

## MS. LOWE VISITS HER FRIENDS

By

Dorothy Bryant

Maple Tree Gardens is both a nursing home and a convalescent hospital. Some patients, like my ninety-three-year-old Great-aunt Lily, weren't going anywhere from there; she could last a few weeks or a few years, her doctor said, lifted from bed to wheelchair and back again. Other patients might recover from an illness or an injury and leave.

Aunt Lily had outlived her generation and her only daughter. Her daughter's generation and the next—mine—had scattered to the suburbs and beyond. I was the only one who still lived in the city and had stayed single, so I was elected to keep tabs on her after her latest stroke and let the other relatives know when—something happened.

On my second visit to Aunt Lily, coming in through the courtyard, I noticed a woman who looked vaguely familiar, sitting in a wheelchair beside the dwarf maple tree, with an open book on her lap. Something about that beak-like nose—Armenian? Jewish? Italian? Something about the way that bright, multi-colored scarf floated around her neck. By my fourth visit, I was sure that I had once known this face, minus the wrinkles and gray-white hair. So, on my next visit, I walked up to the woman and said, “Don't we know each other?”

She squinted up at me through little round glasses. “We might.”

“Ms. Lowe!” As soon as I heard her voice I knew. “I had you for English at Jefferson High. Monica Saludi. I'm sure you don't remember me.”

“Sorry. My eyesight's not what it was.” She smiled. “Nor my memory.”

“We read *Julius Caesar* and *Moby Dick* and *My Antonia*.”

She nodded. “Tenth grade.”

“You made us act out scenes. You let girls do men’s parts too. I still remember when you told me, ‘Try to get inside Quee-queg’s head and see Ahab through Quee-queg’s eyes.’ I think that was what made me plow through the whole book.”

She smiled. “Plowed through anything good lately?”

“Oh.” I felt like I hadn’t done my homework. “Well. I sell real estate. By the time I get home, and eat dinner, and check my e-mail, and maybe look up something on the NET . . . I’m too tired to do much but watch a little TV.”

“Pity,” she whispered, as if I’d told her I had a fatal disease.

On the way out, I told one of the attendants, “She was my English teacher thirty, no, thirty-three years ago.” He nodded without much interest. “Has she been here long?”

“Six, seven weeks. Took a fall. Hiking the trail at Land’s End—at her age! Broken leg, sprained wrist, wrenched vertebrae. Cast came off her leg yesterday. They decided to put off surgery on her back. See if time and a little physical therapy will do it.”

“Then she’ll go home?”

“Good question.” He shrugged. “What I heard was she sold her house to move to Oregon and take care of her sister. Got there just in time for the funeral. Came back. Was staying in a hotel, looking for an apartment, when the accident happened.”

“Then where can she go from here?”

Another shrug. “Doc says she shouldn’t live alone. Ask her and she says maybe she’ll go to live with—she names a different person every time. Whoever they are, they never come to see her. At least not when I’m on.”

After that, I began stopping in the courtyard after I left Aunt Lily. My visits to Ms. Lowe were longer on the days that Aunt Lily didn’t know me or mistook me for my mother (they never got along). Our conversations always started the same way:

“How is the real estate business?”

“Fine. How’s your physical therapy going?”

“Splendidly.” Then she would pick up a book from her lap. “Have you read it?”

I almost always had to shake my head, but, just like the old days in school, she never made me feel stupid and illiterate. Instead she would give me a big smile. “Oh, then you have a real treat in store!”

One day she looked up from a book, greeted me, and then sighed. “I’d never really thought about how much Mrs. Bennet suffered.”

“Mrs. Bennet?”

She held up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. “Everyone treats her like a fool, most of all Mr. Bennet.” She shrugged. “I suppose she is. A self-made fool. When she was young and pretty, she made herself into the silly, empty-headed girl that all the young men wanted, including Mr. Bennet. Now, like a good mother, she teaches her daughters to do the same thing—so some other young men will marry them, and later despise them as silly old women—just like her. So many funny predicaments are sad, don’t you think?”

