



CORRUPTED HUMOURS

A Novel

by Donald Friedman

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CORRUPTED HUMOURS

Prologue

Some forty years ago, an unintended consequence of my obsessive campaign to bed a lissome cold-eyed girl named Hillary who wore a constraining ring on her longest toe that made my wits flee, was that I agreed to attend an evangelical service at her family's church. Under normal circumstances a cynical nonbeliever who was offended at the notion of public praying, to say nothing of religious proselytizing, I sat beside her, hypocritically joining in the private and corporate prayers, the psalms, songs, supplications and all the rest of it, only to hear the minister sermonize how "all expectations are unreasonable."

The minister's argument, which I found risible (unaware of how sadly prescient it was of my plans for Hillary), was that we really are not masters over any aspects of our lives, that our attempts at control are illusion. "I'll be in Chicago on Wednesday, God willing," he said was the way we must frame it. Or, "God willing Hillary will say yes." *Mann tracht und Gott lacht*, is how my Yiddish-speaking friend Basha-Rose puts it—man plans and God laughs.

Of course, we need to live our lives as though we really had a grasp on the future, as though we had a basis for our belief in necessary connection. We entrust our safety to the state and have faith it won't turn against us, turn our money over to anyone who claims to know why markets go up and down, and routinely put our bodies in the hands of doctors, expecting fixes and cures.

In the first half of 2004, as we were realizing that somehow we'd gotten into another unjustifiable war, a month or so after a large passenger plane crashed for no apparent reason into the Red Sea, and on the very day that an unanticipated change in zoning board members rendered valueless the sure-fire real estate investment his advisor had put him in, Albert Snaedeker, himself a physician, confidently submitted his body to the care of a skilled colleague

and friend, at the very hospital with which he was affiliated. There was a benign but large polyp to be removed from his sigmoid colon--a routine procedure with a predictable outcome..

Wheeled into the operating room, Dr. Snaedeker received and returned cordial greetings from the anesthesiologist and the surgeon.

He was helped onto the operating table. At his head was an anesthesia machine with a color touch screen, the most advanced form of a proved technology that would magically bring him to near-death and back. Next to it was the familiar monitor of his vital signs. The rack with endoscope, camera, and light source, was rolled over by a technician. Already in place was the latest, clean-line electrosurgery generator; it would cut, coagulate, and cauterize with exactitude.

Propofol, that powerful, milky-looking sedative so famously abused by Michael Jackson, was injected into his IV line and in seconds he was unconscious. The surgeon's plan was to do what the referring gastroenterologist could not: remove the polyp through the colonoscope. If unable to do that, the patient would be intubated and attached to the anesthesia machine. The surgeon would then simply cut out the troublesome section of colon using the laparoscope. Not needed for the moment, Prakesh Ghandi, the anesthesiologist, took a break. Other members of the team stuck electrocardiogram monitoring leads on the patient's shoulders and chest. The grounding plate for the electrosurgery device was adhered to his left thigh where the hair had been shaved. In short, all proceeded as it should.

Eleven minutes later wet shreds of Snaedeker's intestines—dark red and shiny with their lubricating mucus—along with fresh bright blood and bits of shit, were everywhere. They were spattered on the eyeglasses and gowns of the doctors and assistants, on their instruments and LED readouts. They dangled from the armatures and twinkling metal reflectors of the operating room lights, were stuck to ceiling tiles. Dr. Spencer, the surgeon, sat on the floor clutching his

nearly avulsed right thumb, surrounded by scalpels, scissors, sutures, and hemostats from a cart he'd upended as he'd fallen backwards, the cart mistakenly left in the room by a surgical tech who'd gotten a breakup message from his girlfriend.

Moments before, a loud eruption of blue-flame had torn through the patient's belly, making projectiles of his tissues, melting the latex on the surgeon's hands. Dr. Werdenschlag, the quick-thinking resident threw a nearby pan of saline solution into the wound, and stepping in for the fallen Dr. Spencer, tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the patient from bleeding out.

The surgeon's colonoscopic approach had gone flawlessly. He quickly found the targeted polyp dangling on its stalk, placed the electrocautery loop precisely at its base, and closed it tightly, ready for a swift slicing. He scrupulously reviewed every precaution against perforation. Only then did he click on the juice.

