

FICTION | AUGUST 3, 2009 ISSUE

# THE VALETUDINARIAN

BY JOSHUA FERRIS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (LEFT TO RIGHT): PHILIPP KEEL, FROM "COLOR" / STEIDL; ANDREW BUSH, "WOMAN DRIVING SOUTH AT 38 MPH ON LA CIENEGA BOULEVARD NEAR THE BEVERLY CENTER, LOS ANGELES, AT 1:49 P.M. ON A WEEKDAY IN MARCH 1997" / YOSSI MILO GALLERY / JULIE SAUL GALLERY



The day after Arty Groys and his wife retired to Florida, she was killed in a head-on collision with a man fleeing the state to escape the discovery of frauds perpetrated under the guise of good citizenship. Arty found himself bereft in a strange land. He knew none of the street names or city centers. His condominium was underfurnished and undecorated. The cemetery where Meredith was buried was too bright and too hot on the day of the interment and on every visit thereafter. Whenever Arty had imagined one of them at the other's funeral, he had pictured rain, black-clad figures under black umbrellas, the cumbersome dispersal of the gathered through mud in the lowest spirits. He saw Meredith leaning down to grasp at one last memory as their daughter, Gina, bent to encourage her to stand, both women weeping—for it was always Arty who died in Arty's daydreams. But on the day that Meredith was laid to rest golf and tennis beckoned to retirees in radiant waves of sun, and the fishermen of Tarpon Cove sported cheerfully with the devilish snook.

To the surprise of his children, Arty didn't return to Ohio. Over time they got the sense that he had stalled, then that his wheels had shifted into reverse, and then that he was heading backward at full speed, toward some oncoming atrocity—a slow and entirely psychological reënactment of their mother's death. He was without responsibilities after a long professional career, and for three years now he had been without the one person, helpmeet and bickering companion, who could shake him out of his recliner and force him into the world.

His worst instincts claimed him. He started a feud with Mrs. Zegerman, his neighbor in Bequia Tower, one of three tall condominium buildings overlooking Naples Bay just west of the Tamiami Trail. Arty suggested in a note slipped under Mrs. Zegerman's door that her Shih Tzu, Cookie, whose incessant yapping came right through the walls, deserved to be shot by Nazis. Mrs. Zegerman accused him of being an anti-Semite. Arty countered that he was not an anti-Semite but an anti-Shih Tzu and that all Shih Tzus should be rounded up. A few days later, Mrs. Zegerman found an unopened box of rat poison near the potted phlox beside her welcome mat, and the tension escalated from there.

In other respects, Arty withdrew. His brooding caused him to lose golf partners and alienated him somewhat from his one true friend, fit and generous Jimmy Denton. Jimmy had come down to Florida after making a killing in the Danville (Illinois, not Connecticut) real-estate market. Jimmy had taken Arty golfing and talked baseball with him, but now it was growing late on Arty's birthday, and he had not yet received a call from Jimmy or from any of his children. He was starting to feel as unloved as he had the day of his ninth birthday, when only two of the eleven invited guests showed up to his party, a pair of twins who took off their shirts and came together at the arm to show where they had been separated.

He was instantly relieved to hear the first ring of the phone, an old rotary that vibrated with the vigor of the Mechanical Age. He let it rumble and stop, rumble and stop three full times so that the caller would not suspect how lonely he was. After the third ring, he snatched it up. He let the pause grow and then said a very casual hello. It was his daughter, Gina, who lived by herself in a horse stable in Belmont.

"Happy birthday, Daddy!" she cried into his ear. "Happy birthday, happy birthday!"

"Oh, Gina, God bless you for calling," Arty said. "Happy birthday to me. Happy birthday to your old man."

"I'm sorry I didn't call earlier, but we had to put a horse down today. His name was The Jolly Bones, and he was absolutely everyone's favorite. He was almost sort of human. This one time—"

"My gallbladder's ruined," Arty declared.

"Your gallbladder, Daddy? How did that happen?"

“Yes, my gallbladder. Dr. Klutchmaw says it has to be removed. First a low-glucose plasma concentration, then the heart, now the gallbladder. I have never given a thought to my gallbladder my entire life, but evidently it wears down like an old tire. I didn’t mean to make such terrible decisions.”

“What decisions are those, Dad?”

“Klutchmaw tells me I could have prevented this if I had stayed away from fatty foods forty years ago, but no one gives you a manual, Gina. No one hands you a manual.”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so gloomy,” Gina said. “Not today. Not on your birthday.”

