No. 90/91 • Spring/Summer 2005

Confrontation



A Rear-Eyed View of a Procession

The Get

Marc Bookman

Stu Appelbaum was certain he had put his marriage behind him. The miserable failure of it, the parsing of the blame, the real guilt and the imagined guilt and the guilt he knew he should be feeling but didn't, the screaming and crying and horrible silence, he thought he had put all of it behind him with a simple divorce. Simple: no children, no house, no assets to speak of beyond a fish tank and a living room of leather furniture; and the entire process occurred by mail, painlessly and without emotion. "Pursuant to Title 23, Section 3301 (c), the mutual consent/no fault clause of the Divorce Code of our Commonwealth, and ninety (90) days having passed since the commencement of your action, your petition for divorce has been granted by the Honorable John T. Youngman, Jr. of the Court Of Common Pleas . . . , " the letter started. He read it through to the end—there was a complex discussion of statutes, codifications, rights, consequences—and then crumpled the paper into a ball and shot it into the trash can, where it hit a milk carton and bounced out. Only then did it occur to Appelbaum that he should keep the letter. He unraveled it carefully, smoothed it with his hands, and placed it in a drawer with some loose batteries, a deck of pinochle cards, and a copy of his rental agreement. He did not think about the letter for the next two and a half years.

Occasionally, though, he thought about the end of his marriage. The irony of the words "no fault." The impossibility of them. Appelbaum was certain that all divorces were the fault of someone—some*one*, he emphasized when the subject came up. He did not believe in mutuality of cause. One spouse always wanted out before the other, always saw the future first, always took the self-fulfilling prophecy of aloneness in hand and shaped it into an unpleasant reality. Appelbaum even remembered the moment, although he mercifully kept it to himself—the night before their first Thanksgiving, when Marcia had fallen asleep in front of the television set. The gray light against her cheek, the sagging shadow under her eye left him

with a profound understanding of his own frailties—he would not be spending the rest of his life with Marcia Golden. This insight did not devastate or even sadden him, but instead caused him to feel something less heartbreaking but more disappointing: relief.

It was easy for Appelbaum to shoulder responsibility for the divorce—he was the sort of person who liked to be in the wrong, who liked to own up to things, who liked, finally, to be whispered about and recriminated against. In fact, though, the blame was easiest for him to accept because he had earned it, not by the silliness of a single mistake or the dunderheaded ineptitude of oblivious irresponsibility, but through a callous and implacable disregard of his spouse's feelings. He was an ass. There was no starting point for his behavior, just as there is no starting point for being wise or sincere, but for Marcia's friends there was a first indication: Stu's birthday party, which Marcia had gone to great trouble to arrange, only to have Stu show up an hour late with his idiot buddy Clive, both of them reeking of pot and leaning against each other in hysterical laughter.

"It's your birthday party," Clive said, looking around wide-eyed at the guests ringing the room. Apparently he had forgotten why they had come.

"They don't look very happy, considering it's *my* birthday," said Appelbaum with mock indignation. This set them off again.

Only a month after that he had famously stayed out for an entire weekend, yukking it up to his friends that he couldn't remember a single minute; and professing the same amnesia, only infinitely more sadly, to hers. Then a photograph turned up on Stu's dresser, not even hidden except that it was sticking out of a book he was reading, of Stu at the beach with an old girlfriend. An undated photo, he pointed out, an *old* girlfriend; but he sported the same goatee he had grown only three months before, and the bathing suit he was wearing looked to be one Marcia had bought him. Not to mention that the photo was in a book he was reading now, not five years ago!

Marcia had not wanted a divorce. She was not the "divorcing kind," she told him when things started turning. Her parents had been married, happily and not, for thirty-one years, and she understood the idea of weathering a storm. Vicissitudes, her mother told them the night before their wedding, are what marriage is all about.

Stuart nodded in agreement, as he always did when his soon to be mother-in-law spoke; but Marcia was offended, not because of the bad timing as much as the prescient tone her mother used. Had it really been as obvious as all that?

