

Your main commentary should be focused on *the expression of contrast*. Other topics may also be addressed.

Because of my friendship with Joyce Mazzucchelli, who owned the house on Carroll Street that she shared with her B.P.M. daughter and two grandchildren, I was able to find new digs for Aurora and Lucy. There was an empty room on the third floor of the brownstone. In former times, it had served as a multipurpose workshop-studio for Jimmy Joyce, but now that Nancy's Foley walker ex-husband was gone, why couldn't they live there? I asked. Rory had no money and no job, but I would be willing to pay the rent until she got back on her feet, and now that Lucy was old enough to lend an occasional hand with Nancy's kids, it might work out to everyone's advantage.

"Forget about the rent, Nathan," Joyce said. "Nancy needs an assistant for her jewelry business, and if Aurora doesn't mind helping out with the cleaning and cooking, she can have the room for free."

Good old Joyce. We had been monkeying around together for almost six months by then, and even though we lived in separate places, it was the rare week when we didn't spend at least two or three nights in the same bed - hers or mine, depending on what the mood and circumstances dictated. She was a couple of years younger than I was, which made her something of an old broad, but at fifty-eight, fifty-nine, she still had enough moves to keep things interesting.

Sex among aging people can have its embarrassments and comical longueurs, but there is also a tenderness to it that often eludes the young. Your breasts might sag, but your skin is still your skin, and when someone you care about reaches out and touches you, or holds you in her arms, or kisses you on the mouth, you can still melt in the same way you did when you thought you would live forever. Joyce and I hadn't reached the December of our lives, but there was no question that May was well behind us. What we were together was an afternoon in mid-to late October, one of those bright fall days with a vivid blue sky above, a gusty nip in the air, and a million leaves still clinging to the branches - most of them brown, but with enough golds and reds and yellows left to make you want to stay outdoors as long as you can.

No, she wasn't the beauty her daughter was, and based on the early photographs I'd seen of her, she never had been. Joyce attributed Nancy's physical appearance to her late husband, Tony, a building contractor who

had died of a heart attack in 1993. "He was the handsomest man I ever met," she once told me. "The spitting image of Victor Mature." With her strong Brooklyn accent, the actor's name emerged from her mouth sounding something like *Victa Machuah*, as if the letter *r* had atrophied to such a degree that it had been expunged from the English alphabet. I loved that earthy, proletarian voice. It made me feel on safe ground with her, and as much as any of the other qualities she possessed, it told you that this was a woman without pretension, a woman who believed in who and what she was. She was the mother of the Beautiful Perfect Mother, after all, and how could she have raised a girl like Nancy if she hadn't known what she was about?

On the surface, we had almost nothing in common. Our backgrounds were entirely different (city Catholic, suburban Jew), and our interests diverged on nearly every point. Joyce had no patience for books and was a strict nonreader, whereas I shunned all physical exertion, striving for immobility as the *ne plus ultra* of the good life. For Joyce, exercise was more than just a duty, it was a pleasure, and her preferred weekend activity was getting up at six o'clock on Sunday morning and riding her bike through Prospect Park. She still worked, and I was retired. She was an optimist, and I was a cynic. She had been happily married, and my marriage - but enough about that. She paid little or no attention to the news, and I read the paper carefully every day. Back when we were children, she had rooted for the Dodgers, and I had rooted for the Giants. She was a fish and pasta person, and I was a meat and potatoes man. And yet - and what can be more mysterious about human life than this *yet?* - we got along like gangbusters. I had felt an immediate attraction the morning we were introduced (out on Seventh Avenue with Nancy), but it wasn't until we had our first long talk at Harry's funeral that I understood there might be a spark between us. In a fit of shyness, I had put off calling her, but then one day the following week she invited me to the house for dinner, and so the flirtation began.