

THE AFFAIRS OF OTHERS

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PHOENIX

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

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HOPE

THE BODY OF A WOMAN aging. It's a landscape that, even as it vanishes, asks a lot of the eyes. Or it should. No two landscapes the same. They never were the same, no matter their age, but then how time brings details to the body.

Of course every woman's body ages. What's disorienting is how friendly it all starts out, with words like smooth and tight and firm, high and pink and wet—words that are given to women's bodies and that they wear around, as comfortably as cotton. And why not? These are gifts they did little to earn. Life does this so rarely—offer unearned or unasked-for rewards. But inevitably the words fall away, one by one: There goes tight, there goes smooth, god, even wet. And the words that replace them, that are provisioned,

are not nearly so welcome or easy to carry. Some women carry these new ways of addressing their bodies with pride. They'll explain that the knots in their flesh tell a good story. Others celebrate the change of vernacular, the end of a certain kind of surveillance. Or they continue to pursue the first set of words—high, tight, smooth. It's not wrong or it's not for me to say. Who am I to say? I am a young or youngish woman. I am in my late middle thirties, though I could be twenty-five or fifty. I believe I have no age anymore. I am not unattractive but neither am I beautiful. I married a man I first met in college and then again later, a few years after graduation. My husband died a difficult death. I went with him, or a lot of me did. I cannot apologize for this nor do I wish to challenge that I am changed.

Being a widow was a respected thing once. Understood as a destination. Now, we are asked to let go, move on, become someone or something else, marry, divorce, marry again. American life asks us to engage in an act of triumphant recovery at all times or get out of the way. I have been happy to get out of the way.

My husband left me comfortably provided. With the money given me, I bought a small apartment building in which I live and rent three one-bedroom apartments. Behind my building in downtown Brooklyn there is a garden of three hundred square feet with an old lilac bush that blooms a deep ancient-looking purple, a tall female ginkgo, a scrawny sycamore, and then a strange assortment of

plantings to which the previous owners and I have made a halfhearted commitment. In my case I queried will this herb or flower grow, and if the answer was yes, I let it make its bid for survival and maybe even return on its own the following year. I am often surprised by what greets me in the spring. Weeds of course but also a determined patchwork of grass that reminds me of the head of a disheveled balding man. My tenants have asked to contribute to the garden, but as I am not here to make a family of them, to know them too well, I've not encouraged this and so their relationship to the garden is as tentative as it is to me. I have only been a landlord for four years.

I didn't normally allow subletters, but George brought her, a candidate, to meet me on a day where, though it was only the beginning of March, I could smell the soil in the damp air and had noticed the daylight was lengthening. George had always been a good tenant. He lived above me on the second floor and was careful of the noise his feet made over my head, and once when I was ill with a bacterial bronchitis, he had gone to pick up my antibiotics at the drugstore for me. He taught English at St. Ann's, a private school on Pierrepont Street that turns its students into sophisticates long before they can vote, and he had published poems in journals meant to impress the literate. He was gay and had had a roommate initially, a lover of many years who left him after only a few months of living in my building. At night, during that time, when I couldn't sleep, I heard George walking the floorboards, the same

length, back and forth and back and forth, as if he were schooling himself in precision. If I focused on his regular steps, the predictable shifts his weight made, I would fall back to sleep, his vigil excusing me from my own. Once I heard him cry out—it sounded like someone had startled him. I immediately thought of a ghost, perhaps of himself, when he loved and was loved.

I had seen the woman to whom George wanted to let his place on the streets of Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill alone or sometimes in the company of people I took to be her family. She had broad shoulders for a woman and long legs, though she was not overly tall, only a little above average in height. I could have mistaken her for French—her clothing, her unapologetic femininity, the dark lipstick and the way she swept her hair up on her head and into a twist—but the accent, the volume and pace of her voice, and the openness of her face didn't fit. It would be fair to say she was beautiful. Last fall, I was sure I had seen her with a young man on Hicks Street, on a deserted residential block. I had felt I was intruding and crossed to the other side of the street. I took him to be her son because he resembled her—same color hair, same body type. She grabbed him abruptly and hugged him with all of her, as if she were trying to steady him against a mean wind or force something out of him. That day, I remember I thought *sorrow*, she's trying to hug his sorrow away and there was no time to lose apparently. When she let him go, she looped her arm in his, and they walked away vividly in step, in

league, heads high, not embarrassed or worried about who might have seen them, but full of vitality and purpose. I believe I am remembering that right or that is how I want to remember it.

