

P E T E R   C A M E R O N

someday  
this  
pain  
will  
be  
useful  
to  
you

FRANCES FOSTER BOOKS  
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I

*Thursday, July 24, 2003*

THE DAY MY SISTER, GILLIAN, DECIDED TO PRONOUNCE her name with a hard G was, coincidentally, the same day my mother returned, early and alone, from her honeymoon. Neither of these things surprised me. Gillian, who was between her third and fourth years at Barnard, was dating a “language theory” professor named Rainer Maria Schultz and had consequently become a bit of a linguistic zealot, often ranting about something called “pure” language, of which Gillian with a hard G was supposedly an example. My mother, on the other hand, had rather rashly decided to marry an odd man named Barry Rogers. Gillian—Gillian—and I had both suspected that this marriage (my mother’s third) would not last very long, but we assumed it would survive its honeymoon, although when we heard they were planning a honeymoon in Las Vegas our skepticism grew. My mother, who has spent her entire life avoiding places like Las

Vegas and merrily disdaining anyone who visited, or even contemplated visiting, such places, had announced, in a disturbing brainwashy way, that a honeymoon in Las Vegas would be “fun” and a nice change from her previous honeymoons (Italy with my father and the Galápagos Islands with her second husband). Whenever my mother said anything was, or would be, “fun” you could take it as a warning that said thing was not nor would be at all fun, and when I reminded my mother of this—I used the example of her telling me that the sailing camp she had forced me to attend the summer I was twelve would be “fun”—she admitted that sailing camp had not been fun for me but that was no reason why a honeymoon in Las Vegas would not be fun for her. Such is the ability adults—well, my mother, at least—have to deceive themselves.

Gillian and I were eating lunch, or some midday meal approximate to lunch, when my mother untimely returned from her honeymoon. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon. Gillian sat at the kitchen table doing the *New York Times* crossword, which we were not allowed to do when my mother was home because, as she often told us, it was the only dependable pleasure in her life. I was eating a fried egg sandwich. I was supposed to have been working at the art gallery which my mother owned but which was effectively run by a young man named John Webster, but John had sensibly decided that since my mother was safely out of town, preoccupied with whatever unthinkable activities preoccupy a fifty-three-year-old woman in Las Vegas on her third honeymoon, and since it was July, and no one had set foot in the gallery for several days, he would close the gallery and go and stay with friends

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in Amagansett, and I could do whatever I wanted for the rest of the week. I was not, of course, to tell my mother about this hiatus, for she believed that at any moment someone might walk in off the street and buy a garbage can decoupage with pages torn out of varied editions of the Bible, the Torah, or the Koran (for \$16,000). My mother opened the gallery about two years ago after she divorced her second husband, because she wanted to “do” something, which you might have thought meant work, but did not: “doing” something entailed buying a lot of new clothes (very expensive clothes that had been “deconstructed,” which as far as I could tell meant some of the seams had been ripped out or zippers had been put where God did not intend zippers to go) because gallery directors had to look like gallery directors, and having lunches at very expensive restaurants with curators and corporate art consultants or, occasionally, an actual artist. My mother had had a fairly successful career editing art books until she married her second husband, and apparently once you stop working legitimately it is impossible to start again. “Oh, I could never go back to that work, it’s so dreary and the last thing the world needs is another coffee table book,” I had heard her say more than once. When I asked her if she thought the world needed an aluminum garbage can decoupage with pages torn from the King James Bible she said, No, the world didn’t need that, which was exactly what made it art. And then I said, Well, if the world doesn’t need coffee table books then they must be art, too—what was the difference? My mother said the difference was the world *thought* it needed coffee table books, the world *valued* coffee table books, but the world didn’t think it needed decoupage garbage cans.

And so Gillian and I were sitting in the kitchen, she intent on the crossword and I enjoying my fried egg sandwich, when we heard the front door unlocking—or actually locking, for we had carelessly left it unlocked, so it was first locked and then unlocked—which took a moment during which my sister and I just looked at each other and said nothing, for we instinctually knew who was opening the door. My father has keys to our apartment, and it would have made sense—well, more sense—that it was he arriving, seeing as how my mother was supposed to be honeymooning in Las Vegas, but for some reason both Gillian and I knew immediately it was our mother. We heard her drag her rolling suitcase over the threshold (my mother does not travel lightly, especially on honeymoons) and then we heard it topple over, and then we heard her chucking the books and magazines and other debris that had accumulated on the couch in her absence to the floor, and then we heard her collapse on the couch, and say, rather quietly and poignantly, “Shit.”

