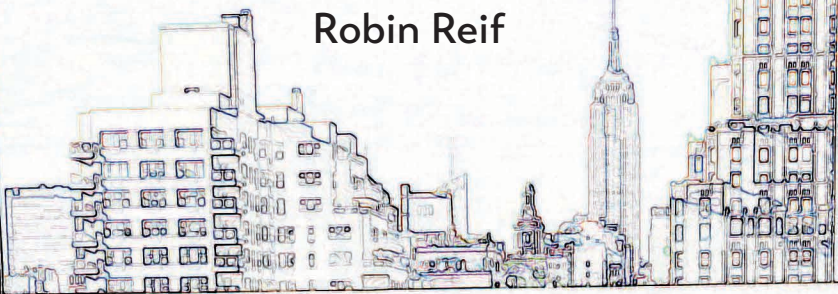


# Someone

Robin Reif



*Photo by Pamela V White*

Midway through my precarious twenties, I met a man I'll call Hugh. Decades older, an accomplished academic and critic, he was a minor though respected figure in New York literary circles.

I first saw him standing at the window in an empty classroom, looking out on soot-stained dorms huddled in the winter haze. He was tall and portly; his jacket and tie did only a so-so job of elongating his thick middle. Though he was Sunday-school scrubbed—fresh shave, neat, sandy hair—I guessed his age as midfifties. “The *Man*,” I thought in the slang of the day as a spasm of contempt ran through me. He stood in polished wingtips, a lit cigarette dangling between his freckled fingers. I was sure that Hugh, an obvious WASP, gave off the superiority of class. Despite the faint tremor in his hand, I could not then see that he was a desperate smoker, nor could I read his fastidious hygiene as evidence of anxiety.

---

He was teaching a course at NYU Medical School on doctor-writers—Rabelais, Chekhov, Walker Percy, and others. In those days, the late '70s, bringing a humanities curriculum to scientists represented an effort to create well-rounded physicians, whose job, after all, was the restoration and healing of humans. The course was open to all grad students, and I was a part-timer in the School of Journalism, surviving on freelance jobs after ricocheting from acting to law school to a year of premed-for-postgrads courses, then switching to journalism. Now twenty-six and churning out chirpy advice and breathless girl-against-the-world features for *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, I anguished over forgoing a medical career to spend my life writing trivia. The very idea of this seminar gave me hope. Perhaps I, too, could become a doctor-writer, have a serious, useful career with experiences worth writing about. If only my stubborn heart would agree to beat at least a little faster at the thought.

Early on, I believed that Hugh disliked me as much as I did him. His eyes seemed to tense each time I spoke, my words tumbling out passionate and unconsidered. By contrast, he spoke with formidable precision, in a standard American accent laced with an occasional lilt that hinted at time in the South. Everything about him signaled sobriety and gravitas: “Maugham’s vision,” he’d say, “reflected the scientism that disfigured the fin de siècle.”

We once argued about the novel *Of Human Bondage*. Philip, the hero, obsessively bound to Mildred, finally tires of being played and abandoned and so resolves to marry Sally, with whom he’ll live a life of dutiful convention. Hugh said this ending was inevitable. I countered: Why would Philip, an artist and orphan, renounce obsession for a merely sensible match? This conversation would later haunt me.

When the class ended in May, I walked the harshly lit hall toward metal elevators large enough to bring the dead down to the morgue and noticed Hugh calibrating his pace to stay abreast of me. Outside on First Avenue, it was one of those spectacular New York days when the clear light shows you things you hadn’t noticed before. I was heading home to my walk-up in Brooklyn, Hugh to his townhouse in the Village. He offered me a lift downtown. I declined, saying I had no money to split the cab. Amused, he hailed one. When we got out at Washington Square, he walked me under the arch and into the park.

We paused near the fountain to say goodbye, and he turned to look directly at me. Standing so close, I sensed his heft and solidity, also a clean scent from beneath the shoulder of his suit jacket. “I want to thank you

---

for raising the level of discourse in this class,” he said, taking my hand. His touch and words set off an alarming joy. When I left, everything in sight seemed intensely real. Drifts of daffodils, translucent grass, and the patterned shade of maples all sent my heart skyward. I had been noticed; I was *someone*. Perhaps the world had a place for me.

