

The Printer



Le Bonheur de vivre by Henri Matisse, 1905–1906

by [Shai Afsai](#) (March 2022)

I

My third year at Boston University, tired of dorm living, I arranged to rent the basement apartment of a thirty-something couple's home not far from campus. The minute I met the wife, it was clear she wanted to have an affair. As I stood in their kitchen discussing the lease with her husband, she looked me over hungrily – like a pregnant woman studying the steaming platters at an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet.

I was young then, lean and well built, with a full head of dark curls. I hadn't planned to get entangled with a married landlady, but the more I took in Mrs. McMullan full-bosomed, leggy figure, her slender arms and shapely calves, the more convinced I became that an affair actually might not be a bad idea. By the time her husband and I signed the lease, he'd as good as handed his wife over along with the keys for the duration of my months in their basement.

At first I felt guilty, naturally. But Mrs. McMullan had sweet lips and an agile body, and that settled it. Guilt, like memory, dims with time. Considering that Mr. McMullan was an inattentive and unaware husband, I soon discovered that rather than wrecking his marriage, I appeared to be helping it. And yes, the McMullans had a baby boy, but he had no way of grasping what was transpiring between his mother and me, and so no harm was being done to him either. The toddler's grandmother spent her mornings pushing him in a carriage through the streets, and her afternoons dotting over him at her house a few blocks away. This coincided with the time that Mrs. McMullan's husband was at the office, toiling away as an entry-level accountant, and left us free to do no good.

As I say, I felt guilty, at first. In fact, I liked Marsha's husband. Bob was not only a landlord – he was also a friend. In some ways, he treated me much as if I were his own son, which added oedipal dimensions to the affair that I preferred not to dwell on. Often, he'd come home from work and invite me upstairs for supper with him and Marsha, who prepared an especially delicious baked ziti once a week. After eating, Bob and I would hang out and have a beer, play Le Truc, or watch a game. On Sundays sometimes, if the weather was nice, we'd toss a football around in the park or go for a short run. He'd apparently put on quite a bit of weight since getting married, and I wanted to encourage his flailing efforts to get back in some sort of shape. A couple of times, Bob tried to pry into my romantic life – the attempt, I supposed, of an older, married, now-overweight man to vicariously enjoy some youthful, unwedded thrills – and I was amazed at my own calm during those interactions.

The first time I slept with Marsha happened like this. I'd been living in the house less than a week and was skipping my morning classes in order to sleep late, having spent the previous evening downing pitchers of beer around Harvard Square with my comrades from the Young Socialists League.

While discussing the living arrangements, Bob had explained that the washer and dryer were situated in the basement, but he assured me they'd only be used at reasonable hours so as not to interfere with the diligent scholasticism he sensed I embodied. Marsha came downstairs that morning in a skimpy teddy, ostensibly to do laundry, and finding me still slumbering at eleven in the a.m., went ahead with it anyway. I was awakened, half-naked, the churning of the washing machine reverberating through my dehydrated head, and saw her bending over a basket, flashing cleavage. She apologized, offering a massage in conciliation, and I said yes, my back being slightly sore.

After that, things seemed to improve for Bob. Mrs. McMullan must have berated her husband something awful, completely disregarding the fact that if a man works extremely hard in one area – say, as an entry-level accountant – then something naturally has to give in another department – say, the bedroom. I mean, Bob wasn't twenty-one anymore, whereas Mrs. McMullan was as feral as a sixteen-year-old girl whose parents are away for the weekend. Evidently, I was alleviating a lot of the pressure that had built up in the household, and soon Bob became a smiling, whistling fellow. True affection reigned among the couple, and Bob swore his wife's cooking had never tasted better.