We sat there for a moment in stunned silence. It was almost as if we thought if we remained silent and undetected, she might reverse herself—get off the couch, replace the debris, right her suitcase, toddle it out the door, fly back to Las Vegas, and resume her honeymoon.

But of course that did not happen. After a moment we heard her get up and walk toward the kitchen.

“Oh good Lord,” my mother said, when she entered the kitchen and saw us, “what are you two doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” asked Gillian.

My mother went to the sink and scowled disapprovingly at

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the dirty dishes and glasses. She opened the cupboard that housed glasses, but it was empty, for Gillian and I had been favoring the technique of rinsing and reusing glasses rather than washing, storing, and reusing. "My God," my mother said, "all I want is a drink of water. A simple drink of water! That is all I want. And that, like everything else I have ever wanted, appears to be denied me."

Gillian arose and found a fairly clean glass in the sink and rinsed it and then filled it with water from the tap. "Here," she said, and handed it to our mother.

"Bless you," my mother said. My mother is not a religious person and her use of this language disquieted me. Or further disquieted me, as her unexpected arrival had already achieved that effect.

"Whatever," Gillian said, and sat back down.

My mother stood at the sink, taking odd, birdlike sips from the glass of water. I thought about how I had once learned that birds cannot swallow and so must tip their heads back to ingest water, and how if in a rainstorm their beaks are left open and their heads tilted back they will drown, although why they would have their beaks open and heads thrown back during a rainstorm is a mystery to me. My mother finally finished drinking her water in this odd manner and then made what seemed to me to be a great show of rinsing out the glass and putting it in the dishwasher, which of course was not an easy thing to do as the dishwasher was already full of (dirty) dishes.

"What happened?" asked Gillian.

"What happened?"

"Yes," said Gillian. "Why are you home? Where is Mr. Rogers?" Both my sister and I enjoyed calling our mother's new husband by his surname, even though we had been urged repeatedly to call him Barry.

"I neither know nor care to know where that man is," my mother said. "I hope that I never see Barry again in my life."

"Well, best to discover that now," said Gillian. "Although I suppose it would have been best to discover that before you married him. Or before you agreed to marry him. Or before you met him."

"Gillian!" my mother said. "Please."

"It's Gillian," said Gillian.

"What?" my mother asked.

"My name is Gillian," said Gillian. "My name has been mispronounced long enough. I have decided that from now on I will only answer to Gillian. Rainer Maria says naming a child and then mispronouncing that name is a subtle and insidious form of child abuse."

"Well, that's not my style. If I were going to abuse you, there'd be nothing subtle or insidious about it." My mother looked at me. "And you," she said, "why aren't you at the gallery?"

"John didn't need me today," I said.

"That is not the point," said my mother. "John never needs you. You do not go there because you are needed. You go there because I pay you to go there so you will have a summer job and learn the value of a dollar and know what responsibility is all about."

"I'll go tomorrow," I said.

My mother sat at the table. She took the half-finished cross-

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word puzzle away from Gillian. "Please remove that plate," she said to me. "There is nothing more disgusting than a plate on which a fried egg sandwich has been eaten." My mother is very particular about what people around her eat. She cannot stand to watch anyone eat a banana, unless they peel the whole thing and break it into attractive bite-sized pieces.

I got up and rinsed the plate and put it in the dishwasher. I filled the dishwasher with detergent and started the cycle. This act was too transparently ingratiating for anyone to acknowledge, yet it seemed to have a softening effect upon my mother: she sighed and rested her head on her arms, which were crossed before her on the table.

"What happened?" asked Gillian.

My mother did not answer. I realized she was crying. Gillian stood up and moved behind her, reached down and embraced her, and held her while she sobbed.

I went down the hall into the living room and called John in Amagansett. A woman answered the phone. "Hello?" she said.

"Hello. Is John Webster there?"

"Who's calling?" the woman asked, in a hostile, challenging fashion intended no doubt to discourage telemarketers.

