

Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center

From the Selected Works of Louise Harmon

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Sati

Louise Harmon, *Touro Law Center*



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SATI

LOUISE HARMON*

Marie may have been my rock, but Beth was the hard place. It's a narrow spot to be in, both of them counting on me, both thinking I should champion her cause. It wasn't just a difficult position they put me in, it was an impossible one. It seems fair to say I can't really function without either one of them. There's only one solution: I'll have to put myself out to pasture. It's probably time anyway.

The American Association of Law Schools (AALS) rules require that we give the law school a year's notice, even deans, should we decide to retire, but I'm sure they'll waive the requirement. My contract's up, I'm sixty-eight, and there's no real money issue—no kids to put through college. Besides, I'm certain that in the eyes of some, I'm too old for the job. Maybe retirement will be a relief. Frankly, after all these years, being a dean holds no allure. Some of the work has become downright repugnant. Those incidents with Posillico, for example. I really wonder sometimes how it is these slime balls always find some nice young girl to fall willingly into their lair, and how it is that the rules and regulations tend to exculpate. But it's not just that. There are those nasty tenure battles, and the faculty staffing issues—peripatetic scholars like Pat Robbins who keep wanting semesters off to visit at other law schools, to broaden her sphere of influence, and those fatally wounded warriors like Hazard. Then there's that poor old fellow, Ed Tarsky, who went round the bend. Sometimes I wonder if that won't be my fate as well, to be carted off from the law school in a set of canvas restraints.

But I'm being flippant. I know it won't happen. It's not my style. Too flamboyant a way to exit, too unconventional. No, when I retire, there'll be an appropriate ritual of departure, a dinner in my honor perhaps, a bestowal of a chair with the university's logo on it, some polite, but not overly warm words about the legacy I leave at the law school, my imprint, my stamp. Not an enviable task, to deliver the eulogy at my retirement party. It will be hard to find what to say. Here is a man who made no lasting contribution to the law school, but who was always there, ready to listen to faculty requests for better offices, better schedules, more pay, more research assistants, travel money to attend conferences. Here is a man who had the expertise to introduce the keynote speaker at graduation, year after year. Here is a man who could pose for the picture in the yearbook underneath the Letter from the Dean, a man with a firm jaw, and a receding hairline, a man of some

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intelligence, but no scholar. No, here is a man sent from Central Casting to play the role of leader, and like Ronald Reagan, he played it well, until his brain dissolved into a bowl of oatmeal. That's how it will be.

I have come to dread those weekly conferences with Beth. She may just be my administrative assistant, but as anyone with any insight into the internal operations of the law school knows, Beth is actually running the place. She started out almost fifteen years ago as a sort of girl Friday, right out of high school, but over the years, more and more of the administration has fallen upon her shoulders, especially the budget and scheduling, so that now, she's more like woman Monday through Friday, and sometimes Saturday and Sunday. It seems like just yesterday that she started working behind the desk in the Registrar's office. She had a sort of giddy quality back then that doesn't seem to be there now. When I see Beth storming in and out of her office (which is right outside mine, inside the Dean's Suite), with her brow furrowed, and her shoulders up around her ears, it seems as if her center of gravity has shifted several feet closer to the ground. I suppose it's just that she has a family, a husband who likes his meat cooked medium rare, two children (a girl and a boy, like matched salt and pepper shakers), a Girl Scout troop to take on camp-outs in what always seems to be unseasonably cold and rainy weather, not to mention a law school to run. All that responsibility could make anyone seem less than giddy. I know it would really get me down.

