### ALEXANDER THEROUX

# Laura Warholic

or,

The Sexual Intellectual

A novel

#### BOOKS BY ALEXANDER THEROUX

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Cover design: Alexander Theroux | Interior design: Adam Grano | Editor: Gary Groth | Copy Editor: Steven Moore | Promotion by Eric Reynolds | Production Assistance: Kristy Valenti | Published by Gary Groth and Kim Thompson | Laura Warholic or, The Sexual Intellectual is copyright © 2007 Alexander Theroux. All rights reserved. | Permission to reproduce material must be obtained from the author or publisher. | To receive a free full-color catalog of comics, graphic novels, prose novels, and other fine works of artistry, call 1-800-657-1100, or visit www.fantagraphics.com. You may order books at our web site or by phone. | Distributed in the U.S. by W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. (212-354-500) | Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books (800-663-5714) | Distributed in the United Kingdom by Turnaround Distribution (108-829-3009) | ISBN: 978-1-56097-798-8 | First Fantagraphics printing: December, 2007 | Printed in China

# for Sarah ab imo pectore

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Vectors converge in tensegrity but they never actually get together; they only get into critical proximities and twist by each other.

—R. Buckminster Fuller

You can write on a wall with a fish heart, it's because of the phosphorus.

—Anne Carson

The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy the heavens. Doubtless that is so, but it proves nothing against the heavens, for the heavens signify simply: the impossibility of crows.

—Franz Kafka

There is another world, but it is in this one.

—Paul Eluard

Every sin is the result of a collaboration.

—Stephen Crane, "The Blue Hotel"

### I

#### Womanifesto

One lover is always murdered in the act of love. A man poetically "dies"—Elizabethan slang for orgasm—at the moment of crisis. But in the encounter does a woman, impaled on passion, die as well in her surrendering swoon? The question goes far deeper than merely asking where love goes; when losing ourselves in an embrace we exchange fates. There is no disfigurement in reproduction, it is clear, only restatement. In a real sense, every shape is a letter. I am only asking, in the final detente of coupledom, who survives and why?

wrote "The Sexual Intellectual," recollection taking precedence over tact to illustrate a point of love as he raced to finish his column. He glanced out his office window to a sky the color of pewter. It was the kind of late September afternoon, dark and rainy, smelling of fog and old quilts, that reminded him he lived in a seaside city. As he wrote from scribblings taken from a notebook in his coat pocket—he always kept two books there, one to write in, one to read—his eyes hurt, for he was almost as blind as Orion.

Eugene Eyestones, partly because he hated his job at *Quink*, a monthly magazine, was late as usual with this installment, an ongoing self-dialogue—a solipsist can only talk to himself—on the subject of love, the one planet in the universe, as he often said, where everyone is a stranger. What can one say touching on the subject of romance

when the ache of love so often resembles the ache of grief and guilt? It presented in its moods and mysteries the world's most severe paradoxes. How difficult it was for two people to be at the same emotional place at the same time! Lust, sex, passion, desire, jealousy, fear: were they not the source of man's profoundest terrors and tragedies in the oligopoly of broken hearts? Or was he merely thinking of the commercial journal for which he now worked? It was a serviceable enterprise incorporating feature articles, profiles, book and movie reviews, literary interviews, sports, poetry, photos, and various monthly columns, and aimed for a kind of hip, low-life expressionism with a view to culture by way of a neo-tabloidal formula in which each fragment seemed comprehensible, while the whole enterprise was one of anarchy, at least to Eyestones.

He had been going through hell during the last few months by way of a public scandal over a controversial essay he had written on the thorny subject of women, creativity, and the laws of nature. The piece had generated more heat than another, smaller, inflammatory article he had written several years before on the criminal assault of six savage, unrepentant black rapists upon a jogger in Central Park, when he had referred to them—they had bashed her head in with a brick, spilled 80 percent of her blood, and left her for dead—as "monkeys who did not deserve the space they lived in." That he had never intentionally employed the noun as a racial insult did not matter, not when the political shills and conniving imbeciles and dunces of both colors got hold of it in the politically correct arena, for immediately voices were raised demanding he be fired.

