

SURBURBAN HIGH TIDE

Norman German

1

“Wait. Let me get a raincoat.”

“Forget the raincoat. You’ll get wet anyway.”

Halfway down the drive, they launched the canoe in a lake of clear yellow water. Jack guided the canoe into the street and headed south on Ashland. With her paddle, Ami jabbed at debris as the canoe cut a V down the suburban canal.

“Look at that!” she squealed after poking a brown mass that disintegrated into thousands of ants. Later, she touched a big red crawfish with her paddle and watched it scoot to safety. Just as the voyage was growing dull to Ami, a water moccasin dropped from a low branch with a menacing sound and resurfaced as a living S. Jack touched Ami’s hair with his paddle. She screamed and slapped at the imaginary snake, nearly capsizing the canoe. Jack threw his paddle clattering onto the aluminum floor. The moccasin submerged. “Whoa,” Jack said, gripping the sides of the canoe and rocking it back and forth until water slipped over the gunnels.

“Stop it, Jack!” Ami cried with a frightened laugh. “You’ll tip us over.”

In his exaggerated Ami voice, Jack mocked, “You’ll tip us over, Jack. You’ll tip us over.” Ami swung at him behind her back. Jack laughed. “It’s only two feet deep. You wouldn’t drown if you fell out, you’d die of a concussion.”

Ami twisted around and lunged at her husband with a paddle. With Jack’s help, the canoe capsized. Jack managed to keep his head above water. Ami stood up squealing, her dark red hair streaming in her eyes. After a short playfight,

they righted the canoe.

“Let’s go white-watering,” Jack suggested. He ran the stop sign on Ashland, took a left onto Jefferson, and headed for the gully, where the water came to a muddy boil.

“You’re not really going to do this,” Ami said. She lifted her paddle from the water. Jack dug his in deeper. “Jack-Jack-JACK!” she screamed as the current sucked the canoe forward and propelled it downstream. More confident now in Jack’s abilities, Ami laughed with fear and delight.

As they were drawn downstream, Jack reported the sights in his tourism-guide voice. “On the left, ladies and gentlemen, is Old Lady Hawkins’s house. To the undisguised pleasure of all her neighbors, the fifty grand she kept buried in the backyard was washed away an hour ago.” Occasionally, Jack touched the water with his paddle to steer the canoe right or left. Ami fussed as it began to rain.

“Right,” Jack said. “Like you’re gonna get wet.” Ami giggled, seeing his point. They passed Glover Street and waved at some kids showing off on their bikes for Channel 7’s Roving Reporter Newsvan. The cameraman panned towards the canoe and locked on them as they sped downstream. “Coming up, folks, is the McNeese Street rapids.” Ami looked up to see foamy water spilling over the street. The canoe bottom struck the cement curb and lodged for a moment before Jack levered off with his paddle and sent the vessel careening across the bridge. The gully curved to the left, parallel with Sarver Drive. Jack pushed away from a low-hanging limb. Coming out of the turn, the canoe hit a red reflector mounted on a metal pipe and spun around. The gully narrowed and quickened, preventing Jack from straightening the canoe.

“Hold tight,” he commanded Ami, who was no longer laughing. A hundred yards later, the gully widened into a peaceful expanse of slow-purling swells. “See,” Jack laughed. “No big deal.” They relaxed in the canoe and drifted backwards downstream. The gully suddenly narrowed again and Jack felt the canoe lift in the rising water at the bottleneck, then plunge and shoot downstream to meet the bayou. Where Pleasant Drive intersected Sarver, Jack, glancing over his shoulder, saw water splashing against the square maw of a

concrete structure built to replace the old creosote bridge.

Facing upstream, Ami was oblivious to the danger behind her. Jack scooped into the current and tried to paddle away from the bridge towards Sarver Drive. Over Ami's head he saw the Channel 7 Newsvan feeling its way down Sarver, its bumper dozing a hump of water before it. The canoe's square stern struck the concrete abutment with a metallic thump. Ami tumbled backwards, hitting her head on a reinforcement strut.