I should be ashamed of the fact that a young woman of thirty something is actually running my law school; she's not even a college graduate, let alone a lawyer. It's not something I like to advertise, but I've heard from other deans of law schools far more prestigious than mine that it's fairly commonplace: to turn over the reins to a competent, overworked and underpaid female employee who lacks academic credentials. The trick, or so I heard in an unprecedented moment of utter candor from Mike Rosenthal whose law school upstate is run by a middle-aged, wide-hipped ex-paralegal named Deb, is to create the illusion that you're actually in control. I'm scrupulous about that. I never let Beth take a leadership role in public settings. She never meets prospective donors, for example, and I don't let her attend faculty meetings, even though other administrators, such as the head of Career Planning or the Admissions Director are invited, as long as the faculty is not in executive session. Beth might be called upon if her presence is needed, which it often is, since she is usually the only one who has any clue what is going on. How much money is left over in the budget for adjuncts? When does the fall semester exam schedule begin and end? How does the Student Bar Association go about funding student-run organizations? Are we required to open honor code violation hearings to

the public? These are questions that Beth, and Beth alone, has the answer to, and so, from time to time during a faculty meeting, I have to place a discrete call to extension 201 and ask her to “come up” to the Faculty Conference Room for a minute. Seconds later, she swooshes in, looking apologetic and somewhat flustered, and we ask her how the world was made, and she tells us, and then she backs out of the room, and smiling, disappears, back into center of the law school’s hidden nervous system, into her inner sanctum—to her orderly desk with its photographs of Carly and Conner with their basset hound, her computer with beanie babies draped across the monitor, and a patchwork of hortatory yellow and pink stickums stuck to the screen.

Beth and Marie have never gotten along. As I think back on it, I realize that this is not their first round. When Beth joined us in the Dean’s suite, maybe ten years ago or so, there was another flurry of antagonism between the two. At that time, Beth’s position as *de facto* head administrator was not that well established, though even then she was formidable. Marie let it be known, however, that she was not going to be bossed around by a girl young enough to be her daughter. I guess that by then Marie had already been with me for over a year. She worked as a secretary for a private practitioner in town for a long time before that, a litigator with the unlikely name of Darrow Hanks, but he had died, and she came to the law school looking for a job that was less demanding. I’ll take less pay, she said archly during her interview, but I won’t take more pressure. I suppose at that time she was already in her late forties, and I was nigh onto sixty. (I don’t have any memory of us looking any different, either of us, than we do today, but we must have.) She was a modest and demure woman then, much as she is now. I’ve always thought of Marie as sort of a mourning dove, a small headed, large breasted bird of olive drab hue, one who would as soon cock her head to the side and coo tremulously, as look you in the eye and crow. There was, and still is, a prettiness about her, although it’s a subtle look. At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, I would call her lady-like. She always dresses discretely, in expensive, but not flashy clothes, often in suits of gray or green, like the color of the sea on a November day. Her blouses are almost always pastel and silky soft, or at least that is how I imagine them. I wouldn’t know, of course, never having felt them, but I have to confess that sometimes I stare at their soft folds beneath the serge lapels of her suits, and wonder which was softer: the fabric of her blouse, or the tissue-paper thin skin that covers the top of her breasts.

During the interview, I noticed that on her resume Marie was a graduate of Smith. This was good—the secretary she was replacing, Doris Ann Gruenbach (with an e), had gone to Vassar. These things mattered. I not only needed a discrete woman, I needed a smart one. For

years, Doris Ann had been writing all of my speeches, and my official letters. She had always done this at home, out of sight of anyone at the law school, although not exactly on her own time. She used to say that she'd have to leave early on Friday, to "get some research done," wink, wink, and I'd wave her out the door, knowing full well that Doris Ann was going home to crank out my introductory remarks for the Moot Court Dinner, or the welcoming speech to incoming students, or the annual donor letter, or some other such bit of official, empty prose. Doris Ann was very good at what she did, although I had no basis of comparison at the time. Her writing was straightforward, and sort of folksy. My introductions had a down home, humble quality that was shed in later years once Marie started to write my material. Doris Ann, who was a student of American literature, preferred Mark Twain and James Thurber, and possessed an understated, wry sense of humor, whereas Marie had studied English literature, and leaned towards Henry James and someone she called Trollop. I don't know who he was, but I can only guess that he had a certain elegance of style since everything Marie does has style. Once Marie started doing my writing, I became much less inclined to tell lawyer jokes or to poke fun at my tie. Indeed, once Marie came on board, my ties no longer sported Snoopy in a Santa Hat at the Holiday Party, but were always silk, navy or maroon, with geometrical shapes of a similar dark and English country gentleman hue.