I tended to regard my relationship with Mrs. McMullan as being along the lines of free love, a concept that now took on a meaning for me beyond that of simply not having to pay for sex. Which isn't to say I stopped doing that. Naturally, I still frequented prostitutes. One could hardly attend Boston University in those days – especially as a history major – without acquiring a taste for them, a taste that once developed tended to follow one into adulthood, through marriage, the birth of a daughter, an unavoidable divorce, and a burning sensation in the genitals that suggested it might finally be time to quit. Once I even proposed to Marsha that

we employ a woman for a threesome, in response to which she smacked me so hard I thought my jaw had broken. This physical assault was followed by so fierce a torrent of curses against my circumcised member that I knew it was best never to raise the subject again. I apologized, then she apologized, offering a massage in conciliation, and I said yes, my back being slightly sore.

Who knows how long this could've gone on? But like all such sweet things, it ended, fading into yet another dim, guiltless memory. The last time I slept with Mrs. McMullan happened like this. She'd come down to the basement in a baby doll so accentuating all her fine features, looking at her made me ache. Sprawling herself on my bed, on the clean sheets she herself washed along with all my other laundry, she kissed me passionately as I peeled off her lingerie. How much more passionate would I have been had I known it was to be our last afternoon together.

We were collapsed in exhaustion, scarcely able to smoke our cigarettes, when I suddenly heard Grammy McMullan's voice upstairs.

"Did you forget to bolt the door?" I gasped.

Before either of us had a chance to react, to put on our clothes, to put out our cigarettes, Marsha's mother-in-law, the senior Mrs. McMullan, was already heading down the stairs. She'd probably heard the damn washing machine going – the very household appliance that first facilitated our adultery thus becoming the cruel instrument of its termination.

"Marsha! He said his first word!" she was calling excitedly. "Are you down there? He said his first word! He said his first wo—"

The grandmother glimpsed us there, naked above the sheets, cigarettes in hand, and froze. She stood immobile for a moment, and then clutched at her heart, her eyes rolling

toward the back of her head, and passed out, hitting the cement basement floor hard as she fell.

So it happens that for the inarticulate babble of a baby, happy copulation is forever ended. While the ambulance arrived, I packed up my meager belongings, stuffed them into my car, and wrote Bob a hasty note, thanking him for his friendship and hospitality.

“Here, Gary. Keep this as a memory of me,” Mrs. McMullan whispered, handing me the skimpy teddy she’d worn on our first morning together. We kissed good-bye before she followed the departing ambulance to the hospital, her loquacious baby strapped into the child seat in the back of her Subaru station wagon.

Getting into my own car, I bid farewell to a fabulous lover, a cordial companion, and my last month’s rent and security deposit. I perused the obituary columns for weeks after the incident, but as there was no mention of an elderly McMullan, I can only presume she lived – even as, I sometimes think, a part of me died that day.

I drove to my buddy Rich’s apartment, where I took up residence on his couch for the remainder of the semester. I might have entrenched myself there until graduation, had Rich not met Rosina, my former high school girlfriend, at a keg party. As she moved in, I was moved out. Other comrades from the Young Socialists League offered alternative sofas until I found a place of my own.

II

I was twenty-four when Claudia and I met. Most of my friends were already married or engaged by then, I’d just started a promising business, and though I wasn’t particularly inclined toward connubiality, it appeared like the inevitable thing to

do. And I was in love, at least with her body, which at the time seemed sufficient reason to propose. After the wedding, however, she quickly became pregnant, plump, and frigid. Seventeen years later, my greatest pleasure in life had become watching my pair of Chocolate Labradors, Karl and Frederick, run loose through our fifteen thousand square foot backyard.

I realized this with much introspective dismay as I alternately sipped pulpy orange juice and Maalox one chilly Monday morning, seated on a plastic lawn chair in my gazebo. A disturbing cramp had lodged itself in my abundant belly, and a tired sadness in my soul. Following Karl and Frederick with my eyes a few moments more as they scurried through the grass, wrestled briefly, and pursued a squirrel until it escaped up an oak tree, I sighed, finished my juice and anti-dyspepsia liquid, and headed to work.