"This is Bryce Canyon," I said. I always refuse to give my real name when someone demands to know "Who's calling?" They should say "May I ask who's calling?" or "May I tell him who's calling?"

"He's not available at the moment, Mr. Canyon. Can I give him a message?"

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"Yes," I said. "You may. Please tell Mr. Webster that Marjorie Dunfour has returned unexpectedly from her honeymoon and if Mr. Webster values his livelihood he should return to the city posthaste."

"Post what?" the woman asked.

"Haste," I said. "Posthaste. Without delay. Immediately."

"Perhaps you'd better talk to him yourself."

"I thought he was unavailable."

"He was," said the woman, "but he has appeared."

After a moment John said, "Hello."

"John, it's me," I said.

"James," he said. "What's up?"

"My mother is here," I said. "She just arrived. I thought you might like to know."

"Oh shit," he said. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "but Mr. Rogers seems to be history."

"Oh, the poor thing," said John. "So soon. Well, I suppose it's all for the best, to figure it out sooner than later."

"That is what we told her," I said.

"All right," he said. "I'll take the jitney back tonight. You don't think she'll call the gallery this afternoon, do you? Or, God forbid, go in?"

"I doubt it. She seems preoccupied with her misfortune."

"You're so heartless, James. It's unnatural. I worry for you."

"I think you should worry about yourself. If she finds out you closed the gallery she might get a little heartless herself."

"I'm on my way," said John. "I'm packing my bags as we speak."

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II

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I thought that under the circumstances the best thing to do might be to get out of the house, so I took our dog, a black standard poodle named Miró, to the dog run in Washington Square. Miró, who seems to think he is human, doesn't really enjoy the dog run, but he will sit patiently on the bench beside me, observing the simple canine ways of the other dogs with amused condescension.

Right outside of our building is a tree well filled with impatiens and English ivy with two plaques attached to the little iron trellis around its base. One reads IN MEMORY OF HOWARD MORRIS SHULEVITZ, BLOCK PRESIDENT 1980–1993. HE LOVED THIS BLOCK. When I first saw this plaque, about six years ago when my parents divorced (my mother sold the apartment we lived in on West Seventy-ninth Street and we moved downtown; my father moved into an awful Trump building on the Upper East Side. He has one of those hideous apartments with huge curved windows you can't open and fake gold faucets and weird men in costumes in the elevator in case you don't know how to push a button), I misinterpreted it, thinking that the dates supplied were Howard Morris Shulevitz's dates of birth and death, and that he had been a little boy who had died some tragic early death and as a consequence had been given the posthumous honorific title of Block President. I had very tender feelings about the boy, who had died at approximately the age I was then, and felt in some way that I must be his successor, and so I vowed to love the block with Howard's ardency, and I even had fantasies about dying young myself—I thought about throwing myself

out our living room window so that I would land on the sidewalk in front of the tree well. I would get my own plaque then, beside Howard's: JAMES DUNFOUR SVECK, SECOND BLOCK PRESIDENT, 1985-1997. HE LOVED THIS BLOCK TOO. I made the mistake of mentioning this little fantasy to my mother, who informed me that Howard Morris Shulevitz had probably been an old man, a petty tyrant who had nothing better to do than annoy his neighbors with building code violations. The second plaque on the trellis emphatically states CURB YOUR DOG. I don't remember exactly when this one was appended to the railing, but one can only imagine why it was necessary, and now seeing those adjacent plaques never fails to depress me, for even if Howard Morris Shulevitz was, as per my mother's imagining, an unpleasant person, did he really deserve to have his name, and memory, evoked beside a CURB YOUR DOG sign? I find this whole phenomenon of naming things after the deceased disconcerting. I don't like to sit on a bench that is a memorial to someone's life. It seems disrespectful. I think if you want to memorialize someone you should either erect a proper memorial, like the Lincoln Memorial, or leave well enough alone.

