called in, a sinister doctor in the pay of the Duke. This doctor would have mixed up a final, lethal, potion to finish her off. There would have been a touching death scene and then a fancy funeral, with candles, and after that the Duke would have been free to go on the prowl for another beautiful girl to turn into a Duchess and then bump off.

On second thought, I decided that the Duke wouldn't have lifted a finger in the matter himself: he was far too snobbish to have bothered with any of the actual poisoning. I gave commands, he said, later on in the poem. (I'd skipped ahead.) The dirty work would have been done by some thug with a name like First Murderer - as in plays by Shakespeare - while the Duke himself was elsewhere, dropping names and paying phony compliments and showing off his costly artworks. I had a picture of how he would look: he'd be dark and suave and insultingly polite, and would wear a lot of velvet. There were movie stars like that, such as James Mason. They always had classy English accents. The Duke would have had an accent like that, even though he was Italian.

'Well?' said Miss Bessie. 'The subject is as if. We don't have all day. Marilyn?'

'Maybe she's dead,' said Marilyn.

'Very good, Marilyn,' said Miss Bessie. 'That is one possibility. The attentive reader, I said attentive, Bill, this does

apply to you, unless you have some other more important engagement to attend to - no? - the attentive reader would certainly wonder that, and might wonder also - if the Duchess is indeed dead - how she might have died.'

At the sound of Bill's name I found myself blushing, because Bill was my boyfriend; to be on the receiving end of Miss Bessie's sarcasm was humiliating for him, and therefore by extension for me. It was true that Bill was not an attentive reader, but he regretted it, or else he resented it, I wasn't sure which. I could visualize him now, two rows behind me, going red in the face with shame and anger as his friends smirked at him. But Miss Bessie didn't care about that. She trampled right over you if she thought you were fooling around - if you got in the way of her teaching.

'Of course we often say of a portrait, "It's very lifelike," ' she continued. 'That would be the other possibility. Perhaps this remark of the Duke's is merely a comment on the verisimilitude - the lifelikeness - of the portrait itself. The entire poem is told from the Duke's point of view - therefore nothing he says may be taken as objective truth. We will return to this question of point of view later.'

Verisimilitude, I wrote in my notebook. Lifelike. The Duchess is almost alive. Point of view.

Miss Bessie was the best English teacher in the school. Possibly she was one of the best in the city: our parents said we were lucky to have her. She drove us briskly through the curriculum as if herding sheep, heading us off from false detours and perilous cliff edges, nipping at our heels when we slowed down in the wrong places, making us linger in the right ones so we could assimilate the material of importance. She described our task of learning as a race, a sort of obstacle course: there was a lot of ground still to be covered before the final exams, she said, and it had to be covered rapidly. This ground was strewn with hurdles and rough parts, and other difficulties. The days were speeding by, and we still had Tess of the d'Urbervilles looming up ahead of us like - we felt - a big steep hill of mud. It was true that once we got to the top of it, Miss Bessie - who' d been up there many times before - might show us a view; but meanwhile there would be a lot of slipperiness. We'd tangled with Thomas Hardy in the form of The Mayor of Casterbridge the year before: it was going to be heavy slogging. Therefore we needed to polish off the Last Duchess before week's end so we could catch our breath over the weekend and then get a good run at Tess.

> *'That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,*
>
> *Looking as if she were alive. I call*
>
> *That piece a wonder, now; Frà Pandolf's hands*
>
> *Worked busily a day, and there she stands.*
>
> Will't please you sit and look at her?'

'Now, class. "Will't please you." To whom do you suppose the Duke is speaking?'

Line by line, Miss Bessie hauled us through the poem. It was an important poem, worth - said Miss Bessie - a full fifteen marks on the final exam. English was a compulsory subject: we couldn't get out of high school without passing it. But Miss Bessie wasn't interested in mere passes; she wanted top marks from us. She had the reputation of the school to keep up, and also her own reputation. Her students did well because they were well prepared. 'You must be well prepared,' she told us frequently. 'Of course, you will have covered the material, but in addition to that you must read the question twice and make sure you answer what is being asked. You must keep your head and not panic. You must outline and structure.' For each piece of work we studied, she produced a sampling of the questions that had been asked in previous years and drilled us in the acceptable answers.

