

On an early June Saturday, Marty flopped down on her bed. At this time of year, a lozenge-shaped piece of sunshine came in through the window and lay flat on the puffy white comforter. Doug would arrive in half an hour and Marty was too excited to do anything but wait for him. She also wanted to close her eyes and relax them.

It had been almost four months since Doug had kissed Marty goodnight after one of their occasional dinners. They had not been able to let go of each other that night. Their long rambling conversations had fueled a bodily hunger which felt both wrong and terribly right to Marty. She felt helpless before it, and so, apparently, did Doug.

Marty felt that Doug was her match, as wild in his body and his thoughts as she was. That first night she woke up once to feel that he was absolutely familiar in her bed and again later to feel that he was absolutely unknown, magic, a prince. She had longed for love and was now overcome. It shook her to her foundations. Doug said she was only seeing the tip of the iceberg.

It began because Doug was angry at his wife. The baby Mackenzie was carrying had been conceived during crush the previous September, a time when Doug was never at home. In the intervening months, Mackenzie had confessed that she didn't exactly know who the father was either. She had been at a rock concert; things had happened afterwards; she did not know exactly what. Pregnancy was easy for Mackenzie and she was haphazard about it as she was about most things. The baby was expected in a couple of weeks.

"I can't talk to her," Doug told Marty. With Marty it was the opposite. He could say anything and he made her talk too. They were hard on each other. The first night, they shredded Marty's pantyhose, ripped her bra and Doug bit the pearls from her ears. They used the doorways, the walls, the bed, over and over. Marty's body shook as she remembered. But also, Doug said, "the mood I see us in is of these two people having tea and talking quietly."

"You are liberating me," Marty said. "I trust you enough to talk. And you're interested!" Marty felt he loved her naturally, simply. He was quite a bit younger than Marty, but the harmonic between them did not seem to quit. Marty was overwhelmed. She had never before had such access to her emotional life. She was trying to re-balance, find a place in her life for this extraordinary man. The process went on at a deep level, not conscious. It felt like structures shifting, like blockages vibrating free and blowing away. Each time they left each other it was more difficult.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Doug. "We've got time."

But did they?

When Doug arrived, he looked fresh and dapper, with a haircut, a white shirt open at the neck beneath a blazer. He wore jeans, of course, and lace-up boots. He sat down on one of Marty's wooden dining chairs, saying in his rough Oakie voice, "Come here."

Marty came. He put his face into her bosom as she stood in front of him and reached his hands under her clothes, around her waist and down to her tummy. Marty felt his hands burning on her skin, the liquids sloshing around in her bottom. Marty kissed his ears, his neck, his mouth.

Despite the terrible sweetness Marty felt, they couldn't stay that way, holding each other. They must get up, as Doug said, eat solid food, go out into the world. They

were going to the wine-tasting of the Family Winemakers organization at the Palace Hotel. Doug wanted to show Marty some of his world. “You look great!” he said, standing up.

Marty smiled at him. Doug always told her she looked beautiful, but she found it hard to believe. Beauty was mostly found in magazine photos. Marty did realize that her tai chi practice pushed the blood throughout her body, energizing her skin and thinning her waist. But it was one of the amazing things about Doug, that he appreciated life as he found it, as it really was in all of its three-dimensionality.

“We’ll take a cab,” said Doug. “Now that I have a parking place, I have to emigrate!” Finding a parking place on the top of Russian Hill where Marty lived was difficult and parking downtown would be expensive.

Marty called a cab and they went down into the street to wait for it. Marty took Doug’s arm. She felt small beside him, wearing a short black linen coat dress, with white buttons down its front. Under it she wore white stockings and flat black shoes. Perhaps they did fit the profile of the well-heeled Russian Hill couple, for only a moment. It felt surreal to Marty. Nothing was ever as it seemed.

“The Palace Hotel,” said Doug grandly to the cab driver.

Marty laughed. She knew that Doug had been poor, had eaten cheese from the welfare department when his mother didn’t have much money. But here they were, sailing over Nob Hill on the leather seats of a taxicab. Doug held Marty close. A spatula could not have been inserted between them. “That you exist is a miracle,” said Marty softly. But she felt that a sword hung over them.