Another time the book she held up was Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. As usual, I shook my head, no, I had never read it.

“Don’t let anyone tell you that poor Little Jude is a monster. He’s just a desperate child, trying to make sense of life.”

On the way home, I stopped to rent a DVD. There it was, on the shelf in front of me, *Jude the Obscure*. Why not? That night I watched it, and I could hardly wait until the following week to see Ms. Lowe.

“In the movie,” I told Ms. Lowe, “when Susan tells Little Jude she’s going to have another baby, he cries and says over and over, ‘How could you do this? Why?’ because there were already two more babies and no food and they’re being put out of their room and—was that in the book?”

“Oh, yes. It was a terrible blow for Little Jude. She wouldn’t give him a straight answer. So—tragically—he tried to solve a problem he couldn’t understand.”

“My grandfather told me the exact same story about himself. He was about nine or ten—just like Little Jude—when his father saved enough money to bring him and his mother to America, to a rough mining town in the rockies. Worse than what they left in the old country. So he comes home from school one day, and there’s his mother in bed with a baby girl in her arms. Great-aunt Lily.” I jerked my head up toward the window of my Aunt Lily’s room. “Grandpa told me he burst out crying and screamed at his mother, ‘We don’t have enough to eat, and you go out and buy a baby!’ He said all the adults giggled. He used to tell me that story over and over again. I think he never got over it.

You know, if things hadn't gotten better for them pretty soon, I wonder if my grandfather might have—could have thought—like Little Jude—“

“—that it would be better for his parents if he and the other children were dead.” Then Ms. Lowe mumbled something like, “I make a point of telling Little Jude that nothing was his fault, that's what children often think, you know. Luckily your grandfather didn't.” So she was starting to talk to the characters while she read? That made me smile to myself, remembering when we read *Othello* in school. I threw the book against the wall and yelled at him, “How can you be so stupid!”

Ms. Lowe was getting stronger now, out of the wheelchair, using a walker to get herself out to a lawn chair in the courtyard. At that point, I handed her one of my business cards and told her my firm handled rentals too. I'd be happy to help her find a living arrangement that suited her needs. No charge, of course. She just smiled and thanked me.

That day the book on her lap was *The Touchstone*. “Early Edith Wharton.” I looked blank, as usual. “About a man who secretly sells valuable old letters to a publisher. Pathetic love letters written to him by a famous writer. The book becomes a best-seller. Makes him rich, but—well, I won't give it away.”

“I bet I know. The famous writer is furious.”

“No, she had already died before her novels became famous.”

“Then it didn't matter.”

Ms. Lowe's eyes shot out the look that used to freeze students who were fooling around in the back of the class. “It certainly did matter. He should have returned them to her when she asked him to.”

“But she was dead. Isn't it better that he kept them?” I tried to say something smart. “If the writer was famous, the world needed to know everything about her to understand—“

“The world does NOT need to know everything. What belongs to us is in her books, transmuted, made into what we need, something universal.” She suddenly slapped the book shut with a sharp, cracking sound. “The work! We must study the art, not peek through keyholes! Here.” She handed me the thin book. “Take a few minutes to read it—then tell me what you think. And while you're at it, take a look at *The Aspern Papers*. Similar situation, but—“ She laughed. “Our Miss Tina has character!”

The Wharton book was short, so I sat down and read it that night. A couple of days later I got *The Aspern Papers* from the library.

The next time I saw Ms. Lowe, I said I thought Miss Tina made a mistake.

“Are you telling me she should have given the poet’s love letters to the so-called scholar who took advantage of her loneliness—even romanced her in a gondola—anything to get his hands on them?”

“That scum-bag? No, I would have thrown him into the Grand Canal. But I wouldn’t have BURNED the letters. When the aunt died, Miss Tina could have sold them to a museum or a rich collector. She certainly needed the money.”

