EXPIRATION DATE

I don't remember telling Thomas he could move in with me, but here he is sitting across the breakfast table wearing Eliot's terry cloth robe, his head in the paper.

"Do you want to go to the American Rep?" he asks, still not looking up. "They're doing "Tis a Pity..."

"She's a Whore," I say.

He looks up, grins, "You don't have to take it personally." He has no sympathy for an older woman's scruples. He thought it was amusing that I used to ask him to park his 10-speed in the garden instead of leaning it against my front porch. I am still married to Elliot.

"I thought you wanted to broaden my cultural landscape," he says, leaning back, the robe open to his waist, the grin broadening. "Educate the narrow musician."

Thomas was my violin teacher, still is, matter of fact. He insists that I continue to come to his studio at the conservatory. On Wednesdays I practice like mad until the last minute, jump into the car, fight the Route Nine five o'clock traffic, park behind Jordan Hall and run up the three flights of stairs, my grandfather's German-made violin under my arm. This housewife hopes not to have kept the young maestro waiting.

"Just for that," I announce, rising from the breakfast table, "you can do the dishes."

"Yes, ma'am," he says and stands to slide the dishes into stacks on his arm. He takes everything in one trip into the kitchen and turns on the hot water full force. I sit down in the window seat. I love to watch him in the kitchen. He shifts his weight back and forth rinsing and arranging the dishes in the dishwasher. I glance at the phone. I must call Eliot, before he calls back again. My situation embarrasses me. Philandering housewives are supposed to be nervous that their lovers will phone and arouse the suspicions of their husbands. I'm beyond all that. I watch Thomas's back. The loose sash of the robe rides on his high hips.

He has the confidence of one who was chosen, and indeed, he was adopted. An olive-skinned baby with black curls, he was given to a young Italian couple in the North End. I can imagine his upbringing. They raised the little tyrant on a silk cushion. He never carried or even put away his own violin until he was in junior high and caught on that it wasn't cool to be seen entering youth symphony rehearsals with one's mama following three paces behind carrying the violin case, the satchel and the music stand.

I myself have tried not to play the mother, give him money or buy him clothes. I fight that cliché. But what are the rules? for someone like me, raised by a perfect mother among totems which once loomed invincible and now clutter the landscape like fallen Roman columns?

Thomas is reading the date on the little box of cream. "This stuff's damn near immortal," he says and sticks the carton in the fridge. He is a tidy housekeeper.

"All right, my love," he says. The dishes are finished, he's wiped up the crumbs and now leans back against the sink, hands outstretched on the counter top. "It's Sunday. What's it going to be? the bicycle trail, Walden Pond, Newbury Street?"

I turn my head aside.

"Too tame, huh?" he says. "Maybe you wanted to go up in a balloon? We could go to New Hampshire and get our cards read or our bodies painted." He straightens up and comes to sit on the little footstool in front of the window seat. "What turns you on Lily? You want to go to Neiman-Marcus and shoplift?"

The trio Thomas plays in is going on tour next week—Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, Tulsa, Louisville—then a chamber music competition at Spoleto, after that, teaching at a music camp in North Carolina. It will mean the whole summer. If he goes without me, I shall have gone up in a smoke of craving and despair by the end of June. But I don't quite trust his invitation, so I let circumstances accumulate, hoping they will push me one way or the other. It's now the end of May, and I still haven't decided if I'll open the house on the Cape. It's probably too late to rent it.

I get up from the window seat. "I need to talk to the realtor on the Cape," I say.

"The realtor?" he groans. "What have you done all week? Huh? I come home to my woman. My only day off from breaking my back to put food on the table. And you've pissed away your week and can't give me a few hours pleasure?"

I love when he talks from the North End. The last thing in the world my father would ever have called my mother was his woman. "All right, all right," I say, "you check on that back tire you were complaining about, and I'll get on my jeans. We'll bike to Newbury Street, picnic at Neiman-Marcus and hit their jewelry counter before we go."

From my second floor window I can see Thomas bending over the bike in the garden. He's still in his pajama bottoms and has draped Eliot's robe around the statue of Alice in Wonderland. I hope Mrs. Wainwright next door can't see him.

Eliot's telephone voice sounds strangely warm after all this time. He says things have not worked out in Manchester, adding, "I should never have tried it with someone so much younger."

"It?" I ask. I haven't much patience. Is he referring to three years of life in general with the nymphet or to their baby or to the carnal act itself?

