

ASSISTED LIVING

“There was music from my neighbor’s house through the summer nights. . . .” Eddie, reading aloud from the well-thumbed book, slowed down as he mouthed the sensuous words of the next line: “In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. . . .”

“Oh, yes, indeed” said Roy, his eyes closed, a warm smile wreathing his well-lined face. “Just listen, Eddie, to how Fitzgerald draws the reader into Gatsby’s world.” Then, easing back on the recliner in his cramped quarters, Roy recited the phrases from memory: ‘came and went like moths’ – just picture that, Eddie – and then, ‘among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars’ – isn’t that marvelous writing?”

Seated in a chair facing Roy, Eddie looked up from the page. “Sure is – and even better when I listen to you recite passages like that.”

“Well, that’s just what I did for a living all those years – teaching English to high school sophomores, who’d been raised on comic books and needed to hear the sound of really good prose. Most of them didn’t even read the books I assigned but simply scanned the Cliff Notes before class. So I’d recite certain passages from memory – to give them a sense of what they were missing.”

He cleared his throat – a signal, Eddie recognized, that Roy was about to impart some words of wisdom to the young man. “That’s an important point for you to keep in mind, Eddie, if you’re going to follow in my footsteps one day. An English teacher has to do more than just ask questions of his students – he has to demonstrate why words make a difference.”

“I can see what you’re saying. Were you able to get through to them?”

“Sometimes – but not always – and only with some of my students – not all. In part, it depended on my picking the right

passages to highlight. For instance, I happen to love the epigraph to *The Great Gatsby* – the lines by Thomas Parke D’Invilliers that appear right after the title page and go:

‘Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry “Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you.’

But I never recited that to them, because they wouldn’t have known what the hell D’Invilliers – or Fitzgerald, for that matter – was talking about. . . .”

Eddie looked bemused. “What *were* they talking about?”

“Aha – I’ve piqued your interest. We’ll talk about that when you finish reading *Gatsby* to me.” Roy cleared his throat once again, telegraphing more advice to come. “In fact, Eddie, this illustrates something else you ought to use with your students – to dangle some goal out in front of them, giving them something to aim for. . . . Well, that’s enough advice from me. Now let’s get back to that third chapter, with the ‘five crates of oranges and lemons,’ the ‘salads of harlequin designs’ – and then, the line I remember so well, ‘the lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun’ . . .”

Eddie resumed reading to Roy, who would stop him every few paragraphs to comment on some aspect of the novel he knew so well, or to quote a line from it, or to offer another tidbit of unsolicited – but not unwelcome – advice. And several times a day, Roy would pass along one of his favorite aphorisms – the most recent one being Hamilton Wright Mobie’s wise words on why not to fear opposition: “Remember, a kite rises against, not with the wind.”

They had been doing this for almost a year now. Roy, 82 and never married, had no family in the vicinity. He resided in a sparse single room at an assisted living facility called Elmwood in a mid-sized Connecticut city. Roy looked younger than his years and was in good health, except for a bad case of what’s called AMD – age-related macular degeneration, an eye disease that blurs central vision. Although in better physical shape than many other Elmwood

inhabitants, he needed the facility's support system to cope with his AMD. Roy was still able to see well enough to get around, but he no longer could do what he loved best – read the quality books that filled the shelves of his small quarters.

Eddie, 20, was a night student at the local community college, who majored in English and wanted to become a teacher. He came from a poor but industrious family, and for financial reasons, still lived at home. He had answered an ad Roy put in the town paper, seeking “someone who not only can read to me – hell, I can get that from books-on-tape – but who shares my enthusiasm for the written word and can discuss good literature.” Roy interviewed Eddie, liked the young man, and hired him on the spot. Now, each weekday in the spare hour Eddie had between the close of his day job as a book store clerk and the start of his evening classes, he would come to Elmwood to read to Roy. Eddie could tell from Roy's enthusiastic response that these sessions were clearly the highlight of Roy's otherwise drab existence.

Later on that afternoon, when Eddie finished a description of one of Jay Gatsby's parties (“A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell”), Roy said, “Stop there.”

“But that's not the end of Chapter 3.”

“I know, but there's something else besides books I want to talk to you about.”

