

## No One Gets To Stay

Since leaving the priesthood Julian has slept with twenty-six women—how this number baffles Diana, whose knowledge of bodies is limited. Sometimes she does not know what to make of her own body with its wild need to touch Julian. And so she asks and asks and asks, “What were they like? What did you do with them?” These women hover at the edge of darkness as Julian utters their names. Sara wore flaming skirts of orange; Lucinda insisted on drawing the bedroom shades. Amy traveled to the Grand Canyon with Julian, where she pronounced the great wonder nothing more than a big hole in the ground; Maureen wrapped her body in thick cotton T-shirts, boxers, and high, white socks, never to be removed, making sex a keyhole affair.

Each name is a moment from the past pronouncing the future, a time when Diana will take her place near the end of the line. Julian tells her all he can remember of these women. “There was one,” and he stops. His thin shoulders contract and his pupils glow. He touches Diana’s arm, and even as he folds himself around her, she knows he feels his phantom lover, the one, he says, the one he nearly married. But this phantom woman refused him, and Diana must know why.

“She fell in love with another man,” Julian says. “I still see her,” and he hesitates but then continues solemnly and without pride of possession, “I remain friendly with her—with all of them.”

Diana wonders how they see it.

The snow is so white it is blue. Diana walks through Harvard Square arm in arm with Toni; they are an unlikely couple: a young Nigerian poet and a middle-aged white professor. Toni announces she has broken off her affair with a married man—he will not leave his wife for her.

“Did you really think he would?” Diana asks.

“No,” Toni replies. “But I’m tired of living alone. I think I’ll get a dog.”

“Dogs are reliable,” Diana says. “As long as you feed them.”

“And husbands?”

“In general? Or mine?”

“Yours.”

“Definitely unreliable.”

“Maybe you should feed him.”

A man in a brown coat with smudges of black sits on a bench, shouting at a woman in an oversized black down jacket. Homeless. A sheet of torn tin foil shields a half-eaten sandwich, which the woman grabs.

“You stupid cunt!” The man spits at the woman.

The woman slaps the man, and the fight begins. Soon they are rolling in the snow. The man stands up, unzips his pants, and urinates on the woman.

No one stops them.

“That’s love,” says Toni.

Diana lives in an alternative sphere of values, where salvation is dictated not by what she doesn’t do, but by what she does. Is this a higher order? Diana is not sure. There are many things she no longer does, and she doesn’t miss them. But every day she misses her son Christian, and every night is a torment—warring storms of flame and thunder, her son’s body thrown into the air, spiraling inexorably downward in smoke, obeying grim little rules about gravity and fire, echoing thuds of flesh and bone in the bestial din of war. This is not how she wants to remember the son she will never see again.

Julian does not know about Christian or the sledgehammer of death. Or perhaps he does. The world is not so small, and their world is even smaller. But boundaries exist in small worlds, and Diana knows there are those who favor Julian just as there are those who favor her. What is known bears no resemblance to what is told. What her lover of one year does know is that Diana is restless at night, and he cannot bear the tossing and turning, so he sends her home to her husband and dog and the son who is still alive and the carefully folded flag from the Marines. And she brings back stories, which Julian absorbs: teenagers roaming the house like a pack of coyotes, scrambling for pancake breakfasts and meaty dinners; teenagers pulling her into corners to confess what they cannot tell priest or parent; teenagers calling in the middle of the night because she tells them she will never turn them away no matter what they do. Her own son Nicholas brings more and more teenagers to the house, as

if one might replace Christian. What her husband makes of the constant crowd is not something Diana thinks about. Marcus is rarely home; his job takes him farther and farther away each month. When he is home, he shuts the door to his study, emerging only to eat or shower. Diana enters his study when he is gone. Bright box-like shapes on the walls mark the spots where family pictures once hung. Diana removes the nails, leaving a black hole at the top of each spot.

Some recover, she thinks. Some pretend to recover. And some never come back.