"Don't move!" Jack yelled. "It's all right. Just don't move or you'll tip us over." From the corner of his eye, Jack saw the newsvan ease to a halt. He looked up to see a reporter with a video camera rising out of the sunroof like a periscope. The man focused his camera on the canoe, then panned across the scene for an establishing shot. Jack knew he was covering the area around the canoe so his viewers could see the water rushing from upstream and slapping against the bridge face, forming a backwash of muddy froth, an occasional wave bucking over the curb.

"Hey, can you give us a hand!" Jack hollered at the reporter. The man waved.

Jack struggled to keep the canoe pointed upstream. With Ami down and towards the stern, the bow cantilevered out of the water. Depending on the shifting current, he paddled on either side of the canoe to maintain its balance. The brief eddies his paddle made reminded him of a flushing toilet.

When the current afforded him relief, he looked up at the newsvan. After several minutes, Jack's arms grew heavy and burned with fatigue. Twice, Jack saw the man set his videocam on the van's roof and descend into the cab. Once, he opened the driver's door and was about to step into the water towards them when he seemed to recall something and changed his mind.

"Goddammit, give us a break here!" Jack yelled. Then he had to focus on the roiling water. Quickly, he shifted his paddle to the other side. Looking up, he caught a glimpse of the cameraman setting up a tripod on the van's roof.

At that moment, Jack saw himself objectively for

the first time, as if through a wide-angle lens. The man was setting up for a once-in-a-lifetime shot. He was going to film their deaths.

2

Of the many types of love one can be afflicted with, Jack Bell suffered from three: love of photography, love of fame, and love of a woman. And then another woman. And then another.

When he was twenty, Jack wanted to be a photographer. At LSU, he had taken all the available preparatory courses and was planning to matriculate in the fall at Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara. His mother was a broker, his father an optometrist, so life was easy for Jack. He lived in his parents' backyard in a mother-in-law cottage, part of which he had remodeled as a portrait studio. Most of his earnings he spent on film and filters, flash units and backdrops, lenses, chemicals, paper, and the hundred little gizmos of the trade. For a while he thought it was photography he loved. But after the thrill of shutter sounds and flashing strobes diminished, he realized it was the results that intrigued him, not the equipment or procedure.

Slowly, he came to the awareness that his photographs were memorials. To something. Occasionally, hanging the wet, slippery sheets by clothespins in the red dark, he found himself staring trance-like at the ghostly images and would shake his head and wonder how long he had been in that silvery world.

Leafing through a *Modern Photographer* while waiting on a client one rainy afternoon, he discovered what he was trying to capture in silver and black. He flipped from a full-page Kodak ad on page 39 to the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen: her ivory skin bordered by out-of-focus ringlets of black hair, her sensuous lips just parted, as if for a kiss, crystalline eyes smiling and peaceful, her face exuding grace. Next to the portrait was the image of what he thought to call "hag" before he read the caption and found the two subjects to be the same woman. At that moment, Jack Bell

knew that what he had been trying to do in the darkroom was stop time.

* * *

When the customer arrived, she apologized for being late while fidgeting with her damp hair. Jack said it was okay; they'd do some shots until it dried and if she didn't like the prints she wasn't obligated to buy them. They'd take some by the window, in natural light, with her gazing out as if disappointed by someone who hadn't arrived.

After the window poses, he suggested swaddling a blanket around her and placing a book in her hand. There was something about being photographed that made certain women develop a quick affection for the man behind the camera directing their movements—complimenting, looking closely up and down, then through the lens, complimenting, then the flash and another compliment, moving cat-like to adjust a lock of hair, careful scrutiny, more directions, a final compliment, the flash.

Often, Jack fantasized about the sessions. The women gone, he spoke to them confidently, unbuttoned their blouses, told them to look down, now, without moving their head, into the camera. Barely able to contain their passion, they complied and suggested other, more daring poses. After the imaginary sittings, the women seduced him on the floor by the fireplace painted on a canvas backdrop.

Jack looked through the viewfinder at the woman looking at him.

