

SASHA VIVELO

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A DEAL WITH  
BUDDY PROZAC'S SON

**M**Y CAR DRIFTS PAST the mouth of the broad suburban driveway. The white house belongs to the brother-in-law I've never met. Light bulbs blaze in sconces on either side of the front door.

The car comes to a halt with a loud crack. The right front fender has chewed up the wooden mailbox post, breaking off some good-sized splinters. Worse, the blow knocked the post askew in the ground. The whole thing, black mailbox with wrought-iron scrolls and all, leans sideways at a wild angle. This is all I need on an illicit visit to my husband's nephew.

I have a condom in my back pocket.

At the sound of the doorbell, footsteps creak from somewhere within; but he leaves me waiting on the porch for a few moments. I notice the neighborhood. Floodlights, tall white facades, aluminum siding, garages, and a BMW in a driveway. A safe, quiet scene. It's late, and I haven't eaten. I'm hungry for a chocolate chip cookie, something I haven't had in two years. I wrap my arms around my waist.

The door opens. I expected an awkward, nerdy boy, pimply and plain, a college student caught in the unforgiving peaks and valleys of a belated puberty. Neil, my husband Jason's nephew, looks instead like any reasonably popular college guy.

He swings the door wide while keeping one shoulder safely hidden behind it. "Hi," I say. "I'm Marie. You must be Neil. I—"

He freezes, staring past me. "What did you do to my parents' mailbox?"

I force a social laugh and shrug. "Nice to meet you," I say. "Forgive me for a sloppy parking job?"

His gaze moves from me to the mailbox and back again. He steps aside to let me in. We stand in the hallway for an awkward moment, looking at each other.

He wears a charcoal-gray, loose-fitting long-sleeved t-shirt, a pair of jeans so clean that I'm guessing his mother washed them this morning, and white athletic socks. His medium brown hair, the same color as Jason's, shines with health. He keeps the heels of his hands tucked inside his shirtsleeves as he closes the door.

"It's good to finally see you in person," I say, making sure to keep eye contact.

Neil shifts, sliding his socks over the stone tiles of the entryway. "Well, this is my house," he says, then puts a hand to his forehead. "God, I sound like an idiot."

In the living room behind him, chairs upholstered in crushed velvet stand on an Oriental rug below a dustless white mantel.

"No, you don't," I assure him.

"Wow," he says, staring at me. "You're prettier than I expected." His eyes shift and focus somewhere on the wall behind me. He looks mortified.

"It's OK," I say, but my tone sounds dry.

"Are you mad?" he asks. "About me being blunt?"

I start to slide my hands into the narrow pockets of my jeans but think better of it. Instead, I extend a hand and brush his elbow with my fingertips.

"Of course not, Neil," I say. He reaches out to a row of four light switches behind him. Fidgeting, he flips one a couple of times, and the living room light goes off and on again.

"Yeah," he says. "You know, I'm just kind of overwhelmed that you're actually here. Uncle Jason has some pretty crazy ideas, huh?"

So this is Neil Lauder, the sheltered nephew. He speaks naturally despite his nervousness, and his young body is drawn in fluid lines. Maybe this evening isn't going to be as big a chore as I expected.

**I**'VE BEEN SAMPLING MEN FOR A LONG TIME. It started in college. Growing up, I expected the usual, that I would meet some guy during my early twenties, make a family with him, and that it would be a natural sort of thing. The boys in college—and they were boys, not men—wanted to taste me like wine, spit me back out. I found I didn't mind that so much. I felt the same way about them. After a while, it became like a dance, one partner after another, and each time I filed away new information in my mental library. For instance, smokers' skin has a toxic smell, like plastic. And it's possible for a man to think he's in love yet make love as if he's a thousand miles away, and equally possible for a man to believe he's merely an artist at the craft of physical pleasure yet fuck with the cellular earnestness that must have joined Tristan's body to Isolde's.

Every man was a conquest. The game of finding partners continued once I entered the working world. Though I couldn't explain why, some time in my mid-twenties, I began crying after orgasms. Not every single time, but it happened often enough. This gave me yet another way to categorize men: Some fumed or acted hurt, thinking they'd done something wrong or had too small a penis. Those were the ones I never saw again. A second category of men cried with me, telling me about their divorces or their alcoholic recovery or the length of their probation sentences. I saw them again, when I liked them, but I prepared to bolt at the first sign of entanglement. A third category, the rarest, said nothing and asked nothing about my tears but merely held me. If God ever asks me whom I'd nominate for sainthood, I'll know whom to recommend.