“I want you to do yourself a favor and stay away from fatty foods, my girl, because a worn-out gallbladder is no walk in the park. Klutchmaw has a man who plans to remove it and that means going under the anesthetic, and I may be diabetic. I’m waiting on the test results.”

“Well, that sounds good,” Gina said. “But what about today, Daddy, what do you plan to do on your birthday?”

“If I had known about all of this forty years ago, I wouldn’t be so gloomy today, but no one gives you a manual. The cigarettes ruined my bowels and I smoked them only ten years before I noticed the warnings. When I go, I have a feeling it will be because of the lungs or the bowels and not the heart after all.”

“Do you have a golf game lined up today, Daddy?”

“I’m too fat to play golf anymore,” Arty said. “It’s a good thing you called when you did, sweetheart. I was just about to go into the kitchen and attack the Oreos.”

Gina stayed on the line until she was called away. They were having a little ceremony for The Jolly Bones. She encouraged Arty to get out of the house for what remained of his birthday and to have a good time, maybe by riding his bicycle.

The sun was never so part of the earth's essence and beauty as when its golden meniscus quivered at the edge of Arty's balcony, at the top of his sliding glass doors, and his condo, furnished at last with that marriage of wicker and cushions, filled with the light of a dying day, which colored the clouds and restored to the sky all the pastoral visions of the earliest era.

After finishing the Oreos and three glasses of milk, Arty struggled not to dial a number long committed to memory. Doing so went against Klutchmaw's express demands, and it might tie up the phone right as someone was calling to pass along kind birthday wishes. But in the end he reasoned there was no point aging another year if you couldn't spoil yourself. A familiar voice answered after only half a ring. It was Brad. Brad put in the order for a large meat-lover's pizza and a two-litre Sprite. Anxious about tying up the line, Arty nevertheless announced that it was his birthday.

"Happy birthday, Arty," Brad said. "How old are you?"

"Yes, happy birthday to me. Thank you, Brad. I'm a composite sixty-six, but that doesn't tell the whole story. I've lost much of my aerobic potential, so I put the lungs at about a hundred. I put the legs at eighty-five. How old are you, Brad? They don't give you a manual, you know. I don't want you to be shocked when they tell you they're coming to pull all your teeth."

"Arty, man, the other lines are screaming. Can we talk tomorrow?"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, Brad, you bet. God bless for calling. Happy birthday to me."

"Happy birthday, Arty."

By one of those good fortunes of timing that lonely people long for, the phone began to ring just seconds after Arty set down the receiver. This racket of activity gave an impression of momentary pandemonium that brought joy to Arty's one day. Again, he let the phone ring three interminable times before answering, and then, as the mouthpiece travelled through the air toward his lips, said casually, "... think they're going to have a wonderful year this year."

"Dad?"

It was his son, Paul, calling from San Francisco. Paul worked in a hospice where he sat among the terminally ill and watched them die. Arty was proud of him—Paul had given his life to a good cause—though not as proud as he would have been if Paul were the owner of a chain of hospices scattered across the country.

“Oh, Pauly, God bless you for calling,” Arty said. “Happy birthday to me.”

“Is there someone there with you, Dad? Should I call back?”

“No, it’s just my friend Jimmy Denton. You know Jimmy. We’re sitting here talking baseball. You know I love talking baseball with an old friend.”

“Well, I’m just calling to wish you a happy birthday.”

“I talked to Dr. Klutchmaw’s office today,” Arty said. “It doesn’t look good.”

“Remind me again,” Paul said. “Which one is Klutchmaw?”

“Dr. Klutchmaw is my internist. He tells me the manufacturer is recalling the stent. There’s a flaw in the thing. It’s not fair, Pauly.”

“They don’t hand out manuals, do they, Pop.”

“No, they don’t. You think your heart stent is going to last you forever, and then the manufacturer recalls the damn thing.”

“Well, everything’s O.K. here. The children are fine, Dana’s fine. Matter of fact, she’s sitting next to me and wants to wish you a happy birthday. Here she is.”

“Hold on, Paul, hold it just a second before you give the phone to Dana. I want to tell you something, son. Now listen to me, Paul. Odds are, you’re going to get fat. You’re going to get goddam fat and you’re going to get the gout. You’re going to have hypertension and high cholesterol and you’re going to be put

on drugs with the worst side effects. They'll make you sweat in odd places. You won't be able to focus or count. Your children will grow distant. Dana will be dead. And you'll be lonely, Paul. I should have told you this years ago, to prepare you, but I didn't know it myself. I just want you to be prepared."

There was a long pause before Dana's voice said, "Hello? Arty?"

"Oh, hello, Dana."

"Happy birthday, Arty."

