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Go Sell it on the Mountain

I MET HER AT LUNCH on opening day. Even then I had trouble holding up. Standing before me in line at the salad bar, she swung around and drilled through me with her charged eyes. “Your first time here?” she said. I nodded. “It shows,” she spit out. (Of course, *she*, I would find out, had been a waiter here twice, then a scholar, and now a fellow.) Then she turned away to pick obsessively at the dripping wet lettuce, choosing only the smallest, greenest leaves. “Enjoy the festivities!” she advised menacingly. I visibly choked. She was small and prim, a light-skinned Cameroonian who’d been in the country all of five years, but carried herself as if she owned us, talking all the time in a swift-moving Brooklyn twang I had trouble keeping up with. Each day she wore a miraculously ballsy outfit, never with a bra. She was dangerous, even a rube like me could tell. Her name was Simone Carpentier. Projecting the most charisma among the two hundred and fifty participants, she would turn that year’s edition of the Green Mountain Conference upside down. Two faculty members would be permanently barred from returning to teach. One fellowship recipient, a scruffy poet, would go missing for a month. I would suffer from nightmares, and break up with Carmen, my longtime Mexican girlfriend back home. And Simone herself—well, we’ll get to that. (Did Keats say, A thing of beauty is a joy forever? He must not have meant live things.)

At the time of the lunch encounter, my head was swirling with the experiences I’d already had. The venerable senior editor of Random House, Chuck Lewison himself, the Grand Old Man of American letters, the discoverer of some of our most prized writers and a worthy Civil War historian himself, had helped me with my heavy green tote bag up the ancient stairs to my room on the second floor of the Inn. I’d driven up in my wasted Ford (the plan was to save money by driving instead of flying from Charleston, South Carolina), boggled at the rapid transformation of the landscape at the higher elevations of New York state, and on into Vermont: this was a

corner of untouched paradise denied so far to country bumpkins like me, given to believe the Carolinas and Virginia were beautiful. Cutting through the picturesque town of Ripton (for two weeks I would feel like I was living inside a postcard), my clunky car speared higher and higher along Route 125 in the dissipating early August fog, the stately rows of sugar maples bestowing paradisaical shade on my bohemian carriage. I passed idyllic waterfalls bordering shady groves, white trickling streams spreading over ancient rocks: this would all be around long after mankind ceased to exist. Passing the roadside sign for the Robert Frost Trail, leading to his cabin, I wanted then and there to hike toward it, even though the last time I hiked I was still a virgin. Green rolling hills rose to my right, the soft morning sun spreading rippling circles of golden light over them. A Vermont Country Store stood weather-beaten and proud, intact as if from Sinclair Lewis's thirties, a few miles down Route 125 from the Inn at the Conference. At my destination, I parked on the side of the road behind a long row of new cars with mostly New England license plates.

This was it! I was finally here, after fifteen years of solitary struggle, writing away to my heart's content, without fear of judgment or censorship, in my bare studio in one of the most literary of Southern towns. Forevermore now I would have some kind of an audience. I would be part of a network of writers, and my work wouldn't suffer from the deadly mark of isolation. Was it now I'd finally make the connection with some influential person in the New York publishing industry, someone who could alter my life at one stroke of his will? I had chosen not to join a graduate writing program, since I believed, like my dead carpenter father who had a taste for good poetry, that real writers, real artists, didn't join academic programs: they were naturally forged from the flux and flow of normal stressful life. I'd spent three thousand dollars, all told, for the right to be at the Conference. Would my idiosyncratic path finally pay off?

When Chuck Lewison said, at the bottom of the stairs inside the Inn, once I'd registered at the office and slapped my name tag on, "Can I help you? Seems like a big load you're carrying," at first I was shy to bother the mighty personage, but then couldn't resist the chance to be in close proximity to him, even if only for a few moments. "It's my thirtieth year straight, coming to the Conference. Never get tired of it. There's always some great new writer to be discovered," he said as he trailed the stairs behind me with the other end of the bag, as if explaining his early presence, this being only the first day. He wasn't huffing and puffing as I was, remaining exquisite in his khakis and polo shirt, his grey-haired classical Roman profile impervious to strain. "I'm Paul Madsen." I extended my sweaty hand when we'd reached my room at the end of the second floor. The door was open; there

were no locks to any rooms at the Conference. My window overlooked Route 125; the green mountain on the other side of it lifted into a swirl of smoky clouds. A horse-drawn hay wagon stood unattended, as if part of the eternal natural landscape. “Paul,” Chuck Lewison acknowledged with a godly nod, “I’ll look forward to hearing about you.” You can’t imagine the discipline I exercised not to immediately unzip my tote bag and plunge my hand inside it to retrieve one of the beautifully bound copies of my finished novel, *Sandiman in Paradise*, and make Chuck Lewison sit on my bare bed to start reading it right then. “Yes, sir! Pleasure, sir! Thank you, sir!” I said instead, revealing my hick origins; excessive formality and respect in casual interactions are dead giveaways of those belonging outside the Boston-Manhattan-D.C. power corridor.

Then began a whirlwind of activities that would give none of us any breathing room for a fortnight. All that time I would think I was so bland as to be unnoticeable, but in fact my very lack of polish was making a definite impression on some of the Conference heavies. My roommate Darren, one of the few overt Southerners there besides me, sporting a shabby beard and never dressed but in a lumberman’s plaid shirt, was a poet who wrote at his farm near Roanoke, Virginia. The minute I met him, he started showing me pictures of his beautiful Scottish wife and three young blonde children. “Poetry is like farming,” Darren said. “You plant, you plow, you dig, you hoe—and the harvest may never get better than the previous years’. But you’re always grateful to get anything out of the ground.” During the worst cataclysms of the Conference, even when people started fainting right and left, Darren’s calm would never be disturbed, although he and I would consume enormous amounts of alcohol at the Barn most nights to maintain our sanity.