**R**IGHT NOW, I'M STANDING IN THE HALL of a \$400,000 house, staring into a young boy's presumably honest gray-green eyes, and realizing with an all-over pang that I don't know anything about being a teacher.

"C'mon," Neil says. "I'll show you the house." He leads the way into a kitchen where gleaming pots and pans hang over an island. Glancing over his shoulder, Neil tells me, "I won't show you the living room. It's too embarrassing because it's, like, so perfect that you're afraid to touch anything. You know? So, this is the kitchen. That's the door to the basement. Dining room's over there. Same story as the living room." He leads me through a doorway to a room where an overstuffed plaid couch, loveseat and chair all point toward a flat-screen TV. "Family room. OK, I'll show you the upstairs."

I follow him. We pause at the top of the plush, carpeted steps.

“Mom and Dad won’t be back until tomorrow morning.” He has his hand on the banister, leaning forward, so that I have to stand almost against his shoulder when I mount the top step. He’s a taller kid than I’d first thought; he must top six feet. He smells of laundry detergent.

“I’m under strict instructions,” he goes on, “not to have any guests.”

“Show me your room,” I tell him. He takes me in and closes the door.

**T**HE FALL I TURNED THIRTY, I had a steady fuck for Monday and Tuesday nights, saw a sweet but immature thirty-four-year-old junior executive on the odd weekend day, and went on first dates regularly. I was looking for something I hadn’t found yet, that much is certain, in love as in career. I have a BS in biology and an MS in marine biology. I love marine mammals with a passion, but I haven’t figured out how to earn a penny from that love. I work as an administrative assistant and pick up a few extra dollars with the occasional job modeling for catalogs, fitness magazines, and print ads. I started out by telling myself that secretarial work and fitness modeling were stopgaps. Over time, when the coveted job didn’t materialize, I kept the attitude of waiting but forgot what I’d been waiting for. Mostly. That fall, I got off my ass and signed up for an evening ecology class through the natural sciences division of the local state university. That’s how I met Neil’s uncle, Jason Lauder.

*Dr. Jason Lauder, if you want to be respectful and thorough, which I don’t. He taught ecology with a zealot’s fervor. He exuded the righteous anger and passionate reason that moves mountains for civil rights causes but, as he pointed out in class one day with unbitting sorrow, had failed to keep thousands of rainforest trees rooted in their proper earth. An avid runner, he paced the classroom with lurching grace. With longish brown hair tucked behind his ears, chest too narrow for his bony shoulders, he was the most colt-like 41-year-old human I’d ever seen. I met him in his office to discuss marine ecosystems. At the end of our second conversation, he said, “You know, Marie, we don’t have to talk just about ecology.”*

“What else did you want to talk about?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You and me, and the possibilities, for a start,” he said.

NEIL'S ROOM IS A PIT OF FILTH. I'd have thought that with parents who are so anal about the rest of their house, Neil would be forced to keep his room at least moderately neat as well. I couldn't be more wrong. He switches on a desk lamp that casts an inadequate, sickly green glow. I can barely see the floor for the clothes piled on it. A small black plastic trash container next to the nightstand overflows with wadded tissues and torn shrink-wrap. Books lie stacked at the foot of the bed. I can make out a few titles in the half-light: *Catch-22*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Siddhartha*, *A Brief History of Time*. Crumpled papers lie among the clothes, as do stacks of torn notebook sheets covered with an illegible scrawl. Neil makes his practiced way through the mess and hits "play" on his stereo. A CD spins with a hiss and Harry Belafonte's voice sings "Brown-Skinned Girl."

"Grandpa's music," Neil says. His hands have found their way to his pockets. "I like it."

The room stinks. It smells as though something died.

"Doesn't your mother empty your trash can?" I ask.

"You kidding? Mom doesn't even set foot in here." He snorts. "Says she's afraid of what she'll find."

Rightly so, I think. Somebody needs to tell the boy that fish and semen smell in three days, but just now I don't have the heart.

He has a computer on his desk, a sleek laptop. He taps the mouse touch pad and the screen wakes up, going from black to colorful. An Internet browser appears.