Taking off his eyeglasses, Eyestones wiped his eyes, paused, and slipped out of his desk drawer in order to ponder its luminous splendor a photo of a beautiful blonde woman. Staring in at her face, pure and meltingly lovely, he wondered was E. M. Cioran correct when observing, "The hermits of the first centuries of Christianity were saints at grips with the dearest of all their possessions: *their temptations*"? The photo was one that unbeknownst to her he had taken by the old bandstand just off Tremont Street in the Boston Common when, surreptitiously, he had to feign with his camera that he was aiming at a mallard! His deep passion for her, glowing brightly in his heart now for three months, would not go away. Strangely, he had never spoken to her. Oddly, it didn't matter to him.

Who was it who remarked that love ceases to be a pleasure when it

ceases to be a secret? We are always between two decisions, he thought. Two eyes, seeing double, avoid diverging images in order to contect one. A dilemma, by definition, always has two horns.

The telephone on his desk rang. It was Warholic, the editor, shouting for his copy. Swiveling around in his chair, Eyestones checked his watch, assured him he was almost finished, and hung up. He produced a blue-and-white teapot and one of several cups from a long-since-broken set and heated a pot of water on a hotplate. Shaking out a fistful of Good & Plentys, he mumped them, put the photo away, read what he had written, thought it too abstract—even confusing—and then took up his pen and continued to write.

It is the subject of *telegony* that addresses the carrying over of the influence of the sire on the offspring of subsequent matings of the female with other males, and of course, speaking of long-term relationships, the volume of that influence cannot be insignificant. An apposite joke comes to mind. He: "I've spent enough money on you to buy a battleship." She: "And you've spent enough in me to float it." As the joke subsides, however, we find ourselves facing another, graver consequence. A white woman—

He paused briefly, hesitating for a moment to make reference to race again, no matter how innocuous, following so damnably upon the Central Park fiasco, but then thought *bugger it* and went ahead and wrote what he wished.

A white woman who has first lived with a black man and then afterwards with a man of her own race will often present her second husband or lover with a more or less intensely colored child. Modified (telegonized) by her first cohabitant, the woman cannot deny that first blood dominates. Di uovo bianco spesso pulcin nero, as the Italian proverb goes. But another matter of consequence is raised, a serious and even disturbing one, that touches not only the telegonized mother and the nature of her child but the core of the identity of a woman, indeed her very alteration. In other words, I am asking what of the influence on the female body by the repeated insemination of the male when trillions of sperm neither needed nor used for purposes of fertilization are absorbed by a woman's mucous tissues and make her gradually more and more like her mate?

How easy it is to write about the complexities of love, he thought,

even to give advice to others in matters of the heart that one did not take oneself. Since he both was and was not involved with a woman, a small matter yet to sort itself out, he found it strangely curious the way love is an agrammatized in the word involved. A writer who must remain in a real sense immune to experience, the better to analyze it, must also in reality be at the mercy of it. And yet afterwards he often does not know whether he owes more to the impulses that drive him to meet his life or to the aloofness that inexorably disentangles him again to comment on it. Was love an empty monstrance awaiting the sacred host of our heart? It was a new feeling for him, love, since for a long while he had willfully frustrated his appetites and fought to get sex out of his system. What lines of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa had he once written down and kept under his helmet? "The fields, after all, are not as green for those who are loved, / As for those who are not. / To feel is to be distracted." It seemed so long ago. Whenever his good friend Duxbak asked him upon leaving on Fridays what he'd be doing for the weekend, Eyestones always laughingly replied, "Alone is wisdom, alone is happiness,' quoth Emerson," although Eyestones was never quite certain that he believed it.

