

## A Big Wonderful Tree Falling Down

by Richard Goodman

“Come *in*,” she said, waving me in with a low hand. I caught the door, and she turned around in a measured pivot, giving me her back and talking as she walked toward the living room.

“I don’t know why you want to see an old lady like me,” she said as she hobbled away from me. I could see she was bent over. She had that smallish hump in her back many old people have, and it seemed to weigh on her heavily.

I laughed self-consciously. I didn’t have a reply. I followed her, experiencing all the excitement, nervousness and tension you feel when you give yourself over to a new person. I was being polite, too, trying to appear well bred. I wasn’t sure how to do that in a brief walk from her foyer to her living room. I decided walking softly was the best way. I was also trying to take everything in. Her apartment was modest, but pleasant, though somewhat dark. The window in the living room faced to the back of her building, an unglamorous structure on Greenwich Village’s Eight Street, between Fifth Avenue and Broadway.

“Sit. Sit,” she said when we were both fully in the living room.

Her eyes flickered toward the only couch in the room. She sat in a tall dark chair behind her desk and immediately lit a cigarette.

“So, you’re Mr. *Goodman*,” she said, as if by saying my name things could now begin.

“Yes, but please call me Richard.”

“All right,” she said. I waited for her to return the gesture. She didn’t. She took a long drag from her cigarette and then tapped the stalk on the ashtray. Later, after I had visited her a few times, I asked her if I might call her by her first name, Lavinia.

“Of course!” she said. “Such a silly name, isn’t it?”

“Well, no....”

“Oh, it *is*. It’s Latin. The name of some third-rate Roman *goddess*. I think Mother had just read Bullfinch’s *Mythology* when she had me. I’ve *never* liked my name.”

Her full name was Lavinia Russ. Even now, when I put it down on paper, she emerges from the fog of time to greet me once again. Lavinia. La-vin-i-ah. A honey-sounding name.

“*They*,” she said, waving a hand somewhere, “they didn’t say too much about you. But you look like a nice man.”

At first, I had no idea what “they” she was talking about. I looked wildly in the direction of her extended hand for a clue. Suddenly, I realized that *they* were the Village Visiting Neighbors, a local nonprofit organization in New York City’s Greenwich Village. They bring people together with older people who need errands done for them, or who simply want someone to visit them to quell the loneliness. It was *they* who had matched us together. In all the time I knew her, Lavinia never spoke the actual name of this organization. So, here I was. On my first visit.

“Well, I want to warn you,” Lavinia said as she took a quick puff of her cigarette, “I’m losing my mind.” She cast a half glance my way but avoided actually looking at me.

“Oh,” I smiled, trying to think of something to say to counteract that.

“I can’t *remember* things anymore.” She struggled with the words. “Words and names I used to be able to pluck out of the air at *will*. I find as I get older, I simply can’t remember them.”

“But that doesn’t mean th....”

“I must be going...*what* do you call it when old people lose their memory?”

“Senile!” I said brightly.

“*Senile!* Yes. *Thank* you. Alec used to say—you don’t know Alec, but he was a great friend of mine—he used to say, ‘Lavinia, for God’s sake, you never could remember those things *anyway*.’”

“But *I* forget things all the time, too. All the time!” I said.

“You do?” She sounded like she wanted to believe me, but she was tentative.

“Yes! I’m constantly forgetting things. I even forget what race I am.”

This brought a deep rolling laugh from her. At its height, it was accompanied by, then evolved into, a wet smoker’s cough, the kind that sounds alarmingly like splitting wood.

“No, really,” I said, mildly alarmed at her cough but satisfied at my ability to make her laugh, “I’m not kidding. I *do* forget things.”

“Well, that’s awfully nice of you to say that, but I don’t quite think it’s the same thing.” She stabbed her cigarette out, then immediately reached for another from a long lime-colored pack. “Old age,” she snorted, as her hand trembled with the lighted match.

And so it was, old age. That and so many other things we talked about in the two years I knew Lavinia. Many many things we discussed, but old age came back again and again and pushed its way to the front of the line, like a rude, bossy tourist, demanding to be served first. Now, some fifteen years later, as I approach the periphery of that harsh land myself, I think of those years, and of her, again and again.

As Lavinia talked, I stole glances at her, trying to drink in this new being, this fresh face. She had very pale, almost sallow skin. She had wrinkles, true, but not the deep Lillian Hellman-like slashes. Hers were thinner, and not as profound. I guessed she might be seventy-five. (It turned out she was eighty-one.) Yet she had the most vibrant hair. The color was an appealing blend of russet and wheat, with tinges of gray. It was cut fairly short and flowed in supple waves. It was rich, delicious.