“Yes,” said Doug. His big hand sought the skin under Marty’s clothes. “I will always say yes to you.”

The summer streets were hushed, the traffic flowing down to the center of town, in the city that Marty loved.

At the hotel, they separated, walking self-consciously down the carpeted aisles of the corridor past the dark bar with its long painting of the Pied Piper toward the light at the other end. A ballroom had been laid out with long tables on either side. Each winery placed the wines it was pouring in rows behind phalanxes of glass stemware. Vases of flowers graced the tables and platters of bread and cheese helped people clear their palates between tastings.

Marty and Doug walked through the center of the room. A few people hailed Doug, but he quickly spotted his partner Jeremy behind a table, pouring wine for a small coterie of guests who were listening to his patter as he poured from a green bottle, one hand behind his back. He looked like a banker with his fine features, in a tightly-fitted blue blazer.

“This is Jeremy,” said Doug, interrupting him. “My friend Marty.”

Marty had heard a lot about Jeremy from Doug. He was the chief winemaker, educated in America and Europe, gifted in his tastebuds and able to blend great wines. He was meticulous in his work and did not mince words, but he was also knowledgeable enough to craft excellence from the grapes he was given. Doug admired him, had been working with him for almost ten years. Jeremy was the winemaking face of the company and got the accolades.

“A glass of our 1991 Pinot Noir?” asked Jeremy, holding out a gleaming green bottle to Marty. “Grown on the west side of the Santa Cruz mountains. Pretty good year:

long growing season; a fragrant, complex wine.” The people Jeremy had been talking to stood to one side, swirling the wine in their glasses, smelling it and then drinking.

“Thank you,” said Marty. Jeremy could probably spot her relative innocence in this group. She was primed to listen and learn, keeping her eyes and ears open and her mouth shut. She took a glass from the array at the front of the table.

“You can just wander around,” said Doug to Marty. “Pick up intel for us. Think of yourself as undercover,” he said, conscripting Marty into the fold. He slipped behind the table, taking his place beside Jeremy and leaving Marty on the customer side.

Marty lifted her glass to the two of them. Her lover, Doug, and his partner Jeremy, who was smaller, more finely built.

Jeremy turned to Doug. “Where’s that Vince? Have you seen him yet?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” said Doug airily, his smiling eyes on Marty as she sniffed the glass of Pinot Noir. “He’s probably wandering around, buttonholing some investment banker or venture capitalist.” To Marty he said, “Come back around five. We’ll be packing up and then I’ll take you somewhere for dinner.”

Marty backed away. She was not a customer. She must give place to people who would buy. The atmosphere was festive, light gleaming on the glassware, people clustered around the tables, the beautiful bottles arrayed before them.

Though Marty too had grown up relatively poor and isolated, she felt that her education allowed her to go anywhere, do anything she wanted. She always felt comfortable slipping into posh hotels and restaurants, doing as she pleased. Now she looked around her, quite at home among the well-dressed people who would buy expensive bottles, perhaps place orders for cases of wine to put in their cellars. These were the connoisseurs, the collectors, the wine journalists and taste makers.

Marty swirled the wine in her glass, aerating it and looking at its color, the “legs” it left on the sides of the glass. Doug had taught Marty to taste wines in a simple, unpretentious way. The Pinot Noir smelled clean and fresh with mineral and herbal odors which come from the soil. Marty had no language for them, but she did enjoy the taste which moved from the front to the back of her mouth. Its soft, delicate texture wasn’t acidic. Marty took a piece of cut up bread to eat with it.

Marty wandered around, looking for friendly faces. At the Kendall-Jackson Vineyards table, one she knew, she asked for a glass of Chardonnay. It too was clear and fresh, from a different part of California than Doug’s wines, from the Napa Valley. “Try our new cool-climate Chardonnay, from the Russian River,” said the smiling woman behind the table. Part of her long blonde hair was swept up behind her head in a comb. Marty wished she had a map with her. The label on the bottle said La Crema. Marty let the woman pour her another taste from this bottle.