“And that’s exactly why burning them makes Tina a hero!”

Aunt Lily was seldom really conscious now. After a few minutes, I’d go out to the courtyard, where Ms. Lowe would start talking about the book on her lap. If it wasn’t too thick, I’d take it home and read it that week, and, on my next visit to Maple Tree Gardens, we’d argue about it.

One day I found her sitting silently, tears quietly running down her face “Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes.” She took a long breath. “Today is my son’s birthday.” Son? I never even knew she had a son. “I needed to spend some time with a mother who would understand.” On her lap was Ibsen’s play, *Ghosts*. “You know the play?”

“I saw it a long time ago. Her son has syphilis—before there was a cure.”

“That’s right. Oswald made her promise to help him die when the syphilis reached his brain. My son had AIDS, and he wanted die while he was still himself, before pain or dementia took over. His doctor cooperated, wrote a prescription. When Steven decided it was time, I mixed the drug with applesauce so it wouldn’t taste too bad. He had become very weak. He asked me to feed it to him. I remember thinking, this was the first solid food I fed him, and now it’s the last.”

I took her hand.

A long silence, then, “Helene wants me to come to live with her when I leave here. She’s an interesting woman, lots of spirit, but—I think it would be too sad, living with her, sharing the same sort of loss.” Ms. Lowe thought a minute, then shook her

head. “Besides—Norway? I couldn’t stand that climate.” Then she let go of my hand, and our visit was over.

Helene? Oswald? When I got home, I went on the NET and googled *Ghosts*. The first twenty-odd sites were horror movies, TV shows, psychics. Finally I got Ibsen’s play. There they were. Helene and Oswald, mother and son. Ms. Lowe, like my Aunt Lily, was losing it.

After that, each time I stopped to talk to her, she named someone else who had invited her to move in.

“Jean keeps after me.”

“Jean? A relative of yours?”

Impatiently, “No, no, I mean Jean Tarrow. Tough-minded type, wouldn’t you say? No self-deception. I respect that.” Jean Tarrow. Albert Camus. We’d read *The Plague* a month before and had talked about it. “You just missed him.”

I decided to play along. “Jean? When is he coming to pick you up?”

“Oh, I don’t want to live with Jean. Such a lost soul. I think he has the idea that if he had a ‘mother’ to take care of him, like his friend the doctor—“

“Bernard R—what’s-his-name. I can’t pronounce it.”

She nodded. “I certainly don’t want to be his mother. Well, there’s time, and plenty of offers to choose from. Tina’s very persistent.”

“Tina? Oh, yes, Miss Tina.” I was feeling a little dizzy.

“She insists there’s plenty of room for me.” Ms. Lowe frowned. “I’m sure we’d get along, but—well, the truth is I don’t like Venice any more than she does.”

“Oh.”

“She still owns half of that crumbling palace on that narrow little canal, and that’s about all she has. We could manage on my pension. But in that damp old wreck (my poor arthritis!) on that smelly side-canal. Rats the size of dogs! Add the tourists over-running the place now that air travel is so cheap and—“ She gave a sudden laugh. “If I’m going to live in a sewer, I’d prefer Fred Daniels’ sewer!”

That night I googled Fred Daniels. I found a basketball player, a football player, three lawyers, a stand-up comic, two artists, a dancer, a prominent photographer, and—

there it was—“The Man Who Lived Underground,” by Richard Wright. I found it in a story collection in a used bookstore and read it in about an hour. At first Fred Daniels seemed like just the usual poor black victim of police brutality that you see all over TV and movies now. Except for what he did with the money and jewels he’d taken. Papering the walls of his hole with hundred dollar bills. Studding the mud tunnel floor with diamonds. Listening to spirituals that came through the sewer walls from the basements of poor churches? Or did the music just come from inside him? A poor fugitive going crazy? Going sane? I read it again, but I still wasn’t sure.

