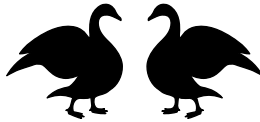


THE RUSTY ANCHOR



Sandra stood alone in the train station parking lot, waiting. This situation was troublingly familiar, but she stared at the Hudson, glimmering serenely in the tepid April sun, and tried to act relaxed. This lasted about one minute, then she took out her phone.

“I’m on the bridge,” Ron said when he picked up.

She looked up at the dual spans of the Hamilton Fish. She knew that he hated to talk on the phone while driving—he lacked coordination—and she worried that her call would cause him to swerve off the roadway. At least, she thought, that would spare them the potential humiliation of this visit. “You’re late,” she said.

“I know, I know.”

“In your emails, you said you’d changed.”

Ron didn’t take this bait, indicating that perhaps he had. “I’ll be there in two minutes,” he said. “I’m on the bridge. Look.” She saw him flash his headlights.

Sandra smiled wearily. She wished email had never been invented. If they’d had to call each other, this stupid reunion would never have been planned. And even if it had, the record of their communication would be ephemeral instead of lingering in her inbox, there to embarrass her forever. You destroyed me, and I’ll never trust you again, she’d written back to Ron, finally—after about his seventh message—one drunken night following a failed date with an accountant. *But we were great in the sack. Why don’t we give that part another try?* Her daughter Lily—so wise after nearly a year at college—had a name for this arrangement. “You’ll be fuck-buddies.”

She saw Ron round the corner. She'd heard from Mary, their one remaining mutual friend, that he'd bought a new car in January, right after his thirty-four year-old tramp, another silver Saab, dumped him:. Sandra pretended not to notice, but his beaming pride broke her down. "Nice ride. New?" She'd always liked Saabs. They were iconoclastic, or they used to be.

She'd gained twenty pounds in the two years since their breakup and only lost eight of them, but as she got settled in her seat, he said she looked nice. He looked the same, but he'd already been pudgy and bald when they met six years back. "Men like him are perfect," Mary had claimed when setting them up. "They have nowhere to go."

He asked her about her trip up. She said she'd read, *as usual*. There was a pause at this invocation of their shared history, dead for so long and now suddenly resuscitated.

"Hey, why don't we go clear out your storage facility now?" he said, perpetuating one of his more enduring excuses for this visit. "It's on the way . . ."

Sandra remembered angrily packing her upstate things the night that he'd finally admitted his affair, but now she had no idea what these boxes contained. This wasn't exactly a recommendation for retrieving them, and given her current housing crisis, she certainly didn't need any more stuff. But in the spirit of appeasement, she agreed. "Okay."

Ron drove through Newburgh's dilapidated downtown—*Crack Capitol of the Hudson Valley*, she'd joked to friends back in New York—and pulled into a crumbly concrete lot just past the highway on-ramp. He parked directly in front of her bunker—#321, like a countdown—killed the ignition, and passed her a key, a tiny brass one, the kind one would use to open old luggage.

The room was empty save for six small boxes, which were stacked dead center in a wide pyramid. With the impending move from her apartment—*my apartment*, her landlord was always quick to counter—she'd recently been checking out storage facilities in the City. There, the goal was how best to conserve space. In contrast these boxes were laid out as if to dominate the room. They looked like exactly what they were: a monument to someone who'd left in a hurry but insisted on putting down roots in the hope of a triumphant return.

Ron studied her, finger primed on his key fob's trunk button. "Shall I load?"

By taking the boxes, he was silently offering to drive her back to New York the next day; there was no way she could get all of this on the train. But Sandra

didn't want him to take her down. If he did, he'd insist on helping her bring her things upstairs, and if he brought them up, he'd see that she had been packing, and she'd be forced to tell him the whole dumb truth: that she'd lost her final appeal in housing court and was going to be stripped of her rent-controlled lease. The price of the place was increasing six-fold. Homeless, single, and fifty-eight, she thought her motives for coming to see him would look suspicious.

"Can't we get them on our way out?"

"I suppose." Ron shrugged. "But we're already here. And I thought we might want to . . . sleep in, in the morning."

Sandra gave him a sultry smile.

It took Ron a while to arrange the boxes in a way that pleased him. This useless particularity irked her, but she kept quiet. She did conspicuously smoke a cigarette, a habit she knew he disapproved of. Though the breeze wasn't exactly warm, Ron opened the sunroof as they left. "Hope you don't mind the fresh air."