Although we'd both been staunch socialists during college, I now owned The People's Printing Press in profitable, proletariat-exploiting partnership with my old buddy, Rich. We'd begun printing mom-and-pop restaurant menus, neighborhood newsletters, and small-circulation magazines soon after graduation – having internalized that our B.A.s in history were not only useless, but likely even an economic liability, scaring off potential employers. We were comforted by the knowledge that it could have been far worse, and that at least we hadn't majored in political science. It turned out we had a knack for business, though, and quickly came to specialize in mail order and department store catalogues. Around that time, Rich married my ex-high school sweetheart, Rosina, and I proposed to Claudia.

What would it have been like if *I'd* married Rosina instead? I pondered this at the intersection on my way to work, waiting for the light to change. The thought had entered my mind now and again over the years, but was recurring more tenaciously during the last month or so. The way to my business was a right, but I impulsively took a left, cutting a car off in the

process. Its driver, a woman smoking a cigarette with her windows rolled up, honked and gave me the finger.

As I expected, Rich's Mercedes was not in his driveway. He was a fanatic about punctuality, especially at work. Rosina was home. I parked my Mazda in front of their house. Through the kitchen window, I saw her seated in a pink robe, blowing on a steaming cup. Falling open slightly, her robe revealed the top of a blue brassier. Unable to think of a pretext for ringing the bell, I reluctantly turned around and headed back to the intersection.

In the rear office of The People's Printing Press, I found Rich leafing through the latest issue of *Playboy*, his enormous biceps flexing as he ruffled the pages. He held the centerfold aloft for me to see. Miss March, suggestively wielding a tennis racket, wore a white tennis skirt and nothing else.

Snatching last month's magazine from the rack, I hurried to the bathroom. For the past several weeks, my belly had been troubling me, as though all my frustrations and disappointments somehow found their way into my gut, there to percolate and swell and torment me. The cramp in my stomach had worsened since earlier in the morning. My chest felt stiff and there was an odd ache in my left arm.

Miss February sat on the sink, folded and ignored. For the next twenty minutes I experienced a series of bowel movements so volcanic, I was certain they were the equivalents of natural childbirth.

Complaining of a stomachache, I left early for the day, around three. I drove toward Rosina by instinct. Parking my car a few homes down, I crept to her door, my heart beating rapidly. Before ringing the bell, I peered through the living room window. Something was moving on the floor. Through the half-open blinds, I spied Rosina naked on the carpet, gyrating with a long-haired blond man. He had a tattoo of a blue anchor on

his right buttock. I watched for several moments and then returned to my car, feeling vanquished. I pushed the driver's seat back and rested my head on the steering wheel. How had my life come to this? After a while, I drove home.

Pulling into my driveway, I found solace in the fact that Karl and Frederick would be glad to see me. I looked forward to playing frisbee with them after they ate, and then brushing their coats. I was certain much of my stress would melt away after giving them a good grooming. But when I opened the front door, I glimpsed the naked, pimped rear-end of a man turning the corner at the top of the staircase. There was no doubt about it. For an instant, I thought my wife might be having an affair, just like Rosina, but her deep-seated frigidity quickly ruled out such a possibility.

Minutes later, my sixteen-year-old daughter – Rainbow – and an emaciated boy with a ring through his chin came down the stairs. *For the love of God*, I wondered. *Is everyone getting laid but me?*

Rainbow, who seemed to be acquiring two body piercings a week – at least in places I could see – ushered the skeleton out of the house, returned to her room, and closed her door without acknowledging me.

“Sweetie, it's okay,” I called out. “Sweetie?”

In response, loud rock music began playing in her room. Promising myself that I'd never again leave work early, I went to check on the dogs.