Duxbak looked like a ball in tall grass. Viewed at the office as a solitary, pint-sized, overly earnest jerk-genius, and because he abstained from joining in various games of office ridicule, standard behavior there, he was mocked as a fool and called a "TBF," as he unfashionably buttoned the top button of his "flag," or shirt. He looked inexplicably umbrellaless and rained-on in the way a penguin looks like a sad little man. He was in fact a contented fellow whose face shone as bright as a Christmas bulb. He wore his glasses on a grosgrain cord that dangled around his neck. He wore a pocket watch, kept strict timetables, referred to clothes as "duds," pillowcases as "pillowskins," paperclips as "trombones," and unself-consciously sported a cap-with-flaps in winter. "He irons his lunch" became a joke at the office, but the fact is he actually did so in order to try to keep the bulkiness of his sandwiches flat. He also matter-of-factly used outdated expressions such as "topnotch," "suit yourself," "What a dandy of a day," "darned if I don't," "swell," "And how!" and whenever he happened to be leaving the office he always waved his hat—he wore one in every season—and cheerfully called out, often to no one, "Abyssinia," a unique Duxbakian take on the phrase, "I'll be seeing you." He always consistently but somewhat crackpatedly said "forth and back" instead of "back and forth." A strong religious faith governed his positive outlook and his way of trying to buck someone up in a cheerless mood was to say, "Worse things happen at sea." Of all his verbal crotchets, however, none was more heartily repeated at critical times, invariably to reinforce his faith that all was well—but it was also a salute—than "The egrets have appeared in Methuen." There were some hints that he fasted and prayed and on weekends worked in a soup kitchen. He was not old, for all that quaintness, only in his late forties. He knew a lot about antiquated habits and old methods, such as how to peel a chestnut and what a snath was and when herring ran and why, and the difference between a wedge and a froe. His shyness was in fact gentleness, the gentleness of a person at peace with himself. He was the servant candle, kind and loyal, and, although intrepid in his solitude, one who felt the sufferings of others, even to the point of giving away most of what he owned to Saint Vincent de Paul charities. He supposedly owned nothing but the clothes he stood up in. Although harassed at the office by rumor, innuendo, and intimidation, a form of workplace violence called "mobbing," he was not so much indifferent to guile as not alert to it. The fact of the matter was, he led a spotless life. No one knew it of course because no one knew him.

Quink, which had a modest subscription list, was also sold in various newsstands, bookstores and, uniquely, coffee shops—a corporate merger beneficial to reader and drinker—throughout the Greater Boston and Cambridge areas and several larger cities in New England. It was the project of an editor's lucky idea, his mother's money, and a fairly talented clique of ambitious, hustling, infighting writers, music critics, movie-reviewers, food-writers, people whose job it was to see and be seen, to gossip, to move in social circles, and to get near the edge of what they felt was current in the media, politics, and fashion, a competitive aggregation of semitalented if mean-spirited oddballs: news dinks, journalists, disgruntled critics, grumpy reviewers, culture obsessives, and wise-cracking hangers-on who worked their small jobs and came up with the commercial fads and formulations that made up the contents of the magazine. Its offices could be found on the opposite side of a long arcade-lined entrance to a three-story building on High Street, near the Ouincy Market. A piano company occupied business space on the ground floor, and there were two separate entrances to the main building, as were there not in life, it always amused Eyestones to ponder, dear lady, dreadful tiger?

Duxbak, short and stout as a cruller, came waddling down the corridor, quacking, "E², E², is your copy ready yet? I've got to shake the tree."

Eyestones had always tried to be readable in his continuing observations on the subject of love, a subject that included, among other things, sex—to him the one universal topos of mankind's mystery and, regarding people, the first window to need. Has the groin a brain? The intellect a gland? And what of the mind is in the face, he wondered, the soul in the eyes? How we adjust ourselves to the luck of our face, and yet how that same face itself often fails to give a clue to ourselves. he thought, momentarily taking a look at his reflection in the late afternoon window peering back at him like a dark, disapproving pirate. He was a tall fellow, something over six feet, with dark searching eyes and straight brown hair that, reaching to his collar, gave him a look of Bohemian carelessness. There was in his look both strength and gentleness, the kind of searching and chiseled alertness his friends associated with the kind of apostolic face found in Renaissance studies. An innocence about him-sometimes a remarkable ineptitude in dealing with matters of daily life—belied his searching intelligence. He generally wore corduroy jackets, jeans, loafers. A lucid ironist with a sharp nose for the fraudulent, hypertensive, intellectual, curious—he quickly formed opinions—he was ruled by various aversions, chief among which was bullshit in all its proliferating forms, subtle and gross, reaching from the pie-faced morons telling lies on television to the calculating lies of common acquaintances to the most private, much more devastating lies we tell ourselves as the desperate last-resort ferocities we all of us use to escape guilt and guile. Slavish adherence to popular opinion for him was particularly revolting, although he tried to read everything he could and compulsively needed to know. Giving up one's freedom was not merely some petty human foible but rather the corrupted essence of our entire scrape and remained for Eyestones our most serious existential predicament. He was as poorly sighted as a kiwi and, wearing thick glasses, peered out from a perceptibly deep place with a look that went far inside you—that is, if you were what he happened to be looking at. One somehow never knew.

