Five Points

EDITED BY

DAVID BOTTOMS

&

MEGAN SEXTON

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Ivy Goodman

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Four older people, older if not old, sat together on a walled patio at twilight, under the outspread branches of a huge princess tree. Only Roy could identify the tree. The restaurant, which Roy chose, was like a woodland cottage surrounded by ogres, in a neighborhood of grimy high rises at the city's edge.

Yes, Louisa had seen the picture, and no, she didn't want to look at it again on Roy's phone. Her husband, an ordinary man, had been dead two months. But Roy was talking about the foreign ambassador lying dead that morning in a photograph broadcast around the world. Dead that morning and forever.

When Louisa had arrived with Ellen, Roy and Patty, his wife, were already seated at the table under the tree. "Walt sends his regrets," Ellen explained. "He's so sorry he couldn't come. You remember my friend Louisa, don't you? What a lovely tree!" Roy frowned and said, "An exotic that's turned invasive. A nuisance. But since it's here, let's enjoy it." He was a thin, stylish man whose face suggested a counterpart from the toolbox, wedgelike, sharp, divisive. It was clear that Roy didn't like Walt's evasion or the surprise of this proxy, this interloper, this Louisa.

In the foreground of the photograph, the middle-aged ambassador lay on the floor, and a slender young man holding a pistol stood behind him. Both were wearing suits and ties. The velocity of the ambassador's fall must have flung his arms outward, opened his jacket, and reversed his likely habitual gesture, in colder months, of pulling down his sweater vest to cover his sizable shirtfront. His sweater had bunched up; his abdomen loomed high. He might have been nearly any unhealthy, overfed middle-aged man lying on the floor, drawing onlookers down to him, as if in reach of his open hand, as if at that exact moment the photographer had also knelt, seizing the image. Behind the gunman, framed photographs hung in a row on the wall, in a gallery setting that seemed absurd and yet, like the gun itself, far too real.

Roy said, "What's fascinating is how the ambassador is lying there, how we see him." The gallery he and Patty owned was downtown, not across the Atlantic where the ambassador had been shot, but understandably,

they—or Roy—took a special interest in the shooting. "Roy," Patty said, lightly shaking her head, a subtle gesture more like a tremor. Ellen said, "I agree." "What?" Roy asked and then, to Louisa, "Oh. The topic. Do you mind?" After a moment, Louisa said, "It's all right." "As for security," Roy went on, "most of our income is in private sales."

All their children, now grownup, had gone to the same private school, and Patty remembered Louisa from those days, long ago. Patty's warmth was almost liquid, next to Roy's rigidity. She'd welcomed Louisa with a hug and whispered, "I'm so sorry about your husband." But Roy had insisted they were meeting for the first time. Ellen and Walt were their friends in common. Dear Ellen and sweet-natured Walt. But no, Roy couldn't place Louisa. Louisa said, "I used to work at the school. I'm with the county library now, in reference." Roy shook his head. "No recollection. Sorry. What did your husband do?" He seemed less angry then, smiling at her with a quizzical charm. Across the table, Patty and Ellen had begun a conversation that Louisa couldn't quite overhear. "Civil engineering," Louisa answered, naming the firm. Roy's next question stunned her, and she needed a moment. His chin was raised, and he was peering down at her as the far-sighted scan a page of print. She, in turn, made one of those minor adjustments in sightline that precedes the glaring stillness of disbelief. "Yes and no," she replied. "Reduced tuition was a perquisite of my old job, and very useful. But no, the boys' schooling wasn't free. Not even close."

Status was both a social and a medical term. At the age when Jason, her husband, might have been let go or forced to retire, he and Louisa had celebrated his promotion. Then came the diagnosis. Cancer. Months later, he died in hospice, his body losing heat beneath the blankets. He was dead—dead—a fact that coursed through Louisa's thoughts. But when she wasn't thinking, she would come home wanting to tell him something, and he would die all over again. Just inside the door, the whole house felt dead. Then, as the evenings unwound, she kept expecting him to reappear. Sometimes she sobbed so hard she wondered if she were trying to dredge him from within her. But tonight, at Ellen's coaxing, she'd come along, to be with people.