In the place I still called home or, at least, my “permanent address,” my parents trailed their grief from room to room. Their son had recently quit medical school to join a cult. Two daughters had lost themselves and possibly their futures to drugs. Another headed out late at night seeking ice cream and Oreos, downing it all before puking it up. My failure to settle on a career made me, the default vessel of my parents’ ambition, a colossal disappointment. That we had all once been bright and beautiful was a goading source of torment.

That summer, from what seemed an alternate universe, came the surprise of Hugh’s postcards from London, where he was teaching, each written in steady, unhesitating script, each letter on a parallel tilt, each word sitting neatly in its row. Stability. Order. A paradise from which I felt excluded.

In September he returned. After he’d taken me to dinner several times, ambushed me with his stylish wit, after I’d wept on his fatherly bosom when my agoraphobic Finnish boyfriend left me, after I learned, to my surprise, that he was younger than my parents, only then did he risk linking his hand in mine one December night as we walked in the Village. Any alert woman could have seen it coming; the woman I was felt blindsided.

A few weeks later, he cooked dinner for me at his apartment—duck, asparagus, and what he said was “a very good Bordeaux,” unaware that I would not drink it. Having seen one sister in the ER after cops peeled her, stoned, off the sidewalk and another skid down a flight of stairs while dazed on quaaludes, I promised myself I’d stay sober. So Hugh managed much of the bottle himself while I downed apple juice from little boxes with straws he kept for his daughter’s twice-a-week visits. There were drained glasses, empty juice boxes, and scraps of torn bird still on the table when he clumsily reached for my hand. “When you look at me like that,” he said and lowered his eyes, “it excites me so, I can’t speak.” His forehead flushed.

Having no experience of adult eroticism, my stomach clenched, and an arm shot out to drape his shoulder like a pal. “What a funny pair we are,” I said. “Let’s have dessert.”

---

“Later,” he said, drawing me to him. The pressure of his mouth filled me with solace and desire, all but annulling my lost sisters and brother, the wounded, wounding parents, and my failure to solve their lives—or my own.

He turned off the light before undressing and slipped in beside me. I reached out and sensed a little flinch. Was he sucking in his stomach? “I’m as jumpy as a cat,” he said, as though to steer my thoughts in a different direction. And yet he handled my body with a finesse so far surpassing anything I’d known that it left me in a swoon for days. As we drifted to sleep, I burrowed into his amplitude. “I’m so happy,” he whispered. In that moment, I sensed the end of my suffering and could not speak.

In the beginning, Hugh spoke of the “likely brevity” of our time together. I knew I was out of my depth so, at the time, felt relieved. But my feelings had no stability.

“Do you think we’ll ever be legitimate?” I asked one morning some weeks later. We lay in the gray light of his bedroom after making love.

“What do you mean?” Hugh was dauntingly precise and, in his soft way, demanded precision from me.

“In your own words, you called this a problematic relationship, an anomaly.”

He rolled away and grabbed a cigarette from his nightstand.

“We *could* work it out,” he said slowly. “But of course, we have enormous differences. When you’re in your prime, I’ll be in my . . . second childhood.” He smiled at his little joke and lit up. “No,” he said, exhaling a soft cloud, “even if my insistence coincides with your acquiescence, even if we worked it out for a time, it wouldn’t stay worked out. It would be unfair to you.”

He was now forty-five, in full maturity and beginning to feel the gravity of age. I was twenty-seven and knew, at least abstractly, that time had me on a short leash as well. I wanted children. Hugh, recently divorced, already had a young daughter and wanted no more. He was the son of a fundamentalist preacher from rural Missouri. I was the daughter of an atheist Jewish doctor from Brooklyn. Hugh had struggled to escape the narrow religion of his father. I had begun to actively seek out the Judaism my parents had rejected.

Despite Hugh’s pronouncing the “likely brevity” of our time together or, perhaps, because of it, I stayed for what I believed would be a short

---

while, for the frisson of transgression, the thrill of the great world Hugh opened, and the momentary shelter. Outside, I was hectic and unsettled, desperate to find direction, always behind, scrambling to catch up without knowing the goal. I was ravenous—for food, love, safety. Hugh fed me, gave me a grown-up man to love and a place to sleep.