Eddie put *Gatsby* down – a little surprised, frankly, because Roy seldom conversed with him on subjects not involving literature.

Roy sat up straight and looked directly at the young man. When Roy started to speak, Eddie noticed that he didn't pause for the usual throat-clearing that accompanied his words of wisdom.

“Eddie, you know how I'm always giving you unsolicited advice in our sessions – well, now I want to solicit *your* advice on a

matter that's important to me. I hope you won't mind my doing so, but there's no one else to whom I might turn. I'm not close to anyone in my family, who at best favor me with once-a-year quickie visits at Yuletide; the friends I used to have are either deceased or non-communicative or nowhere around; and I haven't found anyone who qualifies as a confidante among the few older men who inhabit this place. But I've developed a great deal of respect for your good judgment in our sessions together, and I think you can help me out on this."

Eddie, caught unaware by this unexpected development, replied, "Well, I'm flattered that you're turning to me for whatever this is. I don't know if I can be of much help, but I'll sure give it a try."

"Good. Now here's the situation. There are many more women at Elmwood than men – we males just don't live as long as they do – and I don't mind saying, at the risk of seeming immodest, that a number of them have shown an interest in me. The interest might be characterized as pre-romantic – 'pre' because I've never permitted any of their interests to endure long enough to blossom. What can I tell you? – most of these ladies are nice enough individuals, but they're either too old or infirm or lacking in intelligence to arouse *my* interest."

Roy paused to take a sip of coffee from the cup on the end table. To Eddie, it seemed like Roy was revving himself up for whatever he was about to say.

"But there is one woman here –" at which point Eddie noticed Roy's face lighting up and a smile playing about his lips – "a woman named Brenda who – well, to use the vernacular – really turns me on. I barely know her, but in the halls and dining room, I've seen her in action – as much as I can see with these infirm eyes – and I hear her speak – my ears are still good. She's younger than most of the residents here – I'd say in her mid-70's – and she's attractive, vivacious, intelligent, humorous – the whole nine yards. And for most of her adult life, I've managed to find out, she was a librarian – so I have no doubt we share a love of literature."

Roy stopped, as if savoring his vision of Brenda. Eddie chose the moment to speak up. “Pardon me, Roy, but Brenda sounds great. No offense, but what’s she doing in this place?”

Roy nodded appreciatively. “Good question. I was just coming to that, because this is precisely where my problem lies. She’s here because of her husband, Bob – that’s right, she’s married – who has Alzheimer’s, can’t take care of himself, moves at a painfully slow pace with a walker. From everything I observe, she’s dedicated herself to Bob’s care, in a very loving and patient fashion – but they obviously need the support of the Elmwood staff to get her husband through his daily routine.”

Eddie could visualize Brenda’s typical day, spent caring for her afflicted husband; but he said nothing, waiting for Roy to conclude his presentation.

“And so, Eddie, this is the dilemma I come to you with. To be crude about it, I don’t think the husband is going to last very long; and I’d like to be there, well-placed with Brenda, when poor Bob breathes his last. I’m sure there are other men around with similar ideas – there’s one new guy here in particular I’ve been noticing, named Larry Owen, who seems very interested in Brenda – and I want to beat him and the rest of them to the punch.”

Roy shook his head slightly, as if in wordless self-reprimand for his ignoble intentions, and then went on. “What I want to know, Eddie, is how should I handle the situation to achieve that? I think Brenda would learn to like me if we got closer, but she’s not reaching out to me in any respect – not showing anything but devotion to her husband – so if something is going to happen now, I have to initiate it.”

Roy stopped talking, and Eddie could tell he was awaiting a response. Eddie was touched by what had just transpired – the elder Roy sharing with young Eddie what must have been an embarrassing disclosure of his intent, and then seeking Eddie’s advice.



Eddie noted Roy's avowal of having "a great deal of respect" for Eddie's "good judgment." It might have just been flattery, Eddie realized, but he decided to take it as a genuine compliment – mainly because he did think of himself that way. Since his early teens, he had worked in a series of jobs where decisions had to be made, and he'd never been found wanting. Many of these had involved dealing with, or even negotiating against, other people, so he felt at home analyzing inter-personal matters. And he knew something about women from close proximity to his mother, his younger sisters, and his long-time girl friend.