"God bless you. Happy birthday to me."

Arty spoke to his daughter-in-law for a while about heart stents, gallstones, impacted bowels, insulin shots, and stomach ulcers before he announced that he was being referred to an oncologist for twinges that might indicate a tumor.

"Oof!" Dana cried. "Meredith, you can't do that, honey, you're too big! Arty, Meredith just ran into the room and jumped on my lap. I'm on the phone with Grandpa, honey. Do you want to say hi to Grandpa? It's his birthday today. Say happy birthday to Grandpa."

A great battle of wills commenced behind a fortress of muffled static that collapsed totally in brief intervals during which Arty heard Dana scream, "Meredith Ann! Talk to your—" and Meredith howl as if in terrible pain, before a silence prevailed and a teary Meredith said, "Hello?"

"Hello, Meredith. It's your grandpa."

"Hello," Meredith said.

"Happy birthday to me."

"Happy birfday."

Like many older people who find themselves on the phone with children of unstable attention spans, Arty began to talk non-stop, flinging at his granddaughter every expression of pride and love, interspersed with questions intended not to sate a genuine curiosity but to confirm Meredith's continued presence on the other end of the line. Arty was convinced that she had no interest in him, that as far as little Meredith was concerned he was as good as dead. This provoked the panic that fuelled the blithering that he hoped might overcome Meredith's annihilating silence. He asked if she knew what an internist was.

"An internist is just a doctor," he explained. "My internist's name is Klutchmaw. I'm not crazy about him, but he takes my insurance. One day you'll understand what an important measure of a good doctor that is. Do you like going to the doctor? I don't like it because it always means there might be something terribly wrong with me. You should be very happy that there's nothing wrong with you yet, Meredith. You have your teeth, you can go outside and run around, your bowels have yet to liquefy."

Arty paused a moment. Where was he going with this conversation, and would her parents approve? Yet seconds later he continued, for when if not now to relay to her the stealth of years, the inexorable betrayals of the body, the perfidiousness of the eventualities?

"They don't give you a manual, Meredith, and who's going to prepare you if not your grandpa? I'm not going to go pussyfooting around your bowel movements on account of your innocence, because one day you're going to wake up and wonder why the world perpetrated treacherous lies against such a perfect creature as yourself, and I want you to look back on your old grandpa and remember him as somebody who told you the truth about what's in store for you, and not as one of these propagandists for perpetual youth just because right now your constitutionals happen to be nice and firm. Do you know what a constitutional is, Meredith? I will tell you."

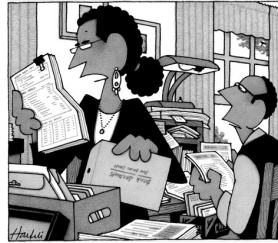
Meredith dropped the phone and ran out of the room. Arty spoke tinnily into the carpet. After a while the phone went dead and then, a few hours later, began to ring, which sent Paul into a frenzy. He finally came upon it on the floor of the bedroom and wondered why he had left it there of all places.

**A**

arty had hoped Jimmy Denton would call, but after his conversation with Meredith, despite his importuning eyes, the stolid black machine remained mute. He imagined a conversation with Jimmy, who, knowing that it was his birthday, would indulge him, on this one day only, as he

expressed yet again his mystification that Bob Sherwood and Chaz Yalinsky no longer invited him to play golf. They'd made a great foursome, Jimmy and Arty against Bob and Chaz. But now he had no one to play golf with, no friend but Jimmy, no companion in life—not even one person who might call him on his birthday.

*“How long do we have to keep statements from banks that don't exist anymore?”*



The doorbell rang. Mrs. Zegerman's Shih Tzu pierced the air with high-pitched barks, which ordinarily felt to Arty like an axe whooshing around his head, but as he moved from rug to Spanish tile he tried not to let it get to him, because someone, oh someone was at his door. He dismissed a late delivery of flowers from one of his children in favor of his old friend Jimmy Denton, there to take him for a beer after shaking free of Jojo, his lusty and calisthenic Oriental wife, who had never liked Arty

and made no attempt to hide it. But just as he was about to open the door he realized with a sinking heart that it was probably not flowers and probably not Jimmy Denton but Dusty, Brad's counterpart, there to deliver the meat-lover's and two-litre.

It was not Dusty.