At that moment, Dr. Gandhi had stepped out to call his wife and let her know he was agreeable to picking up the travel and accommodations bill for her Gujarati family when they flew in for their daughter's wedding in three weeks. Werdenschlag, the resident, had just decided the Vikings plus six points was a great bet, and the pretty Filipina scrub nurse who had twice sucked off Dr. Spencer in the on-call room was wondering if he'd leave his wife. It was a textbook perfect procedure—there was no good reason that the fecal matter should have hit the fan, so to speak.

That the death involved a physician, a person of prominence, meant that it was now for the police and the medical examiner, not to mention all the reviewing agencies and departments within the hospital. It was their job to reconstruct what happened. Following the rules laid out for such matters, the body was delivered to the state's pathologist wrapped in the O.R. sheets and drapes, with everything that was in it at the moment of death—all the lines, tubes and leads.

The report of Dr. Snaedeker's most unanticipated autopsy (which you will find, appropriately enough, in the Appendix) concluded that death was caused by shock from massive loss of blood from the mesenteric artery, one of the main vessels that supply the large intestine, which had ruptured as the result of an explosion of bacterial gases in the descending colon.

The presence of a combustible quantity of bacterial gases was ascribed to poor pre-surgical preparation in a patient who had a chronically malabsorptive intestine that throughout his life had produced excess methane. The medical examiner's conclusion was based on a combination of pathognomonic findings and inferences drawn from the patient's medical history—derived from the High View Hospital chart, and from interviews with the operating room personnel, the assistant superintendent of hospital equipment, and the decedent's sister, Betty Snaedeker.

Betty, however, wasn't buying any of it.

CORRUPTED HUMOURS

The Gates

Basha-Rose, who's thirty years older than I am and therefore already lived a decade longer than I expect to, says I must believe that schtuping young women is going to bestow some kind of immunity and that makes me positively delusional. She may be right, but when you've entered your stream-dribbling sixties, odd little skin growths appearing from nowhere like mushrooms, working out like crazy just to stay even, sliding down the ever-steepening slope, you grab at any handhold, especially when as unprepared as I am for the death I'm heading for—alone and childless. Indeed, if the hooded skeleton led me away today, I would leave nothing behind but a few unnoticed novels produced in 500-copy runs by tiny publishers more than fifteen years ago. As for their author, only should you happen to be among the miniscule universe of subscribers to the chronically failing *Angle* magazine might you have come across the name Owen Berk or any of my nonfiction disquisitions.

My chronic lusting after the nubile can be explained by more than a denial of aging. My ring finger is a good inch longer than my index, which indicates that as a fetus I was bathed in testosterone. This, research says, correlates with a high sex drive. After nearly two decades of grinding out articles on whatever obscure topics Skip Bakley's adult A.D.D. leads him to, my brain is saturated with such trivia.

Skip's my editor, and he's assigned me an astonishing array of subjects to address from some previously unconsidered slant—which, of course, is the point of *Angle*. Over the years I've written about how crime does pay, citing the statistics that show the small likelihood of arrest and the even smaller likelihood of conviction. I've opposed death camp preservation plans,

suggesting that worse than letting the gas chambers and crematoria continue to sink into the ground would be the proposed tourist-friendly alternatives—asking readers to imagine a multimedia center, gift shop, and food court coexisting with skin lampshades, extracted dental gold, mountains of hair and children’s shoes. One of my best was a paean to the collective intelligence of termites, and the miracle of their survival thanks to bacteria that digest the cellulose they devour but cannot.

This past February Skip asked me to review the much-hyped, sixteen-day installation of 7,503, now vaporized, Gates on twenty-three miles of pathways in Central Park. It turned out to be a coup for me as well as Christo and Jeanne-Claude: my *Angle* piece, lauding the ephemerality of the project, was excerpted in *Harpers* and cited with a brief quote in a profile of the artists in *The New Yorker*. (“For one moment only. A blink before eternal blackness. Like Peter the Great, the Seven Years War, my grandparents, and the rest of history’s dustbin. Like smoke up the chimney. Like yesterday. Steel and indestructible fabric turned in an instant into dream...”). Skip was pleased at a small uptick in sales that followed, although he didn’t stop his weekly threats of staff layoffs if subscriptions didn’t increase, which didn’t help my Vietnam-disturbed sleep.