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On the drive in, twice as long in traffic, Louisa had leaned back, adrift in the stop and go and the rhythm of her friend's voice. Tiny, lively, with a curly cap of hair, Ellen sat on a special cushion so she could reach the pedals

and see out the windshield. "...Patty's not the problem. Patty's wonderful, hasn't changed, apart from her weight. Give her credit, she makes the best of it. Tunics and trousers that remind me of Red China or a head shop, but from that designer, oh, what's her name?..." Louisa had wondered briefly about herself, her own familiar slender form, her plain features, occasionally pretty, if an onlooker were predisposed, her reticence, which came across as shy or cold. She hadn't changed; she'd been transformed. "....there's that self-help cliché," Ellen was saying, "people can't hurt you unless you let them? Well, stupid here, I've let Roy trick me. With you at the table, he'll behave, I'm hoping. The thing is, they're like family, you know?" Yes, lots of people their age had made family out of friends when their real families were far away or awful or both. Decades later, those same trying parents, safely dead, were cherished for their misdeeds and foibles, their endearing worst traits, while certain old friends, like family, had become impossible. "I can't imagine breaking off. We've known each other way too long. I...I think of Jason," Ellen said. Because it would happen to them all. They all were going to get sick and die. They all were mortal. Or expendable.

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The sky was getting darker, but the patio was brightened by strings of tiny bulbs and lanterns dangling from shepherd's crooks. A burbling fountain somewhere, or nearby traffic, or the tree's shelter insulated them from the diners at the six or seven other tables. Ellen said, "What's good? You've eaten here before?" Patty said, "A few times, but they're always tinkering with the menu." Louisa stared beyond her own menu, up into the dense disordered latticework of branches overhead. An instant earlier, the wind or a bird had rustled, and a twig had fallen onto the tablecloth. Now Roy held it up, heavy with a dangling cluster of small greenish black seedpods, which, Louisa supposed, would pass through birds undigested and germinate elsewhere, much as certain tempting foods roil through people. "Patty," Roy asked, "remember those olives in Lima?" To Louisa, he explained, "Peru this past summer. We brought our son and his fiancée." Ellen said, "I heard you had a lovely trip." Patty said, "You know I hate olives." She turned to Louisa and asked, "How are your sons managing?" Louisa said, "They have each other. I'm glad for that. They have jobs, friends, their own lives. But it's hard." "It must be. Where are they now?" Patty asked, frowning sideways at Roy, who had once again taken up his phone.

The illusion was, Louisa had let her sons go. They would have gone anyway. Now she had to be careful not to lean on them too much, to

guard against grief for the dead parent twisting into anger with the living one, even heartbreak that the wrong one had died. But to Patty, she only said, "Funny how it turned out. Different colleges, different majors, and they both work in tech." "Like Walt," Patty said, smiling at Ellen as she mentioned Ellen's husband. "Not exactly," Louisa said, "they don't have all those patents or their own firm." Roy raised his eyes, his chin still illuminated by screen light from his phone. "Walt," he pronounced, "is a very wealthy man." "You mean Walt and Ellen," Patty said. All the while, Ellen was laughing. "Every dollar is reinvested," she said, "believe me." Roy said, "He should diversify with art. We should talk." Ellen said, "He knows you want to," and then, "How's Seth? What's the latest? Have they set the date?"

Louisa remembered Seth or thought she did, a luminary in a school filled disproportionately with brilliance and now, as Patty enunciated, syllable by syllable, "a reconstructive ocuplastic ophthamologic surgeon. I told him, Seth, it's too hard to say!" Roy said, "It's not just baggy eyelids, though he promised to do his mother's." "I wouldn't talk," Patty said, and then to Ellen and Louisa, "You should have seen Roy's dad's." "Trauma is Seth's passion," Roy went on, his eyelids half lowered with solemnity, or perhaps the effect was unintended, or his phone, now on the table, still distracted him. "The other week," Roy said, "he had an adolescent patient from the Middle East, family and interpreter in tow, the women veiled. Seth told us the exam room was so crowded, he could hardly turn around." Ellen leaned toward Louisa and said, "Seth's fiancée is an anesthesiologist. They met in med school. She's lovely." "Congratulations," Louisa said, muddling the happy and the dire. But didn't Roy and Patty also have a daughter? Wasn't she the one with purple hair, in that group of girls that had always sat together, energized with talk and laughter, like birdsong? Louisa could ruin an evening that was already bad enough, or she could be the kind of person who didn't even ask. She asked: "How's Tamara?"