By the time Simone shattered my calculated peace at the salad bar, I’d also met Sally Lombardi, memoirist of alcoholism, the greying but always gracious administrator of the Conference; her fat novelist husband Al flirted with everything in sight, from the pubescent to the matronly, apparently without offending Sally; Celia Perkins, the freckled, curly-haired, dreamy Maine fisherman’s daughter, an occasional journalist and the Conference’s longtime administrative assistant, on whom I developed an immediate brotherly crush; and my workshop leader, Adriana Bishop, arguably the most famous teacher at the Conference that year, with two Pulitzers already in the bag at forty-five, her novels about the relentless unraveling of quiet Midwestern marriages said to be the last president’s wife’s favorite reading.

That afternoon, at the introductory workshop meeting, at the Inn’s Purple Parlor—I was one of only two males among ten participants—Adri-

ana made it clear she would run a tight ship. The rules were, before we said anything negative about a fellow workshopper's story, we'd have to detail what we liked about it. Adriana turned out to be a firm taskmaster; the minute one of us started grandstanding, spouting half-baked theories of "what literature is all about" and "the function of the writer in modern society," she chopped off that person's balls without any mercy: "Time out!" she'd interject. "We were talking about the narrative arc of Emily's story. How does it square with Aristotle's paradigm?" I always felt for some reason Adriana didn't like me—perhaps my gentlemanly Southern reticence was mistaken for lack of passion? Darren thought I shouldn't be too eager to make an impression. "Let your story speak for itself," he advised. "Don't try too hard."

But the person that year—other than Simone, of course—who provoked the most emotion for and against was the Conference director himself, Peter Mandelson, winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets at a tender twenty-five, and since then bent on the mission of cleaning up the filth and decadence in American writing, of which tidying up the Conference was a necessary though minor component. Professionalization, standardization, systematization, these were his obsessions, from the administering of contests to the editing of manuscripts, and his aim was no lower than rigorous enforcement of the rule of law to the three hundred and fifty writing programs in the country, to the extent his influence had any meaning. "The quirky personal element has been too romanticized. I want to establish the *business* of writing," he'd famously said in his inaugural year as director a decade ago, as reported in *Poets & Writers*. On the one hand, this cold attitude scared me; on the other hand, meritocracy, even as an outsider, was my only chance.

To the recipients of the coveted waiterships, Peter was a cult figure. Intricate cheers, reminding me of frat house friends my freshman year in college, went up among them, as the headwaiter clinked his glass at the conclusion of dinner the first night, proclaiming, "The one, the only, Peter Mandelson." *Peter! Peter!* went up the chant, even among grizzled octogenarian poets, masticating the last of the dry roast beef. A hush, as in a medieval church, fell over everyone, silencing even the badmouthing sleek New York blonde sitting next to me. As Peter surveyed his empire, I was dumbstruck to find Simone, two tables away from me, staring me down: Was I drooling? Did I have my elbows on the table? My fly was invisible.

I don't remember what Peter said. He probably congratulated everyone for having made it to this exclusive club, and asked us to treat it as a privilege of the highest order. Oh, I'm sure he said something about the need to pace ourselves, and not to participate in everything on the schedule,

otherwise we'd be dead of exhaustion in forty-eight hours: the standard warning at these high-intensity conferences, where every hour, from seven in the morning to midnight, is packed with heavily publicized events that make you feel like a moron if you choose to skip them. I was beginning to doze off. I wished I'd had a couple more months to revise the ending of *Sandiman in Paradise*. Carmen, always practical, had wanted me to wrap things up in time for the Conference.

Simone's deep voice woke me. She had taken the floor, and her head was threateningly leaning to one side. "Excuse me, Peter, I realize this is your show, and my speaking up now is definitely against protocol—but then, everything we take for protocol today was some madwoman's impulse before it became protocol, was it not? Anyway, it strikes me that this year's Conference has already managed to be an exact replica of how last year's began. The same tinkling of the glass by the headwaiter, the same gladiatorial cheers. 'Hip, hip, Peter! Rock the Mountain, Peter!'" Etc. I see five Indians here—East Indians, I mean—and ten Asians, and twenty blacks, half of whom are waiters. Oh, and maybe fifty gays, a third of the faculty." The first groans escaped the veterans; Peter's cold red lips had parted to show his sharp yellow teeth, and his blue eyes were pure ice. Simone hit her stride: "We'll find no formalists among the versifiers. Everyone will think the short story is the art form *par excellence*. Experimentalism will be in vogue. There will be declamations of the unfortunate current tendency to introduce politics into art. Novelists will talk of the unavoidability of rewriting entire drafts fifty to a hundred times. Writing will be compared to hard labour—concentration camp labour? Brilliant first successes will be dismissed as illusionary, unrepeatable serendipities. We'll be told it's not a tragedy if the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker* don't buy much first fiction from newcomers. Agents will try to convince us that publication is not the important thing, perfecting our craft is. The merits of low-residency writing programs will be articulated by recent graduates. There'll be humorous Homeland Security and Sexual Transgression readings. *The Daily Crust* will greet us every morning with news of the arrival of celebrities who run Simon & Schuster and Penguin, whom we'll sometimes actually spot at mealtimes. Veteran faculty will hang out only with their kind, as will younger faculty. Fellows will try to exclude waiters from their parties, waiters will try to exclude scholars, and scholars will try to exclude paying contributors. Someone will be caught fucking in the laundry room after a week. Two minority girls will faint in the Frost Theater during the first days, only to be rescued by white male doctors in the audience. A middle-aged housewife will break down at a reading by a poet of color. The bookstore will run out of books to be signed by novelists.

Most people will get drunk, but almost no one will really make a fool of themselves.” Simone abruptly halted.