Once we had written them, the exams would be centrally marked by a hand-picked team of markers, and then, one day in August, the final grades would be published in the newspaper, brutally, without warning, to be seen by everyone - our friends, our enemies, our families. We dreaded this. It would be like having someone yank open the curtain when

you were taking a shower.

The grades in the newspaper would determine whether we would go on. Going on meant going to university. Our school was not for rich kids - they went to private institutions. It didn't matter so much to their lives whether they did well in high school, because a place would be made for them somehow. Neither was it for the poor: we lacked the freedom of being considered too stupid to go on. The dropouts, as we called them, had left as early as they could, but not before they'd tortured us with taunts of 'brainer', 'brown nose', 'show-off', and 'suckup', and had jeered relentlessly at anyone who actually did homework. They'd left us with an ambiguous opinion of ourselves. 'Think you're so smart,' they'd sneered, and we had thought we were smart, smarter than them at any rate; but we didn't altogether approve of our smartness. It was like having an extra hand: an advantage for opening doors, but freakish despite that.

Nonetheless we would have to live by our deformity. We'd have to use our wits, work our way up the ladder provided for us, make something of ourselves. The boys were expected to become doctors, lawyers, dentists, accountants, engineers. As for us girls, we weren't sure where we were headed. If we didn't go on, we'd have to get married, or else become old maids; but with a good set of grades, this dismaying fork in the road could be postponed for a while.

We would sit the exams during a three-week period in June, in the gymnasium. It would be - said Miss Bessie - a turning point in our lives, but if we were well prepared we need not fear this test, which was a test of our characters, not merely of our intelligence. To succeed we would need courage and a steady nerve, and if those qualities were present it would simply be a matter of setting down the right facts and observations in the right order.

Nonetheless we frightened one another with stories about potential disaster. There was no air conditioning in the gym, and if there was a heat wave - as there usually was in June - we would all cook, stew, and fry. Girls had been known to topple out of their desks in a cold faint; other girls had unexpectedly got their periods, and had found themselves sitting in puddles of blood, which - in the more squalid renditions - actually dripped off the seat of the desk onto the floor, plop, plop, plop - a mortifying prospect. Boys had had nervous breakdowns, and had started shouting and swearing; others had lost their nerve, and everything they'd memorized had vanished right out of their brains, and at the end of the exam it was found they'd been writing nothing but their own names, over and over. One boy had drawn a perfect isosceles triangle on every single page - meticulously, it was emphasized. Meticulously was a chilling touch: meticulousness, we knew, was just one step away from full-blown lunacy.

After school I walked home across the football field, a locale that had once been frightening to me, and forbidden, and significant in some way I couldn't define, but which had now shrunk to an irrelevant stretch of muddy grass. A couple of younger kids were having a smoke behind the field house, where sordid orgies involving a girl called Loretta - one of the dropouts - were rumoured to have taken place. I carried my big black leather binder full of notes in front of me, hugging it to my chest with both arms, my textbooks piled on top of it. All the girls did this. It prevented anyone from staring at our breasts, which were either too small and contemptuous, or else too big and hilarious, or else just the right size - but what size was right? Breasts of any kind were shameful and could attract catcalls of 'Get a load of the knockers!' from greasy-haired boys lounging in groups, or from young men in cars. Or else they would chant,

> I must, I must, I must develop my bust!
>
> I better, I better, or I'll never wear a sweater!

while moving their bent arms back and forth like a cartoon chicken's. Although in truth the catcalling didn't happen very much, there was always the fear that it would. To yell back at the boys was brazen, to ignore them was supposed to be dignified, though it didn't feel dignified, it felt degrading. Merely to have breasts was degrading. But not to have any at all would have been worse.