Never apologize, never explain. She had heard Appelbaum say those words a hundred times in conversations with his single friends - that was how he referred to them, "single friends." Before their first year was over she was straining to hear whispered phone calls in the bedroom, and soon after that callers began hanging up on her and apologizing for wrong numbers. Always a woman's voice. She considered caller ID and *69 and the other tricks the phone company offered for problems such as hers, but finally she settled on a simple question: was he having an affair? All she really wanted was an admission—she was willing to forgive an affair, but not willing to look the other way. There would be no guilty plea, however. *Never apologize, never explain.* When she confronted him after a typical night out, the third in two weeks, he looked away and said nothing. He offered no excuses. He never did. She called him a coward, a weakling, she screamed at him and wept at her own misfortune and awful judgment, she locked herself in the bathroom and demanded that he leave, but none of it provoked him. "What do you want me to say," he muttered, as if her asking about his fidelity was rhetorical. That was when it dawned on her that he really did not know what to say. He was not equipped for the marriage, nor was he equipped for the end of the marriage. When finally she asked if he wanted a divorce, he shrugged. He guessed that he did. Replaying it all in his mind a full year later, while on a date with a woman who had no sense of humor, he remembered exactly how he'd felt when his wife had first mentioned divorce: like an observer from a great distance. As if he were watching himself from the windows of a moving train. After the divorce, they did not talk for some time. What was there to talk about? Their lives had barely intersected when they shared the same roof, and there was nothing left, not even hard feelings. Marcia's mother, who had struggled for years with emphysema, passed away just after Christmas, and Stu sent a condolence card with a few personal words—he hoped things were going well for her, he wrote. In fairness he had not even heard about her mother's death until after

the funeral, and Marcia did not hold his absence against him. She had not called him, after all, even though it had occurred to her that maybe she should. A few months later, they ran into each other as a De Niro movie was letting out, and spent a minute arguing pleasantly about who had influenced the other's taste in movies, while their respective dates searched for traces of tension between them. Applebaum faced the usual questions after they parted, and evaded them as best he could. How did he feel running into his ex? Fine. How long had he been married? Not very long. A few other questions he simply ignored. He was on his second and last date with this woman—he had only called her because Clive was busy and he didn't feel like going to the movie alone—and he certainly was not going to say more. Instead his thoughts wandered back to Marcia, who had introduced her date as a man named Blumenthal. While talking to Applebaum she had held this man's sleeve at the elbow, not so much to stop him from going as to stay in contact with him, to touch him—Applebaum could see they were not yet holding hands, but soon would be. He thought, with passing regret, that it had been some time since a woman had felt that way about him.

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"STUART, THIS IS MARCIA. Could you please give me a call when you get a chance? I'm still at the 834 number." Then she paused and decided not to take a chance. "4637 in case you forgot. Hope all is well. Talk to you soon."

Appelbaum got the message two days later. He had spent the last week in Harrisburg, brought along, ostensibly, for last-minute research, but in reality to move the boxes of exhibits from the hotel to the courthouse, to make copies, to monitor the fax machine and the e-mails. His firm, Schuman and Shapiro, had hired him fresh from paralegal school seven years ago with the understanding that he would be given the flexibility to get through law school at night and still make a living; but Appelbaum had never actually enrolled in law school, and now the paralegal job was full time and sometimes even more. It wasn't what he had envisioned for himself, but he was only thirty-two—younger than many of the lawyers he worked for, he reminded himself—and still hopeful that time was on his side.

A number of messages had piled up on his machine, but there were none from work, and he paid little attention to the rest of them, including his ex-wife's. He was in no mood for messages. The case he'd worked on for two years had settled during the noon recess, but no one had felt it necessary to tell him. So there he was, boxes piled so high in his arms that he could barely see past them, pushing his way into an empty courtroom. Then it was two o'clock and two-fifteen and still the courtroom was empty. He was just sitting there waiting when the bailiff idled in and informed him of the settlement. "They're probably out drinking champagne," he said knowingly to Applebaum. "Both sides too, I'll bet. You know they don't give a damn about the little fella." The remainder of the afternoon he had spent loading the same boxes into the Schuman and Shapiro van while the bailiff regaled him with stories of the big cases, and big lawyers, who had passed through his courtroom. He drove home, alone, without a thought in his head beyond the raging anger he felt for allowing himself to be trivialized. He didn't count; there was nothing he did, at work or anywhere, that counted anymore. His firm had humiliated him, and here it was almost midnight and still not a single person had called to tell him the goddamn case was over. The few messages he had gotten weren't important, they couldn't be—it was a time in his life when there was no one to leave him an important message. He poured himself a shot, drank it, poured another. He made a mental note to call his ex-wife tomorrow.