Both women were very tactful. Doris Ann never actually mentioned that she was going to write a letter or introductory remarks for me. She would just routinely disappear early on Fridays, and the text would appear mysteriously sometime the next week on my chair, triple spaced and ready to read. She even put in {Pause for Laugh} at the relevant spots in the joke, as if I might not know when I was being funny. I'm still not sure how Marie knew that the writing for me was part of her job description, but I can only assume that Doris Ann told her during the week or so that she trained her. (Doris Ann retired because she wanted to spend more time with her grandchildren, at least that's what she told me. Imagine my surprise when I learned from her later that she had gone back to graduate school at the age of 56 to get a Ph.D. in American literature. Now what does a 56 year old woman need with a Ph.D. in American literature, I ask you?) It was different with Marie. She used to ask me, perhaps a week or so before a bit of prose from the Dean's Office might be needed, whether I could use a "little help getting started" on the letter to prospective students in the catalog, or with the speech for the Graduating Seniors Breakfast, for example, in which I bid them a fond farewell, and suggested that they immediately write wills leaving all of their money to the law school. Like Doris Ann, Marie would also put the completed text on my chair, although she used to stamp it with

the DRAFT stamp, as if it were a work in progress. The letters I just sent back to her with an "OK" marked on it, and she would move the words onto the stationary with the Dean's letterhead. I also never tampered with the speeches, except perhaps to add a few extemporaneous remarks, which were almost always a disaster. I learned to stick to my script. A man needs to know his limitations.

What exactly is it that Marie does all day? Beth had posed this question to me several times in our weekly conferences, and I'll have to admit that without revealing her role as my ghostwriter, it's hard for me to answer. Marie does answer my phone, and keeps my calendar, and makes calls for me, and travel arrangements. She always has my coffee ready for me in the morning, brings in the mail and the *New York Times*, and then she gently reminds me: Today, you have a meeting with the Curriculum Committee, or don't forget this afternoon is the lunch with prospective donors, or it's your sister's birthday, would you like me to order flowers. I have a button under my desk that is wired to a buzzer located near her right knee. Like a big old wood bee, it bumbles to her: Marie, I need you. Marie, I want you. Marie, won't you please come in. She also meets and greets anyone who comes into the Dean's suite, from the President of the University to the lowliest first year student who seeks an audience with the court of last resort. May I help you, Marie says in her steady, low slow voice, and elicits from the speaker his identity and mission, and then sits them down on the sofa in the waiting area, next to a potted palm. Then she gets up and enters my office, her stockings squish squishing against each other as she walks, a faint scent of White Linen, her favorite perfume, wafting through the air. And invariably I am sitting there behind my desk, usually reading the paper, or doing the crossword puzzle, sometimes doing nothing, and Marie announces that so-and-so is outside and he wants to talk about such-and-such, and would I like to speak to him.

Marie also knows how to get rid of people that I don't want to see. It's an art form that I've come to admire. Many times, from inside my office, I've stood silently with my ear cupped against the wood of the closed door, while Marie deflects away from my office those petitioners who do not merit my personal attention. She'll ask them the "the nature of the matter" they wish to discuss with the Dean, and then she listens, or pretends to listen, I'm never sure which, and says Ah hah, and Oh no, and Really, with an inflection manifesting genuine interest and concern. She usually tells them she'll inform the Dean as soon as he is available, and the person leaves the Dean's suite feeling somehow better. They have unburdened themselves on the unflappable Marie. Into her sympathetic ear they poured their angst, their disappointment, their feelings of outrage at the injustice of whatever situation that brings

them there, and she has clucked, and cooed and made knowing nods, and generally sympathized, and even though that have not yet seen me, and they may never see me, the unworthy petitioners feel that they have had their chance to express despair. And I've noticed that for some kinds of despair, that's all that's required, an opportunity to make it into sentences. It doesn't really matter that I have not, and perhaps never will, hear the substance of the conversation. What matters is that the unhappiness has been vocalized, the aria of discontent has been sung within the confines of the Dean's suite. In my stead, and on my behalf, Marie is an audience—a human wailing wall.