"Miss Anderson, right?" he said. "What did you say your first name was?"

"Monique," she said. "And please, not 'Miss.'"

Jack looked up from the camera. "Right." He stared at her. From a foggy distance, he heard his voice say, "Look, why don't you drop the blanket and loosen a couple of those top buttons? You look like a preacher's wife."

Monique laughed and tossed the blanket off. She looked directly at him and laughed again, as if she might think him, not offensive, but ridiculous and would get up

and leave without saying a word.

Instead, her face suddenly sobered and she looked down at the buttons. She unclasped the top two.

Jack took a picture.

“One more,” he said, and she unbuttoned another.

Jack shot the picture.

“Another,” he said with authority. Somehow he knew this woman would do whatever he asked.

The woman looked at him. She was not smiling.

“Do you think I’d look better wearing just the book?”

Jack’s eyebrows went up, and a very small part of his mind thought, “People’s eyes don’t really do that.”

He was speechless. After a brief hesitation the woman stood up, faced the wall, and shed her blouse and camisole. When she turned around, she was wearing only the book.

That was the day Jack Bell’s interest in photography revived. Each sitting turned into a rehearsal for a scene he had not yet composed. Everything in and outside of his studio, not just women, became a photographic event for Jack, something to be stopped once and forever in time.

Over the next few months, he explored the nuances of feminine vanity, became an expert at judging how far certain types of women would go. Three, all married, allowed him to photograph them nude. Jack had refined a line of questions and statements that won their confidence. One seduced him. Jack had dealt the woman a line about capturing her figure while she was still young, and she became instantly deciduous.

This stage of Jack’s life came to an end when he showed his collection of proofs to some friends. Big Tony was the older half-brother of a bashful girl who looked a lot more naked than she actually was. From that experience Jack gained a lesson in discretion and a magnificent black eye. He knew it could have cost him much more. He photographed the puffy eye and coded it “Nude Bruise.”

At one of the sessions, after his eye had turned from deep to pale purple but hadn’t reached the cadaverish yellow phase, a willowy, demure-looking girl walked into the studio

and taught him that his personality-reading skills were not as polished as he had supposed.

After peering around the door, the indifferently attractive blonde stepped tentatively in with a puzzled, half-frightened appearance. Dressed in a strapless formal, she looked about as natural as a mannequin. "Welcome," Jack said. "Come in, ah, Anna—right? You look terrific in black." Jack estimated it would take a dozen more compliments than usual to boost this girl's self-esteem enough to give her that confident beauty needed to take the fakery out of formal portraits.

"Are you kidding," she said. "I wouldn't be caught dead in this contraption."

Jack had learned that a question posed with humor in the voice might achieve the desired effect, but if it didn't, the woman could hardly be offended at a harmless joke. This in mind, he asked, "Does that mean you'd like to take it off?" Anna looked at him unflinchingly. "Not for you, buddy." This girl was clearly angry at the world for something.

The intriguing subtleties of female vanity had lately begun to flatten into plain conceit for Jack. This specimen was just what he needed to restore his faith in the feminine mystique.

"Okay," Jack said. As they stepped toward the posing seat, he wondered what it would take to figure this one out.

"Sit here," he said. "Now turn your body this way. Now tilt your head like this." With each statement, he touched her as if testing a hot iron.

Bad vibes, Jack thought. Acts like she was weaned on a sour pickle.

Looking into the viewfinder, he said, "Who's your favorite cartoon character?" This usually broke the ice and produced a self-conscious but appealing smile.

"Look," she said. "You could do me a big favor if you'd cut the crap and get on with this. The sooner you finish, the sooner. . . ." That was all Jack heard.

Jesus, he thought, get a sense of humor. He stared at her as he would a petulant child.

"Right," he said. He looked through the prism.

She was much farther away than any subject he had ever photographed. If she wanted to pretend everything in the world was serious, he would play along and bore her into an early exit.

“What’s your take on the presidential race?”

“A peanut farmer and a slapstick clown? Are you kidding me? I’ll yank the Pat Paulsen lever.”