Because her body was simply no longer up to it, her eyes, and, naturally, her voice, were the major ways in which Lavinia communicated her considerable variety of moods and emotions. Lavinia’s eyes, though somewhat cloudy—she was eventually to have two cataract operations—were formidable. They could, and often did, in a single hour’s time, definitively express surprise, remorse, sadness, anger—this occasionally, but what a fearsome sight!—skepticism and worry. I felt I always had to look at Lavinia’s eyes, for fear of missing something dramatic and essential. In intimate partnership with those stagy eyes was a voice that was frayed and prone to fatigue but which, on any given day, could find its full measure and have you on the edge of your seat. Or, perhaps closer

to the mark, could reach out and grab you by the scruff of the neck, as if you were a wanton cat. Just as it did now.

“The thing is,” she burst out, “I don’t *like* old people. I can’t think of anything *worse* than sitting in a room with a bunch of old people.” She shuddered. “They’re always *complaining*.”

“And so you don’t want to be like them?” I was cautious. I was leaving myself the option of retraction.

“No,” she said, “I don’t.”

No, she didn’t. She did everything in her power not to be jettisoned into that general bin labeled *old*. I’m sure that was one reason why she contacted Village Visiting Neighbors. It was to have some young blood flowing through her days.

“I mean,” she continued, “have you seen those television commercials with that *what’s-her-name* woman talking about diapers?”

She had stymied me. “Johnson and Johnson?” I said. I named a brand, because I had no idea what woman she was talking about.

“I don’t *know*,” Lavinia said, not hearing me correctly, “but she used to be in all those college musicals in the 40’s. Small. A little too cute for me.”

“Oh! You mean June Allyson!” My outburst about a somewhat obscure movie star sounded a bit too gay to me. I toned myself down. I suddenly knew what commercial she was talking about. It was for protective undergarments for old people.

“Yes! That’s the one. And they even talk about *incontinence*.” She shuddered as if asked to eat something unspeakable.

I remembered the commercial well. All the while June Allyson, now aged and speaking huskily, her voice cracking—she no longer had that sweet sexual wisp from her earlier days in the movies—talked with a cheerful frankness about the “troubles” some old people have. *That needn’t be*, she said. What sent a shiver flying down *my* back was the garment itself: large, plastic and elastic-banded. A king-sized diaper, really, that a two hundred-pounder could easily slip into.

“I wouldn’t be caught *dead* wearing one of those,” Lavinia said with bitterness in her voice. “I’d rather urinate in public. So humiliating!”

“Yes, I have to agr....”

“Now, dear,” she said, ceremoniously placing her cigarette down on the ashtray, “I want to hear about *you*.”

I blurted out a few things. Job: advertising copywriter. Marital status: single. Age: 45. And so on. As I tossed off this necessary but hollow-sounding data, I realized one of the things that was so exciting and yet bewildering about this, my first visit with Lavinia. The fact was that, aside from relatives, I didn’t *know* any old people. True, I saw them in the street. I jostled up against them in lines. I watched them being picked up Sunday mornings to go visit their children and grandchildren. But I didn’t have any friends who were over sixty.

“....of those advertisements on television are so clever. I adore those commercials with that man who sells *chickens*.”

Lavinia startled me out of my reverie.

“Oh, you mean Frank Purdue.”

“I don’t know, but they’re awfully clever.”

“Yes, they are,” I said. The truth was, my heart wasn’t in my profession, the “craft” of advertising, as the insiders called it. Craft, my ass. But that was another story. “Did you know he act....”

“Now, dear, before you go.” Lavinia had a short list in her hand, and she began speaking about it without looking at me. “If you can’t get the peach, then any kind will do. And for this I need the small-sized carton—not the big one, *please*. The last person they sent couldn’t manage to get that straight. And *here’s* the money.”

Was the visit at an end? I put my coat on and went out, and in a few minutes bought her what she needed from a delicatessen nearby. When I returned, Lavinia was at the door to meet me.

“Thanks very much, dear,” she said as I handed her the grocery bag. “Now, you go home now.”

“It’s been very nice.”

“Yes, it *has*,” she said.

“I’ll telephone you soon, all right?”

“That would be nice. Goodbye.” She smiled. Her eyes, even squinted against the outdoors, were bright and alive.

I walked home, excited and enthusiastic, as if I’d just had a first date. And I suppose, in a way, I had.