The dog run is this area of the park that is completely fenced, and once you pass through the two gates, which upon penalty of death must never be simultaneously opened, you can let your dog off the leash and let it frolic with its own kind. When I arrived at about four o'clock, it was fairly empty. The people who didn't have real jobs who frequented the dog run during the day had left, and the people who had real jobs hadn't yet arrived. This left a few dog walkers with a motley assortment

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of dogs, all of whom seemed not in the mood to frolic. Miró trotted to our favorite bench, which was, thankfully, by this time of the day in the shade, and jumped up onto it. I sat beside him, but he turned away and ignored me. In the privacy of our home, Miró is a very affectionate creature, but in public he behaves like a teenager who has no interest in a parent's affection. I assume he thinks that it interferes with his I-am-not-a-dog pose.

There is a sense of camaraderie in the dog run that I hate. This sort of smug friendliness dog owners share that they feel entitles them to interact. If I was sitting on a bench in the park proper, no one would approach me, but in the dog run it's as if you are on some distant weirdly friendly planet. "Oh, is that a standard poodle?" people will ask, or "Is it a he or a she?" or some other idiotic question. Fortunately the dog walkers, professionals that they are, only talk to one another, in the same way I have noticed that nannies and mothers never interact in the playground: each, like the dog walkers and dog owners, sticks to its kind. And so Miró and I were left alone. Miró watched the other dogs for a moment and then sighed and slowly lowered himself down upon the bench, pushing me a bit with his hind feet so that he would have adequate space to recline. But I refused to shift, so he was forced to hang his head over the end of the bench. He did this in a way that implied it was very difficult being a dog.

I thought about my mother and her unexpected return. I wasn't surprised that this marriage failed—there had been something weird about Mr. Rogers from the start, which was only eight months ago—but I had thought it would last longer than a

few days. My mother was married to my father for fifteen years, and she was married to her second husband for three years, so I suppose this marriage was proportionate. I tried to figure out what percentage of fifteen years three years was so I could figure out what the corresponding percentage of three years would be—might it be four days? Unfortunately I have never been good in math. Numbers simply do not interest me or seem as real to me as words.

But whether it was proportionate or not, four days is still a disappointingly short time for a marriage to endure. And one could argue that the curve should be just the opposite—that people should get better with subsequent marriages, not worse. At this rate, my mother would be abandoned at the altar if she dared wed again.

My father has never remarried—the woman he left my mother for died, suddenly and tragically, of ovarian cancer before they could both divorce and remarry, cancer moving more expeditiously than the court system, and although he is not religious (my parents were married in the Rainbow Room by a judge) I think he felt in some way punished by this death, and since then he has been involved briefly with a long string of much younger women who all seem to have the same artificial-looking blond “highlights” in their perfectly nice brown hair. (I don’t know if this is a generational thing or a fetish of my father’s.)

That evening my mother went to consult with Hilda Temple, her life coach. My mother had been in conventional therapy for many years (in fact she had spent the last couple of years in

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analysis), but shortly before she met Mr. Rogers, she decided that conventional therapy wasn't "working for her" and had begun to see a life coach. What you did was tell your life coach what your goals were and your life coach would encourage/pester you until you achieved said goals or (more likely) moved on to a different form of therapy. Meeting Mr. Rogers had been one of my mother's goals—well, not meeting Mr. Rogers specifically, and in retrospect certainly not Mr. Rogers; the goal had been to find a partner—and with Hilda's help (or interference) this had been quickly achieved.

While my mother was out Gillian filled me in on what she had learned. Apparently Mr. Rogers had stolen my mother's ATM and credit cards, or at least "borrowed" them while she lay dozing in her nuptial bed, and somehow used them to get \$3,000, all of which he successfully gambled away in the wee small hours of the morning. (Later, when she got her credit card bill, she learned that he had also bought several lap dances—discreetly billed as a "personal entertainment expense"—a \$1,500 portable cigar humidor, \$800 worth of cigars, and a dozen pairs of cashmere socks.)

I was in my bedroom when my mother returned from her summit meeting with Hilda Temple. Gillian had gone uptown to see Herr Schultz. For a while I could hear my mother in the living room talking to Miró. I've always been a bit jealous of how much my mother talks to the dog. In fact, I think we all talk to Miró more than we talk to one another. Then I heard her walking down the hall. I was sitting at my desk, looking up houses for sale in small midwestern towns on the Internet. It's amazing

what \$100,000 can get you in a state like Nebraska. I heard my mother stop in my doorway but I didn't look up.

"Oh, you're home," she said.

Since this was obvious I saw no point in either confirming or denying it.