I read all the press, did my own research and, well prepped, strolled over to the park for a first-hand examination of The Gates, which were steel frames from which hung curtains of saffron colored fabric. They caught the wind’s energy like a sail or mill arm but, untethered, released it at once. They flapped, shuddered, billowed eerily and deflated. I was reminded of an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art—a loop of film that showed nothing but a window curtain making gentle snaps and susurrations as it was lifted and dropped by random currents of air—before which patrons sat transfixed.

At the sixteenth or seventeenth gate on my path, I encountered a slim young woman in a puffy down jacket, her brown eyes bright under a child's ski cap, enthusiastically conversing with the tourists. Every now and then she'd poke a tennis ball-knobbed jousting pole at the wind-tangled fabric until it unsnarled. I liked the graceful way she handled the pole. I liked her poise, her warm style with the passersby. I especially liked the idea of someone still in her self-absorbed mid-twenties working as a volunteer.

"Kjirsti" was the name on her Central Park Conservancy chest tag. She pulled from her pocket small saffron swatches of the same material used for The Gates, and offered them as prizes for answers to random questions she'd pose. Worthless, the orange squares were cherished for the same reason trash plastic beads inspire fistfights when they're tossed from Marti Gras floats, or a lump of cement acquires worth because it was chipped from the Berlin Wall. A useless thing becomes a memento, a way to concretize time.

I waited until a German family moved on, prodded by a complaining child. How about you put three of your questions to me, I proposed to the smiling Kjirsti, and if I get them right, you have a coffee with me when you get off work.

She stood her pole on the ground and leaned on it to look me over.

I smiled at her and waited patiently.

She said, I would want something sweet with that. I assured her a pastry of her choosing was a given.

Ok then. What are Christo and Jeanne-Claude's countries of origin?

This was an easy one for anyone following the media glut on the event, as easy as their birthdays, the one I was expecting, since much had been made of the weird coincidence of their being born on the same day—June 13, 1935. I wondered if she was throwing the game, aiming

for what I hoped she was thinking of as our mutual win, or just toying with me, planning some final conundrum that would require a heroic feat before she played Circe and turned me into a pig.

How did they meet? was question two. And I told the story of how Christo had been commissioned to paint a portrait of Jeanne-Claude's mother, how he got Jeanne-Claude pregnant while she was engaged to another man whom she married and then divorced.

That night in bed, Kjirsti's head cradled in my arm, I riddled her final question; as I had sitting in Starbucks listening to her prattle about Plato, her doctoral studies and Columbia teaching responsibilities, and as we walked and talked about the world's problems, which is to say about the nightmare of our nation being ruled by a gang of thieves and thugs, passing through unseen gates toward each other, and then over Pad Thai and rice wine, as she told me about her professor parents (anthropologists who'd met in grad school) and her skateboarding kid brother back in Sacramento. Thanks to books and movies, the wonderful thing about chance meetings is that if desire is sparked, the script is known; one only needs the courage to speak the words. Anyway, her question—what art has Christo left behind--had been so cleverly constructed that I was still uncertain what she'd done.

There were innumerable preliminary drawings in the hands of collectors--selling them is how Christo raises the millions for his installations. The installations are all, of course, destroyed, and it is only they that he defines as his art. There is also, I suppose, the metaphysical argument—that the memory of what he's done is embedded in the collective unconscious of the culture. I concluded that Kjirsti had figured out how to reserve the final say as to whether or not she would go with me to the last second, that she really wanted to, but needed wiggle room. She didn't care for that when I suggested it out loud.

I thought you were a dirty old man and was this close to pushing the red button on my walkie-talkie and bringing the cops.

Really? I asked, pulling her into me and bestowing a kiss on the lower of her plump lips. So what changed your mind?

Nothing. You are a dirty old man. But I thought you were charming and I said to myself there was no way you would say none. That you'd assume there must be installations somewhere that had been left intact and admit you didn't know, or you'd claim that his drawings qualified which I would reject, as does Christo. Worst case, you said none, and I'd get a Grande cappuccino and a brownie; and if anyone saw me there with Rumpelstiltskin they'd figure he was a fellow student--one of the Continuing Ed people taking courses to ward off Alzheimer's.