But most of a week passed before Appelbaum returned the call. It wasn't that he had forgotten. He replayed the message the next morning, scribbled down the number, even picked up the phone; but at the last second decided that he didn't have the energy just yet. He was still angry, still humiliated, and whatever Marcia wanted could last the weekend and probably longer. It was another of his big sayings: if you spread your failures out, no one will realize how many there are.

There was a second message from Marcia waiting for him when he got home Thursday night. "Stu, this is Marcia. I need to talk to you. I left you a message last week, but maybe you didn't get it." A little more abrupt this time, and no phone number. He had decided not to call her from work—a memo had gone around the firm ad-

monishing the staff about personal calls, a big joke considering the golf trips the partners planned all day long—but now he wished he had. He always hated it when people didn't return his calls.

"Mar," he said when she answered, "it's your ex. Long time no hear, huh?"

"Stuart, thanks for getting back to me. So, how have you been?"

"Oh, about the same. You know nothing much ever changes with me. How 'bout you, you must be an intern by now." He could never keep that straight—intern, resident, fellow? Even when they were living together, he was never certain what was next for her. He only knew she was at the hospital all the time. He remembered her once asking him, in desperation, if her long hours were the cause of their problems.

"Things are good." She decided not to elaborate. "Listen, I have a little favor I need to ask you. Do you know what a Get is?"

"A Get?" He knew, vaguely. For some reason he said he didn't.

"That's what it's called, a Get. It's a Jewish divorce."

"I haven't had too many opportunities to spread good news lately, but I think this may be one of them, Marcia. We're already divorced."

"Ah, yes, the fabled Applebaum wit, I had forgotten about that. Do you suppose it was your sense of humor that persuaded me to marry you?"

"No, I imagine it was your lack of judgment." At this, the simple truth of it, Marcia laughed; Appelbaum waited. "So, a Get?"

"It's just a formality. We meet with a rabbi, a few papers are drawn up, the whole thing is over in an hour." She knew she was being transparently casual, but how else was she supposed to act with an ex-husband she hadn't even spoken to in two years?

"When did you suddenly get Jewish? I mean, I know we got married in a synagogue, but I thought that was just for our parents. Were you studying the Talmud all that time and I didn't know it?"

"No, Stuart, I haven't gotten any more *Jewish*. But I've been seeing a guy who," she hesitated to find the words, "is more Jewish than we are . . . were. It means something to him, and so it means something to me, too."

"I guess where it comes to me, two divorces are better than one," he said. When she was silent at the other end, he clicked the re-

ceiver once with his finger, then spoke quickly: "Listen, I have another call coming in. I'll get right back to you. It shouldn't be a problem at all. Okay?" He hung up the phone without getting her response.

For a moment, a camera flash, he wished he were still married. Spreading himself the length of his sofa, he sat quietly and pondered this wish, this wish that was dissipating even as he thought it. He closed his eyes and tried to remember Marcia, what it was like with her. His memories were scattered, thin; how could he have kept so little? He rolled over and took a deep breath. He knew there was more, he set his mind to remembering. Carefully, almost delicately, he put himself back with her: an early date, a Billy Crystal movie, a Chinese restaurant afterwards. A conversation about the zoo, and whether the animals ever hooked up after the place closed for the night. He felt himself drift.

A ringing phone jarred Appelbaum awake. He was still on the sofa, disoriented, unsure how long he had been out. He decided to let it ring, thinking that it might be Marcia and that he would rather take a message. It wasn't. It was Clive, reminding him that the Stones concert was tomorrow night and that Mick and Keith might be old and ugly but could still rock. "If we're not tailgating by seven we're toast," Clive said, "and you'd better not be out of town with Schmuck and Schmuck, or whatever the fuck your firm calls itself." Appelbaum pulled himself off the sofa. A good Stones concert was just what he needed, something to make him feel young and stupid again.

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HE WAS AT WORK early the next morning. A new associate was there, a guy five or six years younger than him trying to make partner the old fashioned way.