And so I appreciate Marie. I have always tried in the past to be an appreciative boss. I always bring her a present back from my travels for the law school. It's never hard to choose what to get her. Marie collects little boxes from all over the world. I brought her back one from Russia, a shiny, black lacquer box with a love scene on it of a man and woman swooning under a tree, and then one from Agra, a white marble box decorated with flowers inlaid with lapis, striated malachite, and carnelian. There must have been a thousand of those marble boxes in the store where our tour guide brought us to buy "very high quality merchandise," which meant that the store was owned by his cousin, but Marie made that box seem special, as if it were the star of her collection. She kept all the boxes displayed in her living room in a large glass case. I don't know where people get those cases—it looked like the kind of glass case you see in diners on the East coast, with layers and layers of cakes. Marie had a case like that, but hers had little display lights in it, and on the shelves, sat her boxes, with the inlaid marble box from the Taj Mahal in a prominent position.

Of course, I've only seen Marie's home at her annual holiday party. Marie has had a tradition of asking all the members of the administration to stop off at her house after work one Friday in the middle of December. She and her mother played hostess, offering eggnog, and plates of cookies and fruit cake that must have taken them weeks to bake, and there were always matching napkins and paper cups, and Marie's mother, Mrs. Zimmer, would be bustling around, asking everyone if they "were all set." Marie had come to stay with her mother after her divorce over twenty years ago, just to get her feet back on the ground, but she ended up planting her feet in the familiar soil of her mother's home. It seemed like an amiable agreement. They seemed to genuinely like each other, although the two women were very different. Mrs. Zimmer was a loquacious, bubbly sort of woman who died her hair a purplish red and wore large flowered dresses that looked like pup tents, a real contrast to the quiet, demure demeanor of her carefully coifed and tailored daughter. But Mrs. Zimmer died suddenly last year

of a stroke, and left the house to Marie. I've often wondered if Marie was lonely without her mother's cheerful, chummy chatter. At the very least, the house must be quiet, as if someone had turned the Muzak off.

But back to the problem at hand. Once a few years ago, when Marie was out for six weeks, having surgery for female trouble, Beth took over her job. Well, she didn't sit at Marie's desk, she didn't make the coffee, or bring me the *Times*, and she didn't even do much in the way of meet and greet, but she did keep my calendar, have my phone calls routed to her desk, and she did my word processing. (Obviously I didn't give Beth any speeches or official letters to write. Without my even asking, Marie had written all the drafts before she went into the hospital. Beth wouldn't have been up to the task, taking a rather utilitarian approach to the use of language. She is rather plain spoken and only understands words that get things done, not decanal words, words that get nothing done, but that are needed for certain occasions, words of ritual, of introduction, of institutional supplication.) Now in retrospect, I think it was a tactical error not to have hired a temp to take over for Marie while she was out of commission. A temp would never have let on that Marie's job description was on the light side, and Beth would never have discovered that she could assume Marie's primary responsibilities with almost no additional effort. It gave her ammunition.

It wasn't really a fair test because Beth does everything super fast. She darts around the law school at a death defying speed, her sturdy shoes from Naturalizer clomping up and down the halls like a Clydesdale. Marie, on the other hand, rarely leaves the Dean's Suite, but when she does, she moves deliberately, swaying back and forth in her suede pumps, at a pace that's more than stately—it's majestic, the way Marie moves, like a queen making her way through molasses. This disparity in pacing isn't due to their ages, but to their different dispositions. Beth's adamant refusal to do a lot of the things that Marie does for me, however, like making coffee, bringing in the paper, even picking up my suit from the dry cleaner if I'm going to take a trip; that is generational. Beth has been raised in an age of feminism, a movement that thankfully passed Marie right on by. No one would call Beth a liberated woman or anything. She's no Pat Robbins, but those ideas about what a woman should and shouldn't be doing in an office have permeated down to the level of the staff, so that even someone traditional like Beth who bakes brownies and heads up a Girl Scout troop won't run a simple errand for her boss. I think it's a crying shame there's a whole generation of young woman who consider it demeaning to devote themselves to the task of making a man feel comfortable and at ease.