"Hey, I heard back from Beth," he says.

"Who's Beth?" I ask.

"Oh, she's this girl I email with. We hack Linux. We have the same ideals. I mean, people should have an operating system that works and that belongs to everybody, right? She's a senior in high school, incredibly smart. Lives about eight hundred miles away, in Indianapolis. She's amazing. Any problem I can't solve, she can, and vice versa. We're a good team. That's her." He points to a printout of a digital photo, tacked to a corkboard on the wall. She wears dark-rimmed glasses. Long, mousy hair hangs down on either side of a fresh face with a strong jaw. She isn't quite smiling, but almost. I imagine that she's tall, slender but not athletic, bookish instead, quiet yet confident.

I lean closer to the computer. "Let me write to her."

Neil scowls and shakes his head. "You can't write to her. You don't even know her."

"Well, you haven't met her, have you?"

"Not in person, but it's different. I work with her, more or less."

"I think you like her," I tease. "Here. I'll write to her and tell her you like her." I reach for the keyboard.

"No!" Neil says.

I slide into the chair in front of the computer and open Beth's message. It says:

*Actually, I'd always thought of The Matrix as more of a take on quantum theory, and when Neo can look around and see the code that underlies the Matrix, he's able to see that everything is really made of quantum stuff. Discuss?*

I hit Reply. Neil leans over me, gripping the edge of the desk, his knuckles white.

I poise my hands over the keyboard. I'm a fast typist. I type:

*Beth,  
You are the love of my life, and I want to know every part of your body and every part of your soul.*

Neil rips the laptop out from under my hands and snaps it shut.

"Hey! I wasn't finished," I say.

Neil breathes as if he's just sprinted a mile. He jerks the power cord and the phone line free of the desk corner, sits down on the floor, and opens the laptop again. With his back to me, he hunches over the computer, hits Cancel, and shuts down the machine. As he slides it away, it displaces some wrinkled papers. He stands up.

"That was a stupid load of sentimental crap," he says.

"Relax. I wouldn't have sent it," I say, not knowing whether I would have or not.

"OK, whatever," he answers. He sits down on the edge of his bed, back straight, looking up at me. "So what made you come here tonight? I mean, I'm not anybody to you, not really. Why are you here?"

"Neil," I say, "I don't know how to answer that."

He shrugs and nods. "Do you, uh, want to sit down?"

I sit down gingerly on the bed next to him.

**I** MARRIED JASON LAUDER at the end of the following spring semester, not realizing until much later what a prize I must have been for him. I was young, vital, willing to challenge the world with a smile, and my presence had the magic power to keep Jason youthful. At the same time, I had a lot of education and a lot of living under my belt, and although I'd been his student no one could accuse Jason of taking advantage of an innocent college girl. Here was no cloistered dentist's daughter away from home for the first time, starry-eyed over an older man who paid her a compliment; I was a full-fledged woman.

Before the wedding, Jason sat down with me under his dim living room lamp. He bent over a photocopied flowchart from his Ecology 101 classes. The chart showed, in simple terms, the gross interdependencies of a number of plants and animals in Florida wetlands. Glancing from my eyes to the chart and back again, his pupils spinning his irises to gray-green threads, he said, "You see how no two life forms are solely intertwined."

I nodded, solemn.

"Any two organisms, be they species in a swamp or a man and a woman sharing a life and a bed, will eventually stagnate if they interact only with one another. Life is a circle," and he showed me by sweeping his finger over the sheet of paper, "that thrives upon diversity. You and I will remain the strongest, and contribute the most to humanity, by allowing ourselves the sort of sharing at which nature is so adept."

I wanted to say, *It's me, Jason, so you don't have to pretend you're in a lecture hall.* But he'd been teaching so long that such speech came freely. Besides, I didn't need him to translate into the vernacular. I got the point. "Good deal," I said. "Do I get to be the algae? Because, you know, blue-green algae are so damned important."

Jason laughed, sweeping the paper aside. He leaned across the coffee

table and kissed me. "You can be anything you want to be, swamp-goddess," he said.