There was something else I desperately needed and realized I could acquire from him: call it education. I was young. I believed ideas were real. Hugh illuminated ideas that I'd sensed but hadn't truly thought until he spoke them into being: "I'd equate freedom," he once said, "with the absolute possession of one's own spirit, with psychological self-confidence, an autonomous interior selfhood." At the time, everything he said seemed revelatory and new. He showed me that when you have words, you can make exquisite distinctions, more keenly perceive the subtle and fleeting. I'd fill my diary with things he'd said: Of my flirtation with Orthodox Judaism, he once pleaded, "Dear girl, don't be seduced like old-line Marxists who sacrificed personality, subjectivity, and the propriety of a private life to the abstractions of dialectical materialism." I didn't know then that these Marxists were largely Talmudic Jews who'd swapped religion for politics. I did not know that he was asking me to be less Jewish. All I knew was that the man sang to me.

And so I'd ask questions—seeking satisfying answers to queries that felt urgent, not yet knowing that they were breathtakingly naïve. "How can a great artist also be an anti-Semite?" "Do you believe that grace is from God or just a neurological quirk?" Of course, these masked questions far more interior and painful: "How should I live?" "What should I believe?" "How do I save my family and survive them at the same time?"

On a Sunday afternoon in our usual place, naked in his bed, we talked about the Iranian Revolution that was all over the news. I asked him if he could imagine a cause for which he'd sacrifice his life. "Well," he said, "I've never been existentially tested. I've had my trials, of course, my divorces but . . . they've not been on a grand scale."

"Divorces? Plural?" I'd been with Hugh for three months, though managing to blind myself to how ferociously attached to him I already was. I knew, of course, about his recent divorce but not about a previous one. He must have thought this revelation risky, but it actually made him seem more dangerous and exciting to me.

Her name was Joan, he said. We were spooning, turned toward the window, as he spoke. I looked out at the bloated sky overhanging Wash-

---

ington Square Park, its ghostly phosphorescence lighting the early magnolias now relinquishing overripe petals that floated to the ground.

They'd been married for three years when her father had suddenly died and Joan retreated into a paralyzing depression. She had to be hospitalized. Hugh had cared for her two children from a prior marriage while teaching, paying medical bills, and visiting her daily. His savings ran out. He had to move her to a public hospital.

"Each day, it was a new nightmare," he said, "the crowding, the filth, all these . . . ghouls wandering around. After months of failed treatment, she seemed to become one of them." Once out, Joan, enraged at having been locked away in the county hospital, sued for divorce. As Hugh was not the biological father, the children stayed with their mother, who then moved to another state. After telling me, he rolled away, onto his stomach, and dropped his head into his hands.

"I can't make sense of it," he said. "It was the most shattering experience of my life."

As he spoke, the splintered landscape of his story invaded me. Only days before, I'd found my sister, now staying with me in my tiny studio—my parents had kicked her out—lying naked, passed out on the kitchen floor. The drug dealer to whom she owed money was buzzing from downstairs. I ran to check her pulse, then bolted the door, praying that no one would buzz him in while I hauled her body to the pull-out bed. The boundaries of "normal" in my life kept distending, so it didn't occur to me to tell anyone. Still, in taking in another human being's nightmare, I felt the reality of my own.

In an instant, I slid my body under his, grabbing his head and pressing his mouth to mine, not letting up until we both had to gasp for air. Frantic to get him inside me, I fumbled his cock. He grabbed my wrist, pinned it down, and with surer aim plunged, nearly smacking my cervix as we fucked and cried and fucked again.

It was dark when we finally got up to eat something. Afterward, he lit up and after a needy inhale said, "How all this all relates to you is that because of my disastrous marriages, it's not an option I want to pursue again. Since you want to be married, I appreciate that our relationship will likely be temporary."

"Temporary" was an abracadabra that seemed to free him. At times he was intoxicated, surprise-cabbing to Brooklyn with gift-wrapped worn panties I'd inadvertently left at his place. He was expansive, writing be-

---

fore a date, “but mostly, bring yourself—lovely, necessary to me, beautiful Robin whom I crave to see, hold, and more.” He was playful, reciting bawdy passages from *The Canterbury Tales* in fluent Middle English while teaching me new vocabulary—“nether beard” and “queynte.” He could be endearingly unsure: “I am yours,” he’d say, “if you want me.”