'Stand up straight, shoulders back, don't slouch,' our Physical Education teacher used to bark at us during volleyball practice, centuries ago, in that very same gym where we would soon be writing the finals. But what did she know? She

herself was flat-chested, and anyway very old. Forty at least.

Breasts were one thing: they were in front, where you could have some control over them. Then there were bums, which were behind, and out of sight, and thus more lawless. Apart from loosely gathered skirts, nothing much could be done about them.

Hey! Hey! Swing and sway!! Get a load of that wiggle!

Walking beside me across the football field was Bill, who wasn't the sort of boy who would roam around in a pack, shouting things about girls' breasts; or I didn't think he was. He was more serious than that, he had better things to do, he wanted to go places. He wanted to climb the ladder. As my official boyfriend, he walked me partway home every day, except on Fridays when he began his weekend job at a grocery store in the other direction. Fridays after school, Saturdays until three - he was saving the money for university, because his parents couldn't afford it, or wouldn't spare it. Neither of them had gone on and they'd managed fine without. That was their attitude, according to Bill, but he didn't seem to hold it against them.

Several months earlier, Bill had replaced my last boyfriend, who'd replaced the one before that. The process of replacement was delicate - it called for diplomacy, and nuance, and the willpower to resist answering the phone - but at a certain stage it had to be done. That stage came after the earlier, permissible stages had been gone through - the first date, the first tentative holding of hands, the arm around the shoulders in the movie, the slow, gelatinous dancing, the breathy fumbling around in parked cars, the advances and counterattacks of hands, the war of zippers and buttons. After a while, a stalemate would be reached: neither side would know what was supposed to come next. To go forward was unthinkable, to go back impossible. This period was characterized by listlessness, by squabbling and making up, by an inability to decide which movie we wanted to see, and - on my part - by the reading of novels that ended badly, over which I would weep. That was when the boyfriend had to be traded in and a fresh one obtained.

It wasn't that I mourned over the boys individually so much as that I hated to have things finish. I didn't want any phase of my life to be gone forever, to be over and done with. I preferred beginnings to endings in books, as well - it was exciting not to know what was lying in store for me on the unread pages - but, perversely, I couldn't resist sneaking a look at the final chapter of any book I was reading.

As a boyfriend, Bill wasn't following - could not follow - the standard cycle. Behind us were the Saturday-night dates, ahead of us the grim scenario in the gymnasium, with all it might involve: fainting, raving, panic, failure, disgrace. Now that there was so much ground to be covered before June, we no longer had time for the endless evenings parked in a car, with the policemen shining the flashlights in and asking if everything was all right; we no longer had time for the fights, for the sulking, for the monosyllabic phone calls and the grudging forgiveness. Instead of all that, we studied together.

Or, to be accurate, I helped Bill study. What I helped him with was English literature. So far, he'd managed to squeak through it, but now he was frightened, although he didn't call it fright. Instead, he blamed the literature itself: it refused to make sense. He wanted everything to be clear-cut, as in algebra, a subject he was good at. How could there be two or three meanings to one single word at the same time? How could Miss Bessie get all of that stuff out of a single poem? Why couldn't people say things plainly?

Helping Bill wasn't turning out to be easy. He'd get mad at the poem for being complicated; he'd argue with it, and demand that it be different; then he'd get mad at the poet for having written it that way; then he'd get mad at me. After a while he'd say he was sorry, he hadn't meant it - I was really, really smart, in that way at least; I was good with words, not like him, and he admired me for it. He just needed me to explain the thing again, only more slowly. After that we would neck and fumble around, though not for very long because we couldn't afford the time.

This day, Bill and I were in no great hurry to get home. We strolled, we sauntered; we paused for ice cream cones at the drugstore. You had to take a break from the books once in a while, said Bill. The ice cream came in cylinders and tasted faintly of the cardboard in which it had been rolled; the cones themselves were leathery in texture. We reached the funeral parlour and sat down on the low stone wall in front of it. The sunlight was golden; pale greenish tassels dangled from the trees; Bill's hair, which was light brown and cut very short, shone like a soft velvety lawn. It was all I could do to keep from stroking the top of his head, as if he was a plush toy dog, but he wouldn't have liked that. He didn't like to be patted.

