

## I. PROLOGUE

When I reached fifty, turned that mortal corner, I decided it was time to tell my own story unmediated by metaphorical disguise. Mainly I was blocked on a novel I had started two years ago and needed to try something else to get out of my funk. I imagined in telling the story of my life I would rediscover pieces of myself I had lost, which might have some interest to readers who had a similar sense of incompleteness and dislocation. In the past, whenever I thought of writing a memoir, I would hear my father's ironic voice mocking my presumption.

—So you think your life is more interesting than anyone else's?

I had to find some way to silence my father's imagined objections before I could begin. If not exceptionally unusual, my life at least had been eventful. I had been married three times and in love (in the illusion of) at least seven others; I had four children; I had lived passionately (some of the time, much of it in the imagination); I had served in the army (between wars); I had written a number of books.

And if not that eventful, at least my life had been substantial and serious. Or so I believed or mostly believed or aspired to believe. It was possible that the memoir I was positioned to write was a story of self-deception. All those marriages and divorces: they were a record of disappointment and failure. I had either chosen to marry the wrong women (the roseate delusions of romantic love) or I had been too self-involved to adjust to living with an-

Jonathan Baumbach

other person over an extended period of time.

Well, wasn't that the point? My failures were what gave my life the shape and dazzle of fiction. I continually found new ways to deceive myself into making what turned out to be the same mistake. I had married three times to women, on the surface, considerably different from each other, though after I had lived with them for awhile they all turned out to be the same person, the female version of my semi-mad father. It was almost mystical—like some kind of damnable fate—the bizarre metamorphosis of each of my wives into the same prototypical impossible wife. How many men could boast that they had married three different female versions of their father?

## II. AN AUTHORIZED LIFE

Unattached for the moment, serving the indefinite life sentence of his freedom, B felt at times (not all the time) unendurably lonely. The Harts, Max and Heather, out of kindness or pity or whatever, had him over for dinner at least once a week. For reasons he didn't want to investigate, they had made looking after him during this difficult period their personal project. They were relatively new friends, had been neighbors during his most recent failed marriage. He had only known them seven years. Max was a stockbroker, who had some ties to the movie business including a West Coast apartment. Heather, after a 20 year hiatus, had gone back to school to get a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. They were both lively people, though it took B almost a year to warm up to them. He had never imagined in the early days of the relationship that he'd become such inseparable friends with this hermetic couple.

Now he spent so much time with the Harts, it was as if the three of them had become an entity. Whenever Heather hugged him—usually coming and going—he felt a rush of pleasure that made him want to run for his life. He imagined a secret (sexual) understanding between them, an understanding that they were both too sane and mature to take to the next stage.

The Harts did whatever they could to ease his bouts of sadness, which came and went but rarely stayed away for long. When he told them he was blocked as a writer, Heather insisted she knew the way out. The thing to do was to write his autobiography for which, she supposed, he had a ready-made story. B en-

thused over the suggestion but privately rejected the idea. Non-fiction, because of its implicit presumption, had never seemed to him quite credible. Still, wanting to please Heather, he sat down at his computer that night and wrote an opening sentence to a memoir, a sentence he worked and reworked until it was dense beyond comprehension. Though unusable, it was an irrevocable beginning. He had a project now between the other things he did to fill his day—the exercises for his back, the pursuit of love, the caretaking of his parents, the reading and unreading of his unfinished novel.

Heather and Max had given him sanction to tell his story.

Max had to go to LA on business and he was trying to convince Heather to join him for the week. It would mean missing two classes and she said she would think it over.

—Why don't you come too? he said to B.

B said he didn't know what he'd do without the two of them for a whole week, but that he had just started this memoir they had assigned him.

—Give me a couple days to mull it over, he said. He knew he wouldn't go but he wanted the possibility, or the illusion of the possibility kept open.

Heather, for her own reasons, also decided not to go with Max. When she called to ask him to dinner on Sunday, he said he had a prior engagement, which was a rehearsed lie.

—You always come here Sunday night, Heather said. How can you possibly have another engagement?

—Well, I'm not feeling too well, he said. My back has been bothering me.

She laughed at him. —I'll expect you at seven, she said. And bring a red wine if you have something available. I love the wines you bring.

He arrived at ten minutes after eight, got a \$65 ticket for easing through a stop sign on the way, pulled something in his back getting out of the car after driving around for twenty minutes looking for a place to park. He was severely bent over when

Heather answered the door to let him in.