He was also eccentric. His friendships were few, sometimes combative, charged with a shared eagerness and jumpy impatience. A fierce unsociable side fed that impatience. He was *farouche*, at times. A controlled exterior belied a person who often and easily felt wronged, but

he believed that his enemies, people he disliked, fabricated a way for him to know justice by way of what he had to scorn. It took the obnubilation of an idiot to be loval to mankind in general, he felt. And the minor remedy he took from the otherwise incapacitating jugheads who despised him was that they only confirmed his discipline in this vale of tears to be less obsolete. He wrote poetry, sent it to magazines, had even published two small volumes. He tended to ritualize everything: the way to do things. His most successful personal relationships were sustained by writing letters. He hated telephones, faxes, e-mail—being reached! He wrote daily, drove too fast, cooked with joy if not flair, loved to hike, and just happened to be an authority, self-taught, on the behavior of crows, a study he had taken up in youth: how they lived, ate, fought, nested, socialized, and survived. He loved books, much preferred reading to being with people, and to the scandal and disapproval of many of his acquaintanences had arranged his life that way. He walked with a relentlessly canted forward motion that somehow gave the impression that wind was involved. He disliked the media, almost never watched television, despised corporate hustlers, mistrusted all authority—everyone from prelates to politicians—and, having long ago come to see that both the Democratic and Republican parties were each as thin as a wafer, had no faith whatsoever in government. Whereas at one point in his life he would have gladly launched, unprodded, into passionate diatribes in the belief that he could change people's minds, he was no longer convinced that anything he wrote ever really mattered. It was not so much due to diffidence or the onset of doubt as to the more significant fact he had gone so long without the communication of intimacy.

Like all self-inquisitive people, he began to find destiny a personal malignant, a challenge he felt he had to face in the ongoing conversations, more or less his social life, that he always had with himself. It was a dialogue born of his belief that the meaning of life, much of it, could in fact be found. It involved courage, to a degree. When he was growing up, whenever anything really frightened him, he felt the need of going too far in that very dark direction simply to prove himself capable not so much of feeling courage as experiencing freedom. Originality, which was an aspect of freedom, meant more to him than anything. As a little boy, in an attempt to be unique, he would often try to do something that he felt at the certain point of a moment, one particular instant, no one in the whole wide world would be doing—like staring at the W on

a Wheaties box or focusing on a small particular robin on a branch or, say, smelling page 12 of a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. Just knowing in his mind that no one else on earth but he alone was doing that *very thing* at that *very moment* could become a thrill for him. Eugene Eyestones was a dreamer. He did not weep from trouble because of his dreams. They constituted the place where, in his solitude, he deeply felt something. He often reverted in his mind with fond, almost mystical remembrance to walking suspended-like—a recurrent dream of his—through, into, *in*, an Edmund Dulac illustration of a medieval fairy tale, his earliest childhood picture-book. Dreaming was for Eyestones a distinct way of living elsewhere, like walking through the world wearing a pair of green spectacles. A diagnostic pair he actually owned.

A watchful person, he was mostly silent, generally reflective, unless one asked him a question, whereupon he would often give a full, articulate, always scholarly, sometimes pedantic answer, with a little more information than most people usually cared to know. He was referred to at the office at less insulting, charitable moments as "The Man with the Faraway Eyes." "Some people live too much in their heads" was the office-wide judgment on him. He spoke with a kind of rushing, ongoing, over-vaulting insistence of speech that was generally pleasant, soft and identifiable by a sort of insistent stutter. He neither gave nor received orders well. His imagination functioned better when he was alone. For his own peace of mind he divided existence up into a pie chart of three distinct parts: nature; culture (books, music, etc.); and then the workaday world, this last a grouping he met with a descending curve of vitality and which he tried to ignore. His aloofness was the occasion of a taunting quatrain that Discknickers, one of his colleagues, once taped to his desk-lamp:

> All of us always see Eyestones pondering sex like a sly bones, but, regarding people, Eugene is constantly heard but not seen.

In a sense Eyestones's pessimism arose from a true idealism, a deepseated yearning for a better order, a wish to find perfection in the chaotic facts of reality, an impulse that stood and stands behind much art.