I could have sworn she was swaying on her feet. This was magic, this was electricity, this was pure confounded challenge! Three hundred people held their breath to see how Peter would respond. I thought I heard a collective undervoiced “Oh fuck” animate the audience.

“Thank you, Simone, for summarizing the Conference—as you see it. Now, allow me to invite each of you to discover the Conference for yourself, to violate each and every one of—shall we call them Simone’s Rules?—just as you wish!”

Ear-shattering cheers of *Peter! Peter!* exploded among the younger waiters. The faculty broke into prolonged clapping and table-thumping. I was unclear what we were celebrating. In the days to come, I would find out that most of the participants were intent on pretending that Simone never existed: this was their precious time to recharge their batteries, to get hyped and motivated and befriended, and they weren’t going to let the Cameroonian’s personal problems, whatever they might be, interfere with their determination to leave the Mountain elevated in all senses of the word.

What had happened was impossible; it wasn’t supposed to happen. Simone had spoken like filibustering James Stewart in one of those forties Capra movies. “I kinda agree with what she said,” I said to my foulmouthed blonde neighbor. She turned up her nose: “Humph. Some people have manners, and others—others are into showmanship.”

At the cocktail reception that followed at the Barn, a massive structure sheltering huge leather chairs and sofas that allowed for groups to assemble in isolated corners, most of the cliques continued to act as if Simone didn’t exist. She herself wasn’t to be seen. I was desperate to change her first opinion of me. Even if she had won the AWP fiction award two years ago, for her novel about Cameroonian immigrants, *Les Statues de Liberté*, while I had yet to get a story published in an august venue like *The Kenyon Review* or *The Southern Review*, wasn’t the whole point of coming to the Conference to inspire myself to join the upper ranks of today’s writers? I thought of Jean, my idol in tenth grade, who’d publicly humiliated our epileptic English teacher for “undressing” women with his eyes; I’d always lamented not getting to know Jean better.

Peter Mandelson was having a drink with poet Stu Delacruz, who would soon don a reindeer head while he spoke at the Frost Theater of his surrealist influences, Apollinaire and Ernst, Breton and Magritte. Infected by Simone’s daring, I chose this moment to politely join their conversation. “Would you say that surrealism is the necessary counterforce to fascism,

to authoritarian politics of any kind, and as such it needs to acquire an overt political tone these days?" I asked Stu after introducing myself. Peter seemed to mind having been interrupted, but Stu launched into a scathing denunciation of my suggestion: "Politics corrupts art, period. I don't think writers should approach their work with any kind of an agenda." As Stu nervously denounced the straw man I hadn't really set up, Peter excused himself and left.

I soon found myself alone, unable to plug into any of the vibrant cliques, which seemed to have been formed *ex nihilo*, perfected and ready to perform, going back to hip schools and clubs in the Back Bay and the Main Line. Everyone already seemed to know each other. "Oh right, Grace Flook, she taught me Advanced Pedagogical Methods at Sarah Wilson." "No kidding, me too! Five years before she taught you, though." The agents and editors present at the Barn were already known to the hipster kids, none of whom made any impolite advances toward them. I would find that the youths from the MFA programs were invariably polite to me, but I would also always feel an air of condescension. I had no choice but to start gravitating toward the older people, the "nontraditional" writers with families and jobs, and spotty publication credits for years or decades of struggle. People like my roommate Darren.

"Come join us, man," Darren invited me to his twelve-foot-long green sofa. "Did you already meet Lisa? And Christie? How's your back?" I'd slipped that morning on the Inn steps, wet with morning mist. While my own instinct was to try to get to meet as many as possible of the kinds of people I normally wouldn't encounter, Darren, more typical of the Conference attendees, was content with hanging out for the fortnight with no more than the five or ten people he visually trusted immediately, like Lisa Loos, a folk singer with screenwriting credits, and Christie Cunningham, a thumping hearty Midwestern girl whose husband used to be a miner—people not threateningly beautiful. Of course, I had a novel ready to take the world by storm, while Darren was happy to produce a couple of good poems a year. I showed as much enthusiasm as I could when I was with Darren's friends, but something always tugged at my heart, making me wonder if all the action was somewhere else: In late-night parties at the far-flung cottages up the road, assigned to the scholars and fellows, where drunken rituals made for mystical bonding? In serious discussions in some nearby parallel universe, where everyone fretted over the vitality of art in a culture of consumerism, instead of the "Do you know so-and-so?" game usually to be heard?

At ten that night was the first of the readings in the Frost Theater, where in the slim angled spotlight at the podium, novelist Jack Johnson

read his virile prose about hunting and fishing in Idaho as a boy on the verge of manhood might have experienced it. The doors were firmly shut to prevent their slamming in the blustery wind. The half-lit shadowy faces of the listeners perhaps held heads dreaming of their own presence one day at the platform. Every once in a while Jack would stop reading altogether and stare goggle-eyed and open-mouthed at the packed theater, as if challenging someone to rise and disabuse him of the veracity of his narrative. (I would discover that Jack was in the minority in creating straight fiction out of such mundane stuff; most others were turning to memoir.) Where was Simone's ghost?

Darren turned out to be the ideal roommate, quiet and considerate, who didn't even snore. I woke up at five-thirty, as I would the duration of the Conference, so I would have privacy in the communal bathroom. My bathing and shaving rituals were perhaps too excessive to be made public knowledge. At nine there was a lecture in the Frost Theater, Cuban poet Cristina Alvarado talking about structure in the novel, which turned out to be mostly about memories of growing up on her grandmother's lap in old Havana before the Fidelistas took over. At ten there was a craft class with gay novelist Justin Kramer, who praised the demands made on the reader to keep up with the rapid time shifts enacted by his idols, James Salter and Denis Johnson. "Writing is a multiple course feast. You are the host king and the guest lord, but also the humble waiter, and the unseen baker and butcher." *What?* Hello, Simone!