So, although Eddie could have ducked making a reply, he instinctively sensed what Roy's course of action should be and he decided to wade in.

"Well, this isn't exactly my specialty, so you can discount whatever suggestions I make, but I do have a thought that might be helpful."

"Good. Let me have it – that's what I'm asking for."

"I agree that you need to get closer to Brenda now – don't wait and then be edged out by one of those other fired-up guys. But you can't do it as a – what's that out-of-date word you once taught me? – oh yeah, as a lothario. She'd be sure to resist if you were to make a pass at her – given the husband's condition and her devotion to him."

"I'm with you on that."

"What you need to do now is to become her *friend*. And what's the best way to do that? It's by offering to help out with her husband. Take Bob for walks, or recite poetry to him, or assist her at his mealtimes – I'm sure you can come up with ways to be helpful. Brenda will appreciate that – and then, when Bob exits, you'll be well-positioned as a good and supportive friend."

Roy's face broke out in a big smile. "Oh, I do like that advice. It's so obvious, but for some reason I never thought of it in quite that way. . . . All right, Eddie, thanks a lot – I can take it from

there.” And then Roy’s tone reverted abruptly to the avuncular teacher mode. “We still have 20 minutes – let’s get back to Fitzgerald, and hear the stuff about Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker which comes next. . . .”

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“That would be good both going and coming back / One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.”

It was a month later. Roy opened his eyes as he finished reciting the poem he’d committed to memory so many years ago. “Don’t you enjoy *Birches*, Bob? It’s one of Frost’s finest.”

Brenda’s husband, Bob, sat in an armchair in the small living room of their quarters at Elmwood. He was staring out into space, a blank expression on his face, and made no attempt to reply. Roy, seated on a pull-up chair near Bob, waited a moment – although not expecting a response – and then continued.

“Here’s another of Frost’s poems that I fancy. It has two famous lines that oppose each other – the first line, ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,’ and the last line, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’ Let me recite it, and then I’ll try to rationalize the contradiction. . . .”

At that moment, the outer door of the apartment opened and Brenda walked in, carrying a small plastic bag displaying the logo of the neighborhood drug store.

“Well, hello, you two,” she said – “and since I could hear your voice through the door, Roy, I realize I’ve just interrupted your recital of *Mending Wall*. It was my favorite poem freshman year in college. . . . You guys seem to be getting along splendidly – am I right, Bob?”

Bob’s expression had changed to a faint smile upon sensing Brenda’s presence, but he showed no sign of responding to her inquiry, nor had she expected any. While removing her coat and

emptying the contents of the bag, she spoke to Roy as if Bob wasn't in the room.

“I can't tell you how pleased I am, Roy, that you volunteered to spend some time with Bob – to recite those wonderful poems you've committed to memory, to take him for walks that he wouldn't undertake himself, and so on. He may not show you his appreciation, but I'm sure that deep down he's as grateful as I am – and I certainly am, because it frees me up to run some necessary errands and get off by myself for a bit.”

“Thanks, Brenda, but you left out the fact that it's also beneficial for *me* – testing my memory chops on the old verses, getting some exercise myself, but most of all, experiencing the good feeling that comes with being of help to someone who needs assistance.”

“You're a lovely man, Roy – and I'm awed at how you've overcome your own eyesight problem and manage to enjoy a normal, even youthful, existence. . . .”

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A week later, Roy and Bob came to a stop outside Bob's apartment. Brenda opened the door in response to their knock. Roy steered Bob and the walker at a slow pace over to the husband's favorite armchair. Roy then joined Brenda, who was preparing a meal in the small kitchen.

Brenda looked up and said, “Thanks, Roy, for getting Bob up on his feet – he needed that.”

“Happy to do it. By the way, did you see the announcement that they're going to have a string quartet on Saturday in the auditorium – playing some Schubert, I believe.”

“Oh, a favorite of mine.”

“Me, too. Well, if you'd like to go, I'll come over here an hour earlier, so we can prepare Bob and help him get over there and into our seats before the crowd comes in.”

“That would be terrific. Roy, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

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Several weeks later, when Brenda answered the phone, Roy could tell something was wrong.