"What's going on, Apps?"

"Just doing some research. Not too exciting."

"Are you on Phelps?" The Phelps case was the next big trial; half the firm had been working it for the past six months. A Phelps Shipping boat had crashed into a Chesapeake restaurant—a drunken pilot, an oil spill, two dead teenagers and enough liability to keep the firm busy for the next ten years.

"I did some work on the cleanup costs, but I'm hoping to avoid the trial," Appelbaum said, turning away. He wanted to get back to his screen.

"You try to get out," the associate growled Pacino-like, raising his voice and his hands as he walked down the hall, "but they keep pulling you back in."

Appelbaum returned to his research. He had another forty-five minutes before the office filled up, and he spent it researching despair, destruction and the intentional infliction of mental distress, viewed entirely through the prism of Jewish divorce law. Mr. Goldberger had refused to obtain a Get for his ex-wife until she gave him sole custody of their three children; Mr. Solomon wanted a piece of his ex-wife's father's clothing store; Mr. Lewin just wanted the engagement ring back. Appelbaum's favorite was Meltzer versus Meltzer, a case that had been to the Rhode Island Supreme Court twice, the first time when they ordered the husband to obtain a Get, the second time when they put him in jail for contempt. "She's got a better chance of becoming a virgin again than she has of me giving her a Get," Mr. Meltzer told the judge as they took him away. Appelbaum wondered if the man was still in custody—Meltzer sounded like the sort of guy who wouldn't let a little jail time interfere with his better judgment. He had almost decided to check the Rhode Island Department of Corrections website when his supervising partner, a man named Duane Mercer, touched him on the shoulder, causing him to jump.

"Are you working on anything important?" Mercer asked, feigning interest as he often did when about to give an assignment. Appelbaum knew that the answer was "no," that in fact he could not possibly be working on anything more important than whatever Mercer had in mind, because by definition whatever Mercer had in mind was the most important thing Appelbaum could be working on.

"I was just wrapping something up for Rockland. Nothing crucial." Rockland was the young associate who had just left, the sort of up-and-comer who always beat the mid-level partners to work, and thus the sort of lawyer guys like Mercer were always worrying about. Mercer lowered his eyes, almost imperceptibly, to try to see the screen, but Appelbaum quickly cleared it and looked up at his boss.

"Great," Mercer said. "I guess you know we're closing in on this Phelps thing, and I was reviewing your research on cleanup when it occurred to me that I read about a case similar to ours off the Oregon coast. I'm pretty sure it settled, so you won't find it on Westlaw. See if you can get a copy of the pleadings, and maybe a settlement agreement if it wasn't sealed."

"Do you know the town they filed in?"

"If I knew the town, don't you think I would have told you? I know it made some news, you'll be able to find it on the net if you do a thorough search."

Appelbaum thought he had heard an inflection on *thorough*, the slightest weight on the *th* that meant his work was slipshod; but he feared that any response he made might unnecessarily prolong their conversation. Soon Mercer drifted away. In a few minutes Appelbaum had tracked the case down to a coastal town in northern California, and by eleven he had found someone awake on the West Coast to e-mail the pleadings to him. When he saw Mercer again, shortly after lunch, he said he was working a lead. "I'm hoping to find what you need by the end of the day," he told him. "I think the library might have an environmental magazine that featured the case." Now he could simply e-mail the pleadings to Mercer, and he had the afternoon free. He thought to call Marcia and get it over with, put this final unexpected nail of the marriage in the coffin and bury it along with everything else. There was no reason not to, he even dialed the first few numbers while rehearsing what he would say. But what about Goldberger, Solomon, Lewin and Meltzer? These men, Appelbaum knew, had been driven by sins unknown to him; yet, each had felt strongly enough about a Get to lay himself bare in a court of law. Meltzer, perhaps, was still in jail for refusing to grant one. Appelbaum was certain that this ritual, this Get that he had barely heard of before the weekend, was more than he understood, more than he had agreed to under the civil laws of Pennsylvania. Instead of calling Marcia, he decided to see his rabbi.

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IT HAD BEEN nineteen years, and surely Stuart Appelbaum had been more affected by the time than Max Steiner, the rabbi at Beth Sholom.