Things quickly unraveled in Adriana's workshop. We were to have read Felicia Hunter's story beforehand, and I had, on the toilet seat at two-thirty in the morning in the common bathroom. Felicia was an anorexic, from some MFA program in Michigan, and she'd written about an anorexic hiding her problems. I was eager to get a lively discussion going, and as soon as Megan Wiley had recited the story's strengths, the faithfulness of the physical descriptions of sadistic nuns and indifferent teachers leaving her impressed, I said: "I don't know where the narrative arc of the story is. Yesterday," I gestured knowingly at Adriana, "you were talking about the Aristotelian paradigm, the rising arc, the climax, the resting point. Well, where is it? This is only a series of random incidents with the thinnest narrative connection. And besides, what is the narrator's moral stand toward the lead character's afflictions? Does she have a moral opinion? Or is she equally neutral, to her ups and downs? I just don't see the author present behind the scenes." A girl named Hannah Wasserstein said, "Actually, I liked the story. I liked it a lot. Precisely because it *doesn't* impose on us the author's attitude, whatever it might be. I like being allowed to decide for myself." Hannah had asked before workshop where I'd got my MFA from,

and when I said, “I’ve always just written on my own,” she’d asked: “But how do you make a living without an MFA? You must tell me after workshop. Really, I’m curious.” To my surprise, Adriana took Felicia’s side, never saying a word about Aristotle: “I appreciated what you did with dreams, Felicia, but I would have liked to see more of the dark underside. What fears and compulsions truly motivate your heroine? Be more explicit. Ratchet up the tension.” Throughout Felicia listened distantly as if there weren’t a bunch of critics in the room taking apart her work. When invited to respond at the end, Felicia said, “I wouldn’t mind having a private word with Adriana later, but I really don’t have much to say at this point.”

Trekking back from the Barn after a craft class—the enigmatic line breaks of Robert Creeley were spoken rhapsodically of—I was struck by the beauty of the scene. As the late morning mist dissipated, and the peaceful sun shed warm golden light on the mountain, treading on the soft grass it seemed to me that this whole tableau was suspended from the lower reaches of heaven. I stopped on the path winding down toward the Inn. There was absolute silence. After a while, I heard a bird chirp from far out on the meadow to the left. There was usually someone chattering away in the lone phone box on campus, a contraption left over from the fifties, but the box stood empty now. Part of me never wanted to leave this enchantment. Part of me felt this attraction was a dishonorable betrayal of the real world.

Simone was at lunch! She looked grim and forlorn, as she sat near an elderly woman—a Middlebury resident whose husband had performed free legal favors for the Conference in the seventies. I didn’t hesitate as I plunked my tray loaded with mangled cheesy pasta and other institutional fare on the table. “May I?”

Simone looked disappointed. “Oh, it’s you. Still the new kid on the block, eh?” I blushed a deep red. Simone smiled. I thought I perceived friendliness. “Let me guess. You’ve brought with you a novel—about a shy Southern teacher who has a fatal crush on an underage girl, inviting reprobation from the moral community. Something along those lines.” She had come surprisingly close—actually, it was a doctor, not a teacher—but I ascribed it to sheer volume of familiarity with the writings of people with my kind of background. But how did she know my background with such perspicacity? “You have high expectations. Sky-high! Take it from me, these people are not who you think they are. This Conference is not what you think it’s all about.” Her eyes seemed to water as they panned the busily chattering participants, already firmly settled into their various in-groups. A short Jewish poet with woolly hair, the idol of all the black writers at the Conference, cracked some joke to make a roar go up by the salad bar.

“Oh yeah,” I said challengingly. “What is it about?”

“It’s about breaking down your ego. Taking a hammer to it. Splitting it apart, bit by bit, so that when you leave you’re no more than a flatulent, deconstructed zombie—with airs, because you’ve been to the Mountain, and welcomed into the club. Of course, the zombieness tends to wear away after a while, so you need to keep returning, on scholarships if you can, year after year. Human beings weren’t meant to be zombies, were they?” Simone asked the Middlebury woman, who shook her head uncomprehendingly.

Before I could contribute to the zombie question, Al Lombardi planted his yard-wide ass on the chair next to Simone’s. “I wanted to compliment you,” he said, looking Simone’s body up and down with his frog vision.

“On my eyes?” Simone asked coquettishly. She was one-upping the flirtatious plump fictionist.

“On your stand yesterday,” he lowered his voice conspiratorially. “Between you and me . . .” he looked over his shoulders as if Peter’s minions might be listening in, “Peter’s a jerk. All the fun has gone out of the Conference. No one does anything crazy anymore. They’re all closet fascists. And half of them are gay.” He leaned back in the chair, entirely inadequate to hold him, then drained his mug of black coffee in two huge swallows. “Not that your eyes aren’t to be complimented.” As he smiled conqueringly, I felt Al would as soon I weren’t present at the instigation. But I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction, even if his ignoring me was irritating. Al started criticizing the militarism of the current administration; he liked to think of himself as a fearsome critic of the Nixonians. Simone was in another world. Her beautiful brown skin, even and luxuriant everywhere, invited long afternoon caresses. Carmen seemed coarse, rude, vulgar by comparison—unmade and unmakeable. For financing this trip, she’d expect me to marry her. Simone’s unattainability was a challenge.

Simone’s writing was curiously glassy on the surface: it gave you no entry point, no way to project your living, breathing mass of flesh onto the consciousness of the author. This kind of writing was in vogue now, while I wrote in the old-fashioned raconteur’s spiraling manner, leisurely getting to the core of the story. My models were the forgotten story writers of the thirties, forties, and fifties, like Roderick Lull and Morley Callaghan, who killed you with their exploding revelations of your own culpability in unjustness. I didn’t think Simone was capable of this type of slowly building lacerative effect: her convictions were too subterranean in *Les Statues de Liberté*. But at least she’d wanted to deal with elements of the real world, where labor was exploited and the revelation was that labour wanted to be exploited, as opposed to dissecting solitary individual egos as their marriages and adulteries unraveled to no point.