'I'm not going to pass it,' said Bill. 'I'm going to flunk out.'

'No, you're not,' I said.

'I just don't get it.'

'Don't get what?'

'What's going on.'

'What's going on in what?' I said, though I knew what he meant.

'That goddamn Duchess poem.'

Goddamn was the worst swearing Bill ever did in front of me. To say the other words - the F-word, for instance - would have meant he thought I was the kind of girl you could say such things to. A shoddy girl.

I sighed. 'Okay, I'll run over it again. The poem is by Robert Browning. He was one of the most important poets of the nineteenth century. It's a dramatic monologue. That means only one person is speaking, like a monologue in a play. The form is iambic pentameter run-on couplets.'

'I get that part,' said Bill. Form wasn't difficult for him, because it involved counting. A sonnet, a sestina, an abab rhyme-scheme ballad - identifying these caused him no problems.

I finished my ice cream and tucked the end of the cone in between the stone wall and the funeral parlour's flower bed, in which a neat row of red tulips was arranged. I felt lazy, I wasn't really in an instructive mood, but Bill was leaning forward, he was actually listening. 'So, it's the Duke of Ferrara speaking,' I said. 'The whole poem is told from his point of view - that's important, because they always ask about point of view. We know it's Ferrara because it says Ferrara right under the title of the poem. Ferrara was a noted centre for the arts in Italy, so it makes sense for the Duke to have a picture collection. The time is the Renaissance. There was a lot of murdering going on then. Okay so far?'

'Yeah, but . . .'

'Okay, so the Duke is talking to an envoy from the Count. We know it's the Count because it says that, right there at the end. He's dickering for the Count's daughter, he wants to get hold of her for his next Duchess. It doesn't say which Count. They're upstairs - the Duke and the envoy. We know that because they come downstairs at the end, where it says, "Nay, we'll go together down, sir." '

'Why put that in?' said Bill.

'Put what in?'

'Who cares whether they're upstairs or downstairs?' Bill was already getting exasperated.

'They have to be upstairs because there are other people downstairs - see, look, it's right here - and the Duke wants a private conversation. Anyway, the portrait of the Duchess is upstairs. That's what the Duke is taking the envoy to see. The Duke pulls a curtain. There's the picture of his last Duchess behind it. His last Duchess, get it? The picture has verisimilitude.'

'What?'

'Verisimilitude. It means lifelike. Put that word into your answer on the exam. I bet it's worth a whole mark.'

'Cripes,' said Bill, giving a rueful little grin. 'Sure. If you say so. Okay. Write it down for me.'

'Okay. So they stand looking at this Duchess picture. Then basically the Duke tells the envoy about her, and what was wrong with her, and why he bumped her off.'

'Or shut her up in a convent,' said Bill hopefully. Miss Bessie had proposed this as an alternative, saying that Browning himself had done so. The boys in the class preferred this milder version, oddly enough. They could see wanting to dump your wife because she was boring or ugly or a nag, or unsatisfactory in some other way; they could understand the desire for a better model; but killing the first wife seemed extreme to them. They were nice boys, they intended to be doctors and so forth. Only pervs like the Duke would have to go all the way. 'She would have been out of his hair, in a convent,' said Bill. 'She'd be happier in there anyway. The guy was a pain in the neck.'

'I don't buy that,' I said. 'He definitely killed her. "All smiles stopped together" - that's really sudden. It's pretty definite. But on the exam, you need to say there's the two choices. Anyway, he got rid of her. Why, is what the poem's about. What the Duke says is that she smiled too much.'

'That's what I don't get,' said Bill. 'It's a really dumb reason. And there's another thing I don't get. If he's so smooth' - Miss Bessie had dwelt for some time on the Duke's smoothness, though she hadn't called it that, she'd called it cultivated and sophisticated - 'if he's so smooth, why is he dumb enough to tell all this to the envoy? The envoy's just going to run back to the Count and say, "Cancel the marriage - the guy's a dangerous creep!" '

I got up from the funeral-home wall, straightened down my skirt front and back, picked up my books. 'We'll go through it again on Saturday,' I told him. 'I'll copy out my notes for you.'