Jason wrote our marriage vows, and the vows stated that we would have an open marriage, that our sex lives would not be exclusive. We had a small wedding, just the two of us and a friend of Jason's, a Universal Life Church minister. Although months went by and Jason didn't give a nod to another woman, the open marriage policy lent urgency to our sex life, making every encounter intoxicating. We mellowed gradually, until we had some sweet and tender couplings too. Then, in the fall on my thirty-first birthday, Jason brought home a girl.

She was a pretty blonde, mid-twenties, pixie-ish haircut, narrow face, fair skin. Jason had wooed her before bringing her home, he told me later, bought her coffee once, a lunch of soup and a croissant on another occasion. What he told her about his marriage, or about his intentions, I never knew. Within an hour of her arrival, Jason took my hand, caressing my thumb with his, and reached for her hand as well. She got herself out the front door in a hurry.

When we went to bed that night, we left the bedroom window open. We lay side by side in chilly darkness.

"Sorry your birthday present didn't turn out," said Jason.

I rolled over and kissed him on the temple. "I'm glad it didn't."

He stiffened. "Why?" he asked.

Filling my lungs with autumn air, I answered, "Because I'm happy just being with you."

A long silence followed, during which I mistakenly thought he'd fallen asleep. He finally spoke with uncharacteristic coolness. "I thought we talked about that," he said. "You're not saying you've changed your mind, are you?"

"Of course not," I replied, believing it. "I just like to play one on one, that's all. Let's get some sleep."

**T**HE BULLETIN BOARD HANGS on the wall closest to where Neil and I sit. I find myself staring at the photo of Beth, into her bespectacled, know-it-all teenage eyes. Next to the photo, I see now, Neil has hung a printout of an email from the girl. It says:

*Of course I want to meet you, goofball. But we'll have to wait a few months. I have a cousin who doesn't live too far from you. I've developed a sudden feverish desire to visit her over Christmas. Kind of like pretending you're sick so you don't have to go to school, except that you're better than a bellyache. Bye!*

My hunger has resolved into a small tight knot at the pit of my stomach, and I once again notice the fetidness of the air in the enclosed space. Nauseated, I swallow.

"We can't do it here," I say to Neil, after a deep breath.

"Why?" he asks.

"Well, your room is atrocious, for one thing," I reply, giggling to show I mean no offense.

Neil nods. "Point taken. Hey, we're already violating every rule my parents ever made for me. I'll show you their room." He gets up and I follow him. "Usually I don't go in there," he adds as we walk. My stomach relaxes as I breathe fresher air in the hallway.

He switches on the light in his parents' room. A too-pretty paradise of pink and yellow assails my senses. I know who rules the bedroom in Buddy and Annette's household. A doorless walk-in closet opens on my left. A row of petite sundresses and sheaths, all in pastel colors, hangs in disturbing order. Neil freezes in the middle of the room, eyeing the floral striped comforter.

**A**FTER MY FAILURE to appreciate Jason's attempt at a *ménage à trois*, I had to find other partners, to save face. I called my junior executive friend, who knew I'd gotten married. When I suggested that we meet, he rebuffed me over the phone as sharply as if I'd slapped him. His voice cracked before we hung up, as if he'd broken down into tears. My Monday-Tuesday guy, on the other hand, proved all too happy to oblige. He was the sort who asked no questions when I cried, although he cried silently too after our next lovemaking session. Jason picked up a student and spent occasional nights at her apartment. He talked about her in the same casual tone he used when telling me about his running partner or the colleagues with whom he taught life sciences.

As for his older brother Buddy, Jason mentions him rarely and speaks to him less. When we'd been married for two years, the only members of Jason's family I'd met were his mother and father.

The first time I spoke to someone besides Mom and Dad was the June

evening shortly after our second anniversary, when Neil called. He greeted me in his reedy boy's voice and asked for his uncle.

Jason muted the TV, put his feet up, and said, "Hey, Neil. Time for our semi-annual uncle-nephew chat?"

They talked a long time. When they got off the phone, Jason rolled himself a joint and, for the first time, told me how he felt about his brother.

"My brother Buddy," he said with his lungs full, "doesn't have a stick up his ass." He blew smoke. "He has a fucking steel crowbar. Been on Prozac for years, instead of facing whatever crap my parents put him through. They were too hard on him; they were too soft on me." Sober and tense, I listened to his stoned monologue. I never joined him for a smoke; my company did random piss tests.