—I don't know that this is such a good idea, he said, stumbling by her, avoiding a welcoming hug.

—What is it? she said, following him onto the screened-in porch where they generally had their pre-dinner drinks. —You think I'm going to seduce you, is that what it is? Not to worry.

—You're embarrassing me, B said.

She went into the kitchen, leaving him to fend for himself. There was a fifth of Jameson's on the table, a bucket of ice, a pitcher of ice water, a bottle of seltzer and three glasses. There was also a pate with a bite out of it, bordered by a circle of Carr's mini water crackers.

—If you're having a drink, make me one too, she called from the kitchen.

He poured two glasses of Scotch, added water to one and soda to the other and delivered them to the kitchen. Heather was smoking a cigarette and stirring something in a pot.

—Hey, I've never seen you smoke before, he said.

Heather stubbed out the cigarette. —I don't smoke around Max, she said. Actually I stopped smoking 9 years ago.

—Don't start again on my account, he said.

—Aren't you being just a bit presumptuous? she said, turning her attention to something at the stove.

—I was joking, he said, not sure how to take her rebuke. I didn't think your smoking had anything to do with me.

An awkward silence followed in which she seemed to contrive busyness in order to avoid looking at him. After a suitable hiatus, he excused himself and accompanied the drink he had been nursing back to the porch. He had never seen Heather like this. His evenings with Max and Heather had generally been high-spirited and playful, each of them inspiring the other two to their most witty and likable portrayals of self.

After some minutes of trying unsuccessfully to figure out what was going on, he went back into the kitchen. He was carrying a plate of three mini crackers smeared with pate as a truce offering to Heather. She was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and drinking what looked like a vodka tonic in a tall narrow

glass.

—Would you believe it, she said without looking up, I've forgotten how to cook.

—I doubt that, he said. You're one of the best cooks I know.

—Dinner will be served as soon as I get up, she announced.

On her feet, her balance seemed precarious and she followed the contour of the worktable—set up as an island in the center of the room—over to the stove. She handed him a bottle of wine to open, the Zaca Mesa cabernet he had brought as a gift. Once the dinner was on the table and they were seated—she in her usual chair, B in Max's place—she seemed to brighten, to become momentarily her old self.

—I want to hear all about your memoir, she said.

—There's nothing to tell at this point, he said. I haven't settled on a strategy for it yet.

She lifted her fork—she had eaten very little, had mostly moved her food around—and pointed it at him.

—Forget strategy, she said. Just make it truthful.

Her remark annoyed him. —Do you always know what the truth is, Heather?

—Always, she said, sticking her tongue out at him.

She resumed looking disappointedly at her food.

—Tell me about your childhood. You had one, didn't you?

—I had two or three childhoods, he said. I've been looking at old photos as a way of sorting out the past. In none of the pictures I located was I smiling. Heather's eyes went in and out of focus.

—I'm sorry to hear that, she said. I had a happy childhood. All my friends had happy childhoods. I feel so bad for you it makes me want to cry.

—Eat something, Heather, he said.

Heather put a small piece of chicken in her mouth and chewed on it as if it were work that required all her powers of concentration. —The food is good, she said. You don't always know how things will turn out. I'm feeling odd.

She got up slowly, smiled at him as an afterthought, and

walked away from the table. A few minutes later she called something to him from upstairs, something which sounded like, —Don't wait for me, but it was possible he misunderstood and she was asking him for some assistance. She had been too drunk to eat, which was uncharacteristic. He had never seen her this out of it before and he thought if she were sick the least he could do was help her through it.

So he went looking for her, went up the stairs calling to her, not wanting to invade her privacy without permission. He heard what sounded like a hair dryer—it could also have been the purring of a cat—and he followed the sound to the master bedroom. Heather was sprawled across the bed, her feet hanging over one side. He straightened her out, removed her shoes, and turned to leave.

—Where you going? she asked, her head popping up. This is not me.

—It's time for me to go home, he said. When she didn't respond he went downstairs and recovered his jacket from the hall closet.

—Go home here, she called from her room.

—I don't know what you mean, he said.

—I can't hear you, she called back. Did you say something? Did he say something?

He grudgingly reclinced the winding stairway and lounged in the doorway of the Harts' bedroom. Her eyes were closed and he waited for some indication that she was awake before announcing again his intention to take off. When she opened her eyes and saw him or perhaps saw his looming shadow in the doorway, she let out a gasp.