The shock of those words: “I am yours.” To possess this substantial, fully grown man aroused feelings I could barely name. There was, of course, the thrill of a lost Jewish girl’s ascendance over a member of the Century Club and chairman of the English department at a major university, whose WASP tribe, at that time, still seemed to run the world. As someone who secretly judged every gentile by the “Would he hide me?” test, I believed that Hugh would. I felt triumphant on the steed of his prestige and power and, for a moment, let myself believe that I was extraordinary. At a faculty reading by a National Book Award winner, seated next to Hugh in the front row, I felt all eyes on us. I looked younger than I was; Hugh looked older. I realize now that others—faculty women in particular—were likely troubled by the sight of us together. But at the time, I misread their curiosity and perhaps concern as admiration and felt like a celebrity.

But in an entirely different register, I was terrified. Hugh’s exquisite interest in me, the way he laid his large, handsome head on my breast and spoke my name, opened in me a cavernous space, and I took him in as I’d never taken in another human being. This in turn produced a low-level panic whose cause I couldn’t name. It began to intensify and compete for the upper hand.

I’ll say this: my mother was delighted. She wanted every detail, and I held little back. Heartsick about my brother, desperate about my sisters, disappointed by my failure to accomplish anything important in my life, she was eager to be gratified by my conquest, so I fed it to her nearly every day. When Hugh and I had dinner with an Irish critic whose essay she’d recently read in her beloved *New York Times* or we ran into a famous translator and his novelist wife at an event, she’d want to know all about it: What were they like? What did we talk about? How did Hugh know them?

She invited us to join her and my father at an off-Broadway production of *Miss Julie*. On greeting my dad, I was possessed by an impulse I acted upon before I had a chance to intercept it: I stood up on his feet as I had as a child dancing with him at weddings. Yes, I remind myself, with that mix of horror and pity one feels recalling an appalling younger



---

self, *I did that*. My father, being cued, took possession, kissing me on the lips. My mother, meanwhile, broke into her sparkling onstage smile as she spoke with Hugh. Looking on, I realized that he was closer to her age than to mine.

“Robin, I want you to marry me,” Hugh said one April morning, holding my face at a distance so he could focus. “I’m afraid you’ll say no. But then, I’m afraid you’ll say yes and then be unhappy that you’ve missed something you’ve always wanted. I’m too old to start a new family.” Before I could react, he told me to take as long as I needed to think about it.

I did not have the capacity to do then what I now call “thinking.” I lived in a world of feeling. I believed in feelings, acted upon them. I had noticed that my feelings constantly changed, but I knew no remedy. What “felt” right was this, then its opposite, so I suffered constant conflict and exhaustion. The only “thought” I had at the time was really an image: a weekend morning. Sun bright on last night’s snow. Sky, beyond the window, a vast and mighty blue. Children, my children, stuffed into snowsuits, mittens strapped to sleeves, shuttling in their shiny red boots between snowbanks. Kitchen table heavy with warm, crusty bagels, piles of translucent salmon, thick mounds of cream cheese. The back door swings open. Children rush in, wild with delight, cheeks blooming with the scent of cold. Safety, abundance, home. I could not place Hugh in this scene.

Until now, I’d floated in the timeless drift of this love. Having shifted career direction three times in five years; having run from Buddhist retreats to Jewish renewal programs to AA meetings, not because I ever took a drink or wholeheartedly wished to lead a spiritual life but because I found comfort in settings that were kind to broken people, I just wanted to rest for a moment in Hugh’s arms. But his talk of marriage was an alarm. I was nearing twenty-eight and knew the clock was counting down my childbearing years. Uncertain about so much in life, I had one consistent desire: to be a mother. Despite my desperate attachment to Hugh and the crushing anxiety I felt at the prospect of leaving him, it seemed right to face differences that could not be reconciled and to free us both.

In mid-May, enacting the first and last ethical decision I ever made toward him, I left.

Within weeks, my body ached for his. Sitting at my desk, after a long mental absence, I’d snap to, knowing I’d been imagining him alive some-

---

where far from me. Without the halo of his warmth, without his eyes on me, I struggled to feel the reality of my own existence. My mother tried consoling me, though I knew she was disappointed. Unable to quell my orgies of tears, she grew impatient. “You have this brilliant man who loves you,” she said. “You don’t have to marry him. You always have your father and me.” As she spoke, I came untethered and felt violent toward her. Was that what my parents wanted? For me to stay tied to them? Sensing my absence, she called me back. “Some people,” she said, “turn shit into gold. You turn gold into shit.”