The tensions between Beth and Marie in the Dean's suite were exacerbated by a budget crunch at the university. The central adminis-

tration informed the law school last year that we had to cut corners on personnel, and that if anyone quit, we ought to inquire whether their job could be done without filling the position. First we lost one of the secretaries in Faculty Services, so we took her work and assigned bits and pieces of it to the others in the pool. It wasn't that hard. Beth did it. She gave someone else Thomas and Archer's work, and Tarsky—well, there wasn't anything left of that after he got thrown in the loony bin. There was some grumbling among the secretaries, of course, but I told Beth to tell the coordinator of Faculty Services that grumbling wasn't going to do anyone any good. We all had to make the best of a bad situation. We all had to pitch in. Then Donna, the Assistant Director of Admissions, got pregnant and decided that she wanted to stay home with the baby. Once again, we did an assessment of the Admissions Office and saw who was doing what, and then we took Donna's duties and spread them around. It's sort of like taking the same amount of peanut butter and seeing if you can get it to cover a larger expanse of bread. Beth is very good at it now.

It turned out there was one thing Donna used to do that needed to be reassigned: entering the names and addresses of each applicant into the computer's mailing list. It was a menial task, and probably one that an Assistant Director of Admissions shouldn't have been doing in the first place, but it was a vestigial duty from when Donna had held a lesser position in Admissions. At an administrators' meeting, there was some discussion about who was going to enter the applicant names, and Beth suggested rather forcefully that Marie could do the job. It was steady work that could be slowly squeezed out of the toothpaste tube whenever a little pressure was applied. Beth implied that Marie could just fill in the cracks of her day with the peppermint caulk of applicant names and addresses. When she wasn't answering my phone, or typing my letters, or whatever else it is she does, Beth suggested, Marie could enter addresses. When I answered that perhaps Marie had too much else to do, Beth quickly retorted: I doubt that seriously, Dean. I don't mean to suggest that Marie isn't busy, Beth continued in a slow, controlled voice that hinted she had rehearsed what she had to say, only that comparatively speaking, and in light of the budget crunch, Marie was "light loaded."

Perhaps I should have put my foot down right then and there and declared Marie off limits. I was the Dean of the law school, after all, and Marie was my secretary, and thus fell within my domain. She was mine to control. But I will confess to you now—and it isn't something that comes easily to me—that I was more than a little bit afraid of Beth. She was indispensable at the law school, and she knew that she was indispensable, and she knew that I knew she was indispensable, and

that potent conjunction rendered her a force to be reckoned with. So instead of saying right there at that meeting, in front of the head law librarian, and the heads of Career Planning and Admissions, No, Beth, Marie is too busy with my work to type any addresses, I just lowered my eyes, drummed my fingers on the glass surface of our conference table and muttered something vague like: *We'll see*. That fateful moment of weakness on my part, that pathetic, little *We'll see*, that waffling in the face of Beth's determination, was my undoing, and as it is turning out, the undoing of Marie as well. Of course, since Marie was just a secretary, she wasn't present at the meeting and could not publicly defend herself from Beth's onslaught, but it wasn't long before she got the news, and not long after that, Marie knocked on the door of my office.

Dean Stryker, could I see you for a minute? I gestured for her to come in, and rose to shut the door. I could only guess what the meeting was about. Marie sat down across from my desk, crossed her legs, and folded her neatly manicured hands in her lap. She had on a gray suit, and her fingernails matched a blouse the color of boiled shrimp. I noticed that her skin, normally so pearly white, was a little mottled, even on her neck and in her cleavage. It dawned on me that she might be nervous, and I was surprised. Marie always seemed so poised and confident of herself in every situation. Dean, she said with a falsely bright smile, and a slight elevation of her eyebrow, Beth has approached me about the possibility of my typing the names and addresses of incoming students into the computer. She says that I could do this in my free time.