—Come in if you're coming in, she said. She patted a space on the bed next to her.

—I'm going now, Heather, he said.

—Have a safe trip, she said. ...You've always led me to believe that you were besotted by my charms. Was that a calculated deception?

He found himself laughing or trying not to laugh, which amounted to the same thing. —You're a funny woman, Heather.

—I just want to make it clear that I was not asking you to share my bed, she said. I was thinking you might like to stay in one of the spare bedrooms and drive home in the morning. He glanced at his watch which was hard to read in the dim hallway. One of the hands was between the eleven and the twelve. The other was either behind it or illegible in the dim light.

—Get some sleep, he said, meaning sleep it off.

—Just because I had too much to drink and retched on my shoes doesn't make me a bad person, she said. If you feel you have to go, you have my permission to leave. Go.

Her abrupt dismissal caused him to hesitate. —Heather, I want to say that your friendship and support have been important to me during what has been, as you well know, a difficult period.

—Is that right? she said. Well your friendship has been important to me too. I have a confession I want to make to you. Will you hear my confession, friend?

Of course B didn't want to hear it, it was the last thing he wanted to hear, but how could he walk away after saying what he had. He found a hard wooden chair and pulled it up a half a foot from the bed. There was an odd noise in the room with them which he recognized momentarily as Heather sobbing, fighting herself to speak.

—This is between us, she said. Max doesn't know anything about this and I don't want him ever to know. Give me your promise that he'll never know.

—I can't control what Max knows or doesn't know, he said. If you tell me something you don't want repeated, I'll respect that.

She laughed. —I feel as if I ought to ask you for a blood oath whatever that is. This business has been driving me bananas. Give me your word you'll not say anything.

—If you can't trust me, don't tell me, he said.

—That's fair, she said. Or is it? About sixteen years ago, it's more like seventeen now, I was in therapy briefly with this guy who had a practice in the neighborhood. I had a panic attack while I was walking to the market and I saw his shingle and I knocked at his door. Anyway, he was very kind and patient and he talked me

through my anxiety. After that we set up a once a week session to explore the causes of my panic attacks. From our first meeting on, he was more like a friend than a therapist. I remember telling him how comfortable I felt in his presence. It was the same for him with me, he said. He had just separated from his wife and I was going through a sticky patch with Max. He was very easy to talk to, he was, and I badly needed someone to talk to.

So it was not about him, this confession, which was both a relief and a disappointment. Heather had another crying jag at this point and much of the rest of her story had to be pieced together to be made coherent. The gist of it was she had been having a secret affair with this man for 17 years for which she felt terrible guilt but (had B got that right?) they had only slept together, rather unsatisfactorily as it turned out, one time. The affair consisted in meeting secretly, usually once a week, to discuss the need to keep matters secret and whatever else came up. There had been nothing but talk and some hand holding after the first go.

—Don't look so astonished, she said. I don't understand it myself. So? She took his hand and he moved from his chair to the edge of the bed.

—What do you want me to tell you? he said. You're a smart person. You know what you need to do.

—I don't, she said. Tell me what I should do.

The intimacy her confession implied elated B, overrode any discomfort he felt at being alone in the bedroom with an attractive woman who was married to a friend.

—Do you love this man you've been seeing? he asked. The question produced an extended silence.

—I must, don't you think? she said at last. Why else would I keep seeing him? That wasn't the answer he was hoping to get.

—I don't see how you've kept this from Max. Max must know something.

—You think so? I have the idea that Max doesn't want to know. Sometimes I think Max is having an affair and is using my infidelity as his justification. If you were Max, would you want to know that your wife was involved in a long term relationship with another man? The question touched an unhealed sore.

Jonathan Baumbach

—You have to stop this once a week nonsense, he said. And I think you should tell Max. She was silent again and he sensed her annoyance with his answer.

—I know it's hard, he said, but you're a strong person, Heather.

—Fuck you, she said.

When she released his hand, he got up from his perch on the bed. His back was hurting and he had difficulty straightening up.

—I meant the fuck you in a positive way, she said. It would be much appreciated if you stayed the night. When I get into a panic, I need to have someone I can trust around.