They parked in the village of Sloop Hill and walked down to the riverfront. Sandra sat next to Ron in the wooden gazebo he'd paid for the town to build and took in the purpled reflection of the sun setting behind them. Ron considered the stunning sunsets of the River's east bank *banal*—worn-out by Church and Cole in their majestic landscapes—and she'd come to appreciate his loyalty to the wrong side of the tracks. He was a booster for the underdog, a proud son of Newburgh, and was always ready with a boast about the River's western shore: its role in the War of Independence, its naturally fluoridated aquifer, the gypsum deposits that had made his ancestors their fortune. *Stern Cement*. She could still see the ghost of the name on the old smokestack.

He put his arm around her shoulders, and they necked lightly. *There was a word you never heard now*, Sandra thought—*necked*. But that's exactly what they did: kissed as if they were in an earlier era. Once the sun had disappeared, they walked directly to The Rusty Anchor. They didn't even discuss it. Sloop Hill was so small and the options there so limited, Sandra knew there was no way not to do all the things they'd always done when she'd come up here. Even the waitress recognized her. "How are *you*?" she said to Sandra. "Haven't seen *you* here in a while."

"We're fine," Ron said directly. He put his hand over Sandra's.

This action seemed intended as tender, but it still made Sandra feel like a stand-in. She knew from Mary that the new ex was a city girl as well, that she'd also come to see Ron only on the weekends. She was certain that they'd shared all these routines.

She let it go. She felt she had to. It was spring, after all; only a crone could remain unswayed by the lure of rebirth and rejuvenation. She ordered a glass of champagne. “Bring the bottle!” Ron enthused.

They talked nonstop through dinner but avoided any topic of substance. This felt effortless, and it made Sandra realize how severely their breakup had burned her. She’d become expert at staying shallow. They discussed the growth rate in his county. They discussed the land-trust he’d created for his property. They talked for a long time about Bob Dylan, a generational cliché, but one they never tired of. A new documentary had just aired, adding fuel to their debate about Joan Baez: whether she’d become bitter from being used by Bob, as Ron claimed; or whether she was always a grating bitch, which was Sandra’s position. They had two bottles of Mœt and laughed heartily. Too heartily? she wondered.

She excused herself to smoke a cigarette, grabbing matches from the host’s stand. When she returned, the check was paid, the tip had been left and retrieved. She stood there, uncertain. “So . . .” she said, “is it time for the fucking?”

Ron acted taken aback, but her bluntness seemed to liberate him. He put his arm around her back as they walked to the car, digging his fingers below her waistband to graze her naked hip. He pulled a half-smoked joint from the ashtray, and Sandra held it as he drove, swapping it between them and dusting the fallen ash from his beard.

Ron’s house glowed seductively at the top of the gravel driveway, and Sandra hung back as he unlocked the front door. It was an old two-story Greek Revival, white and lined with big white columns, but Ron had bordered the top and bottom of each pillar with a thin stripe of black, causing them to appear to float unmoored from both the roof and the floor.

The place was a jumble inside, as usual, but Ron’s unruly piles of stuff felt comfortingly familiar. The drafty windows breathed life into the warm room. Even *The Small Faces* felt lively when Ron put on their leaden first record. Sandra figured it was the weed talking, but she didn’t really mind. She tossed her coat onto a chair, and sunk into the brown couch. On the coffee table, there was a vase of twisted apple blossoms, her favorites. She felt at home. Ron opened some wine and sidled up next to her.

“I missed this place,” she said, without meaning to.

Ron grinned. “Would it sound hopelessly corny if I said that it missed you?”

“*It?*” She set her hand firmly on Ron’s inner thigh. She’d been with a

number of men since him, a relatively large number. Lily had gotten her on the internet. She'd had no relationships to speak of, but she'd had twenty-seven first dates, and she'd slept with all but four of them. About half of these men were passable in bed, and two made her top ten; but Ron had remained her gold standard, and as things got going that night, he didn't disappoint. They kissed with honest passion, and he pressed his big hands hard against her, even in places where she'd grown soft. Then he went down on her masterfully, more than warming her up. But when it came time to seal the deal, he seemed to be stalling. She imagined that he might be trying to savor this experience. But when she reached down to guide him in, that didn't seem to be the case.

She knew his body well, and she tried some old tricks. Then she tried a few new ones. Ron was a good sport at first. "I've always had a *soft spot* for you," he joked. But as the problem persisted, he became embarrassed and then impatient, and Sandra began to feel agitated. She'd been telling herself and her friends that she was coming up here just for a good fuck, but her disappointment exposed her true hopes and expectations. She felt cheated and pissed off, angry and lonely. She tapped the flaccid head of Ron's dick like an emcee testing a mic. "Hello? Hello? Is this on?" Ron looked un-amused. "What's the matter, captain?" she asked. "Anchor a little rusty?"

"Teasing probably doesn't help." He pulled away. "I guess I'm out of practice."

"You mean since that young chippie of yours dumped you?"