Lavinia. Lavinia! Of course, I telephoned Lavinia. We arranged that I would visit her the next week. She was cordial, but not effusive, on the phone. Those seven days went by slowly, I have to say. I was—well, I suppose I was smitten. I guess I had a

kind of crush on Lavinia, and like a teenager with a crush, I was full of heightened uncertainties. I was secretly worried that the second visit wouldn't be as delightful as the first. And then I had a million questions, all of them eventually leading to one big one: who was Lavinia?

I stepped into her apartment, then, the next time, feeling a disturbing mixture of anticipation and skepticism. I was hopeful, but guarded. I greeted her a little too warmly. She seemed genuinely pleased to have me there again. She was dressed in what I would come to see as her basic Lavinia outfit, an old shapeless housedress and slippers. It was evident after a short while that she had totally forgotten my name. She had a cigarette in her hand. She usually did, I was to find. The entire apartment had that ubiquitous odor of deeply penetrated smoke many apartments had in those days. It rose from the furniture, it came at you from the bathroom towels, it even seemed to linger inside the refrigerator. It's a smell I suspect that is largely unfamiliar to the most recent, largely non-smoking generation.

"I've always wondered," she began talking even before she reached her chair, "what men *do* with prostitutes."

I was taken aback. I think I might have even stammered.

"I mean," she went on, "after they do their business, do they *talk*, or what?" She was seated now. She waved her cigarette around in a flourish.

"Well..." I began, not at all certain how much detail I should provide. Yes, I'd been to a few prostitutes in my time—a fact that always repulsed any girlfriend I was stupid enough to tell about it—but I wasn't sure Lavinia really wanted firsthand knowledge.

“I used to ask Alec, and he would say, ‘Damn it, *I don’t know* what they do, because I’ve never been to one!’”

That name again. Alec.

“I don’t think you do much chatting,” I said.

“I was always terribly naïve about those kinds of things,” she said. “I remember going up to Harlem one time. That was *years* ago.” She tried to moisten her lips, which were almost always dry, with a quick flick of her tongue. The feeble light from her window highlighted her russet hair. She continued:

“I think I was nineteen. I don’t know how I got away from Mother, but I must have. A *shoe* salesman asked me out for a date.” When she spoke the word *shoe*, her voice seemed to drop two or three octaves. “After dinner we went up to his room. For a drink, I suppose. I certainly didn’t think anything was going to happen.

“All I remember about his room was that he had rows and rows and rows of shoes lined up against the wall. All sorts and sizes. *Hundreds* of shoes.” She paused and plucked a tiny piece of tobacco from her lips. “Well, I didn’t know anything about sex. *Completely* ignorant. And at one point—I guess he had given me my drink by then—he started to take off his clothes.”

“He did?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“I just started to *cry*.” She laughed. She laughed at her own youthful clumsiness. The story wasn’t finished, though. She took a quick puff of her cigarette and went on. “Well, the man started to get upset. ‘Don’t cry!’ he said. ‘For God’s sake, *don’t cry!*’

He gave me ten dollars to take a cab home. So, I left. I rang for the elevator, and when it came, the bellboy was inside. I must have still had the ten dollars sticking out of my hand, because the bellboy looked at me, and at the money, and said, ‘You probably could’ve gotten more than that, honey.’”

I roared. Lavinia leaned slowly back in her chair. “And Alec said to me, ‘You couldn’t have been *that* ignorant.’ But I was!”

“Who’s Alec, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, Alec. Alec was my *greatest* friend. Alec Wilder. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of him.

“No, sorry, I haven’t.”

Something nagged at me, though. Somewhere, I did know the name.

“Was he famous?”

Lavinia threw her head back. “Oh, Lord, no. Celebrated, you might say. No, dear, he was a composer. Did you ever hear of a song called “I’ll Be Around”?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s a haunting song. Exquisitely beautiful. You should listen to it. Alec composed it.”

And then it hit me. When I was a student at the University of Michigan, I would listen occasionally to a program on National Public Radio about American music, and Alec Wilder had been the host. I liked the program very much, and the main reason I did was because of Wilder. He was smart, informed, witty, and engaging. I didn’t know a thing about him, and I don’t think I’d thought about him since. But I remembered

thoroughly enjoying the program. And I remembered that his qualities pierced even a self-absorbed college student's indifference.