When B (the hero of my memoir) finally confronts his wife about the man she has been spending so much time with and asks if she is having an affair, she says no, it is just a friendship and of course they are working together, collaborating on this children's book. The answer comforts him and he lets matters ride another week. And then another. The next time he confronts her, she breaks down and cries.

He said or was thinking of saying that he would stay until she fell asleep when Max phoned from Los Angeles. While they were talking, he tried to slip quietly out of the room but he stepped on an errant shoe and turned his ankle, holding on to the wall to keep from falling. His back was throbbing. He tried not to listen, but of course he couldn't avoid hearing their conversation. They talked for fifteen minutes or more, just chat for the most part, a sharing of the events of their time apart. They were so easy with one another, so respectful, so affectionate, so intimate it was as though they were taunting him. If he were ever to imagine an ideal couple on the page, the Harts would be his example. Heather mentioned that he had come to dinner but not that he was still there, not that he

was in the bedroom with her, his back against the wall, trying with minimal success to tune out their conversation. He felt further compromised by her implicit lie.

—Why didn't you tell him I was here, he complained when she was off the phone, but of course he knew the answer and so did she and so there was nothing to be said.

2.

When B was five years old, he had gotten hit by a car, causing a mild concussion and some residual anxiety. He seemed "nervous" for a number of years after that, which was attributed to the trauma of his brush with death. He dredges up the memory of his accident—not that he has ever completely forgotten it—when he finds himself lying in bed, their legs entangled, next to his friend's wife.

He thinks of himself perpetually caught in the lights of a car, trying to decide which way to tumble to avoid being hit, paralyzed by indecision.

Even as an adult, he felt vulnerable to the unexpected. He could never wholly shake the feeling that some unseen danger awaited him around the next blind turn. As a way of averting disaster, he tended to anticipate bad news. Still, he was unprepared for a call from Max virtually demanding that he come down to his office that afternoon for a talk.

—What's this about? he asked him. Max mumbled something about not wanting to discuss it on the phone. Before going off to see Max, he called Heather to get some inkling of what awaited him. Another piece of unexpected news: Heather had no idea that Max had made this appointment with him. She had, she told him, considered ending the relationship with the man she had been having the non-sexual affair with for seventeen years, but she hadn't told Max about it, not yet.

—So, she said, the reason Max wants to see you can't have anything to do with me. I suppose you wouldn't want to tell me afterwards what it was about.

—If I betrayed Max's confidence, he said, how could you

trust me not to betray yours?

—I was teasing you, she said. Don't you know when you're being teased? Still, it's a strange thing for Max to do, isn't it? Has he done something like this before?

—Done something like what before? he asked.

—You know, she said. Don't give me a hard time, okay? And don't ask me to ask Max because Max doesn't know I know he set up this meeting with you. All these secrets are making me crazy.

B thought of postponing his meeting with Max but he was too distracted to do much else so he procrastinated, worked up some low level anxiety, until it was time for him to leave. Despite what Heather had said, he was all but sure that this meeting had something to do with his having spent the night at their place when Max was away. Why else had Max been so grim over the phone.

Max took him to lunch at an exotic vegetarian restaurant called the Sensuous Palate without even asking him if the choice was acceptable.

—I'm thinking of becoming a vegetarian, Max announced as if that explained something.

He had to wait until the meal was almost over for Max's bombshell. —I want you to put yourself in my shoes for a minute, he said. That's something a writer, someone who uses his imagination for a living, ought to be expert at, right?

B was careful with his response, continued to suspect Max was playing some kind of cat-and-mouse game with him.

—I'm probably the exception that proves the rule, he said. I never put on other people's shoes. I have enough trouble getting my own on the appropriate feet.

—Good, Max said, an indication that he wasn't listening. Unlike you, I'm someone who's always believed in the sanctity of marriage. In the 24 years Heather and I have been together, there have only been two lapses. That's not perfect, but certainly from what I hear better than average. A week ago if I made this confession to you, I would have said there had been only one lapse in twenty-four years.

—Something happened during your most recent trip to California.

Max put his hands over his face. —Mea culpa, he mumbled.

B gave an inward (unheard, he hoped) sigh of relief. This wasn't about him apparently, though he remained wary. —Did you at least enjoy it? he asked.

—Hated it, Max said, a nervous laugh escaping. I can't even tell you how it happened. Gail's husband had left her and she was feeling down and I was trying to make her feel better. She worked for me on a picture I had a producer credit on a couple years ago and we had remained friends. Anyway, it was probably a one night thing. I don't see it happening again.