“Hi, Brenda – I was just thinking I hadn’t seen you and Bob for a few days –”

Brenda interrupted. “Bob has taken a real turn for the worse. The doctor was here earlier today – this may be the end for my dear husband.”

“Oh, that sounds awful – is there anything I can do to be of help?”

“Not at the moment, but thanks for asking.”

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The next time Roy saw Brenda was several days later, on a Saturday, at a funeral service for Bob being held in Elmwood’s small chapel. He offered her his condolences, and they shared a hug of friendship; but with a number of other people around, the two of them had no time alone to talk.

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“So,” said Eddie to Roy at the beginning of their session the following Monday, “we’ve finished *The Sun Also Rises*. We can talk a little about Jake’s malady or Brett’s lust, or we can just move on to Faulkner.”

Roy, who was sitting in his desk chair, smiled. “We’ll get to Jake and Brett in a few minutes. But first I want to seek your advice once again – your last bit worked out fine.”

“Okay, shoot” – and here Eddie smiled impishly – “but I warn you, I may have to raise my hourly fee for this unexpected use of my brain.”

“Consider it done. So, Eddie, as you may have heard, Brenda’s husband passed away last week. I paid my respects as a friend should, but now I want to move on with my pursuit of this fair maiden, before some other fellow – like that pushy Larry Owen – squeezes in ahead of me. I am – as you might say – hot to trot. And the question is, how should I go about it. Do I announce my intentions? Do I make the switch and play the paramour?”

Over the weekend, Eddie had learned of Bob’s passing, so he wasn’t surprised to hear Roy renew this line of inquiry. Eddie was pleased that his first venture into advising Roy on matters of the heart had gone so well, which bolstered his self-confidence – not only in dealing with Roy, but in other areas as well.

By way of example, for some months now Eddie had been exploring the possibility of transferring from the small community college he attended to the large state university over fifty miles away. The prospect was attractive to him, and any doubts he may have had regarding his ability to make the transition were rapidly eroding. To be sure, it would cost more, but he had some savings from his current job and assumed he could find part-time work in the new location. He knew he could handle it, and the main obstacle that remained was leaving Roy, for whom he’d developed genuine affection.

At any rate, Eddie had no hesitation about responding to Roy’s question – since he instantly sensed that Roy’s “paramour” alternative would be the wrong course to take.

“No, no,” said Eddie, “not at all. You have to build on what you’ve created these past months. You’re a friend of the family – you can’t suddenly become a lover. Rather, be a mourner.”

Noting Roy’s rapt attention, Eddie paused to let the concept sink in before confidently proceeding. “This is a big change in Brenda’s life, and she needs time to adjust to it. You’ve got to help

her through this period without seeming to have any lustful intentions. Play your cards right, and then, when the right time comes – which, don't worry, you'll know – make your move. . . .”

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“These cashmere sweaters,” said Roy a week later, pointing to a drawer in Bob's bedroom dresser, “are too good to just discard. They should go to the Salvation Army, or perhaps to some of the men around this place.”

“You're right,” said Brenda, from her desk on the other side of the room. “Oh, it's so helpful to have you go through Bob's clothes and belongings with me – bringing a man's eye to bear on the decisions that have to be made”

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One Sunday morning not long after, Roy and Brenda were standing in the alcove at the rear of the church as the parishioners filed out following the service.

“Roy, that was such a good idea of yours for us to attend church this morning.”

“I thought it might be, when I heard what the subject of the sermon was going to be.”

“Yes, and the pastor had such a helpful approach on how to deal with grief. . . .”

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A month after Bob's passing, Brenda and Roy were standing outside the door to Brenda's apartment. She put her key in the lock and opened the door part way, then turned to Roy and clasped one of his hands with both of hers.

“Thanks so much for taking me to the concert tonight. The music was excellent, and it did a world of good for me to get out of this apartment for a change.”

Roy placed his other hand over Brenda’s hands and said, “I too enjoyed it thoroughly.”

“Well,” she said after a moment, extricating her hands from his and turning to enter the apartment, “good night, Roy.”

“Good night, Brenda,” he said and turned to go back to his quarters.

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The next day, Roy was walking in the Elmwood hallway for exercise. He was about to turn a corner when he heard Brenda’s voice coming from the other side of the wall.