In a rare confessional moment, Julian tells Diana he wishes he had a family. But he does not, and he never will. “Children,” he says wryly, “should not have children.” Yet he has begun to refer to Nicholas as his own. It is a dangerous game, and in an effort to stop Julian, Diana introduces him to Nicholas.

They meet in a small coffee shop. Nicholas stamps the snow off his boots and drops his hat on the table. Diana removes her knee-length wool coat and orange silk scarf. All around them students work, their fingers flying over keyboards. Nicholas orders a coffee and a flaky pastry. Diana settles on hot tea. They sit and wait. Nicholas is no stranger to Diana’s friends; no doubt he thinks nothing of meeting Julian.

When Julian enters, Nicholas stands up and shakes his hand. Julian drops his coat and hat on a chair. Winking at Diana, he straightens his black cashmere jacket and smooths his white silk scarf. Nicholas, still standing, offers to get Julian a coffee, but Julian takes a manly swipe at Nicholas’ shoulder.

“Look at this boy,” Julian cries out as if Diana has never seen her son before. An espresso machine hisses. Nicholas flinches and pulls at his scrubby chin-beard. A bemused smile crosses his face. Diana sees Julian through her son’s eyes: a small, thin man with curved shoulders, an old man, and Diana knows Nicholas will forgive Julian his trespass. He will be a boy for Julian.

Even so, Nicholas rolls his eyes and motions to Julian to sit. Diana laughs. This is her son, the boy she knows. Christian was solemn and serious, but not Nicholas. Her son settles in his chair, picking at his Irish fisherman’s sweater. Despite his smile, the skin below his blue eyes is dark and swollen, his lips split from the cold. His shoulder-length hair accentuates the angles of his face, and he twists and curls a hank of hair.

“Son,” Julian says. “I’ve heard so much about you.” He hands him an R. Crumb book of drawings, which Nicholas thumbs through and returns.

“Underground comix?” Nicholas asks. “It sure looks like it.”

“Political art,” replies Julian. His eyebrows twitch, and his eyes gleam. “I loved this stuff when I was your age. Still do.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me.” Nicholas turns away as he offers up Christian’s favorite phrase, and Diana feels the tilt of the horizontal picture they present: the son, the mother, the tug toward the unbeautiful memory, a story sliding into a dark hole. There are moments when a grave opens its face, and this is one of them.

Nicholas cracks his knuckles. Diana peers over her glasses at him, and he stops. But Julian is charmed, oblivious to Nicholas’ irritation.

“Ah, an angry young man. The best sort.”

“I’m not mad, the world is. Corrupt.” Nicholas flashes a cheeky grin at Diana and she knows she is to understand Nicholas thinks Julian an ass. She leans over and tucks a strand of hair behind Nicholas’ ear. He shakes it loose.

With tight, almost cinematic aim, Julian regards Nicholas. “The best of us are sinners. The worst of us are saints.” Julian has stolen this line from someone, but it works for him.

Nicholas perks up. “A sinner or a saint? Are those my only choices?”

“I’m afraid so, my boy.” Julian removes his glasses and rubs his eyes. He has a low tolerance for crowds, and the coffee shop is jammed. The smell of wet wool and chocolate hangs in the air. Nicholas eyes a girl in a tight green sweater and Julian puts his hand on Nicholas’ forearm. “But it’s really all the same, don’t you think? All of us are capable of unforgivable actions. Call it sin if you want.”

Nicholas twists his paper napkin. “Unforgivable actions. Like war?”

“Like war,” Julian nods.

“And the soldiers, who forgives them?”

“It depends on the soldier.”

“*Basta*,” Nicholas mutters. And he is right. Enough. Diana stands on the edge, and she is not sure which boy will push her over.

Nicholas kisses Diana’s cheek and stands up. “Nice meeting you, Julian.”

He saunters over to the green-sweatered girl, and Diana recognizes her as one of Christian's friends. As Nicholas and the girl pass, the girl lowers her eyes, and Nicholas taps her shoulder. "Later, mumsie," he says.