He lived alone. He had never married. He had had many pointless affairs over the years, substituting one ghost for another, and had dated everyone from pretty models to malnourished ballerinas to shiny socialites and at one time even had a relationship in New York City with a peremptory old heiress with Chinese eyes and a face-lift like mercury glass silvering shut her head like a gazing ball in a garden. But in the end what had they wanted and had it been him? Was H. L. Mencken wrong when he stated that not one woman in a hundred ever marries her first choice among marriageable men? He could not say. But he tended to develop intense, irrational crushes and in his enthusiasm once even spent \$125 on a ticket that he could ill afford in order to attend a banquet just to sit, even if at a remote table, in the same room with the exquisite Queen Noor of Jordan, whose beauty utterly distracted him. It was his firm belief that nothing in the whole wide world for pure loveliness could ever match the beauty of a woman. No vast mountain. No white soaring bird. No iridescent sunset. It was a vision in its singular if charming magnificence almost complicit with the nature of disillusion itself. On the other hand, since a good many intermediary plagiarisms always coexisted with and indeed often coopted that glory he also saw that, while adding to their complexity, such things separated us from the light of our dreams. Examining the heart and the head had always intrigued him, the complicated soul, especially what challenged, often provoked, even jeopardized, its stability. It was ideas that he loved, plain and simple. He was an intellectual.

Acquiring and imparting information was a method of meditation for him, a sort of cyclic attempt to keep impermanence in mind as a kind of living proof that he was moving, and as a kind of promise of growth. A Buddhist monk whom he had once met up in the wet highlands of Chiang Mai had shown him how, saying, "The chief problem is the inadequate space of the prayer hall." Although Eyestones, who had been fighting at the time in Vietnam and was not sure if that was spiritual advice or a simple worry about accommodation, had ultimately decided it did not make a difference and had taken it to heart

After he had returned from combat, he realized by a habit of the heart that he wanted not so much happiness anymore as awareness. He saw less and less the logic of the world, but figured that if with each word we win a victory over emptiness and loss, some faith was nevertheless proposed as a way to cope. He never wanted to be one thing after he had returned. During his hitch in Vietnam he constantly read the poems of poet Fernando Pessoa and had gone so far as to learn Portuguese to read them in the original. The poems were all true.

The poems, along with a young woman there whom he had loved, had saved his life. They both came from and fed the archives of his blood, annulling the pain and annealing his spirit. He went through faith and unfaith. "The world is whatever is in us." "Things are because we see them." "The search for truth always confers, if the search merits a prize, the ultimate knowledge of its nonexistence." What did he once whisper at a friend's burial there, weeping onto his boots, when hearing the words he suddenly smiled?

If I had succeeded
In not asking who I was,
I would have forgotten
How forgotten I am.
The wheat waves in the sun
Always aloof and equal.

A sexual intellectual was another paradox. It had not been his own idea, neither the job nor the title, but he had needed money, and it was work, even though he was being paid through a bean-blower. He knew a lot about the subject because he read a lot and thought about what he read. In his late forties, Warholic, the editor who had hired him, was a blowhard with big doughy thighs and enormous cheeks that whenever he spoke gave off a weird buccalingual echo. His nose resembled the numeral 6. He was prematurely balding, and the odd innovative patterns and failed but slick geometries he used to comb the little hair he had left paradoxically did less to cover the baldness than draw attention to it. He was always in his office either eating lox sticks or unfairly bawling out one of the people who worked for him but whom he viewed as nothing but useless prats. What columns ran, when, where, and why, were his bailiwick, and any that failed to meet his approval felt the sting of his tongue, which seemed almost long enough to wipe his nostrils, like a cow's. He was as the food he fed on—he habitually visited sex clubs at night—and, insisting in his typically bullying and misogynistic way ("Women should come with directions!") that a sex column, a wellinformed one, was a must for the magazine, a fascinating sort of pollution, he had hired Eyestones, who over time however had turned it into a successful if somewhat controversial forum. It had become popular. And most importantly—to Warholic—made money.

Warholic was a food glutton. He also picked fights, trying to goad

targets into counteracting him, was a bean-counter, and held grudges. He had to win. He pursued vendettas. His present antagonism was directed at his former wife, a raddled woman named Laura, with whom he had lived in San Francisco for five years, briefly married, and then divorced within six weeks. He presumed himself free of her until he found out that, with draconian fury, she had traipsed after him to the Boston area where, upon getting settled herself if not with the comforting finality that word implies, she began to embarrass herself and everybody else by making scenes at the office whenever she chose to stop by.