I tried to regain my balance, looked around, and realized that friends I’d been neglecting were struggling too. Karen and Ulf, her street-juggler boyfriend, had rented a loft in Chinatown that could be reached only by climbing a neighbor’s stairs, walking across the roof, and going in through a window. David in Williamsburg had a floor so sloped that an orange dropped in the kitchen would roll to a corner of the living room. The stove was broken in Ann’s sublet over a bar on Christopher Street, so she made instant coffee from the hot-water tap. As I watched its blast send cockroaches scurrying, my yearning for Hugh became so intense, I felt ill. I thought of his carriage house on Washington Mews: the level floor, Persian rug, lamps that cast cones of golden light, his boyhood rifle, used to hunt in the Missouri woods, mounted above his bedroom door, his walls of books. It glowed in my mind like a cavern of treasure.

After I returned to Hugh, I promised myself to honor my love for him and suppress all competing desires. Some nights I’d lie atop his broad, sleeping back, my arms looped around him, fingers upturned beneath his slow-breathing chest, stroking his nipples, which were soft as petals. I’d inhale his odor, a mix of cigarette smoke and soap, kiss the volumes of his shoulders. His belly was where his essence lay for me—generous, abundant, a soft landing. I’d run my hands over it, bury my face and kiss it, straddle it, gazing down at his pale eyes. Who can explain these things? Why *this* body, not even of my generation, as the one I needed to possess? I could say it had full provision: the size and strength of a father, the softness of a mother, a generous middle that awakened the most primitive impulses embedded in this crazy love: “Is there room in there for me?” My body, once my own, now, in its madness, yearned to crash into his. When we made love, the way he moved on me, reached inside me, it broke me open. At times I came until I cried.

---

And then one night, some weeks after my return, as we rocked, still locked into one other, an intrusive, unwelcome image came to me: Hugh as a decaying corpse, mouth to mouth, hand to hand, torso to torso, tied to my living body, the vermin and acids from his body infesting me. After Hugh fell asleep, I lay awake in a fetal position on the bathroom floor.

This set off a sudden, unbearable impulse to break free and face the crushing shame of possibly changing my mind once again. I knew this time not to act and spoke only with my mother, who tried to steady me. Unlike other mothers I knew who wanted their daughters to leave home and marry, she seemed invested in helping me stay with a man I could never marry.

On a Sunday night in August, I arrived at Hugh's from a Sabbath retreat. Early on, he'd believed my interest in Judaism did not preclude commitment to him. But this was changing. "I go slightly crazy when you disappear into these Shabbat events," he'd recently said. On this night, I came in, threw my jacket on his bed, and sank into the adjacent wicker chair. Hugh followed me, picked up my jacket, and hung it in the closet. "Tell me about your retreat," he said, leaning on the doorjamb.

"Well . . ." I was hesitant. "It was beautiful." He lowered his eyes. "I see," he said, then looked up, recovered. "I want to hear all about it."

"Today starts forty days of repentance leading to Yom Kippur, when either you're inscribed in the Book of Life or—"

"Social control through fear," he cut in.

"For someone fluent in the language of metaphor, you're surprisingly missing the point here," I countered.

For the first time I remember, Hugh's pale eyes hardened. That night, he turned away from me in bed—broad-backed, hunkered down, unreachable.

The next morning, we made love with an edge of desperation. Afterward, he said, "There's something missing." This hurt as, at that moment, I was feeling great, though compensatory, tenderness toward him.

"When I look into your eyes five seconds, ten, fifteen seconds, and get back that blocked stare, you might be a thousand miles away," he said.

"My god, what do you want? I'm here. I make love with you. Doesn't that speak for itself?"

"Right now," he said evenly, "all over this city, from the bridal suite at the Plaza to a sleazy room in Times Square where someone's been paid, people are making love. It has a range of meanings. The act doesn't interpret itself."

---

“I should have stayed in Flatbush.” I vaulted into a rage, bolting from the bedroom to the hall. “I should have stayed with my own kind. I keep getting involved with the wrong men.”

“What do you mean ‘your own kind?’” He followed me out. Weeping, I crouched against the wall, arm raised to shield myself from attack. To do this, I had to momentarily forget that Hugh was the least violent man I’d ever known.

“I will never be Jewish,” he said gently. “I will never be younger. And whatever is keeping you from being a well-integrated human being, insofar as it does, it affects me.”

I apologized in tears, frightened at how badly I’d let myself behave. But by September, I’d left him once more.