'I'm not going to pass it,' said Bill.

* * *

At home, I lived in the cellar. I'd moved down there in order to study for my exams. The cellar was cooler than the rest of the house; also it was farther away from everyone else. These days I didn't feel like talking to anyone, or at least not to my parents. They didn't understand the gruesomeness of the ordeal before me, they thought I still had time to mow the lawn.

I slipped in through the back door and crept down the cellar stairs, unseen by my mother, and opened the freezer and took out the jar of Noxzema I kept in there. It was my theory that covering my face with frozen mentholated skin cream would stimulate the blood flow to my brain and make it more possible for me to study.

Once my face was entirely cold and white, I paced around my cellar room. I needed to get my thoughts in order, but the Duchess was eluding me. Maybe she hadn't been poisoned after all. Maybe she'd been stabbed with a poignard, or else strangled - not with a nylon stocking, as was habitual in the detective stories, but with a silken cord. Maybe she had been garrotted. This method also involved strangling; I didn't know what kind exactly, but I liked the sound of it. The poor girl, I thought. Garrotted, and all because she smiled too much.

But also - said the poem - hers wasn't any old kind of smiling. Her smile had 'depth and passion' and was 'earnest.' I could see - now I was considering it at length - that a wife who went around smiling earnestly to left and right could have been annoying. There were girls at school who smiled at everyone in the same earnest, humourless way. In the school yearbook, it usually said about them, 'Terrific personality' or 'Our Miss Sunshine,' but I'd never liked these girls very much. Their gaze slid over you, smile and all, usually coming to rest on some boy. Still, they were only doing what the women's magazines said they should do. A smile costs nothing! A smile: the best makeup tip! Get smile appeal! Such girls were too eager to please. They were too cheap. That was it - that was the Duke's objection: the Duchess was too cheap. That must have been his point of view. The more I thought about the Duchess and about how aggravating she must have been - aggravating, and too obliging, and just plain boring, the very same smile day after day - the more

sympathy I felt for the Duke.

But there was no point in dwelling on the Duke's grievances: for the purposes of the final exam, he had to be the villain. Miss Bessie had told us to expect questions like, 'Compare and contrast the characters of the Duke and the Duchess.' For that, she said, we should prepare a list of opposites, arranged in acceptable pairs. I'd started on my own list:

Duke: ruthless, stuck-up proud, oily falsely polite, self-centred, shows off his money, greedy experienced, psycho art collector.

Duchess: innocent, modest, smarmy sincere, earnest, sickly-sweet kind to others, humble, stupid inexperienced, art object.

A list like this would be a help to Bill. He'd be able to understand it, as long as I drew arrows from each of the characteristics on the Duke side to the corresponding characteristics on the Duchess one. My real, confusing thoughts I would keep to myself.

Bill's question about the envoy had stayed with me. It troubled me. Why indeed had the Duke spilled the beans in such a witless manner to a complete stranger if he was trying to convince the envoy to clinch the deal? So, I want to marry the Count's daughter and this is what I did with the last Duchess I got my hands on. There she stands, as if alive. Wink, elbow in the ribs of the envoy, get it? Oh. Right, says the envoy. As if. Good one.

The Duke wasn't an idiot. He must have had his reasons.

What if the arrangement had already been signed and sealed? If it had - if the wedding was a certainty - everything in the poem became clear. The Duke hated to explain things in person because explaining was beneath him, so he was using the envoy as a way of sending a message to the next Duchess, and the message was: This is how I like my Duchesses to behave. And if they don't behave that way, curtains. Curtains literally, because if this next Duchess got out of line, she too would end up as a picture with its own curtain in front of it. Who knew how many other pictures the Duke was keeping behind curtains, up there on the second floor?