Standing opposite him, partially lit by the bulb shining from its gaslight cage, was a young woman dressed in a miniskirt of stretch fabric and a bosomy blouse of silver lamé. Beneath her makeup lay a pallor that had been set in place by long, hard winters. Her hair, straining to be blond, had washed out into a color resembling sugarless gum of a lesser flavor. It fell to her shoulders in two coarse and wavy cascades. She carried nothing in her hands, no purse, no personal possessions of any kind, but when Arty opened the door she raised her hand and dimmed her eye, taking one last drag from a cigarette before extinguishing it under her bright silver heel.

“You are Arty Growsie?”

“Groys,” Arty said.

“Your friend is Jimmy?”



“Jimmy Denton?”

“Is not necessary to know last name.”

Arty was pretty sure the woman was a prostitute. He was at his core a fearful, law-abiding, overly cautious man, yet he let her walk past him into his apartment without a word. She was spritzed for a cheap night at a loud club. Before shutting the door, he sensed, by way of Cookie’s silence, Mrs. Zegerman at her peephole, holding the trembling dog to her crêpe-paper chest.

The girl took a seat on the wicker sofa. Arty situated himself next to her, not so close as to fall within the weather of her communicable diseases but not so far as to appear rude. He was touched that Jimmy Denton would do this for him. The last time he’d seen Jimmy, at the dog track, Jimmy had said that Arty’s yapping was as annoying as his faggot cousin’s at family gatherings. Arty had been going on about Bob and Chaz just as one of Jimmy’s dogs had come in dead last. Arty excused himself, and bought a hot dog and a jumbo pretzel, which he ate in the car as he drove home. They hadn’t spoken since.

“Well, God bless you for coming,” he said to the girl, reaching out to touch her hand but pulling back in time. “God bless you and God bless Jimmy Denton. It’s my birthday, and I was feeling lonely.”

“Ridiculous for handsome and strong man ever to feel lonely,” the girl said.

“I am no longer handsome and I am no longer strong,” Arty said. “I’m fat and I have a bad heart and my internist has warned me that I’m on the edge of diabetes.”

The girl said, “Two requirements to continue.” She reached into her bra and pulled out a condom and a blue pill. “Condom is necessary to use during making love. Erection pill is added expense but is paid for already by your friend.”

“Well, happy birthday to me,” Arty said. “Happy birthday to old Arty Groys. But I’m afraid I can’t take that pill. It is expressly forbidden to me by my internist, Dr. Klutchmaw. It interferes with the nitrates I take for my bad heart.”

“Do you need pill to make penis work?”

Arty nodded his head.

“We gave it good try then,” the girl said as she stood.

Arty surprised himself by reaching out and grabbing her hand. “Wait,” he said. “Don’t leave. Have you eaten? I have a pizza coming. We could have dinner.”

“You eat greasy pizza and you have bad heart?”

“Please, sit down.”

The girl sat.

“Pizza is one of my compensations,” Arty said. “I don’t have to take a pill to eat a pizza. Well, to lower my cholesterol and blood pressure, but that’s different. I eat the pizza and take those pills, but I don’t die. I take that pill, I could die. I could have a heart attack.”

“Friend of mine from my country swallowed twenty-four pills with liquid pipe cleaner and then took razor blade and cut open her veins from wrist to elbow,” the girl said. “Now she lives in North Carolina and works at Holiday Inn.”

A stunned abatement of his own concerns stole over Arty and forced him to look at the girl more closely. She stared back at him with the neutral innocence of a child waiting obediently for the start of a piano lesson.

“She survived?”

“Now she is married to American undertaker who steals all her money, but he doesn’t beat her, so is O.K. for time being. He fought for America in Vietnam War. Did you fight for America in Vietnam War?”

Her questions ended not in an inquisitorial lilt but with a descending, matter-of-fact thud.

“I was in the service from 1963 to 1966.”

“Were you shot?”

“Shot? I was never shot. I fixed chairs and typewriters and other things. I never left Texas.”

“I have been shot twice. Here,” she said, “and here.” She showed him two scars, each a quarter-size debit of loose yellow skin, one in the stomach and one in the leg.

“What was *that*?” he asked.

She lifted her blouse again. “This? From exploded appendix. Ambulance driver took his sweet time. Nurse and doctor take their sweet time. Everyone is taking their sweet time while I am drowning in poison. I am in hospital twenty-six days.”

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Eighteen?”

“I am not telling real age to anyone.”

Arty looked at her again. Though he guessed that she was no older than thirty, her pale demeanor and sodden dye job had consigned her to an eternal middle age. He imagined her on her days off lighting cigarettes from noon till dawn, imagined them burning down in a room defined by drawn shades and muttering talk shows. He saw the crow’s-feet that worked against her beauty, but he also saw the beauty. She must have a robust constitution, he thought, immune to colds and despair, unsentimentally surviving. He knew that if he had been born into the same conditions that she had been born into, he wouldn’t have made it to nine, ten at most. He had said it a hundred times, a thousand, a hundred thousand, to whoever would listen, but now he merely thought it, with that shock of having stumbled upon a perfect demonstration of the rule: “They don’t give you a manual.”