The following Monday Aunt Lily had another crisis. She was breathing on her own by the time I got there, but the doctor was still working over her. So I stayed in her room waiting until he was ready to talk to me. It was a sunny day. I went to the window and looked down into the courtyard. Ms. Lowe sat in her usual lawn chair near the little maple tree.

There were three men with her. Two black men wearing blue denim pants with T-shirts like the attendants wore—but I didn’t recognize these two. The white man was older: long, uncombed gray hair, scraggly beard, black suit, high collar, green cravat. Even from the window I could see his suit was shabby and soiled. He kept talking and waving his arms like a ham actor. Whatever he was saying, I could tell that Ms. Lowe and the two younger men didn’t like it. Some old relative of Ms. Lowe who’d suddenly turned up? He wouldn’t be much help to her.

The doctor had only more of the same to tell me. “We could lose your aunt any time, or she might come back again, like this. I gave her a sedative.”

I knew Aunt Lily wouldn’t wake for hours, so, I went down to the courtyard to check out Ms. Lowe’s visitors. But I was too late.

“Your visitors are gone?”

She laughed. “I couldn’t wait for old Spiteful to leave. You recognized Fred, of course.”

I cleared my throat. Twice. “Fred Daniels?”

“And you may have heard of the younger one, the one who calls himself Invisible. Never gave any other name, did he? No. Just like old Spiteful. A bit pretentious? Recluses always are, as if anyone cares about them digging in and hiding out.”

“Underground,” I managed, a little hoarsely.

“Old Spiteful is proud of being so nasty. He’s even proud when he’s groveling in shame.” She gave a little snorting laugh. “No mystery about his ‘oversensitive temperament.’ It comes out of a vodka bottle.” She laughed again. “I can’t think why that unpleasant man invited me to live with him!”

“He wanted you to—“

“All three of them. Not together, of course, they can’t stand each other. The youngest one, the one who calls himself Invisible, isn’t bad. He’s learned a lot, the hard way. He’s a reader too. We’d have things to talk about. I still prefer Fred, don’t you?

I kept up the act, with some effort. “So you’re going to live with Fred?”

“Oh, no. It’s still a sewer, you know.”

“Yes.”

“You’re looking pale. Something wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“With your aunt?”

“No. Yes. The usual. She’s had a bad spell, but she’s all right for now.”

“You look as if you need some rest.”

“Yes.”

I stopped at the library on the way home, and, with a little help, found the Dostoevsky story and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, got the details on Ms. Lowe’s three “friends” who’d gone underground. Well, it made sense that, when her mind started to unravel, that’s the way it would go.

What didn’t make sense was that I had seen them.

The rest of that week I was swamped with work. A big apartment house sale was finally going through. By the end of the week, I was sure that I hadn’t really seen those three men. Or, if I did, probably they were attendants, nurses, doctors, whoever. I’d just been working too hard. My commission on the apartment sale would give me more than enough for a nice, quiet trip, maybe a cruise, as soon Aunt Lily—no longer needed me

Still, the next week, I was relieved to find Ms. Lowe alone. I nodded politely when she told me that Daniel and Myrah had invited her to live with them. “But I’d never go to the Middle East these days, and, you know, they were looking terribly sad at what

has become of all their idealism about creating a Jewish homeland.” (The book on her lap that day, of course, was *Daniel Deronda*.)

The following week she was chuckling quietly when I stopped by for a brief hello. “Huck says he and Jim have the raft all ready whenever I want to shove off with them. He’s incorrigible!” I didn’t have to look to see what book was on her lap.

The next time, she was looking tired and peevish. “It’s Bazarov. He wears me out. I admire that young man, but you know that way he has of making you feel that whatever you say is an evasion, a lie, a compromise. People who question everything and trust no one are—are as bad as religious fanatics. Don’t you think so?”