"Hey. I thought we weren't going to get personal."

"*This* isn't personal?" Sandra pointed at his crotch. "You know what they say: inaction speaks louder than words."

He sighed. "If you want to know the truth, I meant I'm out of practice with you. With women like you. With . . . women my own age."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, that's charming."

"That didn't come out how I meant it."

"Oh, really? How'd you mean it?"

"I don't know. Not about *you*? More as . . . a confession. About *me*." He tapped his chest. "Our break-up really fucked up my sense of self."

"You cheated on me serially with your neighbor's thirty-four-year-old daughter."

"That doesn't sound fucked up to you?"

Sandra crossed her arms. "Why don't we just do what we came here for, Okay? I'll see if I can wake up Mr. Penis. I can put my finger in your ass. You always liked that."

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so, what?”

“I don’t think so, no. I don’t think that this is a good idea.”

“But that was our whole deal—one decent fuck. Your crack about *women my age* should set me back about a year in therapy. You can at least give me some satisfaction.”

Ron reached for his boxers. “Let’s just call a cease fire until tomorrow, huh?”

“There’s been no fire to cease. And why should we both have to suffer? How about you do me now, orally, and I’ll do you in the morning. I’ll get you up with the sun, if you know what I mean. You can even come in my mouth.”

Ron shook his head. He looked hurt and desperate. He looked exactly how Sandra felt; she only hoped that she was better at hiding it. He gestured toward the stairway. “Do you want to come upstairs with me,” he asked, “or do you want to stay down here on the couch?”

“The couch? It’s the couch for me now? Why not just bury me in the yard?”

“You brought a book. You used to like to fall asleep reading on the couch.”

Sandra grabbed her clothes. “I’m not staying on your couch.” She checked the clock. There were two more trains that night. “Take me to the station. I’m going home.”

Ron nodded and began getting dressed.

Sandra bristled. “You’re not even going to fight me on this?”

He put on his coat and opened the door. She followed him to the car. Tears were rolling down her face, but she wasn’t really crying. “This is just like you,” she said. “You beg me to come up here, and then you refuse to do anything to make me stay.”

“I can’t make you do anything, Sandra. I never could.”

This blatant reference to his ostensible reason for his affair—that she wouldn’t consider moving in with him—brought up not just all their horrid fights from that time but all of the lost solutions this idea now represented. They’d been happy, happy-ish; they may have been able to be happy. They could have lived out their silver years up here in comfort, giving each other what they wanted, or at least staving off her current issues.

This realization infuriated Sandra, and she turned her rage outward, picking at Ron however she could. Their fight quickly became a volley of ugly insults, a greatest hits reprise of the traits they most reviled in the other:

Ambivalent; unfaithful. Vindictive; impassive. Self-hating; self-sabotaging. Insecure; impotent.

They were seething, but they managed to stop briefly as they approached the bridge. Sandra watched, disgusted, as Ron chatted up the tollbooth clerk. They passed through, and the gate swung down behind them. "I hate your side of the river," she said.

Ron sneered. "I hate your side."

He glanced at her once spitefully and then suddenly braked sharply, pulling the car to the shoulder. "Get out," he said.

"We're in the middle of the bridge."

"No, we're not. We're still on my side." He pointed at the crest. "Now get out."

"You're crazy."

"Good for me." He leaned over and yanked open her door.

Sandra wasn't going to beg. She stepped out of the car but lingered momentarily, grasping for last words. "I was . . . counting on you," she said.

"Same here. Fuck you."

The roadway was divided, so in order to turn around, Ron had to cross the bridge, making a mockery of his county-bound pride. Sandra clambered onto the walkway and watched his taillights disappear into the tree-lined streets of Beacon. She expected that he'd head to the bridge in the next town up in order to avoid having to drive back past her, but before too long, she saw him returning on the other side. When he reached the point just opposite where she stood, he pulled to the shoulder. And with six lanes of traffic between them, he opened his trunk and began throwing her boxes into the River.

"What the fuck?" she yelled uselessly. She thought about running across to him, but there was no way to clear the wide aerial median between the east- and west-bound spans. Anyway his actions somehow made perfect sense. During the Industrial Revolution, Ron had often claimed, the River was seen as illimitably cleansing. People threw everything into it, literally everything, and it frequently backed up against vile dams of floating waste. She wished they still lived in those times. She'd dump it all. She fished in her purse for a cigarette and shakily struck a match. Rusty Anchor, she read on the back of the pack. Indeed. She glanced over the railing as a flannel nightgown floated by. It had been her favorite. The water billowed it and made it ripple; it looked as if a fat woman were wearing Sandra's nightgown and drowning. She tossed the matchbook in after it and watched it all flutter downstream.