“I have question,” she said. “Life is so tough, you are afraid of one little pill? It is one little nothing. You take it and we have good time. Maybe I come back next week. Every week we have good time together, and you no longer sit on this nice sofa and think, Oh, poor me, I’m so lonely, I’m such lonely old man.”

She was close now. He was starting to like her overbearing perfume. She placed the pill on his knee. He stared at it. He had never had to consider this option before. He rarely met new people; he was too scared of rejection. Yet here was a girl willing to take him in her arms and kindly ignore the humbling sight of him blundering his way toward ecstasy. Those stern warnings to heart patients not to take such pills—they were probably just the exaggerations of executives afraid of lawsuits.

The girl straightened herself on the sofa and reached around her back and untied something essential. She lifted her blouse to reveal the kind of breasts that Arty believed were seen up close only by men who dealt cocaine or played professional football. There was disbelief, and then there was what passed beyond the realm of the comprehensible into the sensuous world of warrior kings. Dusty arrived with the pizza. Arty ignored the doorbell.

**M**rs. Zegerman resembled a mosquito. She had long, thin limbs and a small, very concentrated face whose severe features were drawn dramatically forward, culminating in a sharply pointed nose.

She had passed the day waiting for an apology from Ilsa Brooks, with whom she had had a falling out after arguing over a movie they had seen together on a recent Sunday afternoon. Ilsa had thought the film was a return to the screwball romantic comedies of the nineteen-thirties, but Mrs. Zegerman wanted to know in what nineteen-thirties comedy was everything “F this” and “F that.” Ilsa told her to get with the times. Mrs. Zegerman responded by saying that matters of common decency were timeless, and now the two women weren’t speaking.

She was preparing for bed when she thought she heard the doorbell ring again, and again her first thought was that it had to be Ilsa, come to apologize. It would be such a relief to have her *matinée* partner back again, but as her bare feet left the Persian rug for the red Spanish tile she remembered that Ilsa had returned north to Chillicothe on Wednesday, and she quickly reverted to the opinion that her former friend’s ideas of both movies and morals were wanting.

Through the peephole, she watched the pizza boy pointlessly ringing Arty’s doorbell until she could take it no more. She stepped out into the open-air vestibule to explain the situation: Arty Groys was inside that condo with a woman who had appeared half naked on his doorstep. Mrs. Zegerman was convinced

that the two of them were in there interrelating. It was shameful and disgusting. It was also holding up commerce.

“Arty’s in there with a woman?” the boy said. “Our Arty?”

She had no idea what he meant by “our.”

“You sure he didn’t just kick off?”

“He’s not dead,” she replied.

“Well, God damn,” the boy said, removing the pizza from its spacesuit pouch and placing it with the Sprite to one side of Arty’s door before nodding goodbye and galloping down the stairs. “Tell him it’s on the house!” he cried. This was not the first time she had watched him go. He was a well-tanned boy. Perhaps he surfed. For a brief second, she imagined her body warmed by the sun and her head pillowed by the sand, while out in the distance he waved to her between surging whitecaps.

She stepped back inside her apartment and picked up Cookie. She decided to wait there for Arty to emerge with his floozy so that she could give him a piece of her mind. A moment later, Arty’s door slammed like a shot. Mrs. Zegerman turned in time to catch a glimpse of the departing girl, who fled down the same stairs as the delivery boy while quickly buttoning her blouse, carrying her silver heels in one hand. Mrs. Zegerman naturally assumed that she had been repulsed by the sight of Arty’s horrible penis. Then a long time passed at the peephole, and Arty didn’t come out for his pizza.

**M**rs. Zegerman found Arty on the floor of his living room. She was thrown into a panic that emptied her mind entirely of common sense. She simply did not know what to do, and the sensation of helplessness resounded with only one thing she remembered in all her years: the terror of the day that Mr. Zegerman had stumbled while walking along the wharf and hit his head on that utterly purposeless green metal thingy. She remembered the seep of his warm blood through her summer dress as she cried out for help. Now it was her neighbor whom she might have loved for years and years, so swiftly and completely had she been struck dumb at the sight of him. He had collapsed between wicker sofa and African coffee table, his legs hairless and white as wax, his stomach a great pale mound, and his face as pinched and pink as crab shell.