Steiner, in fact, appeared exactly as Stu remembered him: fit, deeply tanned, and with the same lengthy sideburns that seemed cool when Stu was thirteen but now suggested a man living in the past. His pastel-shaded sweater and khakis left the impression he had just shot a seventy-eight rather than ending a long session immersed in the Talmud. He was a modern rabbi of a modern congregation in a deep suburb of Philadelphia—there was no old world in him.

"Can I help you," the rabbi said.

"I'm not really sure," Appelbaum said. He stood uncomfortably in the threshold of the rabbi's office, not sure whether to enter or wait for an invitation. For a reason now unclear to him he had dressed in the most uncomfortable of his three suits, a tight fitting dark brown polyester he might have been *bar mitzvahed* in had it been six sizes smaller. He felt the sleeves creep into his armpits, and decided to sit in the huge red leather chair in front of the rabbi's desk; he immediately felt lost in its depth. The rabbi waited. There was no look of recognition on his face.

"I'm Stu Appelbaum. You got me through my *bar mitzvah* a long time ago."

"Stu Appelbaum," the rabbi repeated. "Of course. Stan and Shelly's child. How are they?"

"Living the Boca life," Stu said.

"Boca Raton? I was just down there a few months ago. They must love it."

Stu just nodded. His father had been dying of Hodgkin's for the past two years, and he didn't want to lie about it.

"So what can I do for you, Stu? Are you thinking about coming back? A lot of people your age are doing that."

"No, Rabbi, I'm not very religious these days, I never really was if you remember. But I didn't know who else to ask. You see, my ex-wife wants a Get."

"Your *ex*-wife?"

"We divorced a few years ago."

"And for some reason, even though you're divorced, you don't want to give her a Get?"

"No, it's not that. I mean, I didn't have any trouble with the divorce."

"Who wanted it," the rabbi asked. He straightened his legs to the side of the desk and brushed a crumb from his stiffly pressed pants.

"It wasn't really a *want* situation. My wife insisted on a divorce, and I didn't object."

"But you're objecting now?"

"Not objecting, exactly. There's nothing between us—I haven't even seen her in a few years. I was a terrible husband, practically not a husband at all, and there was certainly no ill will when the marriage ended. We didn't have any reason to stay in touch, and we didn't."

"So?"

Appelbaum thought the rabbi might be losing interest in his story. "I just thought I should know more before I said yes. About the history, the ritual. About what I was giving up. I just thought I should understand."

"What's to understand?" Now Appelbaum was certain that the rabbi had heard enough. "Either you're a *farbisener* or a *khazer*." The rabbi saw his former student's vacant expression and raised his voice. "Bitter or selfish, bitter or selfish. You want to know what you're giving up? Nothing at all. There's no mystery here. She means nothing to you, and I take it you mean nothing to her. It's a formality, for God's sake. What do you want, to turn her into an *agunah*, out of spite?"

Appelbaum wasn't sure about that, either, but he nodded in agreement and rose to leave. The conversation had gone worse than he had expected; but what exactly had he expected? A divine and holy course charted by a virtual stranger? A secret, mystical explanation not available to American jurisprudence? He was a fool, the rabbi had said as much, and suddenly he was overcome with despair. For a moment as he tried to stand he felt the weight of failure, of every imaginable kind of failure, collapse him back into his chair. The rabbi looked on in consternation—had he said anything to cause such a reaction, or was this Appelbaum fellow ill? Locking his eyes onto the younger man's as he moved around the desk, the rabbi saw at once that the problem was not physical at all, that Appelbaum was simply thinking about something other than standing in much the same way an experienced driver might be distracted from the road and find himself in a field. After waiting a few seconds to see if Appelbaum might extricate himself from the chair and spare him-

self further embarrassment, the rabbi finally reached his hand down and pulled him up. The younger man's dismay showed in his posture, which was slouched almost unnaturally and left him almost a foot smaller than the rabbi. Steiner bent slightly: "Listen . . . Stuart, is it?" He waited a second to be sure he had heard and remembered correctly. He proceeded calmly and quietly. "Stuart, I may have been a little abrupt. Maybe I haven't explained things very well, or perhaps I jumped to conclusions. What I want to say is that we don't live in biblical times, even though sometimes it might seem that we do if you read too many newspapers. A Get is not a husband's right like it was two thousand years ago or two hundred years ago or even twenty years ago. It's not a giving up so much as a giving to. A Get is an opportunity to move on, an opportunity to start again." Stuart said nothing. He felt his suit pulling on him, felt the heat of the rabbi's words down his neck, the accusation pounding in his temples: bitter or selfish, bitter or selfish.