"My brother Buddy knows, in a Prozac-colored sort of way, that there are a lot of bad things out there in the world," Jason went on. "He wants to keep his kid spotless. And I'm talking to Neil, and he's coiled like a spring. The boy's going to explode." He filled his lungs again. "Quarter of a million a year, and Buddy doesn't know a thing about real life." Long exhale. "Or about kids. How does he expect Neil to grow up, and not get his ass kicked once he walks out into the real world, when he and Annette keep him leashed to a ten o'clock curfew?"

He stubbed out the glowing tip of the joint, saving it. We'd been sitting in the dark, and now he switched on a bright lamp. His soft-eyed gaze wandered over me. "Take your shirt off, sweetheart," he told me. With a half-laugh at him, I did so. My bra was lavender lace.

"Uh-huh. That's it. God, you're beautiful. And you're wise. Have I ever told you you're wise? You could teach young Neil a thing or two."

I thought he was joking. Over the next few days, Jason talked to Neil again several times and told me more about him.

Buddy and Annette kept close tabs on their son, insisting on knowing where he was at all times, and who was with him. Neil had given up trying to bring friends home; his parents forbade him to see most of them. One friend mentioned driving over the speed limit, another friend mentioned drinking a couple of beers, and soon Neil had no friends at all.

"He hasn't said so directly," Jason told me, "but not only is his life sheltered as all hell, he's still a virgin to boot. I'm worried about him, Marie."

"Why's he still a virgin?" I asked. "Is he repulsive or something?"

Jason sighed in exasperation. "He's got no chance, not with Daddy Prozac sitting on top of him all the time. I don't want to see Neil turn out like his dad."

**L**ET'S NOT WORRY ABOUT the bed for right now," I suggest to Neil. "Sit on the floor with me."

With visible relief, he sits down cross-legged on the carpet. I sit to his right, a little behind him. I put my hands on his shoulders.

His muscles are tense beneath his shirt's thin fabric, and vitality flows through him as strong as a current of water. I lean forward and rest my cheek against the rough coolness of his face for a moment, then draw back. I take hold of his arm and lift it, placing it across my shoulders. He draws me in fractionally, awkward fingers playing over my arm. I feel warm inside, but not aroused. I stroke his eyebrow with my thumb. He closes his eyes, and his body trembles. I want to tell him to go write to that girl. Instead, I kiss him.

**S**HORTLY AFTER WE GOT MARRIED, Jason encouraged me to work out more and follow a strict diet. The program worked. My photo shoot bookings doubled compared to the early days. I had less and less time for other lovers, and Jason had less passion for me. One night, as I kissed his neck and nipped his earlobes, he stared into space and patted my knee absently. I asked, "What do you want?"

"Hmm?" He turned to look at me.

"What can I do for you? What would make you happy?"

"Mm," he replied, sliding an arm around me, "I've been neglecting you, haven't I?" He kissed my lips and stroked me, an empty shell of the motions of passion. I pulled back.

"It shouldn't be about neglecting me, or not," I said. "I'm not a pet."

"What?"

"Look," I said, "I can tell you've already gotten what you need somewhere else. Let's just forget it."

He pulled me close again. "Let's not forget it. Let's do something about it." He slipped a hand under my shirt, under my bra.

I didn't stop him; it had been too long. We moved to the bedroom. I had to stroke him to get him hard. He entered me in a pantomime of the way he moved when he really wanted me; the effect resembled the sound of a song played out of time. I put a hand on either side of his face, forced him to look me in the eye. "You're trying too hard," I said. "Let's stop."

His eyes narrowed. After a pause, he thrust again, roughly. "The hell we're stopping." I gasped; he stiffened inside me. "You've been missing me."

"Mm-hm."

"What?"

"Yes, I've missed you."

Maybe half an hour, maybe two hours later, when my inner thighs were deeply bruised and the sheets darkly spotted with our sweat, he pinned my hands over my head, stilled his body, and looked down at me. I squirmed, rocking my hips, wanting more and not able to touch release.

"You asked what you can do for me," he said.

I didn't answer, only nodded.

"Go help Neil," he said.

"I don't understand."

"Teach him how to be with a woman. Teach him well." His voice was a whisper, a breathless, voiceless urging. "It's a win-win deal. He gets to break the ice of his own inexperience, with you—and you *are* something. And you get new blood."