The late-October morning was cool and crisp, a sweet, ashy autumn scent on the air. I hadn’t seen Hugh in six weeks. As I walked south on University Place toward class, there he was across the street, turning into Washington Mews in his Burberry trenchcoat. My heart lifted. My legs ran without my explicit consent and caught up with him at his door, just as a blond woman carrying houseplants slid past him and up the stairs.

“Hugh!” I said and he turned his face to me. “I’m sorry for coming unannounced, but I . . .” He seemed terribly embarrassed. I waited, mind looping and spiraling, not knowing where to land.

“Linda’s moving her plants in,” he said hoarsely.

“Who’s Linda?”

There followed weeks of sleeplessness and morning terrors, intolerable envy of that blur of a woman I’d seen with her plants. Without his love, who was I? I was invisible, demoted. Just another struggling writer living on next to nothing. Already thin, I’d shed fifteen pounds by the time I ran into him on 8th Street in late November. He seemed surprised and upset to see me this way. Weeks later, he called. We agreed to meet in a Village café.

The night was frigid, snow packed down on the sidewalks; inside, it was overheated and noisy, the table tiny and unstable. Smoke filled the room and bit the back of my throat. Already seated, I watched Hugh walk heavily toward me. The sight of galoshes over his shoes ignited something so tender in me, I wanted to leap up and take him in my arms. But he sat and got right into it. “Your fierce longing has developed in private,” he said. “So how can I rely on it?”

“What do you mean?” I said this because I knew what he meant.

---

“I mean that jealousy is the most irrelevant of passions.” There was a tremor in both hands as he pulled a cigarette from an open pack and lit up.

Why had he pursued me in the first place? I asked, once more evading a truthful response with an attack. He’d known that I wanted children, that I was not his peer. What had he seen in me to give him an idea that never would have occurred to me? I know now what he’d seen: a girl with long, loose hair, her womanhood so delayed that her ardor was displaced onto literary debate. In clothes too young for someone in her twenties: knee socks, pleated skirt and sweater settling on diminutive, braless breasts. He’d seen a woman that an older man wouldn’t hesitate to approach. But sitting in that café, I didn’t yet allow myself to think that he might have plied his advantage.

“On the one hand,” he said, “you are a woman,” and he spread the fingers of his right hand. Then mirroring the gesture with his left, he said, “On the other, you are still a child.” He tented and clasped his hands, forming a neat triangle on the table. “You are both. I love that.” He paused; then, with a heavy sigh, said, “I love *you*.”

I got up. “I’m going to the bathroom,” I said. “I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

Spring arrived. Linda was gone. Distressed at all the trouble I was causing him, I was determined, once more, to stay put with Hugh. He knew me before I was able to mask or mute any part of myself. And still, he loved me. He was fluent in all the small gestures of tenderness—brushing a stray hair from my forehead, shyly taking my arm as we crossed a street. My older sister became engaged that August, and I turned twenty-nine in the shadow of a childless future. Hugh was headed toward fifty. I became more openly ambivalent; he, more sadly resigned. He started questioning my “profound passivity.” “You’ll accept me, but you don’t really want me,” he’d say. “Yet you won’t go out there and get what you *do* want.” He could not give me the life I wanted. He could only give me his love. And I needed that love to live.

“I feel like I’m walking on ice, and I hear it starting to crack in the distance,” he said one September night. Then, after we’d made love, “I love you, Robin, but it’s grief.”

For me, more damaging than grief was the vortex of coming together and breaking apart that I provoked and he tolerated for the next three years, my final years of being young. I came to know myself as mon-

---

strous, my leviathan heart and lethal tail whipping me this way and the opposite. Repelled by my own behavior, I'd voicelessly wail, "Won't anybody stop me?" I'd wonder with detached fascination whether my wildness masked a perverse need to know: Who am I? How much can I stand? Where is the boundary? I longed to go off a cliff just to feel the shock of hard ground and a forced stop. Increasingly distressed by my despair and his own, Hugh found the words to help lead us out. He spoke of moving on without losing one another, describing it as "ferrying each other to a better shore."