I'd acquired Karl and Frederick as puppies, and in raising them experienced all the satisfaction missing from my relationship with Rainbow. I'd fallen in love with the Labs the second I spotted their little furry faces at the pound, and hadn't bothered seeking Claudia's permission to bring them home. *Who, after all, made the money to buy a large house with a spacious backyard?* I'd reasoned to myself. Claudia resented

my taking the dogs in against her wishes, and hated the evident happiness they provided me. But I was firm for once, and Claudia caved in the face of such unexpected resolution. Karl and Frederick remained. Although she often toyed aloud with the idea of putting them to sleep while I was at work or of poisoning them while I was in the shower, I knew Claudia feared the repercussions that might follow such heartless actions. She understood if there was one thing that could drive *Gary boy* – her favorite belittling nickname for me – to spousal homicide, or worse, it was harm to his precious Labs. Still, Claudia relished talking about doing the dogs in, and the day she compelled me to get them neutered remained a mighty and oft-referenced victory for her. She'd been waiting impatiently for us at the front door when we got back from the vet. "Now no one in this house has any balls," she said.

Delighted at my return from work, the Labs slobbered and beat their tails. I felt my sadness decrease. I opened four cans of Pedigree and filled two bowls with water. When they finished feasting, I reached for a frisbee, and Karl and Frederick sprang to attention. With what required surprising energy, I flung the frisbee far into the backyard. The dogs made a joyful dash, retrieved it, and returned running. I managed to toss the frisbee twice more before becoming winded and dizzy. It felt as though my chest were shrinking. I knelt down on the gazebo floor, struggling to catch my breath. Prodding me with their noses, the dogs whimpered, at first with disappointment that the game had ended, then with concern.

Ms. MacNeill – for Claudia had kept her maiden name, something my Uncle Jules warned me from the start boded ill for any marriage – returned from work. I remained seated on one of the plastic lawn chairs in the gazebo, sipping a light beer, tightly gripping a bottle of Maalox Maximum Strength Liquid Vanilla, and reassuring the dogs I was fine.

Claudia began busying herself in the kitchen, slamming cupboards and drawers, banging pans and pots, clashing dishes

and silverware. "God forbid *he* might ever cook dinner," she said loudly. "I have to slave all day and then come home and take care of *him*." Claudia worked part time as a nurse at the hospital up the road, averaging fifteen hours or so a week.

She persisted in conducting her cutlery symphony, but I never once turned my head toward the kitchen window. By now, I wanted as little to do with my wife of seventeen years as was possible for two people living in the same house, and avoided her religiously from the time I woke up in the morning until the hour at night when I collapsed onto the gray leather living room couch that had become my bed for the past month.

"Dinner's ready!" Claudia yelled, her high pitch making me and the dogs wince. Karl and Frederick sensed the tension in the home. Occasionally, in my darkest moments of dejection, I liked to think that, gentle as they were, the beasts would tear Claudia limb from limb if she dared venture into the backyard or gazebo while I sat there. But she had no interest in the Labs and kept away.

"Dinner's ready! Hello!" Claudia continued calling. Reluctantly, I entered the kitchen and seated myself at the table.

Rainbow came downstairs in a yellow half-belly tank top, a black mini-skirt over thin purple stockings, and green very-high heels. An opal pendant dangled from her navel. Her hair was bright pink that day. She waited until her mother took a good long look at her before sitting down.

"I'm pleased to find my child dresses like a prostitute. That's always comforting," Claudia sneered into the pot of spaghetti. "It's what a mother wants to see when she comes home tired from work. What can you expect though, with a father who spends more time worrying about his dogs than his own daughter—"

"Will you shut the fuck up, Mom, and just dish out the

noodles?”

Replying, Claudia pointed the pasta ladle first at Rainbow, then at me, and then back at Rainbow. “What did you say? Did you hear your daughter, Gary boy? Did you hear her? Apologize, young lady! Apologize right now!”

I leaned back in my chair, enjoying myself immensely.