Marty backed away. She was a lightweight, her head already buzzing. She walked out of the room and into the corridor. The Palace Hotel was famed for its Garden Court, a beautiful room domed in glass where Marty had had tea with Lana more than once. Long ago, she had also had lunch there when Cardigan Shores sent one of its venerable employees to celebrate her retirement with the women from the typing pool. Marty sat in the corridor on a large upholstered chair, holding her wineglass. The last part of wine tasting was thinking about the wine. What was your experience?

Marty knew that Doug had big notebooks full of information about the wines he had tasted, the vineyards and wineries he visited. Information he collected went into

databases he had set up on his computer. "I'm an early adapter," he told Marty. Marty had set up employee databases at Whittaker Perotta, but it wasn't so necessary at her new company. Other people took care of this information now.

What Marty did appreciate however, was the fact that Doug used CompuServe to send her messages. She looked for one every day. It was a system whereby you wrote your thoughts to someone, as if in a letter, posted it to a hard disk somewhere in Ohio and the person it was addressed to received it when they signed in through a modem on their own computer. It was instant communication, a miracle. Marty had actually seen very little of Doug. He had come to the city five or six times since they began to be physically involved. It was very hard for Marty to see him so little. All of her thoughts centered on him.

In the world's terms, their alignment was not right. Marty was pretty sure Doug didn't think of their coming together as anything more than an affair. He was married and deeply involved with his family. He was completely honest about the fact that he had no heart for the 'D' word. He was doing the best he could.

But in nature's terms, Marty felt that the affair had gotten away from them. She felt a growing sense of their partnership. Doug felt like her match, unlike the other men friends she had. He was open and talkative and saw only the best in Marty. The bodily awareness Marty had found through tai chi opened her. She had taken him to the center of her heart. But it could not be. The uncertainty, the evanescence of the relationship contributed to the depth to which Marty had let Doug sink into her. A sense of doom hung over them, adding poignancy to their feelings.

By now, Marty knew a great deal more about Mackenzie. She was a lovely young girl who had married Doug in a romantic, flower-bedecked garden five years ago. Doug said that Mackenzie was a child, that he had wanted to take care of her. Since then they had had three children together.

Doug had found that, beyond having the babies, Mackenzie did not know what to do with them. Often enough, she dropped them off at Doug's mother's house in Santa Cruz and took off on adventures. Given his own need to work in the fields and scout vineyards around the state, Doug felt the family was fractured, the kids' most stable home with their grandmother. "It's not what I wanted," Doug told Marty.

Mackenzie was not easy to talk to. She hedged, agreed, pretended and then slipped out of any discussion they had. Marty had seen photographs in which the family looked, for all the world like a real family, kids ranged around their parents. She had also seen the kids with Heather the summer before: Zoe, who was bossy and talkative at three, and the twins, Nic and Natasha, sweet two-year-olds.

Marty knew, however, that Doug and Mackenzie were not partners, that Mackenzie wanted to be one of the kids. She liked Doug's attention, and Marty now knew how well Doug was able to pay attention! Once he had shined his light on you, how could anyone get along without it, she wondered.

As Marty watched, people circled in and out of the room where the wine tasting was going on, laughing and talking. Marty stood up. She went back into the room and stood at the back of a queue for a glass of deep, dark Cabernet Sauvignon. Some of the wines poured were very expensive. She might never get another chance to taste them.

Across the room she caught Doug's eye. He came over to her. "Have you had enough of all this?" he asked. "I think I've done my duty here. We could leave."

“I know so little,” said Marty, smiling up at him apologetically. “I have to figure out what an appellation is, what the grape varieties are. I feel quite out of my element.”

“Wine is big business in California,” said Doug. “It’s worth knowing about. But people do fetishize it. It represents the ‘good life.’” He laughed a bit sardonically. “They know little of the hard work in the fields, which is mostly done by Hispanic people.”

“Yes,” said Marty.

