

1 We Met at the U

I met Iris O'Blennis in choir when I was twenty. We were juniors at the University of Minnesota, 1963. She was in social work, I was an English major. Choir met MTW 3–4:30 in the musty basement of Northrop Auditorium. I took my place among the baritones and stood behind a pale shining alto with short brown hair and long neck and that was her. **Dear Mr. Blue, I am too shy to talk to girls.** Sing to them then. Join a choir. Pick out the girl you want and stand behind her and blend your voice with hers, gently, reverently, in tune, as if lifting her by the waist, and this will excite her and also create trust. Animals mate by ear, so do people. People mate in choir all the time in Minnesota. We are a choral state. Our director, Bruno Phillips, was rehearsing us in *The Passion According to St. Matthew*, and I leaned forward and looked down the front of her silk blouse and saw her pale freckled breasts resting in their white hammock and my baritone heart swoll up, as did my baritone pants.

April is in my mistress's face,
And July in her heart hath place.
Within her bosom lies September,
And that's the one that I remember.

I was thrilled to stand within inches of her and smell her and brush against her bare arms as we swung off together in "*O Mensch, bewein dein' Sünde gross,*" breathing in unison, my voice a buttress and sounding board.

I followed her like a dog. She ran with a crowd of poets and literati

who camped in the corner of the Shevlin Hall cafeteria and said airy things about jazz and sex and revolution and I sat studying her and entertaining lustful thoughts, working up the courage to ask her to come with me to a movie—**O Mr. Blue, how do you do that?** You do it by doing it, sir.—and then one day in May, I was witness to a horrible traffic accident (CAR JUMPS CURB, SLAYS FAMILY OF 4) and an hour later I stood dumbly in choir, weeping, as the apostles cried out for the soldiers to let Jesus go—“*Lasst ihn! Haltet! Bindet nicht!*” and I swayed forward and put my right hand on her bare shoulder and she turned and smiled up at me. And afterward asked me what was wrong. And I told her.

It was on the West River Road. I was sitting on the grass, reading *Dubliners*, and a car jumped the curb and mowed down the four picnickers. Bodies strewn like dolls on the grass and the Buick Dynaflo smashed into an elm tree and the driver was wandering around, an old man, confused, needing to “get to Dorothy’s” and pleading with the dead to get out of his way. The bodies covered with picnic blankets. The crowd of relentless gawkers. The Elvis lookalike priest giving last rites. Fresh gawkers arriving by the minute. *What happened?* Car went out of control. *Anybody hurt?* No, they’re all dead. Four people gone, evaporated like a song.

We lay side by side on the grass in front of Northrop looking up at the white clouds and I told her all about it.

She took my hand and pressed it to her cheek.

“I am glad you’re alive,” she said. “Life is so precious, we have to savor every moment.” And she scootched over and kissed me on the mouth, a sisterly kiss that lasted longer than intended and sort of flared up into something passionate and noble, her tongue searching my mouth, and then she touched my pants and I about passed out for joy.

Odd fish that I am, I didn’t speak to her for a couple weeks. I

skipped the kaffeeklatsch. Too much to say and no idea how to say it. So I made as if we'd never met. And my disregard paid off.

After the big performance in May of the *Passion*, I emerged from Northrop Auditorium and there she was, waiting, and said, "When are we going to make love?" We headed for her apartment on 8th Street SE above the Rexall drugstore and I followed her up the stairs. Why not? Two magnificent things in one day. The apartment was tidy, spare, a white kitchen table and two chairs, a row of clay pots, a sheaf of dry milkweed in a vase, a pine bookcase, a poster of Uncle Sam pointing his finger (I WANT YOU TO WORK FOR PEACE & JUSTICE), a big bed with a blue chenille cover. She lit a dozen candles on the windowsill and put the Bach cello suites on the record player. I sat on the bed. "The bathroom is down the hall if you need to use it," she said. What would I use it for? I didn't know. Was it my job to get a condom out of the medicine cabinet? I went into the bathroom, rinsed my face, stared at it in the mirror. Tried to look handsomer. No condoms in the cabinet. She lay on the bed. She said, "I honestly believe that people who love Bach are good people." We kissed. She tasted of blackberries. I took off my shoes and socks. She lay my hand against her trembling breast and I unbuttoned her shirt and she slipped out of her jeans and I took off mine. I kissed the pale slope of her belly with the little indentations from the elastic like the ghostly skyline of an alabaster city. The lush valley below. The birthplace of civilization.

The doorbell rang a nasty ring and she jumped up. "It's the landlord! He said he was going to check the toilet!" So I pulled on my pants and tried to look businesslike, went to the door, and it was a hollow-eyed man who wanted to discuss prophecies in Scripture. His handshake was damp. Perspiration shone on his brow. No easy matter getting rid of him, he was so jazzed on the idea that I stood at the threshold of a great spiritual turning point, and I hemmed and hawed about being busy and then I told him the truth: "I can't talk

to you now, I am about to get laid, sir." He didn't understand *get laid*. "I am about to fornicate with a young woman." He backed away, quite mournful but promising to pray for me, and I returned to the bedroom feeling oddly depleted. The imminence of the Last Judgment and all. Fornication did not seem like a good idea, with those avenging angels poised to descend, the Antichrist, Armageddon, the seven-headed beast, the whore of Babylon and so forth. I put a Sinatra record on to get me in a secular mood. I thought, Oh boy, what if I can't—and that was a fatal thought to have right at that point. My penis shrank to the size of a tassel. It hung down like a defeated flag, like Florida. It forgot what it was there for. The minutemen lay down their rifles, the redcoats took Concord and Lexington. Meade turned tail in the face of Pickett's charge and Gettysburg went gray and Lincoln fled Washington, disguised as a washerwoman. The U.S. Marines surrendered Iwo Jima. The Washington Monument melted like wax. I went to the bathroom and tried some little twirling and stretching exercises. *Fourscore and seven inches long, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a great rebirth of the penis, for the penis, by the penis.* Finally, I lay on Iris's bed and turned my face to the wall. After years of gigantic involuntary erections in high school hallways whenever a girl came within three feet, now on this historic occasion when I am naked with a naked woman, God takes the lead out of my pencil.

"Do you want me to leave?" I said.

"I want you to stay the night."

"What for?"

"To be with me." She nestled her head against my neck. "It's no big deal," she said.

"You're telling me," I said.

She lay, holding me. She was sweet. A social worker is used to dealing with silly predicaments. She fixed a frittata for supper and got out her Scrabble board and let me beat her. We lay curled to-

gether in the dark. "I love your voice," she said. "You put so much feeling into the baritone part."

The candles flickered on the windowsill, my cigarette burned in the tuna-fish can, a still small voice said, "This is where you belong. Don't mess this up."