The ladle remained pointed at Rainbow. “I would never have spoken that way to my mother. Ever. Are you going to apologize, young lady? Are you? Apologize! Apologize, you little bitch!”

This was just what Rainbow needed. She’d probably skipped school in the morning to get high with some friends, laid that scrawny fellow most of the afternoon, put on an extra special outfit for dinner, and now there was nothing like a good fight with Mother to call it a day.

“Mother, you refer to your own offspring as a prostitute. A bitch. And then you’re upset because I tell you to shut up.”

“You told me to shut *the fuck* up!”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes! Yes! Gary boy, you heard her!” The ladle was again pointed at me.

I remained impassive.

“You heard her!” Claudia’s voice cracked. “To think how I slave away for you two.” She returned the ladle to the pot of spaghetti. “Oh, what’s the use?”

Sensing her chance, Rainbow went in for the kill. “Maybe you’ve been taking your patients’ medications again, Mother, because it seems you’re hearing things.”

“Oh, what the hell’s the use?” Claudia cried, tears running

mascara and makeup over her cheeks.

“Well, if you’re finished with the drama, Mother, maybe we can sit down and eat these fucking noodles. If you’re through with the hysterics, that is.”

Claudia sat down. We ate dinner in silence, except for an occasional belch from me, done partly because I knew it infuriated my wife, but also because my stomach had become extremely gassy in the past few weeks.

Dinner over, Rainbow returned upstairs, I retreated to the gazebo with a roll of Tums, and Claudia relaxed in front of the TV. Watching the dogs dash happily through the yard, I resolved I’d get Rosina in the sack if it was the last thing I did. Rich didn’t deserve her, and with the life I’d been living with Claudia, I’d earned myself a license for any future actions.

The following morning I slept late. Claudia banged cabinets and cupboards, broke dishes and glasses, blasted the television and radio, but I remained curled beneath the covers on the couch.

“Here I am slaving at the hospital *and* at home, and my lousy husband won’t even get up and go to work,” she grumbled. Claudia had a maid clean the house twice a week and cooked spaghetti every meal we didn’t order out.

Finally, she departed to the hospital for a three-hour shift. Emerging from the blankets, I phoned Rich and let him know I wouldn’t be coming to the office.

“My stomach’s hurting bad, Rich. Real bad. It’s like Mount Vesuvius erupting in there.”

“Probably because of your wife’s cooking,” Rich reasoned. “See, that’s why I never eat at home. You take it easy and get to a doctor.”

I hung up, showered, and shaved. Primping myself before the bathroom mirror, I doused my face and neck generously with Oscar Pour Lui, and slicked my thinning hair with some of Rainbow's gel. I selected a red Hawes & Curtis silk shirt and my most stylish shawl lapel suit from the closet. Attempting to put it on, however, I discovered that the shirt no longer fit well. The suit pants, too, were profoundly tight. By pulling them increasingly lower I finally managed the button and zipper, but my stomach hung over my belt like an exhausted animal. After tremendous exertion, I succeeded in ensconcing myself into the jacket, but the sleeves barely reached halfway down my forearms and seemed ready to tear about the shoulders. My favorite Turnbull & Asser tie followed the fleshy decline of my belly like the final terrifying drop of a roller coaster, and all efforts at buttoning the jacket in order to conceal my paunch's vast protrusion proved futile. By the time I tied the laces of my freshly polished consul leather oxfords, the sweat of a marathon runner covered my entire body, pooling into little Mississippis that surged toward my feet.

Undeterred, I headed to the gazebo and fed the Labs. I considered playing a little frisbee with them, but didn't want to sweat more, and also realized it would be nearly impossible for me to toss anything in my current attire anyway. As I filled their water bowls, I put the final touches on a poem I'd composed – my first since college – while shaving that morning. I tested it out on Karl and Frederick, figuring I might recite it later for Rosina:

We Are Like Dogs

We are like dogs,

running around,

trying to leave our mark everywhere,

fouling up the earth.