Yes, I nodded, trying to seem casual. There was some talk of that at the administrators' meeting. We're trying to allocate Donna's job responsibilities without having to hire a new Assistant Director of Admissions. You know about the mandate from the central administration. The budget crunch and all.

Of course, Marie responded. Her voice wavered a bit in uncharacteristic hesitation, but she continued. I understand perfectly well the need to get the job done, and at the lowest cost to the university, but I don't think, given all of my job responsibilities—and here Marie looked me straight in the eye, as if to say, given the fact that I write all of your speeches and letters—that it would be wise to burden me further. There was no acrimony in her voice, and her look was frank and disarming. Could it actually have been the case that Marie and I had never made eye contact with each other in over ten years of working together? Our relationship has been built on service to me, I suppose, and that doesn't really foster many opportunities for full frontal encounters. Service seems to always come from the side. I will have to admit that I had never noticed before that her eyes were brown. If you had asked me before that look, what color are Marie Warren's eyes, I would have

hazarded a guess they were green or hazel. Something softer in hue, more mutable and ambiguous, not the deep, dark brown eyes that had just locked with mine for the first time.

Don't ask me why this seems relevant, but I did know exactly what color Beth's eyes were. They were also dark brown, but such a different pair of eyes—much smaller, closer together, and slightly magnified by a pair of glasses. Marie's eyes looked more like they belonged to a lower primate, a lemur perhaps, whereas Beth's were maybe more the eyes of something in the pig or peccary family, although I don't know if pigs have brown eyes. (Peccaries might.) I have many times looked wearily into Beth's eyes at our weekly conferences as she fed me dreary facts about this or that; the estimates on the new seating in the main room of the library, whether we should continue with the current caterer for the law school's cafeteria, why we are having troubles making our TIAA-CREF contributions. Beth's brown eyes are all business, all getting things done, all pros and cons and the bottom line. Marie's brown eyes, I was somewhat astonished to observe, were not all business. I almost thought she might be on the verge of crying, and then, oh God, what would I have done?

Of course, I said nothing of any consequence to Marie. I told her that I would take the matter up with Beth, and I may have actually once again uttered *We'll See*, anything to get her out of my office before any tears might fall. I stayed in my office all day, a prisoner in my own suite, sneaking out only a couple of times to get some food, grateful for the bathroom in the back of my office that some long ago deceased architect had thought essential for the maintenance of decanal dignity. (On the theory that a true leader never eliminates in the presence of his troops.) Marie buzzed me when she was leaving for the day, and I gave her a hearty and hollow have-a-good-evening, over the intercom, and then I waited until I was certain that Beth too had gone home, peering out of my window from time to time to see if her Ford minivan had left the parking lot. I was not looking forward to my encounter with Beth. I knew that it was only a matter of time before she would be in my office, wanting to discuss the matter of typing the student addresses into the computer. Early the next morning, before Marie had come in, Beth knocked briskly on my office door, and clomped in, even before I had a chance to say Come in. That was her usual procedure. Why waste time on amenities when we both knew that I wasn't going to deny her admission?

Marie says that you said *We'll See* about entering the addresses. Beth stood over my desk with her arms folded and had on her I-mean-business-this-time voice. I shuddered.

Well, I'm not sure I said that exactly, but I may have said that I would take the matter up with you, Beth. I know you think Marie is "light loaded," but it seems to me that it would be an undue burden on her to give her those addresses to do, with all of her other duties.

What other duties? This was a direct confrontation. Beth stared intently at me through the lenses of her glasses, her sharp little porcine eyes never wavering from my face. I stuttered and sputtered around. I don't remember what I said, but it was a garbled mess of this and that, of answering phone calls, of greeting people who came to see me, of typing and filing. I did not—could not—mention the ghost writing. It was an altogether unsatisfactory answer, and Beth knew that. So did I.