“Race is never a distinct presence in your work,” Al said, still on his flirtative horse. “Why, my dear Simone? Your characters could be anyone, white or black. And yet, with your advantages, your colonial heritage, oppression both French and British and American and—”

“You’re disgusting!” Simone hissed, getting up. “Do you know how much you hurt your wife? Have you ever looked into her eyes? She looks—completely shattered! You want the Conference to be all about screwing and drinking? You want this to be a brothel? Are there no choices besides Vegas and Yale? What happened to the Enlightenment? What did you do with it? Did you eat it? Hunh?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, over and over. Al was equally taken aback. The old woman from Middlebury had left.

“Excuse me. I have to go kill myself,” Simone said to Al, and to me, “You’re cute. But I bet you lack the fire in the belly to really anger people with your writing. However, if you want to leave a few pages of your manuscript...under the door of my cottage, up the road...I can’t promise, but I might be able to, you know ...” She shrugged her shoulders.

I barely had the presence of mind to thank her.

Al looked scathingly at me. “So, Paul! In with the big guns already, are you? I always wonder what it is about you Southern boys, with your humble act and all, that gets to our women. You know, women trained and educated in the Puritan ethic. It’s the old exotic game.” Al was talking more to himself now than to me. “The Northern woman always falls for the Southern man. Biology screams, or something. I hope Adriana isn’t giving you too hard a time, Paul?” So he knew whose workshop I was in. “She’s supposed to be a manslayer. I wouldn’t be surprised if she were a dyke. Is she, do you think? I know she’s married, but what does that mean when both husband and wife teach in a writing program?”

Al’s hapless wife Sally came up at that moment, witness from afar of his latest move on Simone. “Paul.” She slipped her pale small hand into mine. “Are you enjoying the Conference so far?” Al snorted derisively, making it plain he wanted to be away from her.

I would see Al mortally struggling to score with girls the rest of the Conference. He became more and more shameless about it, but Simone seemed to have jinxed his success rate. She seemed to have put a hex on the rest of the Conference, too. Everyone’s vital spirit toward the confab, the ceaseless hip-hip camaraderie, the highflying rumors of self-annihilation, the frenzied nose-to-the-grindstone with winging-it-on-the-fly combination, these seemed to have been dealt a death blow with Simone’s Cassandra act. I believe the moment of Al’s failed coddling to Simone’s presumed race

instinct was the point of no return. The Conference would never really recover.

There were packed Frost Theater readings morning, afternoon, and evening, each of the faculty readers matched with a fellow, the Conference administrators having been careful to pair the lugubrious or the dramatic with their own kind. Peter seemed to get up after dinner every night to make gratuitous announcements, which we already knew of from *The Daily Crust*, and to repeat the inescapable buzz about the comings and goings; he seemed to be inviting Simone to challenge him again, as if ashamed of his mute response the first night. I stopped often outside the Conference office, where Celia, the fisherman's daughter I wanted to squeeze in an affectionate bear hug, seemed ready to pass out from exhaustion at handling the complaints and inquiries of middle-aged housewives buried in an avalanche of flyers and handouts. "Can I help you?" I asked Celia once, almost spilling the coffee on her desk with my nervous wave. "No, thank you, Paul." But several times she would let me buy her a beer late at night at the Barn, while the youngsters courted agents and editors in full sight.

When Simone abruptly left the Conference well before its scheduled end, the Amish poet David King would disappear too, not to be found until a month later in a North Carolina trailer park, drunk, disheveled, and picked up by the cops for rowdiness. David set the standard for country-style cheerfulness. He had the hirsute mien of a person raised by wolves in a forest, and he seemed to write the most self-delightedly obscure verse since John Ashbery. He was a fellow now, and had been a waiter and a scholar in previous years, like Simone. I adored him. I wished I could ask him to read through my manuscript, to tell me if it was any good. He had a Ph.D. in American history from Yale, but you'd never know it by his homespun clothes and lavishly curling Hasidic-like beard. David had had an unrequited crush on Simone since their first meeting.

I read from *Sandiman in Paradise* at the Purple Parlor. I'd decided to go early, to get the nerves out of the way. Two fat girls who spun loud verse exclusively about the intake and expulsion of food preceded me. Chuck Lewison, the Random House god, was standing by the door, his head bowed, thumb twirling in his blazer buttonhole. Just before I took the lectern, someone called him from the corridor and he had to leave. I read slowly. Carmen had been the first to convince me that the languid pace suited my prose well. Mostly I read the description of a summer sunset at Charleston Harbor. My characters are always thoroughly integrated into the landscape. At times I've tried to get away from this tendency, to make the setting and the people disparate, but it doesn't work. As I read, the nerves left me, and I felt I was making an impression. But afterward, no one complimented

me. I resolved to go easier on the remaining stories in Adriana's workshop, afraid of my own turn at the end.