This was getting beyond weird! I’d just finished reading *Fathers and Sons*. Was she getting into my mind with a book before she even mentioned it?

“So you won’t live with Bazarov,” I said, in a careful, level tone.

“Oh, he didn’t even ask. He’ll always be alone.”

“Happier that way.”

“Happy? How could he ever be happy?”

Feeling uneasy and resentful and—I don’t know what, scared? I managed to laugh. “Well, there’s always Ernest and Gwendolyn.” I’d just seen an old movie of *The Importance of Being Ernest* on TV. “Don’t you think they’d be lots of fun to live with?”

Ms. Lowe glared at me silently. Then, “I find the pair of them quite sinister. Empty. Cold. I had to tell them to stay away. Heartless people. Clever and heartless.”

I felt as if I’d shown a serious fault in my character just by knowing about them. I didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t know how to just get up and leave. Then suddenly she said, “Better to spend my remaining days with a miserable bug like Gregor Samsa!” and turned a mischievous grin at me. We laughed together. I’d been forgiven.

She picked up the book on her lap. “You know Faith?”

I looked at the cover and gulped. *Collected Stories of Grace Paley*. “Not yet. I just got that same edition off a remainder table.”

“I like her,” said Ms. Lowe, “and I’ve always thought it would be fun to spend my last years in New York. Exciting. Uncomfortable, of course, the way she’s always

crowding up her life with so many people. Those children of hers are so precocious, they scare me a little, and she attracts such hopeless boyfriends.”

That night, after I read a few of the Faith stories, I shook my head. No, I’d have to tell Ms. Lowe it would be a mistake for her to—then I realized what I was doing!

My next few visits with Ms. Lowe were the same. Name a book I had looked into—damned if it wasn’t on her lap the next time I saw her. But at least she didn’t talk about going to live with the missionary priests in *Black Robe*, or with the Sicilian Prince in *The Leopard*, or, good God, that half-starved *Old Man Who Read Love Stories* on the banks of some forgotten stretch of the Amazon River. I hoped that meant she was giving up those hallucinations—and leaving me out of them too!

Suddenly there was no time to think about Ms. Lowe’s sanity or my own. Aunt Lily took a dive into what were clearly her final days, maybe hours. I turned my clients over to a colleague in the office and got on the phone. I had to contact nearly forty relatives I hardly knew—hoping they wouldn’t come. No such luck. It was spring break, and many of them seemed to like the idea of a family reunion over the dead body of their grandmother or great-great aunt, or second cousin. My parents would stay at my house. I started booking hotels for the others.

For two days and three nights, when I wasn’t on the phone, I was sitting, dozing near my Aunt Lily’s bed. “Keep talking to her,” the nurse said. “You never know what she might hear.” So I bent down to her good ear and reeled off the names of distant relatives who were finally coming to see her. Sometimes I stretched my legs and relaxed my eyes by standing at the window and staring down into the courtyard. Early on the third day I saw Ms. Lowe, up from her chair, leaning on a cane, surrounded by about a dozen people. I asked the nurse, “Who are all those people?” She answered from the bed, not turning to look. “Probably some kind of class. Geriatric rounds. Doctor lectures on different medical conditions.”

“Doesn’t look like a class.”

“Could be a party,” said the nurse. “When the weather’s good, one of the patients might have a birthday party in the courtyard. Or one of the aides.”

Two of the women wore long dresses. But it didn't look at all like a party. More like a meeting.

"Why don't you take a break?" the nurse said, adjusting the IV drip in Aunt Lily's arm. "I'll be here for the next few minutes. Get some fresh air. I'll call you from the window if anything happens."

I went down to the courtyard. Ms. Lowe didn't see me at first. I watched her, standing silent in the midst of these people. I'd never seen her with her mouth turned down like that, her shoulders slumped. Depressed. She saw me, but didn't even try to give me her usual smile. "How is your aunt doing? Not well?"