I told Lavinia about that. And then she told me the story of their friendship. Not all of it, because it was a long one, full of great moments, with highs and lows, that lasted over twenty years. Alec Wilder was a staunch individualist, lived only in hotels, never married, had inherited money, did not suffer fools, was friends with Sinatra and other well-known musicians—Mabel Mercer was his favorite—and had a razor wit. Lavinia worshiped him. (“We never *did* anything, you understand.”) Wilder was to be a third person during my visits with Lavinia, a specter, always ready, through his medium, Lavinia, to add a comment or to make an elaboration. Lavinia spoke of him with as much conviction as if he were sitting next to her, or to me. Lavinia's two marriages had failed, but not this friendship. It had been the beacon of her life. I was to get to know Alec Wilder well in the next two years, and I can tell you that he was a compelling man, *is* a compelling man. If you want to get an idea of his acerbic wit, have a look at his book, *Letters I Never Mailed*. It's wonderful stuff. Three are to Lavinia.

Oh, if I wasn't in love, I was tottering on the edge of falling.

I think now as I look back on it all, I realize that part of the reason for my infatuation was this: If Lavinia, at eighty-one, could be this droll, this acerbic, this sharp, this verbally agile and entertaining, well, then, maybe when *I* was eighty-one, I might be, too. Maybe old age could actually be not just dignified, but graceful.

I don't remember too much about the rest of that visit. Lavinia talked a bit about the woman who cleaned her apartment. “A darling girl,” she said, “but she's very fat and

has the foulest mouth I've ever heard." I left her after about an hour. I made sure we have a definite appointment for my next visit.

My visits to Lavinia eased into a kind of routine. I was working as a freelance advertising copywriter at the time. Since my job—feast or famine it was—could often provide me with considerable windows of free time, I was usually able to arrange to see Lavinia during the week, and during the day. She seemed to prefer that I come in the afternoon, and that was fine with me. I was always glad to see her, and I think she was glad to see me. She would sit down heavily behind her note-cluttered desk, and I would pull up a chair next to her. (I had advanced from the distant couch.) Even before I settled in, she would reach for a cigarette, light it, and begin talking.

As the weeks went by, I learned more about her. She had been married twice, and both husbands were dead. She had three children, two girls and a boy, all grown. The youngest girl was married and had recently adopted a baby from South America. The oldest girl was gay. The boy was married, lived in California, and was a writer. He supported his writing by doing odd jobs. For years, Lavinia had worked in Scribner's bookstore in New York City. This was how she had made her living after her divorces and after her husbands had died.

For those of you who never saw that bookstore, Scribner's—and never will, since it's gone forever—I want say a word about it. I went there many times. It was regal. It disappeared about ten years ago, became a sweater store and now is something else. It was located on Fifth Avenue around 49<sup>th</sup> Street, in that same magical parameter that includes Saks Fifth Avenue, St. Patrick's Cathedral and Rockefeller Center. It was a

wonderful bookstore, of the old kind, with a second tier made of dark wrought iron that wound around the inside, like a widow's walk. The bookstore was a shrine to writers, because Scribner's was the house that had published Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Lardner and Wolfe. Scribner's was Maxwell Perkins' house. You felt enriched browsing there.

For the past twenty years, ever since the second husband died, Lavinia had lived alone. Alone, but not uncontent, I suspect. I think probably she was better suited to being by herself. Her apartment, as I said, was small and simply furnished and dark. On one wall of her living room hung a Renoir reproduction, her sole effort at bringing color to her surroundings. She wasn't much of a decorator. Lined up against the wall opposite her desk were rows and rows of books, mostly hardbacks from the 1940s and 50s. There was a smattering of recent titles, too. Her favorite author was John Galsworthy, a writer I didn't know well at all. Lavinia was a proud, card-carrying anglophile. Books were crucial to her, and she treated them as old, valued friends. Occasionally, she loaned me a book, and if I didn't return it by, say, three weeks, she would drop a heavy hint like, "Now, dear, there's no *hurry*, but that book, you know...."

Somewhere in the middle of all these books was a black wall phone. A small niche had been made for it that would often be closed up by the tottering books. Next to it, Lavinia had stationed a big rocking chair. It was here, after haltingly walking over to quiet the phone's brutal, insistent ring and addressing it angrily as she did with an "Oh, shut *up!*" that she would sit back and take her calls. She didn't mind talking on the phone, but she hated dialing a number. Her eyes and fingers weren't up to it.

Periodically, I would be called upon to do it for her.