—You don't have to justify yourself to me, B said.

—I feel terrible about what happened, Max said. This isn't me. And I haven't told you the most disturbing thing. The girl, she thinks she's in love with me and that this is going to be some kind of permanent thing with us. I told her I have no intention of leaving Heather, but she won't believe me. It's a mess. The kid's in a very vulnerable phase.

—What do you want me to tell you?

—How would you handle it if you were in my shoes? Max asked.

—I'd fuck things up, he said. The thing to do right away is to tell Heather.

—That's the one thing I can't do, Max said. When I had my other lapse—this was about 18 years ago—Heather forgave me, but she said if it happened again it was over between us.

—You don't think Heather would forgive you? You've been together 24 years.

—Two months from today is our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Max said. Why does she need to know? And the last thing I need is to be forgiven, for God's sake. Being forgiven is one of the worst burdens I can think of. Anyhow, would you want to know if you were her?

B didn't answer. He took a bite of his apricot and bamboo tart and savored the experience with insufficient pleasure. He didn't

think he could fit into Max's shoes and Heather's shoes at the same time.

—You want me to tell her, don't you? Max said. You want to see Heather hurt and our marriage in distress. If Heather and I broke up, you could step in and comfort her. That's what you want, isn't it?

3.

B didn't go to the Harts for dinner the following Sunday, made some excuse about having to see an old friend who was visiting from out of town. It seemed to be a mutual decision since Heather, who had picked up, said they had been remiss in not letting him know they were going to be away for the weekend. He was fond of Heather and Max and felt aggrieved his friendship with them had taken this awkward turn. He took time off from his memoir to write them a joint letter, which of course he couldn't send because it implicitly violated each of their confidences.

The following week B was not invited to Sunday dinner or at least not explicitly invited. After not seeing Max and Heather for three weeks, he called to say he wanted to take them to dinner at Cucina, which was a place the Harts tended to go on celebratory occasions. Max answered, sounded glad to hear his voice, said Heather was out and that he would call back after he spoke to her. B's curiosity got the better of his judgment.

—Did you tell her about your second lapse? he asked.

—That was bad advice you gave me, buddy, Max said. Because I was foolish enough to listen to you, matters are a little dicey at home right now. Look, I'll call you back when Heather gets in. Max called back a few hours later to say they would have to pass on his dinner invitation. —Heather doesn't want to have anything to do with you for the time being.

The news surprised and pained him. B tried to imagine his offense, imagined a variety of possible offenses and regretted them all. —What's this about? he asked.

—I haven't a clue, Max said. Even if I knew, Heather has the

right to represent her position in her own words. Don't you think so?

—Would you put her on the phone?

Max was gone for a few minutes and B rehearsed his opening line to Heather, a running gag they had between them, but it was Max who returned to the phone. —She's too pissed to talk to you, he said.

For the next few days, B knew in effect what it was like to be banished from Paradise with no hope of return. The two people in the world he felt closest too had, for no fault he was willing to acknowledge, turned against him.

I have to admit at this point that I had my doubts as to whether this was the right episode with which to begin the book.

B's wife, which is how he still thinks of her, calls to ask him to pay the gas bill at his former house. While she has him on the phone, he asks her if she thinks the Harts are reliable people.

—I haven't seen them since our breakup, she says. Have you been seeing them? I always liked him better than her. There's something about Heather that tends to put me off.

4.

After a month of banishment passed, B ran into Heather at the local D'Agostino's. She was coming down the very aisle he turned up and he stopped in his tracks the instant he saw her. There was no way to avoid being seen so he affected a casual pose, waiting for Heather to make the first gesture. She had been studying a shelf of floor waxes so it took a moment for her to notice him.

—Where have you been keeping yourself, stranger? she said, approaching like the car he had been unable to escape in his

dreams. She gave him a hug that lasted it seemed a couple of beats longer than convention required. She waited for him to finish his shopping and they walked out of the supermarket together. He carried one of Heather's supermarket bags for her along with his own small pickings. He rarely bought more than three or four items at a time when he shopped.

—I'm glad we're friends again, he said.

—What do you mean again? she said. When did we stop being friends?

—Well, he said but then he decided not to press the issue.

—How's the autobiography coming? Heather asked. Have you found a strategy? You see I remembered what you said.