"Eyestones, is that goddamn column done yet?" came a voice booming over an intercom. Eugene saw in his mind's eye the rising of the baleful moon. It was Warholic shouting the fourth time that afternoon. "Such a *kushiyah*!"

Obese, tall, cynical, Warholic had the thick, everted lips of Oscar Wilde and a moon-fat face that gave him the grey, oily look of soft cheese. He was a big balloon of a man whose luffing bagginess made him look even more portly than he was, but his hands were small and soft and always employed in quick, cozening motions. He had a long, mean head, jutting high and blocklike but tending to the ovoidal when straining with anger. While a morbid fatness blurred his features, making it impossible for his face even to hold any other expression than the discontented and cantankerous hoggishness that was habitual to it, its lineaments always rattled into focus when he set his menace loose. He reeked of kreplach and oniony sweat. His suits were splurched, his ties usually wide, gaudy things, mostly of yellow and oven-gold, and he always squished when he walked on shoes with cheap neoprene soles. It was only one of the many ironies of the day that it was Warholic and his ex-wife, a woman whom Eugene Eyestones had unfortunately come to know by way of the turmoil she brought into his own life, as into the lives of others—creating in the cat's cradle of his trying to help her a hideous triangulation with the editor—who had, together, inadvertently given him, Eyestones, the idea for the particular column that, late as usual, he was now racing to complete.

But as the sperm of a woman's mate fertilizes her eggs, why should it come as a surprise to anyone to learn that his repeated infusions would by the same means necessarily modify, shape, and eventually determine the blood of his mate? And would it not follow as night does day that she would eventually begin to approximate or even duplicate him physiologically, who knows, maybe even psychologically, almost as if by direct quotation, in the same way the women in Vincent Van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters* crudely take on the look of potatoes? A woman's body inevitably changes; why not also her mind? Don't the Chinese believe that jade, if worn long enough, becomes part of the person who wears it? The ancient Zoroastrian that one need but have a dream to enter it?

After a certain length of time, does it not seem biologically logical that a sexually active woman's blood that has been so long the receptacle of the same man's sperm must be saturated over the years with what inevitably must reconstruct it? Redesign it in favor of his own DNA? Rob her of the very quiddities by which she was once what she was? It involves the paradox that states what water gives, water takes away. Just as medical inoculations hold out the possibility of an efficient immunity against disease for a lifetime, can we not by analogy conclude that a mate's sperm confers on the blood and through it on the whole female organism not only properties it had not possessed before their invasion but, indeed, the crucial template of the designate male? "She had even begun to look like him," observes Jane Scovill of Oona Chaplin, who was married to Charlie Chaplin for thirty years. "Her face was losing its classic angularity, deep circles appeared below her eyes, her cheeks had an enile ruddiness." Isn't such a transformation only the inevitable result of any extended interrelationship between lovers?

Love literally conspires in the swapping of mooning hearts to form a union of two. A woman with her kisses disappears.

We become the dog we buy.

Eyestones read the page over. Was it cynical? Too facile? If so, was it any better to avoid subjects that were controversial or indifferently ignore them? To his heedless or neutral colleagues his standoffishness was cynicism, in any case, indicating a sort of disengaged amusement. Or so most of them felt. Others considered it merely an attempt at his refusing to share his vitality. While still others found his serious disposition to be the result of some mad arithmetic being calculated in his mind to solve any sorrows he had seen. What did it matter when all of it was self-scrutiny anyway? "I'm almost finished," he told Warholic. "I'll give it to Duxbak for his opinion, copy-edit it, and have it in editorial in a half-hour, OK?"

What is curious is that some women, as if by instinct, some deep biological refusal, *oppose* telegony. "The Duke's Test," a blood test that is used to discover whether a woman's inability to conceive might be due to her partner's sperm, is the index. Doesn't it measure what she rejects? Isn't her body stating not only that it seeks to avoid getting pregnant but also that in a more profound sense she as a woman flatly refuses to be owned, to be mastered?