Patty's response was physical and immediate, as if to capsicum, ginger, ragweed, but in this case to a name that held a life, beloved and somehow threatened. Her nose reddened at the tip; her eyes welled with tears. All at once, Louisa felt dizzied by the prospect of a grave. Roy stiffened, drawing up his shoulders, then his chin. "Tam," he said, "astonishes us with the progress she's made." So she was alive, thankfully. But she was probably not making "progress" on a dissertation, field work, or the like. Patty said, "Might as well be honest. She's back in residential treatment." Ellen gasped and said, "You should have told me. My God." Louisa said, "I'm so sorry." Patty said, "We'd like to keep it confidential." "Because,"

Roy added, "she'll be out before we know it. They love her at her job. She's brilliant." For Louisa's benefit, he added, "Graphic arts." Patty said, "Tonight we were trying to block it out. Impossible, right? But we're hopeful. She was willing to let us help." Patty bent her head toward Ellen and Ellen's teary embrace.

If a tribunal demanded, your husband or your child, your children, whom would you save? Wouldn't Louisa have condemned Jason? Had she, unknowingly, in a nightmare? She should have died instead. Grief, her familiar—that paralysis, that insanity—had overcome her. She stared at the upcurved tines of her fork, the rustic weave of the tablecloth, the menu that lay crosswise in front of her, gothic letters in columns and incomprehensible. Her entire body tensed, as if in readiness to hold her breath. No one's safety could ever be guaranteed. Not her boys'. Not Tamara's. "...Tam," Roy was saying into her ear. Across the table, Patty was also murmuring while Ellen listened, bobbing her head. What a comfort Ellen always was. "...just the kind of thing Tam appreciates," Roy went on, "and I can't wait to share it. Uncanny, don't you think?" The light drew Louisa to his phone, wavering in front of her. "Turn it this way," he said. She blinked at the reconfigured horizontal image, a young man in uniform or costume, lying wounded or dead, isolated in darkness. A famous painting, she knew that much. "Manet," Roy said, "*The Dead Toreador.* See the resemblance?" Louisa wasn't sure what he meant. Because the approaching waiter, a young man in a loose white blouse and tight black trousers, was dressed much the same.

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Gauging their grim mood, the waiter might well have thought sarcastically to himself, typical older group, preoccupied with the sick and the dead. But he didn't let on. They all pretended. Wasn't it a lovely night? It was. Had they eaten here before? Well, some of them. He smiled, and his face was so young that Louisa nearly played along with the pretense that food was art and not just food—calories and nutrition and yet also somehow sacred. He said his name was Steve, and he promised to take care of them, perhaps better than their own internists. "Any special concerns?" he asked, alluding to those diets of renunciation that came close to abstinence from eating. But no, thanks, they all were fine with the menu as printed. Orchard and grove, farm and field, mammals, birds, scales, shells, and eels from waters briny, brackish, or clear running. The heirloom and the frugal gussied up. Rabbits, lambs, goats, and pigs cradled

by 4-H children from infancy. Ellen said she was hungry for something "wild and unloved," and Patty decided on the game hen, too, and then added, feigning lightness, "I tried to go vegan once, with Tam, but my hair fell out." Louisa chose the instant she was called upon, just as she might have picked a number, any number, or any card from the deck, spun the globe and stopped it with her finger, let the dictionary fall open and her eyes alight on a word. "The...calabaza. Thanks." Roy asked for the lambs' tongues on lamb's quarters and other bitter greens, "if only for its wit." The waiter concurred that the tongue was "very tasty, very clever," and hurried off to get Roy's choice of wine for the table.