They stopped at Purity, a local diner, for a cup of coffee.

—My strategy is to start with the present, he said, and associate from it into past events with similar configurations. Or not.

—Whatever, Heather said. She stared off into space as if she were dissecting his remarks though perhaps she was musing about something else altogether. The coffee was terrible as usual, but its familiarity had a kind of nurturing effect. It was the essence of all the bad burned coffee he ever had in diners everywhere. It was like mother's milk, he thought, though as he had never been nursed (his mother had tried, she said, and failed) he could only imagine that mother's milk, whatever the taste, was similarly comforting. He found himself staring at Heather's breasts.

—You'll be happy to hear I've taken your advice, she said. It's a great relief, I'll tell you, not to have to carry that burden around with me.

—You told Max? he asked.

—Better than that, she said, looking around the restaurant to see if there was anyone she knew. I've created a situation where there's no longer any need for confession. I think you understand what I'm saying.

He was uneasy with the confidentiality of Heather's tone. The sure way to kill a friendship was to be given glimpses of a secret life that didn't and couldn't concern him. To change the subject, he told her how much their friendship, the dinners at their

place, had meant to him over the past few months.

She laughed at his earnestness. —Tell me something I don't know, she said.

—I would if I could think of something, he said.

After they had finished with their coffees—the waitress had filled his cup twice—B walked Heather from the restaurant to her door.

—I'm glad I ran into you, she said, hugging him again. That was fun. We should do this more often.

He watched her climb the steps to her brownstone, feeling oddly embarrassed as if their incidental meeting, their going for coffee together, his escorting her home, represented some undefined violation. Not only that but it felt like a violation he had committed many times before. When she was gone he felt a sense of loss which surely had more to do with something in his past than with Heather going inside.

B surveyed his feelings on the way home. He was not romantically involved with Heather, he decided, and had never been. She was a smart, slightly crazy, sexy woman and he liked her. But he was also aware that he wanted something from her, wanted her—it was hard to define exactly what—to ...love him. Was that what it was? Wasn't that pathetic!

So when Heather called to invite B to have lunch with her the following Thursday, he offered some involved probably unconvincing lie as to why he couldn't make it.

—If you won't come, Heather said, I'm going to end up visiting Roger again. Do you want that to happen?

Surely those weren't the only two choices, he thought, but he withheld the remark. —Roger is your heroin habit, he said. And I'm your methadone cure.

—That's not so far from the truth, she said.

He regretted turning down Heather's request—you don't turn down a friend who's asking for help—and he called back the next day to say he had gotten out of his prior appointment and was now avail-

able for lunch. The first time he called he got their answering machine and left no message. When he tried again an hour later, Max picked up. As an improvisatory move, he reissued his invitation to take the two of them out to dinner some Sunday. Max said they would prefer to stay in and barbecue and why didn't he join them this Sunday like old times.

So his relationship with the Harts had turned another corner. He had been restored to their good graces. "Paradise regained!" he wrote in his journal. Yet the sense of loss he had felt a few weeks ago when they had cut him off lingered. It was further exacerbated by an unreasoning anger he felt toward Max and Heather as a couple, as an entity that excluded him from the intimate world they shared. It was all so familiar what had happened, the twists and turns of his relationship with the Harts, it was as if he had been rehearsing in variation the same unwatchable movie all his life.

B's mother dotes on him, yet his father's needs, which are various and unending, almost always have priority. Do I have that right?

B called the Harts Saturday morning and begged out of his appointment for Sunday dinner. Heather tried to cajole him into changing his mind. —It won't be the same without you, she said. You have to come. Tell whoever it is you're seeing that you have a prior unbreakable commitment to us. You know we love you. You have to come.

It was as if the sirens were singing to him and he was lashed to the boat. —I appreciate what you're saying, he said, but I can't do it this Sunday.

—You're a shit, she said, laughing.

And though he knew it was true, he liked himself better for refusing her.

In truth I had gone back and forth on B's decision. Either way was problematic. Even if he went to the Hart's barbecue, his relationship with them would be irrevocably altered by the events preceding the renewed invitation.

You weren't quite alive, B told himself, unless you surprised at least once in a while that unseen imaginary observer watching you perform. On Sunday morning he called the Harts and got Max. After they joked a bit—their usual byplay—he told Max he could see them tonight for dinner if the invitation was still good.

—You come over to dinner, said Max, and I'll forgive you everything.