“Oh, thank God,” Arty said, when he caught sight of his neighbor. “Call the paramedics, Mrs. Zeger—”

He was cut off by a terrible grip, a twisting vine-strangle of the heart—but his words kicked Mrs. Zegerman into high gear. She rushed over to him throbbing with adrenaline and clamped one of his arms around her slender neck like a nutcracker. She restored him to respectability by returning to its rightful place the underwear that dangled around one ankle. Supporting his bulk all the way to the elevator, she planned to get him downstairs and drive him to the hospital in her Mazda. If she had learned one thing from the death of Mr. Zegerman, it was never to put your faith in the timeliness of men who drive ambulances. But they had to wait too long, much too long, for the infernal elevator, which liked to clamor below with buckling metal and other echoes of motion the minute the call button was pressed, but tended to dally there before zooming right past, up and up, to some grander view of Bequia Tower. At last she told Arty that they would have to take the stairs, and she carried him over to their brink and started the descent with her weighty dying charge. On the final flight, however, they got tangled up and he flew off her, bouncing down brutally step after step, while it was everything she could do to catch the bannister and not follow him. She took one look at the twitching body that lay in a yellow patch of security light and, scared that she had killed him, raced upstairs again to call an ambulance.

**S**he outsmarted the hospital by telling the nurses that she was Arty’s wife. They didn’t question her, and she had license to come and go as she wished. The first two days, he was incommunicado, lost beneath a breathing apparatus when he was not in surgery. To move out of the I.C.U. into a regular unit took another five days, by which time she had found his insurance card and called his children.

“What does this mean?” Paul asked her when she broke the news. “Will he live?”

“How will he get around?” Gina asked. “Who will take care of him?”

Mrs. Zegerman assured them that she would not abandon Arty until one of them could make it down to Florida, and even after they had left again. It occurred to her that perhaps he had said something to his children about her, as she didn’t have to explain her involvement beyond mentioning the fact that she was a neighbor.

Arty's knee was in bad shape from the fall. Once his heart had fully recovered, he would need an operation to determine the extent of the ligament damage, followed by a long period of physical therapy. His weight would be a significant impediment to recovery. The orthopedic surgeon predicted that it might be as long as a year before her husband walked again.

*"It's just . . . we're too lazy to have any of our own."*



Mrs. Zegerman took the elevator up to his hospital room. The coarse, almost particulate sun was showering in through the window, filling the small antiseptic space with a false radiance. There was no need for sun, as his children's flowers had wilted and died days earlier, and the competition between the outside heat and the central air only made the room feel claustrophobic and unpleasant. These things might have gone unnoticed had

her first observation not covered her in a thin sweat of panic: the bed was empty. Arty was not in his room. Had he had another heart attack? Had he died overnight? Overnight! Gone. She wished she had never got involved. Oh, damn it. The dog was enough.

Suddenly the toilet roared and the bathroom door was thrown open. Arty Groys came staggering out, favoring his good leg while fiddling with the fly of the pressed trousers she had brought for him the day before. Mrs. Zegerman was beside herself, for he was walking in defiance of the doctor's predictions. She rushed over to him with exclamations of dismay.

"What are you doing up and about, Mr. Groys? Your knee is in no condition for you to be walking around, to say nothing of your heart."

"God bless you, Mrs. Zegerman, God bless you," he said. "But the heart has never been better, and the knee is only knocked off center a little. If I had remembered to take that cane with me, I would hardly have noticed a thing."

Mrs. Zegerman saw an ivory-handled cane in the far corner of the room. She turned to Arty with surprise, as though she had just found something unsavory in his sock drawer. She had been with him practically every waking minute since he had entered the hospital. "Where did that come from?" she asked.

“We must get out of here, Mrs. Zegerman,” Arty said. “We must get over to Jimmy Denton’s house.”

“Who’s Jimmy Denton?”

“Jimmy Denton is the man responsible for all this, God bless him. He never visited or sent flowers, but no doubt his Asiatic wife is to blame for that. She must have closely guarded the fact that I was dying only ten miles away. She has always been jealous of our friendship. Now, we must do this on the sly. Are you ready?”

“But you haven’t even been released yet, Mr. Groys.”

“Mrs. Zegerman, I must see Jimmy Denton. He knows how to put me in contact with the girl who saved my life.”

Mrs. Zegerman was under the impression that she had been the one who had saved his life. Nevertheless, she found herself sneaking Arty Groys out of the hospital. They simply walked down the corridor, into the elevator, and out the main exit. He did remarkably well with the assistance of his cane.