It makes me lack credibility, Beth said in her flat, matter of fact voice, if I can't run the secretarial staff in the best possible way I see fit. The other women in Faculty Services don't think it's fair, that I'm asking them to double up on work, and assume the responsibilities of employees who leave and who aren't replaced, and that Marie then is left sitting pretty on her throne in the dean's suite, doing whatever it is she does all day, which both you and I know isn't much. Everyone knows it too. Not assigning her the addresses doesn't make you look too good either, Beth continued mercilessly, to ask everyone else to pitch in because of the budget crunch, but when it comes to sharing your own secretary to type in a few addresses in her spare time, you aren't willing to make that little sacrifice.

I made no response since it seemed as if Beth wasn't yet done. Beth continued in that same calculated, controlled voice she had used in the administrators' meeting. If you don't back me up on this, she announced, I will find it impossible to continue in this position.

There it was. The threat was no longer implicit, but right there out on the table. Beth would quit if I didn't make Marie type those addresses. Of course, Marie had never made such an express challenge to me; she never would have. It would not have been her style. In some ways, though, her unarticulated ultimatum held much more power over me than Beth's: If you make me type those addresses, I will cry, and the salt from those tears will erode any desire that I have to make you happy, to bring you your paper, to pick up your shirts, to protect you from the petitioners at your door, and yes, even to write your letters and your speeches. There I was, stuck between Beth and Marie. This was finally my rock and my hard place, and it was obvious to me that if I wanted to avoid getting the life smashed out of me, I would have to crawl out of the crevice on my own.

And so I have chosen to retire. On the way into work, I made the decision to tell Beth first, confidentially of course since I have not yet alerted the faculty or the central administration. It may seem a

precipitous course of action, to make such a monumental decision over night, but I am a realist. I know what it takes to be the dean of a law school. I also wanted to show Beth that I could be decisive, and in command, at least about something. Beth said nothing when I called her into my office and told her the news, except that she wished me happiness and fulfillment in my retirement. As I stared across the desk at this competent, young woman, with her crossed arms and her pink mohair sweater covered with pills, I thought to myself: she looks smug, as if to say, hah, he couldn't run the law school without me. I won. I brought him to his knees. There is nothing that I can say to counteract that look of smugness. Whatever else anyone might say about me, I have always been a man who had a healthy respect for the truth. After Beth whooshed out of my office, I called in Marie, and told her the news: I am planning to retire. I thought she would be shocked and speechless, but she nodded at me as if we had previously discussed the possibility at great length, and that she had advised me to take precisely that course of action. Then Marie utterly flabbergasted me: She told me that she would take an early retirement as well, if I were going to. She couldn't imagine working for another dean, not at her age, starting all over with someone new. Her mother had left her some money and the house—well, it was a nice little house.

In India, our tour guide told us about the custom of *sati*, where the widow throws herself on the husband's flaming funeral pyre, just to demonstrate her fidelity to him, and perhaps her failure to keep him alive. *Sati* struck me as such a flashy display of martyrdom. I didn't want Marie to risk her job just because she was caught up in the drama of the situation. At first, I told her, no, no, that isn't necessary. Just because I'm at the end of the road, is no reason for you to leave. But Marie smiled at me, a most mysterious smile, a smile full of promise and intimation, and again looked me straight in the eyes, and again I noticed that her eyes were dark brown, and beautiful.

I'll write your retirement speech, Marie cocked her head to the side, averting her eyes to the ground. Her face was flushed, and she looked like a young bride, shy, demure, confident of her purity and the power it yielded.

Of course, I returned her smile and suddenly felt the heady intoxication of love—or was it co-conspiracy? I leaned over and pressed her hand. And Marie, you'll be certain to thank all the people who've helped me over the years, all the unsung heroes behind the scenes at the law school who've made my job so much easier?

I'm sure I'm up to the task, Marie said softly. The fire of death crackled and popped around us, and as our bodies of this past life turned to ash, I saw a glimpse of our future burning brightly in the hot white

flames. Marie was right. It was a nice little house that her mother had left her—a nice little house indeed.