She had left an impression or several, and it was a pleasant enough association.

George wanted to go to France for a time to see an ailing friend. He wanted to get away, to write. He talked very briefly about the sensuality of time and of landscape, the sort that can't be had in America, in New York City, and then he talked about Marseille, the city, and Rimbaud—did I know Rimbaud? He talked more quickly than he might usually, which was all to say he wanted out, urgently, but eventually he wanted to come home to Brooklyn, to his apartment. He'd arranged a leave for the rest of the school year and then he had the summer off anyway—the great boon of teaching, he said, summers. There was simply the matter of the apartment, of rent, of me. He could not afford to go if I did not let his dear friend Hope stay for a while. He didn't slow down or acknowledge how a body might respond to the words "let Hope stay." He kept talking, launching his hope at me with her there beside him nodding brightly at intervals, and it was my duty to demonstrate some resistance. I had some but not much. My tenants think me cold. They know that I am young or youngish, but some part of them does not believe it.

I began by explaining how small the building is, how

careful I am in selecting my tenants, that there is a certain consonance of character I look for and mean to maintain.

George offered, “Of course, I would not suggest anyone who I didn’t think suitable.”

Then I brought up precedent, my desire for consistency; at this Hope craned toward me and spoke to me as if English were my second language.

“But I am a friend of George’s and the neighborhood’s, was it Ms. Cassill?”

Her lipstick looked expensive and her brows were dark and high in their natural arch. She knew the impact her face could have, even now in her mid- to late forties. She’d known it for years.

“It’s Mrs., and I don’t doubt that you are—”

“I’m sure the other tenants could be made to see—”

“With that, it’s tricky—”

“Is it really? Huh.” She changed course, biting down on her lip to contain her enthusiasm. “Did George ever tell you that I’m a great cook?”

“Are you?”

“George would probably eat better in his own kitchen with me running it than in France.”

“Well, that’s something—”

“Why don’t you let me cook for you?” She was trying to flirt with me.

“Very kind but not at all necessary.”

She was the sort who created intimacies where there were none.

“I could cook a meal for the whole building if you’d like and serve it out there in that lovely garden. Pâté and bouillabaisse and good bread and wine, a great mess of a meal—”

“We don’t really have . . .” I threw a look at George. Flattened my tone. “No, that’s not at all—*necessary*. I wouldn’t dream of asking that of you or my tenants. We are very respectful of each other’s—what? *Separateness* here . . .”

Her face, which had been full of expectancy, fell slightly, and I saw her age there, a feathering over the upper lip; two sharp lines that had dug in and stayed between her brows, but on a face with good bones and wide planes and eyes so light, an almost yellow blue, these lines gave her a helpful gravity, an authority. She’d run out of the energy it takes to be playful quickly, more quickly than I’d have guessed. She shook her head at George and then opened her arms and shrugged. “Not a good year so far, darling.”

He placed an arm on her shoulder. Placed it because he was gentle with her, wanted to show her gentleness. “It’s been a hard go,” he said.

Looking at me with some impatience now, and taking in a big breath, he was about to launch another appeal when Hope, straightening her neck and leveling her shoulders, making the best of her height, preempted him: “I’ll pay for the whole thing up front, security included. Cash. Does *that* interest you?”

“Money’s not really the issue here. Is it Miss or Mrs.?”

She smoothed her light brown hair on one side above her ear and looked down to inspect her sweater. It was sage-colored and looked handmade, with a silk-cotton thread. It flattered her. “I left my husband, you see. I need a safe place. A quiet place. I thought this was it. George and I thought . . . well”—she put her hand on George’s forearm—“we’re like children, I suppose. We thought it would all fall together. That something could.” Tears bloomed through those strange eyes, and she laughed a little. “George and I both need new scenery, but there are other options, aren’t there, George? We needn’t trouble you anymore.” With a stiff hand, she patted at my upper arm, letting go of me and the conversation utterly. I was no one to her. I had been an obstacle to overcome and that’s all. “C’mon, George. Let’s go find a drink.”