I awoke, still in the liminal state, mentally writing my review of *The Gates*, to find Kjirsti gone, my stack of *Angles* disturbed (and I assumed, thumbed through), and my copy of the Manhattan directory sitting on my laptop, her name and phone number neatly printed in iridescent green marker on the cover. With it was the prize square of fabric, which made me smile. I folded it and slipped it into my back pocket where I would keep it like a talisman—moving it from one pair of pants to another. I hoped Kjirsti'd gotten out before Basha-Rose's daybreak sweeping of the sidewalk so I'd be spared another lecture on aging and self-acceptance. I tossed the phonebook onto the unmade bed, debating whether to wait the customary twenty-four to forty-eight hours before making contact again, or whether I could risk a call before the day was out, and maybe see her again that night as I wanted to. I opened the computer and recorded the rush of words that had been processed in my sleep:

Christo denies he makes “meanings,” “messages,” or “symbols,” just “art.” The art of it may be arguable, but philosophically it is a perfect statement. Exiting through the drink and souvenir sellers, my back to the park, all had disappeared. I considered what I’d seen. A hundred thousand people of every shade, speaking in every tone and tongue, had been pulled from every place on the planet to experience an event in a New York February. They mobbed the walkways on a weekday, held hands, snapped shots of themselves posed in a gate to prove it had been real and that they were there.

I was interrupted by a call from Skip. He told me he’d gotten yet another call from his cousin Betty about her brother’s untimely death in the O.R. while undergoing some kind of routine polyp removal six months earlier. The upshot was that he’d promised her my help investigating the matter. It would be at his expense and I could bill it like any other assignment. He said he assumed I was coming to his party tonight and that Betty would be there as well. He’d introduce us and she could fill me in.

I protested I knew nothing about medical malpractice, assuming that’s what it was, and why didn’t she just hire a lawyer or claims investigator who did—all the time casting a longing glance at Kjrsti’s name. I told Skip, This is New York. Finding a malpractice lawyer is about as hard as finding a drugstore. He said this happened in New Jersey. I said they have drug stores in New Jersey too.

Betty went that route, he said. She brought the records to two prominent attorneys who had them reviewed by their forensic medical experts and got two negative opinions. What can I tell you. She believes there was some kind of cover-up. All I expect of you is to check around enough to put her mind at rest.

I said I'd be there around nine, hoping to have an early meal with Kjirsti. He said come around seven, he was serving dinner. We hung up and I was distressed that I hadn't put up more of a fight, that I wouldn't see Kjirsti and, not least, that I'd lost my train of thought.

The Chatelaine

A novel by Owen Berk

Chapter I

In a rare state of distraction, he hung his clothes in an old metal locker in a dingy room stuffed with cartons of medical supplies. He reflected on how with his penis diverted from the marriage his wife turned daily more angry and depressed, and how there was really no reason he should feel guilty about that. His regular racquetball opponent, a psychiatrist with an inferior game, assured him men confuse their wives with their mothers at mid-life after they've borne children. Freud, he said, stopped sleeping with his wife once he'd turned forty.

If some casual, stress-relieving sex was needed now and then, it was a small compensation which, like their Porsches and summer homes, hardly made up for the years of fun he and his fellow docs forewent for the sake of their studies. And his wife had the satisfactions of children, clubs, shopping, and her horse--not to mention marriage to the chief of surgery.

He stepped into the cold tiled corridor of the hospital basement. Lining the heavily trafficked passageway were tanks of oxygen and anesthesia, metal carts of equipment and a number of seemingly abandoned half- or unconscious patients, cadaver-like except for their connecting tubes and bottles. Orderlies shuffling in paper slippers would appear to push them to their fates through the swinging doors of the operating suites.

On one of the parked gurneys was Lillian Ransom, his wife's oldest friend. Cotton-mouthed, she was shaking with chill from pre-op meds and an only half-tranquilized fear of the impending amputation of her left hand. She had already lost the fingers of both hands, her right foot to the ankle, and her left leg to the knee. Ongoing surgical removals (and potential blindness) were the consequence of an obscure circulatory disease only treatable by ceasing to smoke, which she would not do.

The refusal to quit in the face of such dire consequences was not simple obstinacy but a recognized symptom of the disease. Her physicians shook their heads knowingly as they watched Lillian adapt, teaching herself to hold a cigarette and strike a match with just palms. When her hands were gone she'd get friends to light them.