Next morning I had my first scheduled meeting with an agent, Dylan Marcus, who liked to publicize his five-year-long stay at a Buddhist monastery in northern India, at a formative stage of his career. "Max was awesome this morning, don't you think? What a zany reader, I don't know where the inspiration comes from," Dylan said, when it was my turn for the precious twenty minutes with him on the front porch of the Inn. Darren's friend Christie had gone before me. Sitting at a respectful distance on the porch, I could hear her speak ninety percent of the time, with Dylan occasionally nodding—not asking her at the conclusion to give him the manuscript of her memoir (about her miner husband's insane family) but to mail it to him. If Dylan were to ask me to hand him my manuscript on the spot, I'd consider it a success. Max, the subject of Dylan's accolade, was a person of indefinite gender identity. At times he/she appeared merely a very effeminate homosexual. At other times, I felt the sexual ambiguities extended much farther. At the Conference Max always came with partner Sam, another person of immense gender confusion, with a face that looked male or female, depending on the mood and time. Max had read exclusively from other poets' work, people who weren't afraid to break the rigid genre boundaries that straitjacketed the bourgeois imagination; besides, Max was experiencing a much-needed spell of silence, which had gone on for some seven years. Most of Max's workshop attendees were older females. "Yeah, Max was great." I wanted to use my priceless twenty minutes to plug my work. Dylan talked for a few more minutes about the metaphysical intensities of listening to some of the greatest writers of the time in the history-drenched Frost Theater. "So, about my novel—can I tell you what it's about?" I finally interjected. "Oh, sure ... we have plenty of time still, but...of course, go ahead. I'm all ears." Dylan actually cocked his head. I entered into a robotic recital of the main plot points, feeling every moment as if I were losing a race I was never meant to win.

I bumped into Simone's ghostly form at the mailboxes; mine was stuffed with leaflets as usual. "Hey," she said. "It's not going to work. The agent stuff. It's only for show. To make the Conference more saleable to the naïve, I suppose. But you're not naïve. You're worldly-wise. I could tell from the beginning. So don't fall for it. I bet if you go to his cottage after he flies back to New York, you'll find all the manuscripts given to him dumped on the floor." He had asked for my manuscript at the end, but was it because I'd already indicated I was a stickler for form? I was desperate to find out how Simone had been part of the system, and yet was so outside it, such a critic. How had she sold her novel? As if reading my mind, Simone said,

“Tomorrow is my last night to drink at the Lodge. Come at seven? You’ll be my guest.” The Lodge was where faculty and fellows got together to drink, as opposed to the plebeian Barn; only published writers could come, or guests of such. To crash into the Lodge was considered the height of bad manners. “Sure,” I said with trepidation. To be Simone’s guest! I hadn’t yet had the nerve to show her my manuscript. Maybe now? I wondered what I’d wear; my clothes, I’d discovered, were utterly out of sync, in their fifties staidness, from the hip bright fashions of the depressed free verse poets and experimental story writers.

Imagine my disappointment when I turned up at the Lodge on time that evening, only to be rudely turned away. A half-Japanese, half-black girl, who’d written a well-received novel about the West Coast internment camps from the point of view of a sadistic guard, explained that “Simone’s already left the Conference, in case you didn’t know.”

“But I only met her a few hours ago.”

“Yeah well, a few hours can be an eternity on the Mountain. You’re gonna have to leave.” As if I were so desperate to enter the sacred precinct of the Lodge that I would have lied about Simone’s invitation, which was clearly this girl’s implication!

A group of levitating waiters and scholars could be heard inside, making fun of Peter’s earnestness. A shrill female voice imitated Peter’s: “At this Conference, we do not believe in art for commerce’s sake. So if you don’t already have a job lined up after getting your MFA, you might as well start on a Ph.D. At this Conference, prohibition era rules are occasionally in force. Guys and gals make out at their own risk. Homemade liquor is the most potent, and better not forget to pay the spies, the *agents provocateurs*, the bullying cops.” A male voice, doing Al Lombardi, asked: “And who might the *agents provocateurs* be?” The female voice responded, “Certainly not the literary agents!” To which a roomful of drunk-sounding scholars responded in hooting laughter. The Japanese-black girl firmly closed the Lodge door in my face.

It turned out to be true that Simone had left the Conference, perhaps even the country. For some months afterward, her publisher, a small Midwestern outfit, wouldn’t be able to track her down. The book she’d promised, to follow up on her first big success, didn’t come through. There were rumors immigration had nabbed her on some technical visa violation and deported her back to Cameroon. Others on the grapevine, which was within my reach for the first time, claimed she had become so disgusted with writing she’d become a nun, or an investment banker. I liked to think that Simone was studying privately with some great Irish playwright in Dublin, while exploring the last hidden dimensions of her sexuality. We all know

now what Simone has produced as an encore, the heartless denunciation of multiculturalism masked as a novel that has left so many scratching their heads; but where she was and what she was doing when she wrote it, no one yet knows for sure.

David King went missing a couple of days later. He failed to show up at the Conference office, after lunch, and Celia hit the panic button. It was the middle of a reading by nature writer Gideon Spivey, and I was feeling guilty for not yet having been able to visit the Robert Frost cabin, or even participate in any of a number of goofy made-for-the-nonathlete sporting events on the vast greens of the Mountain. Celia passed Gordon a note, and he read off: "If anyone knows where David King is, please contact the office. The Middlebury police are waiting." Gideon wasn't supposed to read out loud the last sentence. The nerves of two hundred and fifty of the nation's most aspirational writers collapsed at the same time. The older woman next to me, with a long face and a beak nose, started wheezing loudly, and her skin seemed to break into red splotches; her companion, a woman remarkably similar in appearance, rubbed the afflicted one's cheeks hard as if that would resuscitate her. Back in the higher rows, a scream went up. The second of the Indian girls, Rupali, had fainted. (When the first of the faintings had struck a tiny Indian girl a few days ago, everyone had pointed out Peter's wisdom in advising us to "pace ourselves"; I, on the other hand, was proud not to have missed a single nonconflicting event so far.) Following Simone's script, two inhumanly calm white doctors cleared out the crowd and fanned the Indian girl back to life.

All day long the Middlebury police interviewed Conference participants who claimed to be friends with David; David was the kind of welcoming guy everyone instantly claimed as their own, so the police had their work cut out. Had David killed himself? This was everyone's unspoken thought. My instinct was mute on David's fate. It wasn't until months later that I found out, from the few friends at the Conference I maintained touch with, about Simone's alleged cruel treatment of David, which was said to have brought on the disappearance. Apparently, Simone had been relentlessly browbeating David that his Amish reticence was merely a convenient persona, a shell David's inner self would break free of given half the chance. I had a difficult time imagining the unshakably peaceful David getting riled over Simone's provocations.