I soon came to know that what Lavinia revealed about herself she did in a masterfully haphazard manner. Names were thrown out as if I should already have known them. The past and present were often mixed together wonderfully, like a big, complicated chef's salad. Characters dead and alive were spoken of in the same breath without so much a nod as to that one critical difference between them. Perhaps in Lavinia's mind there wasn't a difference. What I came to know came to me completely without warning. This was how I found out she had a son. I had known she had two daughters, but the third child had evaded me. It was if the son had been hiding behind the couch and one day just popped up and said hello. I discovered her second husband in the same manner, hiding behind that couch.

This lack of adherence to traditional narrative form gave the relationship, at least from my viewpoint, a fanciful, improvisational-like quality. I liked that. Right up until our last visit, I felt Lavinia might surprise me with some major fact of her life—that, for example, someone else lived with her in the apartment (which wasn't the case)—blithely tossing out the information as if it were nothing.

What did we talk about those first heady months? Off the top of my head I remember discussing politics, books, the Kennedys (she despised Joseph Kennedy, Sr.), that famed Scribner's bookstore where she had worked for so long, movie stars (She loved Jack Nicholson: "I'm *mad* about him."), her childhood in Buffalo, New York, her neighbors, television ("You'll never hear me say a bad word about it. It keeps old people like me from being too lonely."), money ("I'd love a *boatful*."), birds ("Can't *stand* them. Those horrible dirty little *feet*!"), and a crazy quilt of other things, from the ridiculous to the sublime—including growing old and dying.

These were two subjects that I was eager to talk about but which, in a thousand years, I wouldn't have dared to introduce. It was Lavinia who brought them up herself. She brought them up calmly and evenly as if she were talking about a shopping list. Lavinia had a perfectly uncomplicated view of growing old. She loathed it with every fiber in her body. She was only too aware of every malfunction, every decay of her physical being, and she was resentful.

"If there is a God," she said when one of her arthritic knees was particularly disturbing her, rubbing it petulantly, "when I see Him the first thing I'm going to ask Him is, 'Why do we have to grow *old*? Why can't we be like one of those big wonderful trees in the forest that simply...' And here she made a long, slow swooping movement with her hand, "...fall down when it's time? That would be so much more *dignified*." She looked straight at me, her cloudy eyes narrowing with anger and frustration.

In those moments I would feel a deep, deep inadequacy. What could I do? Oh, I wanted to heal her, to make her young again! Or at least to arrest the process, the descent. I'm also ashamed to say that this rawness fascinated me. I was being admitted into an extremely private room, one that represented the final stage of a journey we only take once. Intimacy on that level—if level is the word—is exciting, whether we like to admit it or not. It was at a price, though. The melancholic attacks brought on by her body could put her into a dark cave of a mood from which she often wouldn't emerge for days. Often we would sit and stare at each other for minutes at a time.

About death itself, Lavinia was of two minds. On the one hand, she could show a sense of outright dread. She could also speak about her own death with an almost child-

like curiosity: “I can’t *wait* to find out,” she would say. “I’m wild to know what *there*.” Did I believe her? Yes, I did. She was so convincing, I almost wanted to go with her.

After about eight or nine visits, I felt comfortable enough to go beyond what had become my accustomed role as the listener. I realized that if this were going to develop into a genuine friendship, it, like all genuine friendships, would have to be balanced. And I *wanted* us to be friends. It wasn’t that Lavinia discouraged me from talking. Not at all. It was just that in the face of such an utterly fresh personality I chose to stand back and be all ears. One day, that changed. I guess I no longer considered my visits to Lavinia to be some sort of charity work—if, indeed, they ever were.

I was glad I began talking. Lavinia turned out to be an equally marvelous listener. She was attentive, even rapt at times, and she was just as enthusiastic and forthright with her comments and counsel as she was about everything else. Even if her responses were not in the form of maxims or proverbs but merely commands—“Don’t *worry* about that!”—her pure commitment to them made them seem irrefutable. It wasn’t long before I was telling her the story of my life.

I told her how for years I’d wanted to quit advertising and be a *real* writer.

“Well, why haven’t you, dear?” she asked.

“I guess I’m afraid,” I said. I hated admitting that. I was being honest, at least.

“Go *do* it,” she said. “Don’t even think twice.”

“What if...?”

She waved her cigarette about dismissively.

“Don’t *think* too much about it, dear. That’s your downfall.” She puffed her cigarette. “Go *write*. Now.”

And she was right. I *did* think too much about these things.

“You know,” she said after a small pause, “I’ve written some books.”

“You?”

Lavinia huffed herself up in righteous indignation—and well she should have.

“Oh,” I said fumbling, “I didn’t mean...I mean....”