“Oh, yes, Larry, that would be fun. And I do so enjoy Woody Allen movies.”

Roy stopped in his tracks. Then he heard a man’s voice, saying, “Fine. I’ll pick you up at your place at six, so we can grab a bite before the picture starts. See you tonight.”

A moment later, the man behind the voice turned the corner, walking toward Roy and nodding a brief impersonal hello as he passed by. Roy nodded back but stayed where he was, not wanting to encounter Brenda just then.

The man, Roy knew, was Larry Owen, who had arrived at Elmwood earlier that year. He appeared to be in his 70’s, good-looking, in possession of all his faculties, and walking with a brisk stride. Roy had noticed Larry and Brenda together on several occasions, including a session at the bridge table in Elmwood’s lounge. . . .

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“I don’t know, Eddie,” said Roy that afternoon, “whether our strategy will ultimately yield any dividends.”

“Just be patient,” replied Eddie – “or, in the words of Edmund Burke that you taught me, ‘Never despair, but if you do, work on in despair’.”

Roy grinned, pleased that Eddie recalled one of his favorite lines. “Touché – I will do just that. But I’m worried about this fellow Larry Owen, who lives here and has been paying a lot of attention to Brenda since Bob’s death. He has some qualities she may well find attractive, including good eyesight. . . . And they play bridge together – a game I never liked, give me Scrabble any time. I’ve also heard he’s a fine dancer, while I’m something of a klutz in that department. I don’t want to miss out on Brenda by holding my fire too long.”

“Don’t worry about the competition. Do I have to remind you that “a kite rises against, not with the wind? As for timing, I’ve always said that you’ll know when the right moment comes. . . .”

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A few nights later, Brenda and Roy were seated side-by-side on her couch watching television. During a commercial, she turned to him and said, “Roy, I’m almost embarrassed to ask you this, but I’ve got a terrible itch in the middle of my spine. Would you mind terribly scratching my back?”

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“. . . And so I scratched her back, which evidently relieved the itch, and she said ‘thank you,’ and we resumed watching the television show.”

Eddie said, “And that was it?”

“Yes,” Roy replied, “that was it for last evening. But unless you advise me otherwise, I’m taking this as a sign that the time has come to make my move.”

Eddie smiled and spread his hands in the gesture a baseball umpire uses to signal that the runner is safe. “Hey, man, if you think this is the right time, then go for it.”

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Late Sunday morning, Brenda and Roy were again seated side-by-side on Brenda’s sofa, having dined on the brunch she’d prepared for him. Brenda was flipping through the pages of a newspaper, calling his attention to certain articles of interest that he was unable to read himself.

Roy turned sideways to face her. “Brenda, do you recall asking me a few weeks ago what my favorite lines were from Robert Frost?”

“I do,” she replied, “and you said there were so many, you’d have to think about it.”

“Right. Well, I’ve given it some thought, and I now have an answer. It’s not so much the beauty of the words, but the fact that these lines capture just what I want to express at this particular moment.”

She looked over at him, her expression a bit quizzical, but said nothing.

“It’s the last five lines in the poem called, *The Road Not Taken*, and as you undoubtedly recall, they go like this:

‘I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –

I took the one less traveled by,’

Here, Roy paused for emphasis, looked squarely at Brenda, and spoke the last line very slowly.

‘And that has made all the difference’.”

She faced him, her face flushing a bit, and said in a mock-formal voice, “And to what road, Roy, do you now have reference?”

He moved as if in slow motion, putting his arm around her shoulder, gently drawing her towards him. In a near-whisper, he said, “Years hence, I want to look back on today as having been when I took the road that made all the difference in my life – the day I told my sweet Brenda how much I love her.”

Brenda put her hand on the side of Roy’s face, half-closed her eyes, and whispered to him, “Darling, you have just given me what Frost would later call, at JFK’s inauguration – another notable day of new beginnings – *The Gift Outright*. . . .”

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When Eddie came to his room the next evening, Roy was exultant.

“It worked! I took the risk and she responded beautifully. We are now, shall I say, an item! I couldn’t be happier. . . . Put away that book – this is no time for Faulkner. Let’s switch to something humorous, to Twain, or Thurber – or better still, Bruce Jay Friedman. . . .”