I whimpered, writhing. He tightened his grip on my wrists and kept the full weight of his pelvis over mine. I couldn't move.

"Tell me you'll do it," he said.

"What about Neil?" I managed to say. "What does he want?"

"He wants it," Jason whispered. "I offered, and he said yes."

Furious, I tried to say, *you offered without asking me?* but instead I made a sound like a growl or a scream. I straightened my body in a quick, sharp movement, almost bucking him off, but he shifted his weight and held me down.

"Say you'll do it," he said. He moved again, slowly, still pinning my wrists. A yielding sweetness spread through me, drowning my adrenaline-charged tension. I moaned, a rising cry that sounded anguished even to my own ears. He moved faster, deeper. "Say it!" he demanded.

I screamed.

"Say it!"

"Yes! Goddamn you to hell."

SITTING ON THE CARPET at the foot of Buddy and Annette's bed, Neil kisses back after a second's hesitation. He kisses with out tongue but with articulate, open lips. His lips, like his face, feel cool. Our free hands find each other and he clenches my fingers in his.

An only child, I have no nephews of my own. Holding Neil's hand, I feel a longing that has nothing to do with sex. This runs deeper, and moves me more, than any physical desire. What I want, I can never have; and the absurdness of everything strikes me. I break contact with him and laugh, tears springing to my eyes at the same moment.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" Neil sounds angry, or offended. I wipe my eyes with my fingertips.

"No," I say, still laughing. "It's just... oh, God, how do I tell you this? It's just that I wish I could have had you for a nephew."

He leans back, resting his shoulders against the edge of his parents' bed. He turns his eyes toward the ceiling and remains silent for many seconds.

"Come on, nephew," I say, rising to my feet. "Walk me to my car."

"But, wait," he says, following me out the bedroom door.

"I'm not going to do it," I tell him. "I changed my mind."

He catches up with me at the head of the stairs. Reaching past me, he

grabs the banister and blocks my way. "It's me, isn't it?" he says. "I'm too nerdy, or not hot enough, and you can't go through with it."

"You don't need me, Neil," I say. "You need a girlfriend, and you'll have one in good time."

"Tell me what I did wrong," he says.

"You didn't do anything wrong. Let me through."

He backs down the staircase, one step at a time, raising his voice, so that by the time we reach the first floor he's yelling.

"Why did you come here? I know you came because Uncle Jason wanted you to, but did you want to? You didn't want to come. I'm nothing but a sympathy case to you. Uncle Jason is a pervert. He's a pervert who has no idea what I want or what I need, and I hate him for thinking I need his help. And you're a pervert too."

I would like to get out of the house without reflecting any of the anger, but that last sentence is too much to let slide. As we come to the downstairs hall, I dart past Neil and put my hand on the front doorknob.

"You," I say, "are just as much a pervert as anybody else. This was your idea too."

I step outside. I try to pull the door shut, but Neil catches it and comes out after me onto the porch. I take quick steps toward the street and hear Neil's voice behind me.

"You fucked up our mailbox, and I'm gonna get blamed!" The neighborhood floodlights make the damage obvious. I hesitate on the walkway, unsure whether to reply or just get out of here.

"They'll think I let somebody come over," he says.

I turn around. Because the light from the hall is behind him, I can't make out his features. "You did let somebody come over," I tell him, and get in the car.

**W**HEN I ARRIVE HOME, Jason lies asleep on the couch. Light flickers from a muted infomercial. Still hungry, I retrieve one of the pint containers of ice cream that Jason keeps on hand for himself and sit in a chair near Jason's feet.

He rolls slowly onto his side, supporting his head with his elbow.

*Go ahead, I think at him, hoping he can read my mind. I dare you. Tell me I shouldn't eat this.*

"So how'd it go?" he asks, his voice fuzzy.

"It went better than I dreamed."

Jason smiles. "He's good, huh?"

"You couldn't possibly imagine."

"I couldn't possibly imagine?" he says, quietly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I reach into my back pocket, draw out the condom, and toss the intact wrapper onto the coffee table. Reflections from the television flicker over the square of foil.

In the dimness, Jason's skin looks smooth and youthful. A feeling of tenderness washes over me, a sweet, protective love. Perhaps, I think, this is pity. I feel I could leave him there, walk out the door, never speak to him again, and not miss him at all.

That, however, is a decision I can make at leisure.