The dogs were noncommittal in their response.

“Well, my boys, today is the day. Today I will mount Rosina or die trying.” Karl and Frederick looked up at me quizzically, their tails oscillating. I decided I should first stop by the florist’s.

I arrived panting at Rosina’s home, my eyes singeing from Rainbow’s gel, and my hands trembling so that I had difficulty ringing the bell. Rosina opened the door clad in a blue robe, her silky brown hair pulled back in a bun, the creamy nape of her neck exposed.

“Hello, Rosina,” I said, nervously thrusting a dozen red roses and half a dozen geraniums at her. Rosina had liked geraniums in high school. All women like red roses.

“Rich isn’t here,” Rosina said, looking at the flowers.

“May I come in?”

“Of course, Gary. Of course. I was about to have breakfast. Come in.”

I sat down at the kitchen table and loosened my tie. The tightness of my pants was beginning to wear on me. My arm felt numb and my chest hurt.

“The flowers are for you.”

Rosina put the flowers in two vases, then made coffee and a cheese omelet.

“How’re Claudia and Rainbow?”

“Rainbow’s hair is pink now. Bright pink. What should I have expected, naming her Rainbow? Actually, that was Claudia’s idea. She thought Rainbow might bring some brightness into our marriage. So much for that.”

“Are you okay, Gary? You look a little ill.”

“Do I? My stomach’s been bothering me lately. Feels like I have triplets kicking around in there... Rosina why didn’t it work out between us?”

“What?”

“Why did you end up marrying Rich and not me? We were so in love.”

“That was in high school, Gary. That was hickeys and the prom.” Rosina placed two pieces of rye bread in the toaster. “You never wanted to marry anyone anyway until Claudia came along.”

“Right. *Claudia*. I always wondered what things might’ve been like if I hadn’t let you go.”

“Let me go? Jesus, Gary, we were seventeen – like Rainbow.”

The uncomfortable image of a naked, scrawny, pimped rear-end turning the corner at the top of my staircase flashed through my mind. “She’s sixteen,” I said. “Even so. Even so, I’ve often wondered. We had good times then didn’t we?”

“Yes, Gary,” Rosina replied, pouring coffee into two mugs. She sat down and crossed her legs. A pink brassier showed through the top of her robe. “We did.”

I watched her scoop sugar into her mug and add cream.

“Black for me,” I said.

Cold sweat soaked my clothes. I drank the near-scalding coffee in three gulps, burning my tongue and the roof of my mouth, and felt my stomach quiver and roar.

“Rosina, I find you to be a very attractive woman. I still find you...very...very...”

“You’re acting awfully weird this morning, Gary. The flowers. This conversation. I’m not sure Rich would approve of this way

of talking.”

“I have a wife who can’t stand me, a daughter who ignores me. What’s the harm of talking, Rosina? We’re only talking.”

“Okay, Gary. We can talk. Relax. You want more coffee?”

“No, I don’t want more coffee!” I shouted. “Your husband, Rich, who might not approve! What would your husband say about you rolling around on the carpet with some long-haired stud while he’s at work? Don’t give me that about your husband!”

“Gary Kellerman, what the hell has gotten into you? I don’t like this hollering.”

“Rosina –”

“You know, I think maybe you’d better leave.”

“But Rosina –”

“Look, Gary, I see you’re under pressure. Stress makes us act funny. Why don’t you go now – and we’ll both forget this conversation.”

“I just want... I just want to roll with you on the carpet, Rosina. I love you... I always have.”

“Love?” Rosina repeated, as though the word tasted bad on her tongue as she rolled it out her mouth. “Love, Gary? Look, I might sleep with you, if you took better care of yourself. But look at you, for Christ’s sake.” Crisp bread popped out of the toaster.