"Not well," I nodded. "But you are. You're on your feet, no walker today."

"Yes," she said, flatly. "The doctor says I can leave any time." She did look strong, as if she could go on another ten years or more—the way old people do now—but as if she took no pleasure in the thought.

"You have a lot of visitors."

"Just the usual—you know them."

"I don't think so."

"Oh?" She sounded so tired. "They're in and out all the time, but never all at once like this. I'll introduce you."

I followed her around as she muttered, listlessly, first to the women in long dresses. "Monica, Anna." A tall, very beautiful woman. Before I could say anything, a younger woman, short, pretty, but with an unhappy mouth, nudged her way in. "And Emma, of course."

Then Ms. Lowe led me around the maple tree, "introducing" the others with a weak gesture and a name. "Lily." A tiny, tense woman who gave me a frightened, eager-to-please look. "Edna," who glared at me with defiant, defeated eyes.

Ms. Lowe led me right past a wild-eyed teenage boy and a blonde, thirtyish brute with even wilder, despairing eyes. "You don't want to meet them," she murmured, but they heard her, and both of them gave us the finger.

She ignored them and turned toward a sad man in his fifties. He wore overalls, like a farmer. He took my hand and bowed over it with a kind of natural, courtly grace.

“Mr. Shimerda, this is my friend Monica. Her visits have helped me to get through some tedious days here.”

He bowed his head slightly again as he gave me a gentle, melancholy smile. “Most correct. Only one friend make possible to live,” he said with a heavy accent I couldn’t place.

Ms. Lowe turned toward a stunted, pale little boy watching me solemnly, then shrinking back. “Don’t be afraid. You know Monica. She understands.”

“Ms. Saludi! Monica! Come, please!” It was the nurse, at the window. I ran up the stairs to Aunt Lily’s room.

“She just slipped away, between one breath and another. Don’t feel bad. She wouldn’t have known it if you were here.”

I picked up the first grand-niece that afternoon at the airport. The rest of the relatives came in during the next three days. My mother, my sister, and my twelve-year-old niece took over feeding them, so that I could concentrate on the “arrangements.” There was no fuss over my decision to cremate, and only a bit of trouble getting a priest for a Catholic funeral, because Aunt Lily had hardly entered any church for sixty years, but that was what she had asked for, so that was what she got. It went okay. So did the catered lunch in the church social hall. There were a few sour looks when some relatives found out that I had been named executor. I told them I’d be perfectly happy if any of them wanted to stay and help with the paper work for probate, the sale of Aunt Lily’s property, the sorting out of—they backed off, saying they trusted me to take care of things, they really had to get back home.

They all disappeared over the next two days, leaving me the usual loose ends to tie up while I got caught up at the office. For the first time in two weeks, I slept straight through the night without waking up to remember another thing I’d forgotten to do.

Two nights later I had a dream. It was a replay of my last visit with Ms. Lowe. We were standing in the courtyard, and she was introducing me to her visitors, starting with the little boy she’d been talking to when the nurse called me in. “You know Little Jude Fawly, of course. And Antonía’s father.” The gentle, sad man in overalls took Little Jude aside, patting his head and speaking softly to him. Ms. Lowe took me around, making abrupt introductions. “Paul and Schmeryakov, of course.” She hardly glanced at

the two who'd been so rude to her. They smirked at me. "Edna Pontellier, Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Lily Bart," she rattled off. "I expect more will turn up. Here comes Ophelia." She looked once more at me, intently, as if she were in some awful struggle, and losing. She tried to smile. "I get the feeling they're ganging up on me." Then she turned away.

I heard a scream and woke up. But the scream was inside me. Smerdykov? Yes, he killed old Karamazov, then hung himself. Little Jude, Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Lily Bart, Ophelia. All suicides.