The Duke was merely showing consideration by saying all this to the envoy: he wanted his likes and dislikes to be fully understood ahead of time - only this much smiling, and only at me - to avoid unpleasantness later. ' "Just this/Or that in you disgusts me . . ." ' he'd said. Disgusts: pretty strong language. He'd found the Last Duchess disgusting, and he didn't want to be disgusted by the next Duchess.

This was not the accepted view of the poem. The accepted view was that the envoy was horrified by what the Duke had told him and had tried to rush down the stairs first in order to get away from such a twisted nutbar. When the Duke said, 'Nay, we'll go together down, sir,' he was stopping the envoy from barging in front. But I didn't think so. I thought it more likely that the envoy had motioned the Duke to go ahead of him - probably he'd made a brown-nosing little bow - and the Duke had courteously set them on an equal footing. 'We'll go together down, sir' - he was acting the pal. Most likely he'd put his arm around the envoy's shoulder.

If I was right, they were all three of them in cahoots - the Duke, the envoy, and the Count. The marriage was a trade-off: the Count would hand over the dowry and kiss the daughter goodbye, and would get social prestige in return, since Dukes rated higher than Counts. Once the Count's daughter had reached the Duke's palace - his palazzo, as Miss Bessie had told us it would have been called - she'd be all on her own. She couldn't expect help from her father, or from anyone else either. I thought of her sitting in front of her mirror, practising her smiling. Too warm? Too cold? Too much upward curve at the edges? Not enough? In view of the hints from the envoy, she'd be totally certain her life depended on getting that smile down perfectly.

On Saturday night I made my way over to Bill's, wearing my studying clothes: jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, with a loose man's shirt over top. I went on my bicycle because Bill's parents were out in their car, or so he'd told me on the

phone, so he couldn't pick me up.

Bill's family lived in a small, square, newish yellow-brick two-storey house; rows and rows of identical houses had been built in that area just after the war. The main bedroom was over the garage; there was a tiny vestibule, then a hallway that ran past the doors to the living room and the dining room to the boxy little kitchen. At the back there was a stuffy, cramped room with a La-Z-Boy recliner and a sofa bed that pulled out for guests, and the TV set; that room was where we did our studying when we were at Bill's. At my house, we did it at the dining table when my parents were home, and in the cellar when they weren't.

I rang the doorbell, Bill opened the door right away - he must have been waiting for me - and I stepped into the vestibule and slipped off my running shoes. This was a rule at Bill's house: shoes left at the door. Bill's mother had a job - she worked at a hospital, though she wasn't a nurse - but despite her job she kept the house spotless. It smelled of cleaning products - Javex bleach and lemon-oil furniture polish - with an undertone of mothballs. It was as if the whole house had been soaked in preservatives to keep it from ever changing, because change meant dirt. Bill and I never went into the living room, although I had looked into it. It had mole-coloured wall-to-wall carpeting and was crowded with varnished end tables, which in turn held an array of china figurines and crystal ashtrays, or were they bonbon dishes? The drapes were kept drawn to stop things from fading. There was no such roped-off, hushed, consecrated space in my own house.

Bill's mother didn't altogether approve of me. I'd learned about this kind of disapproval - the age-old disapproval of mothers toward any girl dabbling in their sons - from Chatelaine and Good Housekeeping (Your Mother-in-Law: Best Friend or Worst Enemy?), so I hadn't been surprised by the chilliness of her smile. On the other hand, whenever I encountered her she'd go out of her way to thank me for helping Bill study what she called 'his English.' It was a shame he had to study it - it wouldn't be any use to him later in life, and he got so discouraged about it; why couldn't he be allowed to focus on his strengths? - but since he did have to study it, better he should have a clever friend like me - she didn't say 'girlfriend' - to keep his nose to the grindstone.

We started our studying well enough, going over the possible questions, and the answers to them, in point form. But then Bill said you needed to take a break from the books once in a while, and he went and got us some ginger ale, and soon we were fumbling around on the sofa bed. We didn't pull it out into a bed, however - only a cheap girl would have connived at such a thing, and also we were aware that Bill's parents might return unexpectedly, as they had done before. This evening they didn't return, but after a while we sat up anyway, and smoothed down our hair and did up our buttons, and went back to the studying.