“It’s true,” I acknowledged, defeated. “I don’t have Rich’s iron biceps or steel abs. I have *this*.” I grabbed fistfuls of my ample stomach to emphasize the predicament. “Oh, God, my –”

“Hey, Gary, are you all right? Gary?”

I tumbled from my chair to the tiled floor, hitting it hard as

I fell. "Uuughgh...guuhug..."

"Gary!" Rosina shrieked.

I crossed my arms over my chest and rocked back and forth. "Call the doctor...an ambulance...oh God...uugug...guhug...uughgh..."

Drool streamed out my mouth. The pain in my chest was unbearable and I felt myself losing consciousness. I thought of Karl and Frederick.

"Quick!" I tried shouting at Rosina, who stood strangely immobile. "She'll kill the dogs if I die! Uugug...guhug...she'll murder them before I'm cold in the ground! Guggug...help...damn it!"

Chocolate colored canine faces hovered above, and the warmth of love engulfed me.

III

Rosina never disclosed the precise circumstances surrounding my collapse and near-death on her cold kitchen floor. Even as my torturous union with Claudia neared its final dissolution following that episode, Rich and Rosina's marriage steadily improved. Perhaps lurking in the recesses of Rich's subconscious was the realization that if I could be alone with Rosina in their kitchen while he was obliviously away at work, then some other man could just as easily make his way into their bedroom during that time. He even began eating meals at home.

As for my marriage, Claudia had divorce papers served to me the day Rainbow graduated from high school – eventually seizing half my assets and obtaining an injunction forbidding me to come within fifty feet of my former home. I didn't care. The divorce was like a magnificent dump after nineteen years of emotional constipation: painful and foul, of course, but

necessary and satisfying, providing a sense of relief that is difficult to put into words. Without Karl and Frederick, who died while I was in the hospital recovering from my heart attack – from food poisoning, according to the vet – I had no need of a big home or yard anyway.

I rented a modest studio apartment above The Cho-Zen, my favorite Chinese restaurant, and threw myself into my business – the one area of my life where I've always had success – as well as evenings of unfettered passion with a youthful prostitute named Gazelle. I'd enjoyed her company on occasion while married, but it was seven times sweeter now that I was free of matrimonial encumbrances.

After the heart attack, Rich insisted I get a membership at his gym, and it was there that I met Ana Silberstein, truly the best thing to have ever happened to me. With Claudia and Rainbow gone, I immediately felt decades younger. Through diet, proper nutrition, and regular exercise, I began shedding pound after pound of pulp, reclaiming not only my former spirit, but much of my former body as well. While I no longer boasted a mop of curly hair, I was soon in decent enough shape for a man in his early forties who'd only recently nearly lost his life. A high school English teacher, Ana did Pilates and Israeli folk dancing, and together we joined a bowling league recommended by my Uncle Jules. I hadn't had a hobby since high school. Now I knew all about approach, dead wood, foul line, and lift.

After several months of courtship, Ana requested that I part with my studio apartment and move in with her. It took very little convincing, as I was eager to spend as much time with her as possible.

She truly is incredible, and even gets along well with Rainbow, who calls or visits whenever she's low on cash. Rainbow is majoring in political science, of all things. Well, let her.

I'm getting to know Ana's family, too. Just recently, Ana's younger sister, who's in the midst of a complicated divorce, came to stay with us for a while. I've been helping Lisa move her things in and get settled in the basement guestroom. We hit it off right from the start, which is quite different from how it was with any of Claudia's emotionally-closed sisters.

Tonight Lisa and I plan to have dinner at The Cho-Zen and catch up on laundry, while Ana goes to her weekly Israeli folk dancing class. I think I may ask Lisa for a massage after dinner, my back being slightly sore.

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Shai Afsai's articles, short stories, poems, book reviews, and photographs have been published in *Anthropology Today*, *Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *New English Review*, *The Providence Journal*, *Reading Religion*, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, and *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. See more [here](#).

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