“Celie, really,” he said to me. He had never called me “Celie,” only “Celia,” my name in fact and what I prefer to be called. “I can’t afford to cover the rent while I’m gone. And I have to go away. I really *have* to. Do you really want to go to the trouble of getting a new tenant, of evicting me?”

I took a moment. I pretended this was something I hadn’t considered. I had always planned on saying yes, but he had to know, as she had to know, that this was my home first, theirs only by concession, and with some formality; a place here had to be earned. I was responsible for the roof, the boiler, the cast-iron plumbing. I had refinished all the floors, had sanded and painted the walls, and re-

hung all the doors. This building in all its particulars, even securing the building permits from an unhelpful urban bureaucracy for the renovation of the entrance and windows, readying the old cable elevator for inspection, had given me purpose when I was newly widowed. I'd claimed it with intentions I didn't even fully understand. Yes, a safe place. Order. For me and others on the other side of walls, of floors, tenants I would and would not know. A city arrangement on my terms for as long as I stayed in the city.

I had hired help of course, but I worked alongside Anton and his wife, Marina, and his brother, sometimes their son, Ukrainians all. They were hardworking and did not complain, at least to me, about my insisting to participate in the work. My muscles remembered every effort still, and I could see my contributions everywhere around me. My mistakes, too, though these weren't appreciable. I'd been careful, and I believed the building and I had an agreement. We would keep each other well.

I'd extend myself for my tenants but only so far.

I called to Hope, who had moved to the door, her long back to me. "Can you take care of plants? George has so many. You even have an orchid or two, don't you, George? They're temperamental."

George nodded.

"I've taken care of George's watering here and there when he's gone on shorter trips," I said.

"She has," he said. I could see the pleasure welling in

him. He was a neat medium-sized man with a broad face that always reminded me of actor James Mason's; it was soft and hard, gentlemanly but acute, and it colored easily. He was forming a paunch and had begun to belt his pants higher.

"I've not killed anything." Hope gave us her profile first. "Or anyone," then she turned and smiled with her whole body, "yet." She laughed low to high, arriving at something like a giggle, and then threw her arms around George. When she released him, she looked at me full in the eyes. She went to touch me but thought better of it this time, out of respect, I suppose, and steadied a look on me so grateful and unshy with relief that I barely heard her "thank you" or listened to the details of her arrival. I've only known one person who could focus on a body so completely, with such sincerity, and he was gone.

As they opened the door to go, she ran back to me and grabbed my hand. "Not to worry. I will try to behave myself." I smelled her then. She wore a perfume or deodorant that was floral and spicy. Rose and rosemary or smells like these, at odds and in sympathy, that bring to mind a versatile garden, and spring. It was light but present, and her hand covering mine was soft and hot. "You have made us so happy."

FERRY CAPTAIN

WITHIN A WEEK her scent filled my building—a week of scuffing and scratching, lugging and rearranging above my head. That was George preparing to go. He moved almost constantly and when he stopped for a bit, there would come a burst, a racing toward some object, I thought—a forgotten piece of clothing. Or maybe he startled himself with the thought of a book and whether it was worth bringing. Hope came and went during this time, carting in bits and pieces of her life, her arms circling a garbage bag of what could have been clothes or her own linens, a plant, a reading lamp, with more to come. I did not always see her during these visits, but I heard her voice, the sound of her feet, lighter but as ungovernable as George's had become

overhead, and I smelled her or I swore I could. Yes, given my responsibility, I was sensitive to my environment, but surely my other tenants had noticed the activity; perhaps George had told them of the change.

The Braunsteins, my tenants in apartment three, were an excitable pair, a modern couple, teeming with plans. Not so Mr. Coughlan, my tenant on the fourth floor. He would not make much of Hope's arrival, or only briefly. He had been a merchant marine and then a ferry captain all over the Northeast. I usually saw him coming or going on his walks in the morning, when he was full of the new day, his life and its particulars popping in his head, in his body, already. Once he had saved a seven-year-old boy who'd fallen overboard from drowning; he'd kept an epileptic in full fit from swallowing her tongue. Another time a fallen tree branch caught in the boat's rudder had nearly put his ferry out of commission, but he had prevented that. With me and I'm guessing with others, Mr. Coughlan was often pleading his case; eighty-two is not too old when you know so much or more than most captains today. He did this without aggression. He had too much joy and expanse in his recollections, and he had a great capacity for quiet, for enjoying it, even parsing it. When he was particularly nostalgic and finally at home in my company, and me in his, he'd pause and try to give me some sense of the full fresh air he'd known, of the life growing in an engine, and even of the sounds he missed, without theatricality. "Out there," he'd say, "you have to be

awake,” yes, for the pounding and spraying, the shushing and sluicing—all that energy, motion, and promise around him daily; and the men, their names out of old movies, Gus, Bud, Ike, who were better on boats than anyplace else. Company lost to him now—or almost, because he still lived it, the sounds and voices, here, upstairs, in my building.