“I have,” she said, with dramatized dignity, “written four or five.”

*What an idiot I was.* I tried desperately to recover.

“Really? What are they?”

“Well, my *favorite* is one I wrote for children. It’s called *Over the Hills and Far Away*.”

“Do you have a copy?”

She pointed to her overstuffed bookcase. “Somewhere in all that confusion.”

“I’d love to see it.”

Lavinia got up slowly and walked with difficulty to the bookcase.

“Come here, dear, will you.”

I joined her. She squinted at the spines of the books. “It’s here somewhere,” she said, sweeping her hand across a row near the bottom. “See if you can find it.”

In a minute, I did. “Yes, here it is.” I plucked out the book. Indeed, she had written a young adult novel, as they’re called now. “May I take it home and read it?”

“If you swear by all that’s holy that you’ll return it.”

“Yes, I do. I will.”

Lavinia, it turned out, had written four books—*published* four books—and had been the editor of a fifth. And how many books had I written? None! Later, I tracked

them all down. I was most delighted by—and still am—her book called *A High Old Time: Or How to Enjoy Being a Woman Over Sixty*. It's a splendidly written book, full of sharply spiced aphorisms, and it has *personality*. It falls easily into that category of books written by high-spirited, witty, literate women who have a no-nonsense approach to life.

Lavinia loved good manners, and wit, and humor and decency. And character. It's all there in her book. This, of course, is what distinguishes people ultimately, isn't it? What they do, and how they do it. It takes some of us a long time to understand this, because we are susceptible to glitter and rhetorical flourishes and all sorts of personality con artists who enter our lives. When these people disappear, we wonder what happened, and we're left questioning our own judgment—or, more to the point, our own needs. So, sitting in that small room with Lavinia, who was dressed in her drab housedress and worn slippers, I was smart enough to know how lucky I was to be with the genuine article.

Lavinia was repelled by bad manners and vulgarity as much as she was attracted to grace and to wit and to honesty. Her rants were as enjoyable to listen to as were her commendations. More so. These things *mattered* to Lavinia. She despised self-pity, for example. That word *despise* is so apt. When she didn't like something, she didn't like it with her full body—from her narrowed, fixed eyes down to her tensed knees and arched toes. It was wonderfully entertaining to be in the presence of such an able despiser, especially when her subjects were people or traits that deserve to be despised.

And so self pity was at the top of her list of behavior to be banned forever. Here's what she says about it in *A High Old Time*:

Anecdotes rooted in self-pity are excruciating bores, for self-pity is a bore. Its only fascinating aspect is that if you feel sorry for yourself, nobody else

feels under any obligation to feel sorry for you. You're doing too successful a job of it yourself to invite their compassion.

Have you ever by mistake put in a dress whose colors bleed with white clothes in a washing machine? Everything else in the machine is ruined, because the dye spreads so virulently. And so it is with self-pity: it can discolor anything you do or say.

So it was humiliating for her, I know, when the tyranny of old age began to wear her down, and she would complain.

Spurred on by Lavinia, I began to make plans. Plans that would eventually take me out of advertising forever and, for a year, out of the country.

Meanwhile, the visits continued. So many wonderful moments there were. Lavinia told me the story of her marriages, both of which were bad. Her second husband she particularly didn't like. He used to belittle her. They had nothing in common. I asked her why she'd married him in the first place, and she said, "I don't remember." They were living in a house somewhere, and one night he had to go downstairs to the basement to fix something. And she said,

"So he opened the door to the basement, and just as he was standing there at the top of the stairs I..."

Lavinia raised both her hands, palms outward.

"You mean," I said, "you were going to push him down the stairs?"

She nodded slightly. "I thought it would look like an accident."

I laughed. It was *funny*.

"But you didn't."

"No. Didn't have the courage." She took a puff of her cigarette.

“But you came close.”

She smiled. “Just wanted to....*umph!*” And here she actually did make a good, strong pushing motion, finally getting the satisfaction, vicarious as it was, she’d deprived herself of years ago. I looked with glee as I imagined the boor tumbling down the stairs, getting what he deserved.

Now, you tell me, how could you not fall in love with a woman like that?

In all the time I knew her, I think we went outside three times. Because of her arthritic knees, walking for her was arduous, but her doctor told her she must walk, and so once in a while, complaining about his tyranny, she asked me if I would walk with her. We didn’t walk far, just over to Fifth Avenue and down to Washington Square Park where we would sit for a while before returning to her apartment. Lavinia held onto my arm as we walked, and didn’t say anything. I think she might have been in pain, or perhaps she was simply concentrating so as not to stumble. Her pace was determinately slow. She wasn’t particularly happy about being outdoors, but it always made me feel better to know that I had gotten her out for a bit. She looked so pale in the sunlight, like a cloistered nun.