He said hello to his resident and asked him to present Lillian's case. Only half-listening as they stepped up to the sinks, popped air-tight brush packets, and began the five-minute scrub, he was thinking he'd better put some effort into his marriage. Alone time, a romantic getaway should do it. Under the flow of the handle-less faucet, he considered options that might appeal to his wife, as he followed the routine cleaning of the four planes of each hand and finger, up one side and down the other. Unfortunately, as he entered the O.R., hands up, sterilized to the elbows, who should approach to gown and glove him, but Edwarda, fresh from their quickie in the on-call room.

No sooner did her limpid brown eyes lock his own over their masks than he began to fanaticize an uninterrupted dalliance with her.

He nodded, looked away, inserted his arms into the gown and paused as the circulating tech tied him up from behind.

The resident was examining the ruined wrist of the now unconscious Lillian. More quizzing ensued. Where would he place the incision and why?

Here, he pointed, it will allow quick healing, and won't interfere with a connection socket for a prosthesis.

Good, and how will you shape the muscle around the bone? And as they discussed the crafting of a healthy stump, a long-ago memory intruded, the memory of unrequited desire, at the ache from watching the fiercesome grace of Lillian's dancing, and one specific moment when he was undone by no more than the diffident buttoning of her coat as she prepared to depart for a date.

Of course I'll cut the nerves above the amputation site and sew them into tissues to ensure they don't regenerate into excruciating neuromas.

He nodded his approval thinking about the way he had suffered Lillian and his wife speaking of poets and artists in a contemptuous womanly code that made him feel dull and diminished, then annoyed and resentful. In their school days, he understood that Lillian saw him as shallow and his education as culturally impoverished. For a year he absorbed the pain as he struggled to crush undeniable longing.

Extinguishing a small flash of anger, he suddenly realized he could kill two birds by organizing a marriage-restoring ski trip from which he'd escape to Edwarda's bed.

Let's go. Let's go, he called his team to action, readying them for the lawful mayhem to come, reaching for the scalpel as he looked up from the putrefied, about-to-be-dissected flesh, at his lover. There was an instant of confusion, the slightest of hesitations as the ulcerated mess he was about to remove was replaced in his mind's eye by the graceful wrist he had so passionately wanted to kiss, and he felt again the humiliation of her rejection. Then it was gone, his power returned and was quickly coursing with the blood rushing to his hands, his brain, and his groin.

CORRUPTED HUMOURS

Launched

It was a typical Skip party. He was the hub of a wheel with a hundred disparate spokes. He liked the control, and he was by nature a collector. Besides a renowned group of medieval and Renaissance music manuscripts and a lot of art, he owned antique toy soldiers and books about the Holocaust from the perspective of the persecutors as well as the victims. Among these were signed first editions of *Mein Kampf*, and Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*; drafts of two of Goebbels' unpublished novels; and one of Houston Stewart Chamberlain's writings on "Scientific Anti-Semitism." That was what was visible: there was a heavily locked room in which he claimed to store the balance. (But once Theresa, a woman we'd shared, hinted it held a sexual dungeon, I hadn't stopped speculating about the truth of the allegation and scrutinized every aspect of Skip's life for evidence.) In any case, it was people he most enjoyed collecting, a Boswell for his day.

The bartender, perspiring heavily in his white twill jacket and bow tie, finally looked my way, and I specified a newly fashionable vodka on the rocks. Nearby a couple were loudly discussing the Dadaist news that the Republican Majority Leader had subpoenaed a brain-dead lump of flesh named Terri Schiavo to testify. Then, making short shrift of a few pieces of tuna sushi lifted from a passing tray, I threaded my way over to Skip, exchanging greetings with *Angle* colleagues and nods with people whom I knew only as his regular attendees. I took note of the radiant, wide-mouthed girls offering the hors d'oeuvres, but all I could think of was how only Kjirsti would do.

I found him holding forth to a small group before a couple of recently hung portraits. They were, he explained, of Jane Burden--one by her husband William Morris, the other by her lover and Morris' friend and fellow Pre-Raphaelite, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The gathering was to celebrate these latest additions to Skip's small but well composed collection of artwork by writers.

He broke off his lecture to lead me to a tall, slender woman and introduced her as Betty. She was a woman someone conjures up, an oddity sent by central casting for a scene intended to show the variety and range of the female of our species. She possessed the piercing blue eyes of one of my exes' Abyssinian cat, set wide in a pretty boyish face that bore some resemblance to Skip's. The androgyny was emphasized by short, highlighted hair, no apparent makeup, a strong handshake, no rings or bracelets or other jewelry beyond diamond ear studs. It was belied by the movement of her breasts under her sweater.