Diana has been claimed by her son. He has not called her "mumsie" since Christian's death. Nicholas stops at the door, as if he has forgotten something, and indeed he has. He returns for his hat.

"Hey," he says, looking at Julian. "You got a brother?"

"All men are brothers," Julian says.

"Asshole," says Nicholas, and he's gone.

Diana eyes Julian. "That went well," she says.

To her surprise, he is laughing. "Not what I expected," Julian muses. "He's quite like you."

This is what people once said about Christian.

"He'll warm up to me, won't he?"

Diana grips her mug. "Probably not," she replies.

Has Diana told Julian about the wrong boy? She sometimes catches herself in a state of gray planes and shadowless green light, where she and Christian sit and stare at one another. When she reaches out to touch him, her hands pass through warm, vibrant air. If there's a soul, it moves out to what it loves, and she feels Christian's soul in her, just as she once felt his fetal shape. She would like to tell Julian that no one gets to stay. Instead she calls him "Boy", and he is charmed; he believes he, too, can have the assurance of the late-night calls and confessions Diana grants her son's friends. These are easy gestures for Diana, these intimacies of distance. She is there, yet missing. Perhaps it is all the women. Perhaps it is Christian.

Toni buys a black and tan Yorkshire terrier. "Walking a dog beats stalking a man," she says, waving a plastic bag in the December chill. They walk the backstreets of Harvard Square with Master, who stops to sniff tattered paper and blackened clumps of leaves.

"You might have named her something less slavelike," Diana says.

Toni's glasses slip down her nose as she leans down to scoop up Master's little mess. "But I am her slave," Toni protests. "Why not be straight about it?"

"Indeed," Diana replies. "Why not?"

But Diana is not straight about anything.

Toni tosses the bag of shit in a black trash bin. “At least I don’t have any secrets,” she says. “Not anymore. Do us all a favor, will you?”

Diana sighs. One day these favors will come flying back to her in another form, but for now she does what she always does. She agrees and asks, “What?”

“Dump Julian. Divorce Marcus. Get on with it.”

Diana laughs and grabs Toni’s arm. “You only get one wish,” she says.

“No,” Toni replies, pulling her green scarf around her neck. “You only get one life. Holy fuck, Diana. You of all people should know that.”

Despite the thick burnt-siena curtain blocking the entry to the restaurant, a cold, black breeze blows across their candlelit table every time a customer enters. Diana shivers and wraps her scarf around her shoulders and across her chest. Swaddled against the cold, Diana picks at her Portuguese fare. Julian eats *sardinhas grelhadas*, thick black sardines, which stare pitifully up at Diana. Since Christian’s death, Diana eats sparingly; her body is thin as wind. “Don’t ever get fat,” Julian once told her.

Julian appreciates angles, sharp corners, and calibrated shape. His rigorous sense of form might, in another man, be seen as aesthetic elitism. But its source is alarmingly simple, a position based on rules Diana is beginning to understand. Julian may have left the church, but he has not forsaken obedience. His rules come not from a tablet, but from a need to classify truth and beauty, to order expression. Pandering ghosts of long-dead souls materialize and evanesce in his sight. The power of Julian’s singular mind liberates still life from immobility and reveals the potency of conceptual rigor. Diana believes this makes him a true art critic even when, in those slow moments of intimacy in his bed, she feels the hollow spot on his chest where a striking mat of gray hair grows, much as wild grass on an untended grave.

The candle on the table flickers; Julian lifts a white linen napkin to his face and wipes his sardine-oiled lips. In the dim light, his face glows. They speak of the war, but when Julian presses Diana for her opinion, she thinks of Christian and tells herself, “Say nothing you will later regret.” It occurs to her that sixty-one-year-old Julian is old enough to have fought in Vietnam, but he did not. When they are together in bed she often smells fear on Julian—a mix of oil, wax, and gin, and it is then that she lets him rest his head on her chest. “My angel,” Julian says, as she rubs his temples with her cool fingers.