His usual, clever monologue took a detour into belligerent dialogue. “What’s your opinion on the nuclear arms race?” “Population control?” “Are the two related?”

Her replies were like personal insults.

After five minutes, Jack had a difficult time thinking of questions while adjusting his focus and manipulating the light sources. He knew he was onto something. The questions produced an effect on her face he had never captured on film. A kind of beautiful ferocity.

At the end of the session Jack was exhausted.

“Great,” he said. “These’ll be some really nice shots.”

“I’ll believe it when I see them,” Anna said.

Jack’s tolerance switch finally tripped.

“You know,” he said, “you really are a very attractive woman, but your attitude makes you look like a witch and frankly I don’t give a shit whether you pick up these prints or not, it’s your loss.”

* * *

In less than a year, they were married.

Anna was a poet. She had “done time at LSU,” as she put it, before discovering that her idea of poetry did not coincide with that of the professors—any of them.

She quit school and waitressed and wrote poetry. Finally, Anna realized she didn’t know what to do with the stuff, even if it was good. That’s when she seeped into journalism, writing documentary articles on topics like Huey Long’s demagogic legacy in Louisiana and streaking as a psycho-social manifestation of insecurity caused by an eroding value system.

After the wedding, Anna said she was ready to leave for

Santa Barbara any time he was. Jack told her he didn't need a degree from Brooks in order to become a good photographer. She said it would be easy for her to land a job in a newsroom and told him to drop the self-sacrificial pose; it disagreed with his character. The discussion ended when he asked her if she needed a professor to teach her what poetry was.

For two years, Jack and Anna were happy. She wrote; he took pictures. Without intending to, she landed a job at the Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* through a personal response to one of the editor's cranky commentaries. Written in a colloquial style, it opened, "You think you change anything with your play editorials?" and closed by calling Mr. Andrew Lofton a heartless bigot. The editor replied, saying she had the true fire, then asked her to join his staff.

During her first year in the newsroom, Anna learned that she had a lot to learn. Occasionally, she noted positive changes in the city resulting directly from Mr. Lofton's cynical essays.

As high-school and then college friends dropped away, Jack and Anna made a circle of acquaintances from the newspaper. They ate out and went to parties together. They attended weddings, baby showers, funerals. From the associations, Jack derived a list of loyal clients. In Anna's second year with the *Advocate*, the editor threw a Halloween party at his house.

"Andy's not at all like I imagined he'd be," Anna announced to Jack as she placed the hairy wart on her putty-elongated nose. "He has a great sense of humor and really cares about people."

Jack had wrapped two old, tattered towels around his lower right leg and was strapping them down with leather boot strings.

"Yeah," he grunted while tightening the laces. "Seems like you picked up some of his charm. You sure didn't have any when I met you."

Jack was a big hit at the party, only not in the way he wanted. From an encyclopedia drawing, he had thrown together what he believed was a reasonable facsimile of Genghis Khan. He bought a fake beard from a novelty shop,

trimmed it to specification, and topped off the barbaric look with a ferocious pair of horns planted in a Viking skullcap.

“So what if Genghis Khan wasn’t a Viking,” he explained to Anna while admiring his image in the mirror. “It gives the rig a certain . . . je ne sais quoi, no? A kind of chic meanness.” Anna laughed.

So did everyone at the party. The first was Mr. Lofton.

“Well,” he said, greeting them at the door, “if it ain’t the Wicked Witch of the West and Genghis Khan in Drag.” The label stuck, much to Jack’s chagrin, for he had attempted a vicious look and achieved only impotent silliness.

Jack won first prize for best costume at Lofton’s party. It wasn’t his fault they thought the getup was a parody of the ruthless Mongol.

Without Jack and Anna’s knowing it, the party was the zenith of their relationship and the cause of its decline. Lofton circled back to Jack with regularity, kidding him about the outfit, and got to liking him so much that he asked him aboard the *Advocate* as a full-time staff photographer, promising he could work with Anna whenever possible. Jack said he’d think about it.

For weeks afterward, Anna’s colleagues badgered her for a photo of Genghis Khan in Drag.