One day—this is now deep into our relationship—I arrived ready to take Lavinia out for one of those infrequent walks. We’d planned it on the phone. I found her glum and terse. When I asked her what was wrong, she wouldn’t answer me. She wouldn’t even smoke a cigarette. She just sat there, mute. It took me quite a while to get her to come forth, and even then I could only extract words bit by bit. Finally, in a great effort, and full of self-recrimination, she said,

“I’m *depressed!*” She barely looked at me.

I didn’t know what to say. Not that Lavinia couldn’t be down. She could be upset about the pain in her legs and about her penchant for forgetting things. She would rant about those plagues eloquently. I’d never heard her use the word “depressed” about herself, though. It wouldn’t have been in character.

“But why?” I asked, and quickly groped for a reason. “Is it your legs?”

“No, honey. No.” She spoke with the slightest condescension, as if something so trivial could hardly be the cause.

“Your eyes?”

She shook her head slowly. Then, her lips trembling, with great difficulty she forced herself to speak,

“I’m just afraid I’ll...end up in one of those...*homes.*”

I’m not doing justice to the great fear that pervaded her confession. Her eyes were stark raving full of it. It was naked helplessness. When she finished telling me this, she looked up at me, her mouth twitching. Her eyes began to water. She was totally afraid.

“But...but why do you think you’ll be sent to a home?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just getting.... Nothing *works* any more.” She stole a quick, humiliated glance at me.

“Well, a few things may be on he blink,” I said, trying to sound authentic, “but you won’t be going to any home.”

She forced a half smile on her face.

If I were being honest, though, I knew she had grounds. Who was to say that some day she might decline so profoundly she wouldn't be able to walk from her bedroom to her bathroom? Who was to say those cursed legs of hers might not give out altogether? Who was to say that old age, relentless and unsparing as the wind, might not come to her one too many times? Who was to say she might not have to go to a home?

I tried my best to cajole her out of this black mood. She looked at me, dubious and still trembling. I think she may have reached out a hand to me, but I can't be sure. My mind is clouded by the intensity. I do know I felt closer to Lavinia than I ever had. She was in a pitiable state: She was completely helpless.

By the time I left that day, Lavinia seemed to be feeling better. I was still worried, though. I called her that evening to check on how she was. She thanked me for my help and said she was fine now, dear, thank you. She attempted to minimize how bad she had felt. "Oh, it was one of those *moods* I get in, that's all. They always pass. I'm *mortified* that I complained." But this seemed to me to signal a change. Lavinia was growing old in the way she loathed and feared.

In the meantime, I had been following her advice. I had resolved to quit advertising and to do what I always had wanted to do. *Write*. I had stashed away as much money as I could in my bank account from my freelance work. Those were the days when you could make a bundle as a freelance advertising copywriter. Money and work were everywhere. I managed to get a job for six months that paid extremely well. My goal was to save enough money to go to the South of France for a year. And to write. It was now or never, I thought. Lavinia had helped put me over the edge by giving me a

verbal shove now and then. I knew this was what I wanted, and needed. I had already made a deposit on a house to rent in a remote village in Provence. It was owned by an American couple, and it was cheap. I figured I had about two month's more work, and I'd be ready to go. I'd have enough money to live on for a year over there.

I told Lavinia about my plan one day. I thought she'd be thrilled for me.

"Oh, really, dear?" she said, when I told her about my plans to leave New York.

"Yes, and *you* are partially responsible for my being able to do it."

"Me? I had nothing to do with it. It's *you* who did it."

I didn't sense the pride and enthusiasm I was expecting from my decision.

"So, what do you think?" I was eager to be seen as her protégé.

"Think? I think it's wonderful, if that's what you want to do."

Her tone was somewhat flat. She of course knew this is what I wanted to do.

I left that day irritated with her. I didn't think I wanted much. Just a slap on the back, maybe, or a *good for you*.

I stayed away for two weeks. It was out of spite, and that was out of being hurt by Lavinia's response to my life-changing plans. I guess you could say I was trying to punish her. I'm not especially proud to admit this, but I'm not especially ashamed, either. But of course I was *leaving* her. And why should she celebrate that? I knew she was happy that I seemed to have found the courage to do what I wanted to do, but that wasn't the point, was it? I was cutting off something. I wasn't going to be visiting her anymore. She had reached out to me, and now I was pushing her away.