Toward the end of these years, during one of our not infrequent trial separations that never lasted more than six weeks, a young man with olive skin, a beautiful face, and slightly turned-out gait offered to share his umbrella when I got caught in a rainstorm. His name was Noah. He'd come to the United States from Belgium for medical school and had decided to stay. His father was a rabbi in Antwerp, having survived the war with his Polish yeshiva in Shanghai. The father's parents and sisters had perished in a ravine outside the Mizocz Ghetto. His haunted terrain bordered my own. My father had been a liberator of Dachau. A Jewish physician who saw everything just as the fleeing Germans had left it, he channeled his rage and grief into building field hospitals from whatever supplies he could commandeer, working past exhaustion to coax starved, typhus-ridden bodies back to human form while their souls, like his, remained in stunned limbo. When he finally returned home, he collapsed, holed up in his mother's house for nearly a year, adrift in some indeterminate borderland, indifferent to the postwar euphoria around him. His nightmares and easily triggered temper were symptoms, I now believe, of PTSD. Whereas I grew up feeling that I had not suffered enough, Noah was sick to death of the Holocaust. His family had paid the price; he was grateful just to be out of Europe and had no interest in an American girl's naïve guilt.

Noah was close to my own size, so when I held him, my arms felt a bit empty. While I was eager to fulfill my dream, he didn't like his assigned part. As a psychiatrist, he was wise to the empty spaces within me and wasn't signing up to fill them. Our relationship lasted four months.

Hugh, meanwhile, weary of drama and disappointment, wrote to me in late summer, saying he'd met someone, Marie, and planned to vacation with her in Italy. After reading his note, I tried to get myself in hand by fleeing the city, traveling to Amherst to see a friend. Arriving, I never left the bus station. From a pay phone, I called Hugh, who'd been

---

waiting to hear from me. Within an hour, I headed back to New York, sitting among stray passengers in the lonely glow of the Greyhound's Hopperesque light. When we hit Route 91, I was jolted from a dream that my father was carrying me down to the basement to have sex. He'd turned into Hugh, then back into my father. This cut to a scene where I was very small, standing in the punishing winds of bone-gray November, penned in by an iron gate before me and my mother behind me, screaming, "You've ruined everything! You've ruined everything between your father and me!" Had I been a tree, her screams would have shredded the bark off my back.

I pitched over, stuffing my hand into my mouth to stifle a cry. I managed to keep silent, rocking and sweating, then threw up in the metal hole of a back-of-the-bus toilet. Whatever that dream's meaning, I didn't dare to probe. All I knew was that I had intercepted Hugh's life once more and once again could not follow through. I had promised to be there the next day at noon. Once home late that night, I struggled to catch my breath and read psalms aloud through the hours without pause. "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. I shall not want. I shall not want." I was trying to keep myself from the knife drawer as I fantasized gashing deep into my arms, stomach, thighs. Something physical and specific would be more manageable than the shapeless terror that possessed me.

I showed up the next day at Hugh's in a shell-thin white dress. It was August, a stifling day, yet I was shivering. I knew I was in greater danger than ever and feared I was endangering him.

He held my body, vibrating with shame, covered me with kisses. I wept; we made love. We belonged to one another in a way that simply could not live in the world. When he called the following day, I was incoherent with grief.

I retreated to my parents' house. Unable to get myself in hand, I tried to tuck myself into my mother's arms. She pushed me away. "Hugh doesn't want a sick girl," she said.

"Who made me sick?" I screamed and lunged at her. My father interceded and told me to leave.

Hugh married Marie that December. From his last letter: "My heart is full of love for you . . . but of all the fates I can and cannot have, this is the one I want."

The next two years were a blur. I must have slept, eaten, put on a face to go to work. At *SELF* magazine, where I'd gotten a staff job, I wrote about nightmares, eating disorders, and other invisible illnesses.

---

It would be twelve years before I married a man I only briefly loved. By then, I'd outlived my fertility.

In the years after Hugh, more fundamental than bearing a child was the bare-handed labor of birthing a self. I had to learn to leave what I loved when it was necessary. First, I left my family. How can you become someone with so many other bodies, desires, and troubles pinballing every which way within one family? In being gone so long—fifteen years—I missed my sisters righting themselves, my nieces' and nephews' births, my chastened parents maturing. While gone, I'd married and divorced and lost a stepson I'd come to love as my own.

Early in my exile, I spent a year in relative isolation, going only to work at the magazine and returning home to my Brooklyn studio each night. I came to love the silence, to recognize its manifold textures, to luxuriate in the privacy I'd carved out. I marveled that the more I was alone, the more I felt myself a separate but constituent part of things. I remember walking one evening in the honeyed dusk of my Brooklyn neighborhood. On a wide, leafy street, treetops edged by declining sun, it was lusciously quiet. For just a few seconds that I will never forget, the sweetest feeling of existence overtook me. It seemed to come out of nowhere. With no one watching, no one approving or judging, I knew with certitude that I existed. I was *someone*. I remembered Hugh's definition of freedom: "autonomous interior selfhood." I understood something about grace.