“Look,” they said, “we know Jack took at least five rolls of film at the party. He’s bound to have handed you the camera once.” They were wrong. One of Anna’s complaints about the marriage was that Jack was too busy photographing everything and everyone else to live life firsthand.

Jack turned down the job at the *Advocate* in favor of his own, more-flexible hours. Ultimately, however, something productive came of the offer. For months, Lofton had been getting letters from the residents of Roseland Terrace, asking him to write one of his barbed editorials about the City-Parish Council’s almost criminal negligence regarding the most dangerous intersection in Baton Rouge.

“Too easy for me,” Lofton said, tossing the batch of letters on Anna’s desk. “I’ll let you file your teeth on this one.”

The most dangerous intersection in Baton Rouge was Park Boulevard at Broussard Drive because people ignored the stop signs on Broussard. Neighbors had long advocated a traffic light, complaining to the Council that their children were endangered at the crossing and their private lives constantly interrupted by accident victims wanting to use their phones to call the police.

Anna took Jack with her to the location on Saturday morning. They parked in the elementary school lot and walked to the intersection. While Jack was setting up the tripod and mounting his camera, Anna observed the drivers and took notes.

Several times before Jack was done she interrupted him. "Man, would you look at that." Jack glanced up, then went back to fumbling with the knobs and levers. "Did you see that guy? He acted like the stop sign was a mirage that suddenly vanished."

"Will you give me a break," Jack said. "You're making me so nervous I can't get the damn thing secured." When he finished, he looked through the viewfinder and sighted on the intersection.

"Nah," he said. "This'll never do. I need a wide-angle."

He reached into his Halliburton for the lens.

"Talk about a rolling stop," Anna said as an LTD looked both ways and gunned it. She scribbled in her notebook. "I've already noticed a pattern," she said. "It's mostly rich people who run the signs. Figures."

After locking the super-wide in place, Jack focused on the intersection. He lowered the tripod to headlight level and sat on the ground. He was almost settled when a white Impala sailed through the stop sign and intercepted an old Dodge. Jack punched the shutter release button and prayed he had the right f-stop for the ambient light.

Anna dropped her pad and pencil and ran to the wreckage. Jack burned the remaining twenty-three frames in less than a minute.

The Sunday *Advocate* featured the first photograph, taken at mid-impact, on the front page. Two months later,

the traffic light was installed. For weeks Jack and Anna argued, not always playfully, over whose contribution was most important.

“The pen is mightier than the sword,” Anna would say.

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” Jack would counter. Like that, day after day.

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Jack became obsessed with the photograph, by the violence of the wreck stopped in time. In the picture, the two cars would always be crashing. The incident inaugurated what he called his Motion Phase, during which movement-in-stasis became his dominant theme. At baseball games, he took hundreds of shots to catch the sliding runner just off the ground, the swinging bat at the moment of contact, the ball a millisecond after it left the pitcher’s distorted hand.

And his Motion Phase initiated what he could only much later with humor call his First Divorce Phase.

Anna interpreted Jack’s photographic relationship with life as a thinly disguised detachment from it based on fear of involvement. Her approach, she felt, was more direct and therefore more honest and therefore better and therefore, by that strange twist of emotional logic often employed by married couples, irreconcilably incompatible with Jack’s.

* * *

Jack felt he needed a change of scenery, a fresh backdrop against which to compose his new life. He moved across the state to Lake Charles, where his brother practiced cardiovascular surgery, and took an apartment on Kirkman Street. The doctor’s signature secured him a small lease space in a University Place plaza that contained a pharmacy, a deli, a shoe shop, and a toy store. Business was slow at first, with only drive-by and incidental customers dropping in after their shopping.

Partly by renewing a close relationship with his

older brother Keith, who had just happily ended his second marriage, Jack gradually attracted a sophisticated clientele. These women radiated more beauty and money than his Baton Rouge patrons. And they didn't wait for him to seduce them. On weekend fishing trips, he and Keith exchanged racy stories of the studio and hospital. Jack mocked his own failed marriage by referring to his ex-wife as Anna-banna-fo-fanna.