"Everywhere in the living world male generative cells are brought forth in an overwhelming abundance," wrote Dr. Jules Goldschmidt of Paris in the Medical Review of Reviews (April 1921), pointing up the significant fact that nature works with excessive profusion, offering us the essential example of millions of spermatozoa being spent in order to fertilize but a single egg. Goldschmidt then points out that "it is inconceivable that the uncounted other male cells are condemned to useless death without any action on the entire female organism, into which, by reason of their mobility they can easily penetrate either into the mucous membrane of the uterus or into the lymphatic and blood capillaries, and through them into the whole circulation." It is in this aspect that sexual intercourse is, arguably, not so much a dialogue as a monologue in which men do all the talking. I have often thought that men in their smug superiority actually pursue sex in the way they seek to sculpt, or strive to shape. What would better feed the ego of the tribal narcissist than to know that he can gradually transform his mate into himself? But does what he sculpt in fact acquire the lineaments of the original? The lineaments, perhaps, but not the exact line. How could it? After a certain period, the recharacterized woman is no more herself after the transfer of fluids than a photographic portrait is a true likeness. It is rather a fact transformed into an opinion, a stolen simulacrum, a selected modality, accurate in that, while all photographs are accurate, in the final transformation none of them is quite the truth.

After knocking at the door, Duxbak came running in and, beagling over his friend's shoulder, took up several sheets to read them. Few people ever came to Eyestones's office, but for Duxbak he poured a cup of tea. He was his friend, and it was only Duxbak he would allow to look over his shoulder, otherwise a phobia of his. He had started this unlikely job with a bit of altruism, believing that it would give to this middling magazine a dimension its mainly literary thrust needed, but the subject for its vast, bewildering fullness, like trying to square a circle, was rarely right whenever he looked at it and never the same

whenever he looked again. Not surprisingly, his reliance on himself and the aspects of his life as any kind of valid index for his views of love—his heart was his soul, his art was his goal—made him feel, as time passed, less and less confidant of what to say.

Duxback looked up and said, "A peach of a piece, I should judge, and the usual straight-talk express"—he seemed wistful—"but aren't you setting the table for another set of headaches, dear man?"

"I suppose so."

"Remember the other essay?"

"Who could forget?"

"By the way," asked Duxbak, "is it that the very *first* male partner is the one who leaves the indelible impress on the female he sexually possesses?"

"So some say," said Eyestones, pouring a cup of tea for himself. "That is perhaps why in a man's compulsive hunt for virginity—who knows?—there actually may be an unconscious drive for self-identity."

Pausing to ponder Warholic's baleful influence on the personality of his dithering wife Laura, a personality that he had found equally baleful, Eyestones could not deny that he had found the best example of telegony right under his nose. He realized Warholic was not her first lover but felt that, for all he knew, he may have been the longest.

"In the land of the giving, the temptation is to take," he said. "Anyway, given the colonialist proclivities of mankind, isn't the unchartered whiteness of a map always a challenge to conquest?"

"And to possession," said Duxbak, shaking his head in pity. "Indeed, indeed."

"What inseminates, replicates," said Eyestones. "A face is as forged as a photo." Checking his watch, Eyestones sat down to write out the last page of his article, concentrating on bringing it to conclusion.

The more complicated question as to whether or not the lover who unconsciously seeks to reproduce himself recapitulates the photographer seeking inner significance through actual forms is difficult to answer. Where is the deliberating mind that ponders its thoughts in pursuit of a body? Furthermore, is a man depleted who gives and so made less? Rendered weaker? Does a woman completely die to herself? And to ask the poet's question of the act, does she put on his knowledge with his power? Finally, what on earth does nature intend as the result of this mysterious mirror of identities? Is copulation imperialism? Promiscuity a means of

self-perpetuation, adventurism, and control? Isn't it possible that sex is as much a method of the male gene for getting itself copied as it is nature's way of fertilizing an egg? Is it a question of union or exploitation? Sedition? Pollution? Svengali-like creation? Is it a question of the adulteration of blood or the enhancement of it? Or should general judgments be avoided? How so in the matter of genes? Won't ironic alterations of pedigree, finally, result in transforming women so? Won't low eventually speak to high in mad abandon? With conycatchers ultimately proving cousin to Carolingian kings, and kitchen cooks to cardinals? And shall it not follow that high goes to low? Among the ancestors of the Marquis de Sade could be found the Laura of Petrarch's sonnets.