A clearly irritated fellow had been chatting her up. He wore thick-lensed glasses that enlarged his dark eyes so that he resembled an unattractive Paul Auster, but which apparently didn't enable him to read the boredom on her face. He was saying Mozart's musical dice games brought randomness into music two centuries before Cage when he was seized at the elbow by an effusively apologetic Skip, and dragged off to confirm that the painting in the kitchen was, indeed, a Duchamp.

Betty gave me one of those smiles that doesn't engage anywhere higher than the mouth. Her greeting had the kind of warm condescension I imagined her bestowing on a servant loaned by a friend to help with household chores—which is what I suppose I was.

I suggested the terrace for privacy and quiet. Skip's stage was a 5,500 square foot penthouse on East 65th Street with floor to ceiling glass walls. A twenty-foot deep wraparound

terrace that ran the length of the building on its south side was larger than my apartment and didn't figure in his total square footage. It had commanding views of the park to the west, the river to the east and all of Manhattan to the south. It had replaced the Sutton Place brownstone he inherited and sold for what was, at the time, a record eighteen million.

As for how I felt every time I entered, you need only know that my fifth floor walkup is in a still ungentrified section of Hell's Kitchen. It is owned by a wrathful Serb who feels oppressed by rent stabilization. Ceilings and walls are watermarked from repeated leaks; the kitchen has no appliances beyond a small fridge and a stove with only one operating burner, and as any number of freaked-out women can attest, there are roaches in the utensil drawers and mice that remain unthwarted by Brillo pad hole-stoppers.

It was unseasonably warm, and with the heat lamps Skip had considerably placed about, it was comfortable, although the air still felt thin and chilled. I offered my jacket and she accepted, draping it over her shoulders and pulling it around her like a cape. The wasteful, polluting lights refracted and blurred pleasingly.

I arranged two chairs so that we could talk and still take in the view, dragged a small but heavy iron table over for our drinks, and asked how I could help. She took a deep swallow of wine, and let me know Skip had touted me as a great investigative journalist, with a career as a private detective.

A brief one, I allowed. In reality my experience consisted of a year of part-time work waiting for errant husbands to emerge from trysts and recording the times. I found myself wanting to impress her as least as much as I wanted to contain her expectations.

Betty explained that her brother, a respected psychiatrist, had gone into High View Hospital, in Millburn, New Jersey for the simple removal of a polyp in his colon and ended up dead. Need she say more?

Perhaps a little, I said, like what caused his death.

A cauterizing machine had sparked an explosion, she assumed of leaking oxygen, which caused massive hemorrhaging in her brother, and was strong enough to seriously injure the surgeon. They deny, of course, that there was any such leak. Their exculpatory version she said, taking another pull of her wine, is simply absurd. After months of supposed investigation by the medical examiner, hospital and insurance company, they decided that it was my brother's own intestinal gasses that had ignited. Moreover, that it was his own fault because he must not have followed pre-op cleansing instructions.

The first man in history literally hoisted by his own petard. I repressed the urge to voice this aloud.

The ridiculousness of implying that Albert, a physician, couldn't follow directions or comprehend their importance.

Conveniently for them, it turned out Albert suffered from a life-long propensity to flatulence. He apparently lacked a critical enzyme for digestion of certain sugars, and even with a rigorously controlled diet, his bowels generated great quantities of methane-- which as any boy who's ever taken an experimental match to a fart can tell you, is quite flammable.

Of course, I thought, it wasn't just poor Albert. The whole world was killing itself with methane, the main source of global warming, produced by cows and landfills and termites. I retrieved a butt-curved spiral notebook from my back pocket and, excusing myself, reached over

to get a pen from my blazer around her shoulders. I asked Betty for her theory. She denied having one. I merely reject the preposterous, self-serving explanation that's been offered.

When I asked whether she believed her brother's death was not accidental, there was a long beat as she emptied her glass and rested it on the table. I don't believe anyone set out to harm him, if that's what you mean. I think hospital personnel were negligent, or their equipment failed, or both, and that they're covering it up—for reasons of liability, or accreditation, or reputation. To that extent it's intentional.

I wrote "personnel," and under it "equipment", and next to them an angular, multipointed doodle.