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Later that night, Roy and Brenda lay quietly on his bed together, holding hands, listening to Sinatra’s voice on Roy’s stereo, singing, “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning”

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The next evening, Brenda and Roy ate dinner in a cozy romantic Italian restaurant. Their eyes met and their lips puckered as they toasted each other and their newly-formed bond with two glasses of Prosecco. . . .

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A week later, when Eddie arrived at Roy's room, he saw a different man – one depressed almost to the point of despondency.

“What's wrong, Roy? You were so upbeat all last week – why the long face now? Has something gone wrong on the Brenda front?”

“Yes, terribly Not between the two of us – we're very much in love. But a new factor has come into the picture, and it may ruin everything.”

“What happened? Tell me – maybe I can help.”

Roy took a sip of water before recounting his painful new problem. “I may not have mentioned it to you, but Brenda has an only son, Peter, who lives with his wife and kids in northern Minnesota. I met him briefly when he came here for Bob's funeral – not enough time to form an opinion about him. Up to now he hasn't been playing a big role in her life – other than picking up part of the tab for her living expenses. But now, Peter is about to make up for all that neglect.”

“How so?”

“The son-of-a-gun has invited his mother to come out to northern Minnesota and live with him and his family! He says he wasn't able to do that while her husband was alive – Bob's dementia would have been too much for the family to handle – but now that Brenda is alone, Peter would love to have her. He wants his children to get to know their grandmother better – you know, the whole nine yards.”

Eddie realized this was a severe obstacle—not one easy to overcome. He asked, “What’s Brenda’s reaction?”

“She’s torn. She professes to love me, but I’m a new factor in her life. Peter goes all the way back – and she really is attracted to the idea of getting to know her grandchildren better.”

“Do you think she might actually go?”

“Yes, I do. That’s what has me so demoralized. Just when I found the love of my life, I’m going to lose her. It’s not fair But what can I do?”

Eddie’s voice took on a positive tone. “Hey, don’t give up the ship, Roy. This calls for a strategy to keep Brenda here. I’ve already got a few ideas. . . .”

“I hope you can think of something – I’ve become almost paralyzed.”

“I’m on it, Roy. But one thing I can tell you right now – the key to keeping Brenda here is to make her realize how much her leaving Elmwood would hurt *you*.”

Roy’s response was prompt and firm. “No, Eddie, I won’t do that. I don’t want to play on whatever sympathy she may have for me. We’ve got to devise some other tactics. . . .”

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“I’ve got something here for you,” said Roy the next day, when Brenda answered his knock on her door.

“What is it?” she asked, puzzled by the earmuffs he was wearing indoors.

“Here, look,” he said, thrusting a piece of paper into her hand with a theatrical gesture. “It’s today’s daily weather report from northern Minnesota – 15 inches of snow, temperature at 20 below zero, winds of 30 miles per hour. . . .”

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“How did Brenda react today when you reported on the frigid Minnesota weather?” asked Eddie.

Roy shrugged. “Well, she said something like, ‘I know, I know, it’s terrible’ – an observation in which I heartily concurred. It was a good idea, Eddie, and I thank you for coming up with the concept; but frankly, I don’t think the weather will be enough to keep her from heading out west.”

“Don’t worry, Roy – it’s all cumulative, and I’ve got another good one up my sleeve.”

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“Yes, they’re good-looking kids,” Roy said to Brenda several days later. They were sitting at her kitchen table, viewing photos of her grandchildren that she kept in an album. “And I’m sure Peter is, as you say, an admirable son.”

Roy paused a beat before firing his big gun, courtesy of Eddie’s latest brainstorm. “But here’s what you have to consider, Brenda – and that’s Peter’s wife, Donna. You almost never mention her, which leads me to believe she’s not one of your favorite people. Hey, forget Peter and the kids – you’d be moving into *Donna’s* house. And she’s likely to resent your constant presence, afraid you’ll be second-guessing the way she runs the household and brings up her kids. You’re going to represent a real threat to her dominion”

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“What’s new on the Brenda front?” asked Eddie the next Monday when he came to read to Roy.