Roy fiddled with the zoom feature on his phone and asked Louisa to give him a minute. Across the table, Ellen and Patty resumed chatting. Words floated to Louisa from both directions. It was Tam's ex, a real sweetheart, who'd brought her in and called Roy from the ER. She was altogether out of control. Roy pointed to the toreador's head, which was turned toward the blood pooled near his wounded shoulder, magnified now, as big as Roy's thumbnail. Tam hadn't returned their calls for weeks. Couldn't come to Peru, would have lost her job, she claimed, despised the idea anyway. Roy magnified spots of blood on the toreador's cummerbund and a smudge of dirt or blood near the corner of his mouth. They weren't quite relevant to his point, but he couldn't help pointing them out. Twenty years' age difference with this new fellow. Well, okay, it was her life. But they both were inpatients and both bipolar. The horizontal plane, the prone body, the abdomen, and the angle of the feet were key. Had Louisa seen the original, at the National Gallery? Louisa said, "I'm not sure." Raising her voice, Patty said, "And it's taken its toll, hasn't it, Roy? Our sniping?" Roy said, "But she's already better. Despite your fears." Then, luckily, the wine and appetizers came.

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For a short while the conversation centered on the character of the small plates, oily, crispy, creamy, acidic. The others nibbled, and they all drank, including Louisa. Ellen began one of her stories, trying to distract them, and Patty listened with a small exhausted smile, now that she had stopped pretending. Her daughter was sick. She was doing everything she could, there was nothing she could do, and that was why she could hardly move. Ellen, though, was impish and animated. Caught in random moments, she appeared to be making funny faces as she gave her grandmother's recipe for tongue. "It came out liked boiled beef." But Ellen remembered how

it went in the pot looking like a shoe, "this big"—she measured with her hands—tapered at the slender end and ragged at the thick, where she supposed the cow's esophagus had been cut off. As a small child, up close, she'd noticed the milky cast to the surface that shaded a multitude of raised bumps in white. "Taste buds, I guess, but I didn't really think about it, I mean as a tongue like mine"—here she grimaced— "until I mentioned eating it to some girls at school." Patty nodded, still smiling sadly. Her dark hair glinted auburn. Her beautiful silk outfit was the shade of their wine. "Poor Ellen," she said, "those little girls must have been disgusted. Remember that weird tongue from the deli? Purplish pinkish? I used to love it." Roy cleared his throat and said, "Enough. If you'll let me use my tongue to change the subject."

Roy's topic was "a familiar one in aesthetics and perception," he explained. How does art affect how we see? In an instant's time, after the gunshot had sounded—that morning in the gallery across the ocean—hadn't the photographer, unconsciously or not, styled his photographic composition after Manet? "Look," he said, offering his phone yet again. "Look especially at the feet." Ellen broke off some cracker bread and said, "No offense, but phones are germy, and I'd rather not touch it while I'm eating." Patty said, "Roy, she's right. Put it down." He turned to Louisa and said, "You're not eating."

Louisa supposed she had the prerogative to refuse, to tell Roy, no more dead bodies, please. But while she was idle at the table, what else was she doing? She could let her thoughts wander upward again, through the leafy branches overhead, but she feared that meditative pathway would only lead her to the green of Jason's grave. So she looked at Roy's phone as he flicked the images, alternating the two foregrounded bodies on their backs. You didn't need police outlines or tracing paper to see the uncanny resemblance, dead toreador and dead ambassador, more than a hundred years between them. This was how a wounded, collapsing man came to rest, before rigor mortis set in. It seemed as scientific as probability, using falling bodies instead of tossed coins and dice. But the toreador—beautiful, noble, fixed in oil paint—was posing, while the ambassador was really dead.