“Well, come on,” said Doug. “I’m ready for a little of that good life. I’m hungry!” Doug did not seem the worse for the tasting he may have done. Mostly he had probably been talking.

“Shall we go say goodbye to Jeremy?” asked Marty.

“Oh, no,” said Doug. “He knows. I have to get back tonight. I’m going to have crews out tomorrow morning for leafing and tucking. They know what they’re doing, but it helps if I’m there.”

Marty’s heart sank. Doug would not come home with her. He would drop her at her apartment and go home to run his vineyard crews, which surely began at the crack of dawn. “What’s leafing and tucking?” she asked as they left the hotel.

“We go through the vines, pulling leaves that are getting too big, letting air and light in on the clusters. We tuck the vines up on the guide wires of the trellis, so that they are five or six feet off the ground. All part of canopy management. Makes them easier to pick too. Sometimes we thin out bunches and shoots, but only a few guys can do that! We have to manage the harvest exactly, for weight, taste and color. It’s really labor-intensive. All of the grapes for the wines you tasted today are treated with the greatest care.” On the street he put up his hand, and a taxi pulled up alongside them.

“Yes,” said Marty. “I had no idea, really.”

“Someday I’ll take you out to the vineyard,” said Doug. But he did not say anything about when.

It was almost midsummer, the air warm and the leaves on the ficus trees on Hyde Street were thick and lush. The light lasted long in the evening. Doug and Marty ate a potato and pesto pizza at a small neighborhood pizza place near Marty’s house. She loved this odd combination, but Doug did not want to take much time. Marty could feel in him the pull of his home and vineyards.

Primed for his leaving, Marty did not make a fuss. She wanted to beg him to tell her when she would see him again. She felt so lonely when he left. But it would do no good. If you had the guts to love like this, you had to have the guts to separate. The sun had not yet set when Doug left Marty at her door.

Two weeks later, Doug called. “Jason, our son, was born last night,” he said softly. “I’ll come and show you photographs on Saturday, if you’re free.”

The words “our son” fell like lead weights on Marty. “Of course,” she said. Doug had accepted his new son into his family. She had known it would happen. She did not know what it meant for her, but she could guess. And of course, he would be right.

On Saturday, Marty did a long tai chi practice as she usually did. Her legs ached as she walked up the Union Street hill to her apartment, carrying the weapons bag she had made from some old blue jeans. What her legs really wanted was to have Marty sit with a blanket over them, warming their tingling, pulsing selves. But Marty made herself an omelet and a toasted bagel before she sat down.

When Doug arrived in the afternoon, Marty served tea and a piece of tangy lemon cake, Doug's favorite, with some fruit. Once again he was wearing city clothes, a crisp white shirt. He was going on to dinner with the wine buyer from a small local grocery, with Vince and Jeremy that night.

As Marty had suspected, Doug told her he could not sleep with her any more. He must recommit himself to his family. "But we can be friends," he said. "I will call now and then when I'm in town." They were sitting in each other's arms on the green velveteen sofa.

"Does Mackenzie know about me?" Marty asked.

"Maybe," said Doug. "The sad fact is, she doesn't care. She has no idea who I am or what I'm like. All she thinks about is what she needs and wants. She hasn't much sense of the kids either. I have to be both mother and father to them."

"And to her," said Marty. She shuddered to think how the kids managed. They were still small and Marty knew a Hispanic couple lived on Doug's ranch. They must be helping with the kids as well.

Talking to Doug, being in his presence was almost enough for Marty, however. She did not know what the pain would be like when he left. "We let the lions out," she said softly.

"You bet we did!" said Doug, talking in her ear. "Sort of hard to shove them back in their cages."

"But you will," said Marty. Doug was an honorable guy. He did what he said he would.

"Yes," said Doug. "It's a right pickle. You and me and my wife. You and I love each other, but she's my wife."

"I've been trying to let go," said Marty. "But it's hard. I love being with you so much, but I don't want to be stupid."

"What would be stupid?" asked Doug.

"If you didn't love me," said Marty. "But you do." The sweetness hung between and around them, thick with potentiality.

"Exactly as you are," said Doug. "As you love me."