Tonight Julian is anxious. Rapport with others is anathema to him, he prefers to exist on the page. He frets whenever he must go out and becomes someone he is not, in order to be who he is. But there are things he cannot avoid, and the night's exhibition opening is one of them. Diana will guide him, as others before her have done, and she sees now why the number of women in Julian's life climbed with the years. He is steady, but he is steadier when there is an arm to lean on. Julian cannot see how much he has, how little he has to fear. She might tell him about her dead son. She might not. Someone else might. Toni, perhaps? She would do it just to scare Julian off. "Oh," she'd said, "He's quite the intellectual, but he's lifeless next to you."

Diana picks up her fork, moves the food around on her plate: a small piece of arugula, an olive, a sprig of parsley. She spears the olive and eats the meat, leaving the pit to roll around in her mouth.

"I would like to take you home. Skip all this nonsense." Julian's words flick the air. The candle on the table sparks and burns black.

"You are afraid, aren't you?" She drops the olive pit on the plate.

Julian twists his lower lip and gravely nods. "Perhaps," he says. "Perhaps they bore me." A thin smile crosses his face; his hands tumble through the air like slow sage in a ghost town, rolling and stopping in time to his speech.

"So you say," she replies. But already he is fading from her view. Bodies do more than one thing: she can be here, and she can be nowhere.

"Diana," he asks. "Do you want to leave Marcus?"

"Every day," she replies. "But I won't."

"I can't see why not."

"Pentimento," she replies. "The years have made me who I am."

"And you are mine." His smile fades, and Diana knows he would like to swallow his words.

"You don't need me," she replies. "You wouldn't know what to do with me."

"I am besotted. Will that do?" Reprieved, he pauses, and as she lifts his hand to her mouth she stares at the soft, white fingers with perfectly manicured nails. A rank, salty odor stings her eyes, and she quickly kisses Julian's hand and guides it back to an empty spot on the table. Slender, sharp fish bones swim in garlic sauce. Julian lifts one and punctuates the air with an exclamation point. The reception at the museum will not wait; they must leave.

The sidewalks are slick with fat snowflakes; Julian holds Diana by the arm as they make their way up the steps to the museum. The

coat-check girl takes Julian's black fedora and brushes the snow away. Their coats are slipped over thick, metal hangers. Diana unzips her purse and tucks the claim check in a side pocket. She excuses herself and finds the women's room, where she pulls a black and silver clip studded with Venetian glass beads from her hair. She twists her hair into a loose bun and refastens the clip. One tendril-like strand of hair hangs loose, caught in her dangling black earring. Imperfection. She likes it; she leaves it.

As she walks through the dimly lit rooms she loses her bearings. She finds herself alone in a small cloister, far from the noise of the reception. She has been here many times before, but she has not seen what she sees now: a stone tablet depicting a family at prayer. The crosses over the heads of the father and three of the sons indicate they were deceased when the tablet was made. She cannot look at the woman carved in stone. Diana crosses the room to a carved limestone *Votive Stele*: a Buddha with his hands in the positions symbolic of "absence of fear" and "charity". She wants to lick the limestone, feel the grit of stone against her tongue, break her teeth on the Buddha's hands, and swallow stone. Her feet leave the floor, and she gasps, but it is only Julian, and his face meets hers in the dark. His kisses suffocate her, and she claws at his shoulders until he releases her. "Boy," she says. "You mustn't play with me like that," and he says, "I know, I know," although he knows nothing. He guides her to the crowded reception but stops outside the door.

He lowers her shawl, revealing her midnight-blue lace dress. Under it she wears a black silk sheath. Jet black beads hang between her breasts; Julian rolls the obsidian drops between his fingers. Whispering "my sweet angel," he lifts the necklace to his lips and kisses it. A vague feeling of panic sweeps over Diana and she trembles.

His hands steady her hips and he pushes her against the textured wall. Where her dress ends, her boots begin: tight, soft leather with solid two-inch heels. Julian lifts the dress one inch, then two. There's laughter in the corridor, and Diana pushes him away.