"You know what I mean," he says, forcing the responsibility back on me to know him and understand everything. "I want to come home, but Grantham says you're still angry and have changed all the locks and gotten a Doberman."

"I'm going to have to call you later, Eliot," I say and hang up.

Grantham is my cousin and our lawyer. But he has set aside all legal protocol to have himself a heyday laughing at Eliot. My husband is a somewhat stuffy person, the kind of State Street lawyer Grantham hopes never to become. I've always loved both men. I hate Eliot, of course, for his clumsy desertion. But for some reason I haven't gotten around to divorcing him. I love him, him and Grantham, the only really sweet people in my family, except Mother, of course.

Grantham picked me up again and again during that dark crack in my life after Eliot left when I would sit on the floor in the corner of my kitchen, reduced to a tiny organism, aged beyond repair, without talent or purpose or reason ever to brush its teeth again, ashamed to face its mother. This almost invisible creature was what Grantham would reach down and gather up and force, by the power of laughter, to take on color and mass. We laughed at Eliot, and that laughter was all that kept me from disappearing completely. Grantham visited Eliot and the nymphet regularly to collect material for his monologues:

"The poor man has bags under his eyes like a bloodhound. He lives in constant fear that the nymphet will lark into town and leave him alone with the nymphini."

"Diapers?" Grantham would say holding his nose. "You should see that man run from a dirty diaper. The poor schmuck who was too timid to adopt a child with you now flees his own flesh and blood."

Grantham and I laughed and talked and finally, after months of laugh therapy, I began to leave the house and decided to revive my one talent and find a violin teacher.

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“Has the student practiced?” Thomas asks with his back to me. He is sitting at the piano improvising an introduction. Although it is a medley of baroque motifs, it has the seesaw vamping effect of an amateur accompanist stalling while a reluctant performer approaches the stage.

I take my time. Rosin my bow. Tune my strings. He sweetens his introduction. It still sounds like Bach, but I catch just a hint of *Melancholy Baby*. I open the window a good ten inches. We like a breeze. I face out in the direction of the river and strike the opening chord of a Bach Partita for Unaccompanied Violin. I quite deliberately take it slower than he taught me. I like plenty of space for the chords to ring on the bare floor, tickling my soles. I feel his eyes on

my back as I sway with the searching, darting music my arm pulls from the old violin. He is circling me now with the cold appraising eye of a buyer in a slave market. I close my eyes. Sail boats sweep the breast of the Charles. The breeze presses my skirt against my legs. I ride the bow of a ship, pouring out the music, mounting the storm, plowing the water.

“Is that as fast as you can go?” he calls over the music. I ignore him and soar into the updraft of the Chaconne.

I finish, shaking.

Suddenly behind me he whispers, “Those double stops sounded like a cat in heat.” He is still in the game, but I fall suddenly out of it. I step away from him. My life has been a conventional novel with the last half torn out and replaced with the work of some experimental writer. I put the violin away. I close the case.

"Lily, I'm sorry!"

I turn. Thomas stands with his hands out. He looks alarmed. "It was all a game, Lily. You know that, the only kinky thing we ever do, these lessons."

"I know," I say. "But I have to go visit my mother now."

Thomas bites his lip, but he opens the door for me.

The traffic is still terrible as I work my way downtown to the mouth of the pike. I plunge into the westward flow and head for Weston.

Mother is in her garden where a widow of her beauty and vitality looks best. Her garden is deep, a place where a marble column might still stand. She is pruning her rhododendrons which she does every year at the height of their bloom. She'll arrange massive bouquets for the house and her friends. She's wearing one of Dad's old shirts and some pedal pushers. Her garden hat has slipped down her back, and the once red hair is curling out of its bun and glowing pinkly in the setting sun.

"What's wrong, Lily?" she says, squinting at me.

"I don't know, Mama." My voice sounds childish, but I push on. "Eliot wants to come back, and Thomas is going on tour. He's asked me to go, but I think he probably wants to go alone."

"Thomas? Someone, you've been seeing?"

"Could we sit down, Mama?"

"Of course, sweetheart. Let's get these in water and have some tea."