"Rabbi," Appelbaum sighed, as if he were going to ask another question but didn't have the strength. Then he straightened himself, took a step for the door, and, thinking better of it, turned back to the rabbi and clapped him lightly on his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. It wasn't until he was almost home that he wondered what he'd meant by that. Sorry for wasting the rabbi's time? For wasting his own? He pulled into his parking spot without deciding.

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HOME FOR APPLEBAUM was Ridge Creek, a complex of twenty-six interlocking low rise apartment buildings of eight one-bed one-bath apartments, each with its own deck overlooking a small section of an artificial stream that weaved through the development. He had been in the same apartment, T-6, since his senior year in college, when he became the youngest resident of the Creek. But that distinction soon disappeared. Virtually every tenant was a recent college graduate, and only two, by Applebaum's initial count, were over thirty. Marcia had grudgingly moved in with the clear understanding that they would soon find a more suitable home—the complex was even advertised as a great place for singles—and he had assured her that

they would, but somehow they never actually went beyond the Sunday real estate section. Now, twelve years later, he was five years older than every resident but Clive, who had moved into K Building six months after Applebaum, and Mr. Taylor, a humanities professor who had been there since the complex opened and would surely die there.

The day was hotter than he had realized. Spring had been cold and wet, and a mid-April snow had stayed around for a full week, leaving the impression it was earlier than June. The pool had just opened, a stagnant square of blue in the exact center of the development, and as Applebaum crossed from the shade into the sun of the cement deck he regretted not taking the long way home. A group had gathered around the diving board. A beautiful young woman, wearing a tan bikini that made her appear naked, sat at the end of the board, her legs dangling provocatively just inches over the water. Two friends sat closer to the base of the board, three others lay prone at the edge of the pool. Applebaum did not know, or even recognize, a single one of them. The sporadic roars of laughter told him they had been drinking. For years he had positioned himself in the same place, drinking after work, making time—now, as he hurried by, he had the uncomfortable thought that they were laughing at him, at the lame brown suit again tugging at him. It seemed only last summer, or the one before, that he would have pulled open a beer and found himself a spot on the diving board, rather than scurrying away in an embarrassed sweat. "We don't live in biblical times," he said out loud, fumbling for his keys as a scream of laughter came from the pool. "We don't even live yesterday, Rabbi."

When he finally pushed his way into the apartment he felt a gasp, as if breaking a hermetic seal. He realized, instead, that the air conditioner had been left on full; the wall of cold deepened his sweat and made him even more acutely aware of his embarrassment. He stood in front of the blower for a full minute, his eyes closed, his mind replaying the laughter from the pool, the girl on the board, the sway of her legs just above the water. Just as quickly he replayed the rise and fall of his Ridge Creek years, from poolside to brown suit. From laughing to laughed at.

A red 2 flashed above the huge television triangulated into the corner of the living room. Stu extended his index fingers, pushing

the message button and the television in one motion. Sports Center was wrapping up.

"Stu, I left you a message at work and I'm leaving you the same one now. I don't know why you haven't gotten back, but I hope it's just that you've been very busy rather than making a conscious decision not to call me. I'm running out of time, and I need you to cooperate on this. One time, Stuart, I'm asking you for a favor. One time." The message ended with a loud bang followed by a click, the result, most likely, of an angry slam followed by a calmer replacement of the receiver in its home. The door bell rang just as the answering message began its inquiry: "to delete this message please press one, to save it press two, to skip it press three." Stu went to the door as the machine repeated its choices; the bell rang twice more while he traversed the fifteen feet from his living room. It was Clive, pacing back and forth, his eyes a dime's width wider than usual, the hairline of his forehead lightly lined with sweat, already looking as if he had a head start on the night.

"Where the fuck have you been? We're late, man, late as hell. Where the fuck have you been?" Clive took a step back and looked his friend up and down in mock horror. He continued to speak without taking a breath. "You're not going in *that*. Please tell me we're not sitting together. Or do we have a funeral we need to stop at first? Did some fucking lawyer from your firm choke on his fucking billable hours?"