"Look especially at the feet," Roy repeated. "The 45 degree angle reminds me of rabbit ears, those old TV antennas." "But didn't they land that way because that's how the body lands?" Louisa asked. The librarian in her wondered where she might find a positional inventory of every corpse in Western art. "Obviously, the photographer had a choice of angles," Roy said dismissively, raising his chin, "and my point is, his choice

was preconditioned by Manet." "I think he risked his life to take whatever picture he could," Louisa said. She meant, don't forget the young man standing there, holding a gun. But Roy seemed to have forgotten her. He was smiling now with secret pleasure at his phone. "Tam was an art major," he said, "and she would love the way these two match up." So that explained his fixation. He had found something Tam would love, unless she wouldn't, didn't anymore, or never really had, but maybe she would keep pretending, with a daughter's loving indulgence. "You'll have to tell her," Louisa said. "If she'll let me," Roy answered. His face had slackened, and Louisa heard a tinge of the unrequited in his voice—not the taboo but the other impossible desire, to have Tam back, to hold her safe, to relive his life as the father of a little girl.

Louisa's own grief tugged at her, as if in jealousy, and for a moment she forgot where she was. Around the table, the wait staff had begun clearing first-course plates, like medical assistants, at procedure's end, whisking away detritus and tools. Ellen and Patty were complimenting the waiter, Ellen on the trout, Patty on its roe. Roy signaled he was ready to discuss options for a second, different bottle of wine. The busboy at Louisa's elbow asked if she would please pick up Roy's phone, which lay adjacent to her fork. She obliged. There was the ambassador again, in her palm.

He stretched along the bottom of the screen, exactly as he'd fallen after the bullet struck. Layers of cotton and wool—suit coat, sweater vest, shirt and undershirt—would have absorbed the blood that would have been impossible to see anyway, in a black and white photo. Louisa noted his strong profile, high forehead, sparse hair brushed forward in a little tuft, the scalp encroaching laterally. Whiffs from the plates being cleared around her—fish, wine, lemon, onions—might as well have come from him, from the residue of his last meal. Like a person who's always crying, who cries over anything, she could grieve over any dead body. Hair tonic, aftershave, these she guessed at, along with a leathery smell inspired by the oxfords of the assassin, who was still there, too, standing behind the body of his victim. Was it possible to see regret in the assassin's face, in his slackened arm, in the gun aimed more toward someone's ankles than the heads and torsos of the gallery goers beyond the photograph's frame? Maybe he felt he was in a nightmare, one he'd created for himself. His hair, dark and lush, would have its own distinctive smell, and his fear would be ambient, perhaps, in the odor of his sweat. Somewhere the assassin had a mother, even more surely than the ambassador had a wife. Louisa could almost see her doubled over, almost hear her, but then she vanished in the drapery of her clothes.

It was Roy, Louise realized. Roy had startled her when he tapped her shoulder, and now he was holding out his hand. "My phone?" he said. Words formed in Louisa's mind—busboy, ambassador, assassin, no breach of privacy—but she refused to explain. She nearly laughed. She wasn't a thief. And yet Roy seemed to be deciding whether or not to expose her, now that he'd caught her. "Here," she said, "I was always going to give it back." She straightened up and scooted her chair, moving away under the guise of improving her posture. Beneath her right foot, she felt the brickwork sloping where the tree roots had heaved, and she thought, let this evening end now, let the whole patio erupt. But their waiter and his helpers arrived safely, bearing their main courses.

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Patty's and Ellen's resembled split halves of the very same hen, right and left in repose, wings upmost. Roy's, "a disappointment," looked like a scattering of sirloin tips on a green salad. Louisa sat before a bowl of dark orange broth that she sipped through the rest of the meal, but she mostly used her spoon to bestir mysterious submerged solids whose corners and edges surfaced now and then. For a short while, the conversation found respite in Mimi, Walt and Ellen's daughter and only child. "...and Chad wants the wedding soon. They've been together six years already. But Mimi's up for a partnership and wants to wait. You know lawyers," Ellen said, "highly rational." Patty said, "We're lucky if Tam's romances last six months." Roy said, "You're never fair to Tam." Patty said, "You wish she'd settle down, too." Roy said, "I want her to be well." Patty said, "And I don't?" Her strategy was the near-whisper; Roy's was emphasis and volume. Louisa looked down at her bowl and launched cubes of squash toward the center. Peripherally, she saw Ellen's elbow moving, working at her hen. Even Ellen was trying to be invisible. In the meantime, Patty and Roy continued fighting, passing guilt back and forth the way that pain, too, is often passed along, to the shoulder from the abdomen, for instance, or to the jaw from the muscles of the heart. Patty blamed Tam, Roy blamed Patty, Patty blamed Roy, Patty blamed herself, and Tam, in all likelihood, blamed them both. And Roy blamed everybody, the way that sometimes everything just hurts. He turned to Louisa with his quizzical smile and asked, "Are you dating yet?"