“It’s like a roller coaster,” replied Roy. “I was making real progress with her – particularly by following your advice and stressing concerns about Donna, which she recognized as a serious

potential problem. And for the first time she did raise with Peter the notion of her staying here.”

“That’s great.”

“But try to guess how he replied?”

“I don’t know – how?”

“He said it was out of the question – but not just because he and his family wanted Brenda to live with them. No, now he cited ‘financial reasons’ for his insistence on her moving in with him.”

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Peter told her that paying for her room and board at Elmwood had become too much of a burden on his modest income, without the contribution he’d been receiving from Bob’s pension, which has now been cut off. In short, he insisted that he needs to save money by having her join them.”

“Aha,” said Eddie, “that may have been his motive all along in inviting her to Minnesota. You can actually use that with Brenda against her precious son.”

“Maybe so, but here’s the rub – if he’s cruel enough to cut her off financially, she won’t be able to afford to stay here.”

“Let’s talk about that – I’ve already got a thought on the subject”

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“Brenda, darling, I figured it out – we can make it financially here without Peter’s help,” Roy said to her over lunch in her apartment the next day. “I can move in here with you – the space is big enough for both of us – and by saving the money I’ve been paying Elmwood for my room and scraping together a few other dollars, we should be able to make out fine. . . .”

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When Eddie arrived at Roy's room a few days later, the older man was once again depressed.

"I tried everything, Eddie – even the financial argument, although you know I have some doubts about my ability to swing that deal. But it looks like I've failed. She's getting ready to leave for Minnesota this week."

"I thought she loved you."

"I think she still does. . . although Peter has been chipping away at that too."

"How so?"

"Well, when Brenda first told him about me, and why that was the reason she wanted to stay at Elmwood, do you know what Peter said?"

"What?"

"Brenda didn't want to tell me, but I pressed her for his reaction. It turns out that Peter said something along these lines: 'This guy Roy is too old for you, he's losing his sight so you'll have to care for him like you did for Bob, he has no money – he's just a superannuated ex-high school English teacher' – as if that were something ignoble."

"Why that son of a gun. . . ." But Eddie refused to give up the fight. "You say you've tried everything, but have you shown Brenda how much her leaving would hurt *you*?"

"No, as I told you before, I refuse to play on her sympathies. . . ."

* * *

Later that evening, after leaving Roy, Eddie stopped to have a beer at a neighborhood tavern. Sitting alone at the bar nursing a cold one, he mused over Roy's problem.

Roy's making a big mistake, Eddie thought, in refusing to let Brenda know how much her departure would hurt him. *That's the leverage he needs to use to keep her from leaving.*

Eddie didn't want to go directly against Roy's wishes, but he pondered the question: *Is there some way to get this point across to Brenda without doing what Roy was determined to avoid? True love ought to triumph, as the saying goes, but sometimes it needs a little tactical push to get it all the way home.* And as he took another sip of his beer, he got the germ of an idea how to go about it.

But, he mused, would it work? And is it all right for me to – well, not exactly lie, but let's say tell a half-truth? Does the end justify the means? And should I be doing any of this when I haven't been asked to?

Eddie continued to sip his beer and give the situation some more thought. . . .

* * *

Roy lay quietly in his bed. It was Tuesday night, and Brenda was scheduled to leave for Minnesota on Wednesday morning. The idea of being with her this last day was just too painful for him, so he had kept to himself.

But he couldn't stop thinking about her – and dwelling on the irony of the situation. *I had to wait for Bob to die before I could declare my love for Brenda. But it was the very fact of his death that is now resulting in her having to leave me. . . . Whoever's arranging things upstairs has a twisted sense of humor. . . .*

* * *

Roy was about to turn out the light when he heard a knock on the door. He opened it, and there stood Brenda, radiant in a

nightgown and robe. She smiled coquettishly and said, “May I come in?”

Roy was wary as she entered the room and led him over to the bed. Beckoning to Roy to get in, she climbed in alongside him. “Is this the way you want to spend our last night together?” he asked.

Brenda beamed as she spoke. “No, this is the way I want to spend the first of thousands of nights together with you. I’ve decided to stay at Elmwood.”

Roy erupted in joy, and for the next few minutes the two of them hugged and kissed, whispered and laughed, and then hugged some more.