And yet, hadn't Peter Mandelson been shaken up enough by Simone's challenge to go out of his way to be exuberant? At the first Barn dance the night before, Peter had not only stood on a table to gyrate his hips like an Elvis off his painkillers, but stripped off his shirt, revealing his structured bony frame, and seemed about ready to take off his pants too, when his

dance partner, the blondest and youngest Middlebury undergraduate at the Conference, restrained him. Later, I found out that Peter always let loose at the Barn dances, although not to the extent of going nude! How naturally rhythmic Carmen was, compared to the awkwardly hustling sets of blonde limbs I'd seen at the Barn dance! (Disco and new wave at least evoked general enthusiasm, while hip-hop brought groans.) And yet, I felt a sudden stab of conviction that Carmen and I were doomed: as good-hearted as she was, she didn't have the judgment or resources to give my writing career a big enough boost—and was that too unfair to expect? From time immemorial, writers had leeches onto rich patrons, lovers when possible, to feed their habit. Was I such a criminal?

A pair of lesbians from the Iowa writing program fell out of the hayride wagon the next afternoon, one on top of the other, but they were unhurt—although clearly drunk. Chuck Lewison of Random House, looking more glamorous than ever in a navy blazer and yellow ascot, was the first to the rescue. The girls laughed so hard, I thought the mountain would get sick of their demanding echoes. How did one fall out of an enclosed hay wagon? Darren was at my side. “My little girls would've been embarrassed. These folks apparently never get to let off steam.” The ruddy wild-bearded farmer—who'd been maneuvering the mechanized wagon into the most hair-raising turns imaginable, the wagon twisting up and down the green hill on the other side of the Inn—barely broke stride.

Meanwhile, in sight of the hayride, at the edge of the lawn, right along Route 125, a cocktail party was in progress; drinks were free, and everyone seemed determined to lose it before dinner, which today was going to be a picnic outside the Frost Theater. Faculty were balancing drinks with books presented to them to be signed. The writer was compelled to make up intimate-sounding notes for bare acquaintances on the spot (“For Sheila, whose writing kicks, and who's never afraid to make us think harder.”). There were some who seemed to buy many hundreds of dollars worth of books, lining up after every reading to grab the precious autograph and note; I, on the other hand, marveling at the ritual, was determined not to buy a single book at the Conference. Dylan Marcus, the agent I'd been assigned, went by, clearly not recognizing me. He was making a beeline for a slim redhead in my workshop; Sadie wrote exclusively about Central American refugees. Dylan kept volubly hitting on Sadie, still praising Max the gender-smashing silent poet, well after most people headed over to the picnic. Even at the picnic, in their drunken state, people started hitting on the most hopeless targets. “Jerry,” the eighty-three-year-old editor of the greatest Southern literary journal, whose forebears had kept the progressive-agrarian flame alive during fascism's bleakest years in the thirties and forties, was going after the

Irish editor of *Thornapple*, the independent Wisconsin press, at least forty years his junior. I saw *Sandiman in Paradise* go up in flames; nobody cared for my writing.

My second agent meeting was more discouraging than the first because the svelte Manhattan blonde assigned to me feigned unnatural exuberance; I didn't believe her faked enthusiasm for a second. The subject of Carmen came up, which brought on more effusion about the dynamism of Mexico City. I was out of the loop, and I knew it. I had thought I could plug into the literary circuit at a higher point of elevation, at a time of my choosing and convenience, but this was not to be. My novel excerpt left everyone in Adriana's workshop mystified. "You mean to say," Hannah Wasserstein exclaimed, "that in this day and age, a *dirty old man* wouldn't be hauled up and prosecuted by neighbors, teachers, responsible community members, the minute they got wind of his insidious attempts to lure this—this innocent—fourteen-year-old girl? I mean, I know progressive laws suffer from a time-lag in some regions of the country, but come on!" Felicia Hunter, the anorexic, who seemed to have forgiven my harsh critique of her story a week ago, excused me with, "You could have made the girl more vulnerable. You know, given her some bigger trauma to deal with. I could see how visits to the therapist might help flesh out her character more convincingly." No one wanted to talk about the "dirty old man," my hero, the aristocratic Sandiman, who was an expert in Egyptian hieroglyphics, and whose great-aunt had married into the extended Vanderbilt clan. Later, Adriana, in our private follow-up meeting at the Barn, would say, "Paul, have you considered joining a low-residency MFA program? It might be just the thing to hone your craft. You already have tremendous narrative skill—I like how you move almost seamlessly from Point A to Point B—but your characterization could do with more texture, more thickness. Regular feedback from readers might force you to face up to challenges you might now be stepping back from." When I walked outside, the warm early afternoon sun hit me in the face, made my whole body tingle with some sense of lost perfection. I thought how sad it was that writers missed out on the ability to experience reality without filtering sensors. Darren, climbing the path the other way, clapped me on the back and said, "They love me in workshop. They think I oughta send out my poems to much better magazines than I've been shooting for so far. How about that?"

Three days before the end of the Conference, Sally Lombardi caught her husband screwing in their own cottage Delphina Sommers, the silver-haired poet with pencil-thin lips, who preferred gnomic non-utterances to actual conversation. Reportedly, Delphina had a penchant for prolonged anal sex. Al, instead of apologizing and begging Sally to keep things quiet,

became so angry that Sally started shouting and crying, bringing neighboring faculty to their cottage, only to find Al still naked and enraged, pronouncing, "I have put up with you for thirty-two years. You still don't get me, Sally. This might be the time to think of divorce." Whether Al and Sally will ever get divorced is something we on the fringes of the established writing circles don't know yet, but Peter did fire Al from the Conference that very day, canceling his contract for the following year as well. Delphina was gone too, but not before she threw a hissy fit in the Conference office, complaining about the incompetence of the staff who hadn't forwarded her phone messages.