“They did a fine job in there,” he said, “but I’m happy to be leaving. Too many people die in hospitals. You’re safer on a Chinese beach with those scavengers and their rusted circuit boards. And would you look at that,” he added, when they had walked through the automatic doors and entered the day. “The sun is shining so gloriously. Two weeks ago, I would have called that glare.”

**J**immy and Jojo Denton lived in a gated community whose thriving heart was a golf course dotted with sun-dappled ponds—a perfectly manicured oasis of hurricane-proof Spanish Colonials, manatee mailboxes, and geriatric promiscuity. Mrs. Zegerman, staying put at Arty’s insistence, watched her neighbor get out of the car in front of a gaudy palazzo and limp across the dense lawn. He returned not five minutes later, hastily shutting the door.

“Jojo dropped a dime, Mrs. Zegerman. We have to get to East Naples, and pronto. Apparently, they all crowd into a single apartment unit. The thought of it just tears the heart out of my chest.”

“Who are you talking about, Mr. Groys?”



“The young lady who saved my life. Now, please, Mrs. Zegerman, put the car in motion and head east.”

Mrs. Zegerman thought that it was imperative to get Arty Groys home, to set him up, with his bad leg and weak heart, in bed or on his sofa, with pillows and remotes and restorative liquids, and to discuss his dietary preferences, so that she would know what to buy at the grocery store. She had believed that he was in for a long convalescence, and that the obvious indifference with which the widower’s children treated their father guaranteed that she would preside with crowned authority over many months of incremental improvement.

But Arty’s sudden mobility had made her heart sink. The long months of slow, sequestered progress vanished instantly, casting doubts on her plans, and his oblique agenda in East Naples reduced her to feeling like a mere chauffeur. They were heading down a swath of highway raised out of the wetlands, past a schizophrenic landscape of saw-grass prairies and strip malls, where the road signs warned of panthers and the billboards advertised alligator zoos and other South Florida attractions. Mrs. Zegerman came to understand, through Arty’s roundabout explanation, that his friend Jimmy had spent two hundred dollars on a birthday present for him. There had been no way for Jimmy to tell his wife that he’d lost that much at the dog track, so that morning he’d had to come clean. His wife immediately put in a call to the Collier County Task Force Initiative, with whom she had worked in the past to enforce speed limits in her subdivision and to establish random sobriety tests at crucial intersections. At some point, after putting two and two together, Mrs. Zegerman stopped listening.

Arty guided them into an apartment complex and through a maze of speed bumps. To the right and left stood building after gray generic building. They went past a Dumpster center and a large barricade of metal mailboxes while Arty searched squint-eyed for the right apartment. They had to circle three times before he found it.

She braked quickly at his command. He turned away from the apartment complex to look at her. “Thank you for the ride, Mrs. Zegerman,” he said. “There’s no sense in mixing you up any further in all this. I’ll take a taxi home.”

As he climbed out of the car, she was speechless. She was hurt, she was confused, and most of all she was angry at herself for feeling an absurd but overwhelming sensation of abandonment.

“Mr. Groys,” she said, “don’t you need your cane?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Zegerman. That cane just slows me down.”

“But you shouldn’t even be walking!” she cried.

“Isn’t it something?”

He slammed the door. She immediately leaned over the passenger seat and manually rolled down the window. “Arty!” she cried.

He turned with surprising grace and peered back at her from a distance of a dozen feet. “Yes?”

She stared at him through the open window. She was propping herself up on the passenger seat with the splayed fingers of one hand. He stared back at her in the full dazzle of the sun. “Arty,” she repeated. “In all the years we’ve been neighbors, why have you never asked me my first name?”

Arty stood awhile in silence before limping back to Mrs. Zegerman. He bent down to the window. “I don’t know why,” he said. “What is it?”

“It’s Ruth,” she said. “Although my friends call me Ruthie.”

“May I call you Ruthie?”

She had straightened up and taken hold of the steering wheel again. She turned to stare out the windshield while he peered in at her. She replied without looking over. “I suppose that would be fine,” she said at last.

**H**e did not know what to expect and imagined he might encounter some specimen of pimp—the dagger-dark madam or tracksuited thug—but it was a petite black girl who answered his knock and asked him who his appointment was with. After Arty had described her (he didn’t even know her name!), the black girl led him to a dental-office love seat in a gloomy room whose only decoration was a mounted poster of a Budweiser logo, and disappeared down the hall of what was otherwise the kind of apartment that recent grads pile into as one pursues acting, the other a law

degree, a third some kind of entrepreneurial scheme, and a fourth the dollar tips handed out at gentlemen's clubs. The barren despondency of the place depressed him and challenged his resolution, arrived at during his recovery, to see the girl again. He had been living as a dead man for years, and without her sudden presence in his suffocating cloister, coaxing and tempting him, he would certainly have died a dead man. He planned to offer to retire any debts she might have accrued and to furnish her with education funds. Was this preposterous? Would she laugh in his face?