The Stones! He had forgotten, of course, and now his moronic best friend was playing an air guitar to "Let's Spend the Night Together" in the vestibule of his apartment building. "I'll be ready in a minute," he said, letting the door close on Clive, who made no effort to come inside. "Now I need you more than ever," Clive sang through the door. Stu hit the stop button on his answering machine, left the ridiculous brown suit in a pile at the foot of his bed, and selected a "Voodoo Lounge, RFK Stadium 1994" tee shirt from his collection, ripping it slightly at the neck as he pulled it over his head. It, too, was tight around his chest and under his armpits—all day he had felt as if he were suffocating—but there was no time for another shirt. Instead he took a deep breath while he still had the chance.

They smoked two joints on the way, singing to a bootleg tape from the Bridges to Babylon tour, the one from Sacramento that closed with a ripping version of "Brown Sugar" followed by a "Sympathy for the Devil" encore, and when Clive opened the passenger door in the parking lot of the stadium he practically fell out of the car. The smoke emerged behind him in a giant puff and Stu, still in the driver's seat, immediately envisioned Wile E. Coyote stopping abruptly on a dusty dirt road just before an anvil landed in front of him. This is how he knew that the joints were having their desired effect.

The concert itself was familiar—Applebaum had seen the Stones twenty-two times before, in Birmingham and Milwaukee and Buffalo, and Jumpin' Jack Flash was Jumpin' Jack Flash no matter what combination of drugs he took. He still sang to Tumblin' Dice and yelled out "Cherry Red" when Jagger held the mike to the crowd, but maybe the whole thing was getting a little tired, and he found himself wandering away from the music. *One time*, he kept thinking. For long stretches the music became a dull roar as he pondered his ex-wife's request—could he just not screw things up this one time. Toward the end of the concert he even carried the conversation out loud, yelling to Clive, right next to him but singing at the top of his lungs, "why do I always screw things up?" Clive turned to him while the question was still being asked, as if he had been privy to his friend's thoughts, and practically sang the answer: "Because that's what you do best." What was left of the concert and the deliberate two-handed ride home gave Applebaum just enough time to muddle through his own answer to the question, which had something to do with his personal struggle to be satisfied. The Stones were right about so many things, he thought. But over the last few days he had decided that they were wrong about one big thing: time. He was certain that it was no longer on his side.

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THEY PULLED into the parking lot of their apartment complex at two-thirty, and once more a cloud of smoke followed Clive's exit from the vehicle. "Best concert ever," Clive mumbled by way of farewell as he made his way past the pool to his building. Stu nodded to

Clive's back, struggled to the T Building, and opened his door on the second try. Again he had forgotten to turn off the air conditioner; now the freezing air tore layers of smoke off his skin and cleared his eyes. A red 1 flashing on his answering machine tinted the room; he remembered, stuporously, that he had not listened to the message earlier that night. Somehow he stumbled over the play button: "Mr. Applebaum, this is Mercer. You assured me I would have the pleadings on that case we discussed by five o'clock today. It is now five forty-two and I have received nothing. I will be in my office until six-thirty waiting for your call. Otherwise I can be reached at my home number, 610-621-2347. Thank you." The last two words had a sing-song quality that Applebaum took, quite properly, as a distilling of condescension and anger. Mr. Applebaum! It had taken him fifteen minutes to find those pleadings, but Hell would start rejecting lawyers before a partner like Mercer might take the time to do a little research on his own. Applebaum slammed his fist on the answering machine, lighting it up with flashing red eights; almost immediately, however, his anger shifted back at himself. Had he simply e-mailed the pleadings when he'd gotten them, rather than sneaking off on a useless pilgrimage to see a rabbi who couldn't pick him out of a lineup, he wouldn't have had to eat that "Mr. Applebaum" shit. But it was the middle of the night, and it wasn't really his fault that he had just gotten the message. Besides which Mercer had left a home number and had said nothing about how late he could call. And the little prick wasn't married, so what the hell. It would be a rude awakening indeed to get a call now, short and sweet: "Mr. Mercer, sorry to call so late, the pleadings were a little tougher to find than I thought, but I finally got them. I know it's a rush, so I'm sending them to you as I speak. I figured I'd better call to tell you to check your e-mail." Applebaum laughed out loud at the thought of it, empowered by his own condition and Mercer's snotty offer of his home phone. He stretched out on the living room sofa, marveling at how little light it took to illuminate his entire apartment. For a few moments he drifted, then awoke with a shudder that told him he had been gone. He was cold, and tried to swing his legs to the floor to get up and turn off the air conditioner, but it was no use. He rested his head on the sofa arm and gave in.