Later, when things had quieted down a bit, Roy said, “If you don’t mind telling me, Brenda, what caused you to change your mind – to reverse course on the last night before you were all set to leave?”

Brenda, who had obviously anticipated the question, answered readily. “I don’t mind telling you at all. Look, this was always a hard decision for me, close either way – but what tipped the balance toward staying was a visit I had earlier this evening from your reader, Eddie.”

“Eddie? – Eddie went to see you? Why?”

“He wanted to get some advice from me – as your closest friend here – on how to handle something with you.”

Roy seemed puzzled. “What advice?”

They had been lying on their backs, but now Brenda turned on her side to face him. “I guess it’s all right for me to pass along what he said. Well, Eddie hasn’t told you yet, but he applied to matriculate at the state university – a school he’d like to attend and should be able to get in. But that will mean he won’t be in town any longer, and he doesn’t know how to break the news to you. He’s well aware of how dependent you’ve become on your daily reading session

together. Anyway, he thought I might be able to suggest the best way for him to raise the subject with you.”

Roy now turned on his side to face Brenda. “And what did you tell him?”

Brenda reached over and gently touched Roy’s face. “I told him go off to the state college, and I would take care of you.”

“Huh?”

Brenda moved closer to Roy, her words resonating in his ears. “I’ve been so stupid, Roy – just thinking about myself. I never stopped to realize what effect my leaving Elmwood would have on *you* – the person I cherish most in the world.”

She paused to brush his cheek with her lips. “I guess I overlooked this, because you were always too much of a gentleman to bring it up. But you don’t need Eddie to read to you – I can do that. You don’t need to open a can of sardines for dinner – I’ll cook for you. I can take you to places that are difficult for you to navigate with your AMD – concerts and theatre. And I’ll take on some part-time work in the town library to help pay our expenses.” She moved her body into contact with his. “And I can snuggle up with you at night just like this. . . .”

Roy’s mind was on overload. He hadn’t sought her sympathy, and he had to admit that Eddie had steered clear of it also – *but his pretext did have that effect, and was that a sound basis on which to move forward?*

“But Brenda, I don’t want you to stay out of sympathy for me – ”

“Don’t worry, Roy. Now that I’ve made the decision, I realize I’m not doing it just for you, or just for me, but for both of us – we need each other.”

Her answer was just what Roy wanted to hear, eradicating all doubts, and he finally relaxed.

“And Roy, just hear me cry – like in that *Gatsby* epigraph you hold so dear – ‘Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover, I must have you. . . .’” Then, throwing her arms around him, she purred, “And now it’s time for us to *really* celebrate the occasion. . . .”

* * *

When Eddie walked in the door the next day, Roy gave him a stern look and said, “Young man, I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

“Hold that a minute, Roy. I heard the good news that Brenda is staying at Elmwood and just want you to know how happy that makes me – realizing how much it means to you.”

Roy pressed on, scowling as he spoke. “And that’s precisely the subject I want to discuss. I’ve now learned that you went to see Brenda yesterday without my permission.”

“Did I need your permission?”

“And contrary to my express avowal, you played on her sympathies.”

“No, I didn’t – I just asked her for advice as to what I should do about my education. If she made the jump from that to what *she* should do, well, she did it all by herself.”

“And tell me this, young man – how can you justify that lie you told her about applying to the state college?”

“It wasn’t a lie – just a half-truth. As a matter of fact, I’ve been thinking for months about doing this, but I didn’t want to leave you high and dry. Now I’m over that. As a matter of fact, I have the completed application with me today – I wanted to ask you for a reference letter.”

At this point, Roy dropped his pose of mock outrage, embracing Eddie in a big bear hug. “You’re my boy. In fact, when

Brenda and I get married next month, you'll be my best man. But tell me, what inspired you to do what you did?"

Eddie's face broke out into a big smile as he spoke. "Well, it really bothered me that your campaign to win over Brenda – or shall I say *our* campaign – which had been so successful earlier, was now about to crumble. And I remembered that quote of Napoleon you used with me so often, when I failed to finish what I'd begun – '*If you start to take Vienna – take Vienna.*' Right?"

Ray beamed. "Right! And by the way, *now* I can tell you what that high-bouncing *Gatsby* epigraph is all about. . . ."