Toni swings around the corner with Omar, his head wrapped in a black-and-white *keffiyeh*.

"Oh, luv," Toni yelps. "You might as well get a room."

"Just what I was telling him," Diana replies, tugging at her dress. "You'll excuse him, won't you? He was raised by wolves."

Omar shakes Julian's hand and clasps his shoulder. "And you will excuse me if I take our little Toni away for the night? She says I must help her walk her dog."

Toni nods solemnly, her eyes big and bad. "My sweet Master needs me."

Julian pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs his lips. “Toni,” he says. “I’d like a minute with you if I may.”

Toni’s back arches; she opens her mouth as if to hiss.

“Omar and I have had it up to here with this prickly little show. And the party is a fucking bore. No offense, Julian, but they’re all old flaps like you.” She turns her head. “And no, you may not have a word with me. Try, for once, to talk to her.”

But Diana does not want to talk to Julian. She prowls through the crowd, and he follows her. All night he trails her, sometimes seizing her arm, other times resting his hand on her shoulder. One of Julian’s friends pulls her aside. He tells her that behind every great man is a good woman. Although she has heard this before, she laughs—not because it is funny, but because she is not a good woman. It is unfortunate that Julian does not know this. Perhaps she will tell him.

Her husband knows she is a bad person who does good things, and that sometimes she is a good person who does bad things. Either way, Marcus knows. But knowing is not the same as caring.

By the time Diana and Julian leave the museum, it is past midnight. “Stay with me tonight,” Julian says. Diana can do what she wants; the men in her other life will not notice her absence for they, too, are absent, Nicholas at a friend’s house, Marcus in Japan. The dog will nose around for her pack, and when no one is found, she will settle by the door and wait. The hound, like Diana, is patient.

But tonight is different. A baleful note is ringing through her body. She is suspended between earth and sky, and something must bring her down before she floats halfway to the moon. Desire for rest whispers to her.

Banks of windblown snow cover the hilly garden next to the museum. Diana steps to the bottom of the slope, past Julian and his rigid aesthetic, his numbered women, and his anxious love of doom. He does not know what he has done to her—all those women, all those rules. She feels like a childish finger painting in a gallery of planed and planned art. All those solid shapes and she is a chaotic swirl. *Untitled, Number 27*.

Julian puts his hand on her shoulder. There is nothing between them but ghosts of the past and ghosts of the future, dragging their duffels of memory and lament. Diana hears them creak by, hidden in the snap of tree marrow, waiting in the dark. If she hears them, they must be there. A dog barks. Car tires crunch in the snow. Julian coughs.

She has fooled herself too long. There is no going back, and if she is to go forward she must give herself over to the women, to Christian, to

Marcus, to Nicholas, and even to Toni. She will not give herself over to Julian. But she will allow him this: a moment of choice.

“Hold me,” Diana says, but Julian does not move. She spreads her arms and falls face-first into the soft snow on the hill, sinking into the thick drift. She closes her eyes and thinks of angels, her arms the wings, her torso and legs the robe. The snow holds her, cools her, changes her face, puts out the smoke. There is light snow in all her holes—her eyes, her nose, her ears, even her navel—and across all her mistakes.

There is no sun, there is no son, there is no sun in the future. Diana presses her lips against the snow; the freeze spreads. Nothing in nature suits her, yet she feels that the snow-covered ground is hers, that the cold moisture is heavy with beauty dropped to the ground. She hears her name as if for the first time, not as if it belonged to her, but as if it has been given to her, marbled and polished. When she is finished swimming in the snow she rises without blurring the snowy image.

Julian steps away from her as she brushes the white flakes from her face and coat. She stomps her feet. Snow flies.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, as if she’d accidentally tripped. It is a pro forma question, words with no weight. Scanning the street for people, Julian steps farther away from her. The wrought-iron street lamps buzz. Julian’s voice breaks as he asks again, “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her arms; snowflakes lift and drop. “Yes,” she replies. “I’ve broken every bone in my body.” And she laughs, not because it is funny, but because it is true.