Who knew, thought Marty. Who knew that she would fall for a much younger viticulturalist who didn't read books, but was intellectual in other ways. A big, fatherly Oakie who wanted her to call him 'honey.' As long as he was with her, Marty was okay.

"But you're going to leave," said Marty.

"Yes," said Doug. "We're each in our own pickle. A meta-pickle, I would say." He stood up, pulling Marty up with him. "You could have anyone you wanted, you know."

"But there isn't anyone else I do want," said Marty plaintively. The atmosphere around them was so thick Marty felt she must take her tai chi sword and cut it.

But this time, Doug did the cutting. He pushed Marty gently against the wall near the door and kissed her hard on the mouth. "Goodbye, my love," he said. "I'll send you a message. Or call you."

Marty melted. It felt so good to talk. "Thank you for stopping by," she said. She wanted to berate him for leaving, but what good would it do. None whatsoever. She must make what Doug gave her into what she needed. She listened to his footsteps as they fell away on the creaky, carpeted stairway and the front door closed behind him.

Marty had no plans for the evening. “Let go and let God,” she thought to herself, as Al-Anon taught. The nobility of women was that of letting go. It was all they really had. Especially as I grow older, thought Marty. She didn’t need to learn it just for Doug. She needed to learn it period.

On Sunday, Marty walked down the hill to the wharf and took a ferry to Angel Island. She climbed to the top of the mountain on the east side of the island where the grove of pines which Marty had once named for Dad had grown tall. She lay in the dappled shade of a tree, in the long grass and met her lover the sun, who kissed her body where it fell. She ate sensuous food, avocados, chocolate, pistachios and wet green grapes, which seemed especially wet in the dry grass. The trees were dark green above her and the sky a watery blue. Below, the bay was full of sailboats, and she could see the Oakland bridges. A bell buoy rang constantly, one high tone, with an answering low tone from another place.

Marty did not notice that she had been sleeping until she woke up and felt how delicious the sweetness of the heat was. She raised her head and moved the sweaty hair out of her mouth. She felt somewhat numb, could not remember where she was, what she should be doing, what to look forward to.

Sensuality is a beast, thought Marty. A cage of lions. Few people call them out and even fewer did Marty trust to let them play. She loved Doug Henderson. He passed both tests. But she wouldn’t die of love, she did not suppose.

Lying on her rug in the grass Marty remembered that once, after one of their early meetings, she had looked in her own long mirror and seen Doug. He wasn’t going anywhere. He existed. He had his family, his big life. Marty had simplified hers down to her work, tai chi, her friends, the natural world.

Hearing voices on the path above her, Marty turned over, so that some mother would not be horrified if her young son saw Marty’s naked breasts glistening in the light. If my skin is ever beautiful, Marty thought, it is now. Butterflies and black dragonflies with translucent wings flew over her.

The sun was hot, but a breeze blew up in the afternoon. The chirping of the cicadas, which was loud in the heat of the sun, softened. The pines had long growing tips, shining as they reached toward the sun. Shadows were lengthening. The grasses were tall and golden, especially the beautiful quaking grass, or rattlesnake grass with its empty seed pods. I’m a naked little Taoist, Marty thought, laughing sardonically in the woods. Just off the path, within earshot of the world. She put on her clothes and rolled up her rug.

As Marty walked back over the hill and rounded the bend, she could see the ferry for San Francisco coming. She scurried down the hill, scaring a turkey buzzard who sat on a fence post. Purple ceanothus bloomed on the path and the tall purple plumes of Pride of Madeira rose from shrubs along the dock. Marty’s legs tingled as she waited to board the boat. She was still talking herself down from the intensity of Doug. It would take a while. Somehow they had convinced each other that they were free to love. But they were not. Doug was not.

Marty thought of the two Old Testament women who quarreled over a baby, bringing him to King Saul to make a decision. “Here,” said Saul, raising his blade. “I’ll cut the baby in two and you can each have half.” “No!” shrieked the true mother. “Let her

have him.” She wanted the baby to live. Marty felt like that mother. She must give up Doug, so that he could live.