Jack was almost happy. A healthy reserve of women kept him physically satisfied, and he entered and occasionally won awards in state or regional photography contests.

What he called his Recovery-by-Overindulgence Phase ended when two women with hair the astonishing color of the copper coiled around an electric-motor armature walked into his studio. They were identical twins named Ami and Jami who taught fourth grade at the same school.

Jack hated the proofs from their first sitting. They looked amateurishly like a Doublemint commercial—clich'd poses facing towards or away from each other. When he called to offer them a free sitting, he discovered they lived in the same apartment.

For Jack the second sitting was torturously long, but the twins kept him entertained by telling him stories of mistaken identity and girlhood mischief. Over the next few months, with their coming into the studio together or alone and his seeing them around town and engaging in small talk, Jack established a casual friendship with the two.

Talking with Ami one day, he teasingly said he'd ask one of them out, but he had no idea which he liked best because he couldn't tell them apart.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Ask us out twice and we'll either go by our real names or not. Then you can decide which one of us you like best, Bachelorette Number One or Bachelorette Number Two.

"Sounds like y'all have done this before," Jack said. Ami laughed.

"We'll complicate matters by making sure you never know whether you went out with both of us or only one of us two times."

So Jack went out with either Ami or Jami twice, or

Ami and Jami once each, or Jami posing as Ami, or Ami as Jami. The permutations so dizzied Jack that he gave up thinking about it and came to a decision about which one to date by invoking the eeny-meeny-miny-mo method.

Jack never found out that his finger finally landed on Jami, who said she was Ami because Ami liked Jack very much, while Jami was infatuated with Bill, the track coach at the junior high across the street from the elementary school where the twins taught. Jack and the real Ami dated for six months, were engaged for a year, and married in a double ceremony with Jami and Bill.

For three years, Jack and Ami were happy. They bought a starter house, fixed it up, and stayed busy trying not to begin a family and duplicate their lives after that of Bill and Jami, who already had two children.

Two years and thousands of senior portraits and cheerleader poses later, Jack, still leasing the studio, was experiencing job burnout and a premature midlife crisis. The second home never materialized because the double-dip recession of '90-91 sent the parents of seniors bargain-hunting at Sears, Olan Mills, or weekend photographers. Jack and Ami began blaming each other for circumstances beyond the control of either.

"You had so much potential, Jack. I can't believe you're still taking pictures of children with baubles."

"*You* can't believe it! Put yourself in my shoes. I'm *me*, and *I* can hardly believe it."

"What happened to our home on the river? What happened to vacations in Alaska?"

The conversation made Jack feel as if the plot of his life had been copied from a soap opera. His dejection intensified almost to despair because he had recently passed the point of indifference in his sex life, so that when he mechanically brought his wife to orgasm, he no longer watched her with wonder as she transformed before his eyes, but instead tried to imagine what she would look like as a skeleton. That is, Jack had just passed forty, a time in his life when he made sure he always had a dark suit dry-cleaned and ready for somebody's unexpected funeral.

Then, as at other depressing moments in his life, Jack experienced a rejuvenation. A week after the soap opera dialogue, he saw a burning house captured on the six o'clock news. The smoke churned from the roof while an old man sat on the curbside and wept. The voice-over identified the owner as a history professor from McNeese State. Jack hated watching interviews of people who had lost their homes to fire or hurricane. Most of them thanked God that everyone made it out alive, or that only one child, and not the whole family had died. Never mind the destruction of the house, Jack thought as he watched the scene, his finger poised to switch the channel. Aloud, he said, "Thanks, God, for chopping off my arms and legs, but leaving me a mouth to thank you for not poking out my eyes."

The professor, it turned out, was childless. And wifeless, too. "We certainly grieve with you over the loss of your home," the interviewer said to him in the unctuous tone Jack despised. The man freely cried. "What is it that you'll miss most from your house, the one thing you would have saved if you could have?"

Jack yelled at the set, "Why don't you rip the guy's heart out?" The man took off his glasses and touched his baggy eyes, first one, then the other, with a soiled handkerchief.