Eyestones slipped the last sheet over to Duxbak. The Sexual Intellectual! It was precisely because Eyestones was not a connoisseur of eros, quite the opposite, in fact, that without recourse to drivel or drama he could manage to write his monthly column out of the orts and sorts of his life, from books, from thinking, from research, from various relationships he had long ago assigned, not unhappily, to the distant past. He loved the solitude he had to think about such things. His circumstances bred his questions. Was it self-delusion to feel, he wondered, that a lack of attachment seemed to make one more rather than less objective, more alert to everything, less pulled in the arbitrary or biased directions that a good many others faced? Solitude is in a sense a deepening of the present, and he kept his counsel when time presented itself by realizing that art—music and books—for the longest time had been preponderating over his life more than the actual living of it. By restricting his small needs to a few essentials, keeping his mind fixed to his thoughts, he was managing, to avoid unnecessary complexity. With one notable exception, and she had died in the bloom of youth, he loved but had not fallen in love with the women who had loved him—at least until now.

"No apostrophe before 'varsity'?" asked Duxbak, pointing to the sheet. "It's a colloquial term for university. Old-school spelling. Not important."

"Thanks," said Eyestones, laughing, amused at his friend's specific, if antique, diligence. "I've developed a theory about Beethoven's *Violin Concerto in D major, Opus 61*, which I was listening to last night," said Eyestones. "I am convinced that anything so multifarious, any work of art that can run the spectrum of emotions like that, must be about

love, nothing else, only love—desire, jealousy, passion, hope, loss, joy, all variations of it. Just everything. The whole story of it. All of its snakes and ladders. The deepest emotions."

Whether he was staring up at the height of hope or descending into the valley of resentments, Eyestones was a pilgrim of the Absolute. He believed, queerly, doggedly, that it was more difficult, more disappointing, for an intelligent person to go through life than for a dimmer one to do so, simply because as the sense of loss and the sight of failure was everywhere, and most discernible in oneself, no misery along those lines could not be avoided and having to be felt had to be faced. "I am a sorcerer," Eyestones once told Duxbak, laughing, "who in the mere waving of it fears the magic of his very own wand!" He also believed that it was a person's *knowledge* alone that persisted after death and that was majestically brought to heaven, which made him value more than anything a working intelligence, thought, fed by reading, cultivating the brain, discussion, insight. The sole purpose of one's life, he believed, was to find out the meaning of it.

Duxbak finished reading.

"You don't like it."

"No, I do," said Duxbak, who more than anyone knew his friend's heart. In an extended pause, they exchanged a long, meaningful glance that Eugene understood. They kept few secrets from each other, the two of them.

"But what about that last line in your piece?"

He had witnessed some scenes of Warholic's ex-wife.

"I mentioned only the name. Petrarch's infatuation," said Eyestones. "Look, in a way it's even flattering to her."

His friend simply waited.

"All right, all right," said Eyestones. "Strike the last two sentences."

Duxbak dutifully crossed out the lines, quickly ran out, and raced the pages up to editorial as fast as he could. It was the end of a long week, thankfully Friday. Putting on his coat, Eyestones crossed to the editor's office, making sure as he passed the bank of switches by the stairs to put out the lights in descending order, a tropism for order with which he found himself lately burdened. Was it something he had brought back from Southeast Asia, a reaction-formation, the need to feel order as a defense mounted to ward off the feeling that one was going to pieces? It had begun with a minor obsession with counting. But it had strangely grown. He had lately begun compulsively reopening

the lids of mailboxes to be certain his mailed letters got swallowed. He now always sat on the left side at the cinema and proportioned items of food on a plate so as to finish none first, and he had even started mentally reconstructing horizons wherever and whenever he saw aesthetic insufficiencies in them that did not fit his mind's eye. He was ready to leave but not before poking his head into the editor's office to explain that the delay of his column was due to the fact that, having written two versions of it, he had to choose which was better. It was the parable of the man with two watches: never now can he have the right time. Eyestones walked down the stairs and went out. The sky overhead was still grey as an eraser but the rain had stopped. Warholic, opening an upper window, shouted down the side of the building with bloviating loudness, "Hey, Eyestones, we're all doubles, right?"

"Are you referring to Zoroaster?"

"I'm talking about multiplication!" yelled Warholic. "There are two men in all of us!"

What a good definition of nothingness, he thought, going out into the autumn dusk, knowing—unfortunately knowing—the myopic always sees double.

And sometimes twice.