Something prompted him to rise and walk over to the window. He widened a gap in the Venetian blinds and squinted out into the sun. He had a view of the entire parking lot and he saw, once his eyes had fully adjusted, a car he believed to be Mrs. Zegerman's, parked beside a gleaming black motorcycle. It was Mrs. Zegerman's, all right, for she herself was in the front seat. But what was she still doing there? He narrowed his squint and focussed all his attention. Her forehead rested against the top arc of the steering wheel, then her chin, then her forehead again. As she shifted, heaving, between these two positions, he caught glimpses of her face, contorted, wet, until finally she sat silent a moment, chin on steering wheel, watery eyes blinking in the happy sun. Then she righted herself, retrieved a tissue from the glove box, and blew her nose. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time.

His attention was called away from Mrs. Zegerman by first one and then a second squad car pulling up outside the building, their sun-muted siren lights twirling unnoticed by anyone but him. His still delicate heart came to a stop, as if suddenly cast in stone, only to shatter into pieces when it came charging back. Jojo Denton had remarkable pull. Four Collier County police officers stepped out and began to confer, then approach, by which time he had let the blinds snap back and was rushing toward the rear rooms.

He found her brushing her hair in front of a bathroom mirror. She turned and saw him standing in the doorway. She backed up at the mere sight of him—his eyes were still bruised from his fall, his forehead was pinkly scarred, and his pale sweaty demeanor was ghastly. She issued something quick and terrified in a language he could not identify. "I don't believe it!" she finally cried in English. "I leave you one-hundred-per-cent dead man."

"You remember!" he said, happily but a little breathlessly. "I have survived and I have come to thank you, but first we have to get out of here. Jojo Denton dropped a dime and the cops are right outside."

"Cops?"

“Is there a back exit?” he asked.

He didn't wait for an answer. He reached in and grabbed her hand and pulled her with him. He limped briskly to a sliding glass door in one of the bedrooms, where he struggled to undo the stubborn metal lock. While this was going on, he turned to her and said, “Do you remember the pill?”

“The pill?”

“The one I refused to take,” he said. “You persuaded me to take it, do you remember? How did you know what to say to me?” he asked. “How did you know what I needed to hear?”

“You stupid!” she cried, having taken over. “Glass door is open whole time!”

They left just as a thundering knock landed on the front door and reverberated through the apartment. He raced down to be in front of her, his knee be damned, and turned back to speak as they descended the stairs. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“How did you know what to say to get me to take that pill?”

“Are you so stupid? I am prostitute!”

“No, no, it was something more,” he said. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, he brought her to a halt and said, “I want to take care of you. I want to pay your debts. Let me pay your debts and fund a college education for you.”

“This is very tired routine,” she said, “and not good timing.”

Upstairs, invisible, they heard the commotion of the ensuing bust. They hurried across an expanse of treeless yard to the front of the apartment complex. Cars washed by on the street. He refused to allow his knee to bother him as he ran beside the girl. He was simply happy that he had survived to declare his intentions. He had no ulterior motive. What she did with his offer was up to her.

Soon they were several blocks away. There was no cop or squad car in sight, and he could have stopped. But he didn't stop, not even when he turned and saw Mrs. Zegerman. She was driving slowly, turning her face from him to the road and back to him again. She pulled ahead and angled into the curb. She rolled down the window and shouted something he couldn't hear on account of his heavy breathing. He smiled at her. He let go of the girl's hand to wave. He wanted to tell her many things, like how sorry he was to have been cruel to her dog, and how surprised even he was at how well his leg was holding up. Or maybe his strength was only an illusion, just as it had been one summer when he was a boy playing ball, that day he attempted to steal second and was forced to slide as the ball neared the infielder's glove. The infielder missed, and the ball went long, and when he saw that he was free for a run to third he jumped up and took off, despite the hairline fracture that would make itself known—through a pain that came with a dawning awareness of what lay in store—only later, long after he had passed the third-base coach gesturing like mad and made it home, graceful as a dancer, bodiless, ageless, immortal, a boy on a summer day with a heart as big as the sun, with all his troubles, his sorrows, his losses, all his whole long life still ahead of him, still unknown, unable on that still golden field to cast its tall, unvanquishable, ever-dimming shadow. ♦

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**JOSHUA FERRIS**

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