Bill couldn't seem to focus. He grasped the list of opposite characteristics - that made sense to him. But then he said it was a shame, what that guy had done to the Duchess. She probably never even saw it coming, and then the smug little pervert had the nerve to brag about it, he'd stuck her picture up on the wall like a pin-up, most likely she was very good-looking as well, what a waste.

I said all of this was beside the point: the people marking the exam were not going to be interested in Bill's personal opinions. What they'd want was an objective analysis of the poem, using evidence. The poem would be printed right on the exam paper - they didn't expect him to have memorized it. All he had to do was read the question twice and make the accepted points - that stuff we'd been going over with Miss Bessie - and then find the lines in the poem that backed up those points, and then copy them down with quote marks around them.

Bill said yeah, he knew that, it's just that it was such a useless way of spending time and energy - what was it for in the end, what was it supposed to prove? I said it would prove he was an attentive reader, and that was all they wanted to know.

I shouldn't have said 'attentive reader.' It reminded Bill of his most recent run-in with Miss Bessie, and her sarcasm. His face went pink.

He said it was all pretty useless, because being an attentive reader wouldn't get him a job. I said it would, because that way he would pass the exam and he'd be able to go on. Anyway, I said, I didn't make the rules, so why was he mad at me?

Bill said he wasn't mad at me, he was mad at the goddamn Duke, for killing the Duchess. He ought to have been locked up or, better, hanged. So why was I defending him?

We'd had these kinds of stupid arguments before. They came out of nowhere, they went nowhere; during them each one of us would accuse the other of saying things that hadn't been said.

'I was not defending him,' I said.

'Yeah. You were. She was a nice normal girl with a sick jerk for a husband, and you seem to think it was her own fault.'

I hadn't said that, but it was partly true. Why did it make me angry to have Bill guess my feelings?

'She was a dumb bunny,' I said. 'She should have been able to figure out that he didn't like her smiling in that sucky way at every Tom, Dick, and Harry, and sunset, for heaven's sakes.'

'She was just being friendly.'

'She was just being a simp.'

'She was not a simp. How was she supposed to know what he wanted? She couldn't read his mind!'

'That's what I mean,' I said in a bored voice. 'She was dumb.'

'No, she wasn't! He was a creep! He never let on about the smile thing. He never said a word to her. It says in the poem. All that about choosing never to stoop.'

'She was a half-wit.'

'At least she wasn't a brainer and a show-off,' said Bill offensively.

I said the Duke would have preferred a brainer and a show-off to a dumb bunny - a disgusting dumb bunny - because he was cultivated and sophisticated, he appreciated works of art. Anyway, I wasn't showing off, I was just trying to help him pass the exam.

'You think you're so smart,' said Bill. 'Thanks but no thanks. I don't need any goddamn help, and specially not from you.'

'Okey-dokey,' I said. 'If that's what you want. Good luck.' I gathered my books up off the floor and strode down the hall, as quickly as I could in my sock feet, and put on my running shoes in the vestibule. Bill didn't try to stop me. He stayed in the TV room. From the sounds coming out of it I knew he had turned on the TV.

I bicycled home in the dark. It was later than I'd thought. My parents were in bed with the lights out. I'd forgotten to take my key. I climbed up onto the garbage can beside the back door, twisted myself sideways, and slid into the house through the milk cupboard, a feat I'd performed many times before. Then I tiptoed downstairs and into my cellar room, where I burst into tears. Whatever temporary patching-up might take place, the era of Bill was now at an end. Bye-bye love, as in songs. All alone now. It was so sad. Why did such things have to disintegrate like that? Why did longing and desire, and friendliness and goodwill too, have to shatter into pieces? Why did they have to be so thoroughly over?