"My books," he said in a quavering voice. He sobbed gently and turned from the camera. As the TV journalist looked mock-dolefully into the camera and was about to segue into a pitch for the station, Jack heard the old man's nearly inaudible voice repeat, "My books."

It was a brilliant moment, Jack thought, and the journalist was too stupid to realize what he had just accidentally accomplished. The next day, Jack upgraded his video system to Super VHS format.

* * *

By the time Ami said yes, Jack was hoping she'd say no.

What Ami finally said yes to was a video of themselves making love. What made Jack hope she'd say no was the

premature detumescence on which so many middle-age jokes turn. But it worked out, and making and watching home movies of themselves revitalized their bedroom life and brought back their old romance: the days of spontaneous sex on the divan, the kitchen table, the lawn.

“Suburban high tide,” Jack said one day, looking out the living room window at the river that used to be Contour Drive while the TV droned, “fifth straight day of record rainfall with no end in sight.”

“What, dear?” Ami asked. She was in the kitchen stirring around in a wok. Jack smiled. Ami was pathologically cheerful. On rainy days that made everyone else gloomy, she sounded like Beaver Cleaver’s mom. When she was happy, she was obviously, incurably happy.

“Nothing, Mrs. Cleaver,” he said. “Just the name of my next Pulitzer Prize-winning photo.”

“You mean your *first* Pulitzer Prize photo?” she quipped. Boy, Jack thought, she can shred your ego and not even know it.

He stepped into the kitchen.

“Let’s go on a canoe trip,” he said.

“What? Are you out of your mind?”

“Hey, you’re always pestering me about using the canoe or getting rid of it. Come on,” he said, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her towards the door.

“Wait-wait-wait,” she said. “Let me turn off the burner, for Chri-sake.”

“Okay,” he said, heading for the den. “I’ll get the camera.”

“No,” she said, making his shoes squeak to a stop on the tile. She was smiling, but tolerantly, as a mother stares down a loved but incorrigible child.

“No. For me, Jack. Just this one time. Live this moment with me, not your camera.” Then, trying to readjust the mood, she laughed, “Seize the day.”

Jack made some lightning fast calculations, a photograph and his wife on either side of the equation. Then he strode towards her in pretended anger. “Seize your ass is what I’ll do,” he said, grabbing her. She squealed and they

played chase around the table until Jack stubbed his toe on a chair leg and cry-laughed his way out the side door and into the garage where the aluminum canoe lay on its side in lonely neglect.

“Grab that end,” he said, pointing.

“Wait. Let me get a raincoat.”

“Forget the raincoat. You’ll get wet anyway.”

3

At that moment, Jack saw himself objectively for the first time, as if through a camera. The reporter in the newsvan was setting up for a once-in-a-lifetime shot. He was going to film their deaths.

Jack could imagine with clarity what the man was thinking: “I can win a major prize with this shot. It’s my ticket to the big time—a national broadcasting system.”

Ami turned on her side and looked up at Jack. She had been good, he thought. Not once had she squealed girlishly. In that moment of inattention, the bow sliced into the current, which ripped the canoe sideways and slammed it against the abutment. In the second it took him to think of looking toward the van to call for help, he realized it was too late. The man put a leg down into the sunroof and looked at Jack, then at the camera to make sure it was trained on the canoe.

Jack watched as the water surged into the canoe, weighing it down. He looked for the reporter to emerge from his vehicle, but saw him standing on the van top sighting through the camera.

Jack understood.

The canoe sank another inch and slipped under the abutment. Released, the roll of churning water restrained by the canoe violently shoved it under the bridge, slamming Jack’s head against the concrete. Wedged between the canoe and the ceiling of the bridge, he felt his body tumbling in impossible positions. The sound of rushing water and metal scraping cement filled his hearing.

Jack imagined what the footage would look like on

the six o'clock news.

Ami. The woman dying with him. She could easily have been her sister. Or anyone. Something was wrong with the composition. His last random thought was that he wanted to do the shoot again.