Yet who could have been prepared for the greatest surprise of all? It happened at the final bonfire, in the woods behind the farthest cottages. Several of these secretive events were supposed to have occurred already, late at night after the official parties were over. Only the initiates—that is, the youngest and most exuberant among the waiters and scholars—were invited at first. But as the Conference went on, older and older people started finding their way to the bonfires, including the hard-edged among the faculty, and any paying contributors who were so inclined. The Conference wasn't far from closing day when the blonde Middlebury student who'd been Peter's partner at the first Barn dance asked me to walk with her to the bonfire. By this time I'd all but forgotten any hankering sense of loyalty I might have had toward Carmen. We passed the parking lot, where my old Ford had lain unused for almost two weeks now. I'd never once driven into Middlebury, worried I might miss out on something at the Conference, some sudden opportunity for a breakthrough. Only inane come-ons, like "the stars are sure out in full force tonight, aren't they?" occurred to me, as the Middlebury girl casually slipped her arm into mine.

Reaching the site of the bonfire, she left me as nonchalantly as if she didn't know me. In the discernible chill, women in revealing short dresses squatted awkwardly around the fire, watching the licking flames as if mesmerized, while helpful young men roasted marshmallows and occasionally burst into songs which I assumed were part of the Conference lore. I felt utterly excluded from this group of writers overtly courted and rewarded by the prestigious magazines and residencies. A mediocre poet like Peter had established himself as the guardian of the Conference, so that no one he didn't approve of could get through to the next stages. Peter was untouchable. Simone was gone, but Peter would always be here, year after year, long after I had acquired grey hair and collected many unpublished novels in my drawers. I hated Peter. I hated him with my guts. I wanted to take one of the sharp marshmallow sticks and poke it into his guts, to see some emotion from icy Peter.

“People, I have something important to tell you.” Standing up in the shadowy light of the bonfire was Peter himself, dressed in a gray sweatshirt with the Conference logo on it, and tight jeans that showed off his trim hips. “This, I’m afraid to tell you, will be my last year at the Conference.” Thirty or so men and women moaned in unison. Max, the gender-defying poet, the silent voice of his generation, sneezed violently—I thought he had tears in his eyes. “My decision is irrevocable,” Peter went on. “I’ve done this long enough. There is a time for everything, and I feel like my time is past. We need fresh blood here. Some day, maybe one of you will stand in my footprints. All of you are immensely qualified, and worthy of however far you end up going. But now, let’s let loose, and one more time . . .” And here Peter launched the most popular of the Conference cheers. All around me I felt an emotional surge, in which were mixed sorrow and gladness, anger and calm, retreat and advance, blended together in an indecipherable concoction only the young and healthy could fully imbibe. Before long, I slipped away from the bonfire, as the others started converting the yet-to-be-concluded Conference into instant nuggets of nostalgia, snapshots for the perpetual memory banks that would outlast even Peter’s sturdy helmsmanship.

I was indescribably sad the final couple of days. Provisional goodbyes were being expressed all the time, excited promises made by one and all to keep in touch. Everyone—minus Simone and David, and Al and Sally and Delphina, of course—praised how strongly their batteries had been recharged, including those who’d grumbled earlier about the relentless pace of events. “You see the logic of this thing play out over two weeks,” Jerry, the philandering editor of the venerable Southern magazine, was heard pronouncing at the sign-out desk the morning of departure. “I don’t see how you get to a substantially different point than where you started off, except in conditions of total immersion.” Peter had become invisible. The farewell dinner, formal in a Lost Generation kind of way, had been addressed by a young black poet on the faculty, who evoked the necessary ghosts to end on the right note of elusiveness.

“Well, young man, I never did see you after that first day. Are you off soon?”

Chuck Lewison had collared me as I sat on my favorite chair on the Inn porch, my tote bag before my feet, its contents as heavy as when I arrived, failing as I had to distribute any copies of my manuscript. Darren had just left in a van for Burlington airport, making me promise to spend a day in Roanoke on my drive back to Charleston. A young man with a Stegner fellowship had slipped on the wet Inn steps, and like me escaped unhurt. I had been waving to group after group of departing participants. Across the road was the forlorn lawn, favoured for cocktail parties, and the

hill where the hayride had brought out the country bumpkin in tenured writing teachers. Soon, everyone would be gone, and the warm Vermont August sun would reign over the desolation on the mountain.

“Mr. Lewison, sir, it’s good to see you again.” I stood up to shake the great man’s hand. “I’m driving, so I can leave when I choose.”

“That’s good, that’s very good, because I’d really like to talk to you. I asked Adriana about you. She says you have great promise. Now would I be remiss in thinking you just might have a manuscript you’d be interested in showing me?”

The most ecstatic half-hour of my life followed, as I happily plucked the manuscript from its coffin-darkness in the tote bag, and at Chuck Lewison’s request, hit on the narrative’s key plot turnings.

“It sounds really intriguing. Now, I’m going to take this with me, and I promise I’ll read the whole thing on the flight back home to Orlando. I live in Florida most of the year, you know. And I’ll be in touch with you soon—you do have your email here? Good, good. So then!”

We shook hands almost like equals. I felt elevated, enthralled, distinguished. All my life’s bad memories escaped me for that moment. My carpenter father would be proud.

I’d heard, of course, over the duration of the Conference that Chuck Lewison hardly ever acquired manuscripts anymore, that he was more of a venerated figurehead than an active editor, except to the few gray eminences who remained loyal to his literary judgment. But I didn’t care. If I wasn’t yet on my way, I had at least had a glimpse of what lay beyond obscurity. Simone hadn’t even had to force her way in: couldn’t I do the same?