The surgeon, she said, was D.B.Spencer, a colleague and friend of her brother's. They played racquetball together, although they didn't socialize beyond that, perhaps because Albert was single and Spencer was married. She'd met Doctor and Mrs. Spencer at a cocktail party Albert threw. She recalled not caring much for the way he talked to his wife.

Betty brushed at an eye. Do what you can, she said. She shrugged off my jacket and held it out in a single movement. I accepted it. Her gaze turned toward the gauzy, star-obliterating glow of the city, the light that concealed the terrifying vastness of space. I understood I'd been dismissed.

The Chatelaine

A novel by Owen Berk

Chapter 2

She was The Chatelaine. The mistress of the castle, the keeper of the keys. The medieval title had been bestowed years back by the free-spirited Lillian, a sardonic homage to her friend's overburdened life as cook, consort, contractor, and mother of three. What began as their private joke had spread, and the term self-applied by others in her circle of well-educated, post-revolution moms. The irony was not shared with their husbands who, as Gloria Steinem observed of men in general, had never sought advice on how to combine marriage and a career.

That morning she was still in bed and half asleep when her irritated husband instructed her to inform the carpenter that the quiet room was not quiet and tossed a half-legible list of deficiencies at her. He added that she also needed to get the radon inspector in here before they all end up with cancer. With that he was off to remove Lillian's left hand, taking his charm and laid-back competence to work for the benefit of the nurses and patients.

Later, she reflected on her husband's bad humor, discussing it, as she usually did, with Bravo, her retired Thoroughbred. He was twenty-five now and had served her loyally from the day she'd bought him off the track out of the killing pen for no more than his weight in dog food and begun the long process of rehabilitating him.

So he's stressed, she said. Does that give him the right? Maybe he's ashamed of something. Do you suppose he's feeling guilty?

Bravo's near ear twitched and rotated toward her as he leaned into the rubber curry, stretching his neck as she reached his favorite spot. Unlike her husband and children, her horse was demonstrably appreciative of everything she did for him, blowing his warm breath lovingly

down her neck when she picked his feet or ran her hands down his legs feeling for heat or swelling. He listened to her—came out of the field when she called, stood happily in the stable aisle to be tacked up or groomed without the need of cross-ties. Yet her closeness to the animal exacerbated her isolation.

She tried to remember when she and her husband talked and what they'd talked about. When he was courting her, she'd listen in awe as he spoke passionately about diseases and cures. Good that he's got a trade, Lillian would say, unimpressed with his high-status career.

Poor Lillian! The unimaginable agony of the surgeries followed by phantom pain in the amputated limbs, the lost abilities and forced dependency, the social rejection. Was Lillian's courage equal to the diminution? Despite her large bones and breasts and addictive smoking she had been a gifted dancer and athlete. She was muscle and sinew and from her parents' perspective, hopelessly unfeminine. Then she outraged her old-line Newport family by posing nude for an obscure photographer. His career would be made by images of the young Lillian, celebrated for creating a new aesthetic for the female form. Three of those photos were included in a coffee table collection entitled *The Wonder of Woman*. Her husband had purchased it for their teenage son as an alternative to the pandering magazines they'd found under the boy's bed, to let him see the female body as an expression of character and not just anatomy. If her husband was aware of Lillian's photos in the book he had never mentioned it to her, or she to him.

Visiting Lillian in the hospital the cold fall night before her surgery, the Chatelaine found her subdued although, as usual, glib about her situation. She seemed to enjoy horrifying her friend with tales of websites for amputee seekers.

The combination of the shortening days and her preoccupation with Lillian was taking its toll on the Chatelaine. She was as tired and logy when the clock woke her as when she went to

sleep. Still, once up and yoked to her duties, she kept the load moving. She supervised the construction of his new gym and spa. She scrubbed the boat alongside him, kept it provisioned, crewed every Sunday until it was hauled. She entertained referring doctors and their wives. She got their boys to their practices, and their daughter to pony club and dance class. She chaired the Montessori Bake Sale and Back-to-School-Night committees.

But as the nights closed in, she experienced a sleep-disturbing, energy-sapping malaise. She let things slide. The outside faucets were still undrained. The gutters overflowed with acorns and leaves. Her long done garden had been left overgrown. The rotten Halloween pumpkin oozed on the front porch, its eyes and nose mere slits. More than once she'd sat alone on a dreary afternoon, ignoring her chores, listening to the Albinoni Adagio or Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time, unable to move, unable to cry.