Patty naturally responded first: "Roy. How insensitive can you be?" Ellen said, "Roy. It's been two months." In Louisa's head, Roy's name resounded as both the description and the reprimand for characteristic

poor behavior. Roy shrugged and said, "Propriety matters, I guess, for those who care. You know, widows shouldn't be happy too soon or sad too long. Sentiments like that." Louisa said, "I think grief makes me, or lets me, do what I want." "So do you want to date?" Roy asked. Louisa said, "The idea feels grotesque." "No lewd thoughts?" he asked. "No," she said, though several flickered by: a hand, hairy at the knuckles, inside her blouse; a nude male body with one of those little bellies that even the thinnest older men put forth; baffling, distorted coupling reflected in the mirrors of a funhouse. "What kind of cancer did your husband have?" Roy asked. "A very bad kind," Louisa answered.

She didn't say, a person doesn't get to pick, and it wasn't Jason's fault. He drank only socially, never smoked, seldom ate meat, favored vegetables and fruit, kept fit, and was grateful for the privileges of his life. But he'd begun to wonder if he no longer had the stomach for the occasional unhealthy meal, and the aftermath of one notorious lunch sent him to the doctor. The problem, it turned out, wasn't fried food. After he was diagnosed, his communion with his body, with every sensation, was not unlike hypochondria. She understood—of course she did. He was grieving himself, saying goodbye. In marriage, an impenetrable separateness was always present, varying by degree. And yet she felt abandoned prematurely while he was still alive. He had a favorite chair where he sat for hours, aggrieved, stricken, almost as if they'd been arguing and he didn't want to talk about it. He wanted to be left alone. But that was not what Roy was asking, was it? Looking up, Louisa gave herself a moment to puzzle out the words she had and hadn't heard, which seemed suspended in a kind of aural afterlife, waiting for her. "No," she said, "no surgery. Chemo, briefly. His oncologist said it was everywhere, like sand scattered by the fistful."

Roy shook his head. "Don't you just love the imagery? But why sand and not sugar?" He smiled. "In my experience, most doctors use food for comparison. My late father, as I remember, filled up with pea soup. But I can't remember if my poor mother grew a grapefruit or a cantaloupe."

Louisa gripped the table and stood. She wanted to flee—Roy, the restaurant, her own skin, as if she'd been drenched through and through, and there was dirty water in her ears, even in her mouth. She said, "Would you prefer a mortal wound, like you were showing me?"

Was Patty crying? Ellen was sorry. Roy was not. He had lowered his eyes at Louisa's indecorousness. Ellen touched Louisa's arm to keep her from her wallet. "No, Louisa, let me. And wait for me outside. I'll only be a minute. Please wait. Louisa!"

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She took a cab. At the house, she slammed the door behind her and leaned against it, safe. She'd left on the hall light and the table lamps glowing softly yellow in the living room beyond. But she pretended Jason had turned them on. He was here; he had just left the room. She could almost feel him, like a word on the tip of her tongue or the near-impossibility of trying to catch minnows with her hands. Sometimes he eluded her; sometimes he possessed her from within. Sometimes, when she cried and cried, she wondered, like a person helpless inside a coughing fit, will this ever stop? But right then, she didn't want it to. Maybe, in ten years' time, she would love her dead husband more than ever. Maybe the dead were easier to love.