I wasn't sure about the sneering teenager named Paul or—what was her name?—Edna Pontellier. When I got to the office I looked them up on the NET. Yes, quite a few citations of a novel called *The Awakening*. Edna, another suicide. No luck with Paul, until I called the public library. "Mmm. A suicide? Try Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case.' A short story. As I remember it, a teenager steals some money, goes off to the big city, blows it all on high living, then kills himself."

It was two hours before I could get away from the office. I hurried to Maple Tree Gardens and went straight to the courtyard, where a couple of patients sat dozing. No Ms. Lowe. I went into the office, where a new woman stood behind the counter.

"Lowe? Esther Lowe?" I nodded. "Gone."

"Died?"

"No, no. She left, checked herself out—let's see—over a week ago."

"Alone?"

"I wasn't—"

"A man in overalls? With a sad little ten-year-old? A mean-looking blonde Russian? A tall woman in a long dress?"

She was looking at me as if I was crazy. "I'm trying to tell you, I wasn't on that day."

"Did anyone see who she went with?"

The woman shrugged. "You'd have to ask around."

"Did she leave an address?"

"I wish! She left about twenty boxes of books."

“No forwarding address? You’re sure?”

“Let me get out her paper work.” She riffled through a folder. “Here it is. Checked out a week ago last Tuesday.” Two days after Aunt Lily died. The woman showed me the form. On the line marked CONTACT PERSON, Ms Lowe had written the name of her bank. The line marked FORWARDING ADDRESS was blank. “Oh, what’s this?” She pulled out a small blue envelope. “All stamped and everything. Should have been mailed. What did you say your name is? You have ID?” When she was satisfied that the name and address on the blue envelope were really mine, she handed it to me. The note in it was brief:

“Dear Monica: You caught me on a bad day. Don’t worry. Seeing all those poor souls only convinced me I can manage on my own, with short visits to friends. The books are yours. I’ll be in touch. E. L.”

After hearing nothing for two months, I went to her bank. I had to work my way up to the manager to squeeze out any information. Ms. Lowe had arranged to have her pension paid into her account and would make withdrawals on line, “from wherever she happens to be. She said she’d be traveling.”

“Has she made any withdrawals yet? From where?”

He hesitated. “I’m afraid that’s all the information we’re allowed to give you, unless you have an order from the police.”

Another month went by. I had just about decided to go to the police. But then a postcard came, a view of old St. Petersburg. The message on the back read, “The young man who won The Bet makes a wonderful guide. Best wishes, E. L.”

I didn’t have to ask who that was. The story was in Ms. Lowe’s collection of Chekov. I’d been thinking about him—the man who’d bet that he could stay fifteen years in solitary confinement, spent the fifteen years reading, and then rejected the fortune he’d won.

Three years passed. Every few months I would find a picture postcard in the mail: a view of coral reefs, postmarked Sydney.

“Elizabeth Costello will make me  
a sun-tanned vegetarian yet! E. L.”

a smudged desert photo, postmarked Mogadiscio.

“Jeebleh says better to move on.

Still too unstable here. E. L.”

a view of the Rio Plata, postmarked Montevideo.

“Off to Sulaca with Nostromo,

a man of few words, but solid. E. L.”

a drawing of a tree-lined river, signed Tagore, postmarked Bengal.

“Finally I heard Tara sing! E. L.”

The only one I didn’t find in Ms. Lowe’s books was Jeebleh. A librarian told me that he’s in *Links*, a novel that just came out.

Another year went by. Then—just today—the mail brought a postcard with a view of Mount Fuji. I couldn’t make out the postmark on the back. Under it were three rows of hand-painted calligraphy. Underneath, in pencil, Ms. Lowe’s message:

“Issa says my brush strokes not bad. E. L.”

Back to the library, Asian Resources Center. The librarian looked at the card and nodded. “That would be Kobayashi Issa, 1763 to 1827.” She studied the calligraphy for a few seconds, nodded again, then found me a translation by Robert Hass.

What good luck!

Bitten by

This year’s mosquitoes too.