When he appeared at my door four years ago, I knew nothing about him and he didn’t offer much. He wore gray wool trousers and a seersucker jacket that was lightly stained on the breast pocket. His clothes were pressed and his salt hair was combed and brilloed into place. He’d shaved too, but on a face so weathered it didn’t do much in the way of brightening or smoothing. He had hazel eyes that squinted from the anticipation of glare. He was no more than five foot eight.

He made his pitch to me in a very considered way. He said he was staying at a place down the road he did not much care for. Family had provided it for him, which was kind, but it was not for him. “Too many people lining up just to park themselves in front of the TV. The food has no flavor, the windows are dirty, and everything is covered in plastic.” He’d passed by my building on his walks and wondered if I had a room. I said I did, though I wasn’t looking for tenants just yet. He nodded at that and offered me six months’ rent, cash up front. “No one has to know,” he said, smiling at me with his eyes, “but us.” I couldn’t make out any alcohol on him and he did not look away from my

face once. His body looked sturdy for a man of his years, and his stance on shortish legs was wider than most people's as if he expected the ground to buck up beneath him. It didn't seem like he was one to complain if it did; he was simply ready. He breathed through his nose; it was audible but steady. When I hesitated, he stuck his big mottled hand at me. It was alive with blue veins. He let it hang there until I shook it.

He wanted the fourth-floor apartment. It was my smallest, with lower ceilings than the rest, but it wasn't from modesty that he picked it when I gave him the tour; it was for the view. Out of one western-facing window, to the back of the building, there was a slice of the New York Harbor on offer. Another gave him some uninterrupted sky. He went back and forth between those two windows a few times, gauging to make sure he got the sights right. It was then something told me he would die here, in this one-bedroom apartment, and that was what he was deciding, whether it would be okay. I wanted to take our agreement back then—a seam of panic folded my stomach in two—but I didn't. I took his money and lied to his daughter, the family to whom he'd referred, when she came round fuming and pointing fingers in my face. Her father and I had an agreement, I told her without hesitating, and I had no intention of going back on it. She'd had him in an assisted living facility. His various pension payments and social security were meant to go there, not to me. I had simply replied, "What a shame."

I could not explain that I understood better than she did where he really lived, in *Then*—when he was most alive. I also knew that he'd never trouble me, or not intentionally, and whatever my relationship with my other tenants, he and I would never quarrel over hot water or light fixtures.

I climbed the stairs to his apartment now. His door was never locked, though I had cautioned him about that. I knocked, but he had his radio going at a volume that was meant to keep him awake. I knocked again, then went in. He'd tucked himself into his wood-and-leather recliner beside a fragile end table that gave legs to the radio belowing the tide report. He looked too stony in his sleep until the third or fourth breath, when a snuffing exhale rattled him and made his fingers twitch. He was dressed in worn black boots with rugged soles, work pants, and a wool sweater, a favorite outfit of his and the same one he wore in a photo I'd seen, taken years ago, in which he gave a low, two-finger salute from a ferry wheelhouse. The windows of his apartment were all opened. While it was mild for March, it was not warm. I shut all but one of the windows, and that I left open a crack. I checked to see if there was food in the fridge. I found unspoiled milk, some cheddar cheese, and white bread tied tight into formation. In his cabinet were four cans of soup, two of which I had dated with pen on another visit. I surveyed the kitchen and living room area (which were joined and separated by a granite-topped island I had installed) for signs. There was an unwashed bowl and spoon in the sink. The nautical

charts he hung on the walls with tape were crooked, but they'd always been.

I smelled for something rotten or sick or dirty, but there was nothing, or nothing I could smell; then I left, shutting the door I'd oiled and re-oiled quietly behind me. He had reassured me again, by doing so little.