We carry armloads of the blooming branches—pink, ruby, amethyst—onto the back porch. Mother uses the hose to fill the tall crocks she keeps for soaking flowers. We get all the branches standing upright and go into the kitchen where she puts the kettle on. She is seventy-one and, I think, stiffer than during my last visit. But I know that part of the slowness of her movements is calculated; she's playing for time, trying to prepare herself to deal with whatever she read on my face. I don't usually bring my troubles to my mother, a woman cradled nearly all her life in a steady, loving marriage. But something made me tell Thomas I was coming here and with no other ideas, I go with this.

"Now tell me about this Thomas," she says as we sit down at the kitchen table in the dim glow from the bay window.

I talk while staring out at the rhododendrons, still heavy with blossoms. "Thomas is my violin professor."

"Ah, how lovely," she gasps, "not a really old man, I hope?"

"He's thirty-four. He's moved in with me." What am I doing? Have I come here to kill her? She is white behind her freckles. I watch her try to get hold of her breathing. My desperation has made me ruthless.

She sets down the tea cup before it spills. "Does Eliot know?" she asks.

"Grantham has told him a lot of things—that I have a Doberman, that I ride with a motorcycle gang on weekends. I don't suppose my living with a young violinist was much of a bleep on the screen."

"Bleep?" My mother may cry.

"I mean, Eliot knows."

"Yet, he wants to return." She says this as though it is the good news, something we two drowning women should grab onto. "Will he bring the baby with him?" she asks.

"What?" Ah, at long last the grandchild, the tiny girl for my mother to cherish. I never thought of the nymphini in this way. "He didn't mention her," I say. "I believe he's had enough of fatherhood."

"Lily! A man can't desert his child. He may leave the mother, but fatherhood is forever." Mother's voice is firm now. She has the force of centuries behind her. The room is growing dark. I don't know what I came for—not this happy scenario, my family complete at last. His baby was never a real little girl to me. Too much laugh therapy, I guess. I sigh and start to rise.

"Sit down, now, Lily. Surely there's a lot more ground to cover here."

I sit down. "I don't want this baby, even if its mother would give it up which I'm sure she won't. She's reported to be quite addle-brained about her."

"All mothers are, dear. I remember I could hardly leave the side of your crib to eat or bathe. You were so precious to me." Mother sits back in the bench and cocks her head to stare at me. "Do you know how beautiful you are, right this minute—not just your looks, but what a joy, Lily, it is to be in your presence. Do you know? That's why the men love you. Do you still love Eliot?"

"Yes, but I don't want him back."

"Okay. That's all right. You were a wonderful, faithful wife, Lily. Twenty-two years is enough."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Who decided that?"

"I don't know. It just seems right, don't you think." I guess for some things Mother doesn't need the force of centuries. "Eliot left you, just about as indiscreetly as anyone in Weston had ever heard of."

"Oh?" Mother has spared me all the comments of her friends.

"Well really," she says, "birth announcements along with his change-of-address. We'd never realized he wanted to be so public about his fertility."

"We were a laughing stock, weren't we?"

"Not you dear, just poor Eliot. Now what about this violinist?"

"I don't know, mother. I'm forty-three. I'm too old for him."

"I suppose he will want children."

"Well, he has two."

"My god! Where were these sown?"

"Mother! He was married! to a cellist. She's married to a baritone now."

Mother lets her hands drop into her lap. "It's a crazy world, isn't it Lily, so many people scrambling around trying to be happy."

"I guess you think I should find someone my age."

"You certainly could, you know. Walter Thornton is available again. But, of course, he's much too old. I mean, even if he were ten years younger than you, he'd be much too old. Some men are born old, don't you think?" she asks, turning to look out at her garden. I wait for her to go on. "Your father was a fine athlete, such a beautiful body—" Her profile, mottled with freckles, softened by the floating, wiry curls, is so beautiful tears come to my eyes.

"But he could never—play," she tells the dusk, "especially, you see, in bed." She glances back to give me a trembling, apologetic smile—years of loyalty violated.

I smile back at her. How long was she married? How long has Dad been dead? Fifty-three years of loyalty is probably enough.

"Do you want to take home some of the rhodies?" she asks.

"Sure. I'll put them in the breakfast room." Outside the light is almost gone, the glossy leaves of the bushes have darkened, leaving only the glowing flowers visible.

Mother loads my arms with the blooming branches as though they will offer me some protection. At the front door I lean across them to kiss her.

"Thank you," I say. She lowers her eyes as though to rush me lest she take back something.

I throw back my shoulders as I walk to the car. Despite the weight of the branches I am lighter—loosened into this warm evening.

THE END