I could make myself cry even more by repeating the key words: love, alone, sad, over. I did it on purpose. After I'd finally finished crying, I put on my pyjamas and brushed my teeth, and covered my face with frozen Noxzema skin cream. Then I got into bed with Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Miss Bessie would be tackling it on Monday. It would be a full gallop for all of us, and I told myself I wanted to get a head start on it. In reality, I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep: I

needed some distraction from my fight with Bill, which otherwise would have replayed itself over and over while I changed the words we'd spoken into other words that gave me more of an advantage, and tried to figure out what our actual words had meant, and then cried some more.

It didn't take me very much reading and skimming to discover that Tess had serious problems - much worse than mine. The most important thing in her life happened to her in the very first part of the book. She got taken advantage of, at night, in the woods, because she'd stupidly accepted a drive home with a jerk, and after that it was all downhill, one awful thing after another, turnips, dead babies, getting dumped by the man she loved, and then her tragic death at the end. (I peeked at the last three chapters.) Tess was evidently another of those unlucky pushovers, like the Last Duchess, and like Ophelia - we'd studied Hamlet earlier. These girls were all similar. They were too trusting, they found themselves in the hands of the wrong men, they weren't up to things, they let themselves drift. They smiled too much. They were too eager to please. Then they got bumped off, one way or another. Nobody gave them any help.

Why did we have to study these hapless, annoying, dumb-bunny girls? I wondered. Who chose the books and poems that would be on the curriculum? What use would they be in our future lives? What exactly were we supposed to be learning from them? Maybe Bill was right. Maybe the whole thing was a waste of time.

Upstairs, my parents were sleeping peacefully; they knew nothing of doomed love, of words spoken in anger, of fated separation. They were ignorant of the darker side of life - of girls betrayed in forests, of girls falling into streams and singing till they drowned, of girls done away with for being too pleasant. All over the city, everyone was asleep, drifting on the vast blue sea of unconsciousness. Everyone except me.

Me, and Miss Bessie. Miss Bessie, too, must have been up late. I couldn't imagine her doing anything as lax and unguarded as sleeping. Her eyes - not sarcastic eyes, I now realized, but merry eyes, the eyes of an elderly child, crinkled at the corners as if she were suppressing a joke or a quaint piece of wisdom - surely those eyes of hers never closed. Perhaps she was the one responsible for choosing our required reading material - she, and a group of others like her, all of a certain age, all with excellent suits, all with real stones in their lapel brooches, all with qualifications. They got together, they had secret meetings, they conferred, they cooked up our book list among them. They knew something we needed to know, but it was a complicated thing - not so much a thing as a pattern, like the clues in a detective story once you started connecting them together. These women - these teachers - had no direct method of conveying this thing to us, not in a way that would make us listen, because it was too tangled, it was too oblique. It was hidden within the stories.

I looked at my watch: three in the morning. I was so tired I was seeing double, but at the same time I was wide awake. I ought to have been brooding over Bill - didn't he require more tears? Instead, in the bright place at the back of my head, there was an image of Miss Bessie. She was standing in a patch of sunlight, which twinkled off her brooch, the amber-and-gold one in the shape of a bee. She had on her best suit, and a blouse with a crisp white bow, and her impeccable gleaming shoes. She seemed distant but very clear, like a photograph. Now she was smiling at me with gentle irony, and holding aside a curtain; behind the curtain was the entrance to a dark tunnel. I would have to go into the tunnel whether I wanted to or not - the tunnel was the road of going on, and then there was more of the road on the other side of it - but the entrance was where Miss Bessie had to stop. Inside the tunnel was what I was meant to learn.

Very soon I would be a last-year's student. I would be gone from Miss Bessie's world, and she would be gone from mine. Both of us would be in the past, both of us over and done with - me from her point of view, her from mine. Sitting in my present-day desk there would be another, younger student, who would be poked and prodded and herded relentlessly through the prescribed texts, as I had been. The first line of a poem is very important, class, Miss Bessie would say. It sets the tone. Let us proceed.

Meanwhile, I myself would be inside the dark tunnel. I'd be going on. I'd be finding things out. I'd be all on my own.