On a December night, close to the turn of the millennium, I ran from my midtown office to a large common room at NYU's student center. Finding no empty seats, I stood against the back wall, far from the speakers at Hugh's memorial service. Graduate students remembered his kindness, the courage and discipline with which he faced his final challenge, having known for months that his cancer would kill him. I recognized their description of how "Professor D" used to "peer imperiously over his glasses, then suddenly break into a conspiratorial smile." A respected editor lauded him as "a sharp intellect and first-rate critic," and a colleague mentioned Hugh's "constitutional indisposition to run with the trendy crowd." Another called him "an institutional model of civility" and spoke of Hugh's "affirmed stateliness as a professional style." His daughter, now a medical student in her midtwenties, spoke of his "prodigal investment in friendship" and how, even on his deathbed, he tried



---

to dissuade her from her enthusiasm for Kurt Vonnegut. If Marie was there, she didn't speak. I know from Hugh's obituary that their marriage lasted until his death.

Afterward, I walked along Washington Square South. Out of the still, cold night, tiny feathers of snow began to float down over the park, the Mews where Hugh and I had lived out our love, the city—over us all. Then, like a thought reconsidered, it suddenly stopped, leaving no trace. I remembered who I was when I met Hugh: raw and overwhelmed, in need of succor. And, for a while, his attunement and tenderness held me, making him mother, father, lover, friend. I knew I'd been guilty of idolatry, not understanding at the time that worshiping Hugh had subverted the struggle for something more real and difficult within myself. That I had once knelt at his patrician feet made our time seem deeper in the past than the facts allowed. The years since had been hard on America's white Protestants. Approaching the millennium, Jews and other minorities had gained cultural and political ground. I now felt myself an American in full, no longer longing for a surname like Hugh's for camouflage and protection.

I thought about the event I'd just left and how much of Hugh was missing from those tributes. Had anyone in that room ever glimpsed the buried life of this man? Could any imagine that this "institutional model of civility" enacted desire with such variety—exuberance, well-timed restraint, wit, hunger, generosity? The man was a terrible dancer, truly awful, but a gifted, graceful lover. And why had no one talked about his hands? Their beauty, their stunning dexterity. Hadn't anyone else ever seen this man type? Such power, speed, and accuracy! Had no one else teared up to see so large a man performing little tasks—knotting his tie, sewing a button, folding his socks? And why had no one wondered aloud how a man who lived in a haze of smoke could always smell so clean?

He would never know the woman I had become, one finally in possession of her own spirit, the mother I was about to be, my plan, now, in my late forties, to set off across the world to adopt my daughter, how my child would rely on my steady presence as I had once relied on his. He would never know the friend I'd become, the business I'd built, the unorthodox faith I'd found, the life conceived from our sorrow.

## ROBIN REIF



Jiyang Chen

There was much to dissuade me from writing “Someone.” I knew that my tale of romantic obsession had been told many times before. Also, recalling these events always evoked a flush of shame; it was painful to think—much less write—about them. I lacked confidence that exploring a calamitous time in my little life could hold value for others.

So I began with trepidation: Could I invest the chaos I’d lived with coherence? Could I look upon my younger self with charity? Could I cast a sufficiently cold eye on the denials and delusions my lover and I had lived out to expose the human hungers that drove them? Did I have the courage to wring difficult truths out of myself?

Late in the process, I faced another challenge. Obsessive love is, by nature, circular. How could I avoid getting mired in repetition; or could I use that repetition to move the narrative forward? This wrestling led to extensive cuts and rewrites, using one incident as a stand-in for three similar ones, collapsing pages into a single sentence, and other painful maneuvers.

“Someone” is the result of these efforts. I may never stop writing this story. As years pass, new truths surface and new meanings accrue. Do we ever truly understand our lives? Can we ever fully atone for them?

Robin Reif’s work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *McSweeney’s*, a previous issue of the *Missouri Review*, and *Off-Assignment’s* Letter to a Stranger column, among other publications. She is working on a memoir and will receive an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars in June 2023. She lives on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.