When he woke again it was light, gray slate pre-dawn light that poured into the living room because Applebaum had not closed the shades. As he returned to consciousness he sensed that the phone had been ringing; but the room was dead silent as he listened for the next ring. His hair was stiff from the cold, his tee shirt smelled pungently of pot and sweat, and he was still high. A dream ran out of his head when he opened his eyes, something about sitting at a table waiting for food after the restaurant had closed, while a group of old bearded Jews huddled on a cold corner, the wind blowing their long black coats in different directions. He closed his eyes again to bring back other images, but those were the only two he could recall. There was no sense to any of it, and not enough to piece together, and as he lay there he thought that it might not be too late to return to the dream if he could just fall back to sleep right away. But another two minutes passed, and now he was definitely awake. He made his way to the air conditioner, turned it off, and staggered to the shower. The water struck at him like needles; before very long he felt the high leave him, replaced by exhaustion. The steam rose from the floor like white roses, and soon the shower was a sauna. He was tired and his head was pounding and his life hadn't turned out like he thought it might. "Mister Mercer," he said, turning his face away from the water. "This is Applebaum. I got your message. I was up all night, but I could not track down that pleading after all. I am calling to let you know. That is the least I could do." He grimaced and turned back into the water. "This is Applebaum. I sent you the pleadings by e-mail at three yesterday afternoon. I don't know why you didn't get them, but I'm sending them out once more." He shook his head, cursed, and started again. Just then the phone started ringing, and he tilted his ear out of the water to hear; but he couldn't tell if it was the phone or not. He cut the water, and again there was nothing but silence. For a few moments he stood still and just listened; it seemed impossible that a phone call could disrupt this quiet. Then, abruptly, as if he had made a decision and didn't want to allow himself the chance to change his mind, he dried himself off, turned on his computer, and sent the pleadings to Mercer without explanation.

It was still early, the sun gathering in the lower right corner of the kitchen window, the world just coming alive in distant car noise

and the splash of a single dawn swimmer. He opened a drawer under the computer and removed the letter confirming his divorce—he could not recall why it was so wrinkled, and spent a few minutes smoothing it out on his lap, but his eyes went no further than the date at the top, which he quickly calculated to be thirty months ago. He tapped the letter back and forth between his forehead and the computer screen, trying to divine meaning from it beyond the words themselves, but when that failed he turned the computer off. The whirring sound became conspicuous in its absence; the apartment again fell silent. A small umbrella of red blinked above the television, and Applebaum now noticed a message on the answering machine—the phone had been ringing while he was in the shower after all. For the second time in less than a day he found himself struggling to rise under his own power; yet when he finally got on his feet and played the message, there was nothing but a click. He was shaking, and barely managed the few steps back to the sofa, where he fell heavily and swore never to put himself in such a condition again. His head ached, his throat constricted with each swallow, his eyes tightened against the glare from the kitchen. The crumpled letter, still in his hand, began to quiver. An idea suddenly struck him, a tiny pinprick of revelation, that it was not too late to atone. Applebaum's pulse quickened. He could, for once, take a step forward rather than waiting for everyone else to take a step back. But as the sun rose across the kitchen window he made no effort to leave; instead the sofa got deeper and deeper, the apartment steamier—the hours passed through shadows across the floor in sundial time. He faded in and out of consciousness glazed in sweat, exhausted and hung over and certain that he had miscalculated the arc of his life. Finally he summoned a degree of alertness and pushed himself up on his elbows. It occurred to him that the phone had not rung a single time since his shower before dawn, and now he stared at it, as if by sheer will he might cause it to ring again. When some time passed and the phone remained silent, he cleared his voice. "Tell your rabbi to have the papers ready," he whispered. "I'm on my way."