Then something struck deep into me. A shock of self-recognition. *What if*, I thought, *what if* I get over there and nothing happens? What if I can't do this without

Lavinia there with me? And then in a fantastical shift of interpretation, I began to see Lavinia as leaving *me*. How could she do this?

Then one day toward the time I was supposed to leave for France, I came to visit. I walked into the familiar living room and saw Lavinia seated behind her desk, customary cigarette in her hand, big glass ashtray in front of her. I strolled toward her desk breezily. I stopped short. I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I turned. There, seated on the couch, was a young woman. I have the recollection my jaw dropped. In my bewilderment I was still able to see that the young woman was very pretty and, most memorably, had a wide, open smile and vivid eyes. I think I may have even stammered. I felt like Goldilocks. I was probably an inch away from saying, “But who’s that sitting on my couch?”

“Hello, dear,” Lavinia said. “I want you to meet...Bobby.”

Bobby smiled and waved at me.

“Dear,” Lavinia said to Bobby, “this is...” her voice trailed off. She scowled and closed her eyes. “This is...”

“Richard,” I said.

“Of *course* it’s Richard,” Lavinia said.

“Hello,” I said to Bobby. And she said it back to me.

I didn’t stay long. I walked outside. *What right did I have to be jealous?* I asked myself. But I was. I felt like Iago. After that day, I think I made one more visit to Lavinia. The plans for my trip were beginning to take over everything else. I did want to say goodbye, though. I did want to tell her how much these last two years had meant to me. And they had meant so much to me. They had.

And so I left. I went to Provence. I lived in Provence for a year, a marvelous time. I wrote Lavinia letters, sporadically, and sent her postcards. I got no replies from her, but that didn't concern me. She could only write with great difficulty, and her script was nearly impenetrable. Toward the middle of the year, my letters began to taper off, and then the cards, and then I stopped writing her altogether. So much was going on in France that was changing me, making me grow and flourish, and so much of it was thrilling and all encompassing. I didn't have much room for Lavinia.

And then the year was over.

When I came home, I did think of Lavinia once again. What was she doing? How was she? A few weeks after I had resettled myself in my apartment, I called her. A woman—not Lavinia—answered the phone. I asked to speak with Lavinia.

“Who is this, please?”

Right away, I knew. We always do. The news is in the tone, even if the words are hintlessly ordinary. I knew Lavinia was dead. I knew she was dead, and that I would never see her again.

I told the woman on the phone who I was, and explained how I knew Lavinia. It was Lavinia's daughter. I hadn't recognized her voice.

“Lavinia died,” she said. “She died about two weeks ago.”

“*Oh, no.*”

“Yes, it's very sad.”

I don't care how many times we go through it, it's still a cold stark shock to hear the words. *Dead*. No more. Does not exist. How can you fathom that?

I spoke with Lavinia's daughter for a few minutes. I was curious about her death. "Was it an easy death?"

"No. It was horrible. The last few months were just horrible."

I shook my head, as if she could see me. I didn't want her to elaborate. I could imagine, though. I gave her my condolences, and told her how much Lavinia had given me, and how much I admired her, and always would, and then I hung up. So, she didn't get her wish after all. She didn't die like one of those big wonderful trees in the forest that simply fall down. The injustice of it! Well, she knew the whole thing was unjust, this growing old. She knew that. Still.

Then I thought about her vision of that wonderful old tree just falling to earth. I thought how rare and unlikely that really is. When an old tree falls in the woods, it's usually stopped from completing its decent by other, more robust trees adjacent to it. Sometimes when I come upon a tree that's caught like that, I have the notion to go over and push it down, to free it from the restraining tree so it can fall down and die. I'm always surprised at how difficult it is to push the dead tree free. Even if I push hard, applying all my body weight, it resists. I walk away frustrated, and, strangely, feeling as if the tree were somehow ungrateful.

Ridiculous, isn't it, to think like that? It isn't I who am to determine when the tree will fall to the earth. It isn't the tree itself, either. It's something else. Lavinia had to live and die with it. I will, too.

I think about Lavinia, and about the lessons learned, and about the wonderful charged hours we spent together just *talking*. Lavinia. Lavinia. What pleasure you gave me. What hours of pure delight. How much I learned from you—and am still learning. I

do hope that you're someplace with your great friend Alec Wilder and that you two are "laughing till our stomachs hurt," as you loved to put it—just having a high old time.