"I thought you might be out," she said. "Shouldn't you be out?"

"Out where?"

"I don't know: out. At a party or something. Or a movie. You're eighteen and it's Friday night."

"Thursday night."

"Whatever," she said. "You should still be out. I worry about you. What are you doing?"

"Looking at houses."

"Houses? What houses?"

"Houses for sale."

"Isn't that an odd thing to be doing? I didn't know you were in the market for a house."

"I'm not," I said. "I'm just looking."

She stood there for a moment.

I turned around. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just looking at you," she said. "You'll be gone before I know it."

I'm supposed to be going to Brown University in Rhode Island this fall. Well, actually next month: there's some awful freshman-orientation thing at the end of August. I dread it.

My mother sat down on my bed.

"I'm sorry about Mr. Rogers," I said. "Gillian told me what happened."

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My mother said nothing.

"What did Hilda have to say?" I asked.

She looked up at me, and rubbed her eyes. She looked tired and old, in a way I have never seen her look tired and old. "I'd rather not talk about Mr. Rogers," she said.

"Okay," I said. "Well, I'm sorry."

My mother reached out and gently wiped my cheek as if there was a smudge or something on it, but I knew it was only an excuse to touch me. "I'm so tired," she said. "I don't think I've been this tired in all my life."

"Then you should go to bed."

In lieu of an answer, my mother lay down on my bed. I turned back to my computer. I was looking at a house in Roseville, Kansas. It was beautiful. It was an old stone house with gables and a dumbwaiter and the original porcelain claw-foot tubs. It had a pantry and a screened sleeping porch. It had a stone basement that had been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

"Look at this," I said.

My mother sighed and sat up. "What?" she said.

"This," I said. "Come over here."

She got up and leaned over my shoulder. She smelled a little odd. I could smell *Prélasser*, her favorite perfume, but there was another odor just beneath it, an odd, harsh odor of exhaustion or panic or despair. "What?" my mother said again.

"Look at this house," I said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Where is it?" my mother asked.

"Kansas," I said. "Look at these pictures." I began to click

through the photographs that were posted: the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, the central hallway and staircase, the bathroom, the bedrooms.

"Isn't it nice?" I asked.

"I don't like those old houses," my mother said.

"I do," I said. "It has a sleeping porch. And a dumbwaiter. And a Tiffany-glass window."

"Who'd want to sleep on a porch?" my mother asked.

"I would," I said.

"You'd get eaten alive by bugs. There are lots of awful bugs out there in the Midwest."

"It's screened in," I said.

"I'd feel like I was in a cage," said my mother. "And people could see in. Besides, what's wrong with air-conditioning?" She stood up and sighed and said, "Well. I suppose I'm going to bed." But she stood there, as if she wanted to be contradicted.

After a moment I said, "Why did you marry him?"

She didn't answer. She was looking out the window, or perhaps only looking at her reflection in the window—I couldn't tell. For a moment I thought perhaps I had not actually asked the question, only thought it. But then she shook her head lightly, as if to clear it. She was still facing the dark window. "Because I was lonely," she said.

I didn't know what to say. I said nothing.

"It gets lonely," she continued. She seemed to be in some kind of trance, speaking to her reflection in the window. "Even with you, and Gillian when she deigns to honor us with her presence, and Miró, and my friends, and the gallery, and lunches

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and dinners and brunches. He was lovely to sleep with, it was lovely to have someone hold me at night." She paused. "Oh," she said. "I shouldn't be telling you any of this."

"Why not?"

She turned away from the window. "I'll warp you. I'll pass all my bitterness and skepticism on to you, and you won't believe in love."

"I already don't believe in love."

"Of course you don't. How could you? You've never been in love. Or have you? Have I missed something?"

"No," I said.

"You will," she said.

"No I won't," I said.

She put her two hands on my shoulders and bent down and kissed my cheek. "You're too sweet not to fall in love. I know how sweet you are. Maybe better than anyone."

"I'm not sweet," I said.

"Hush," my mother said. "Don't contradict me. I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed. Just say good night."

She stood in the doorway. I turned around in my chair. "Good night," I said.

She walked down the hall, and then turned the hall light off. I heard her bedroom door open and then close. I heard a noise behind me, a little ping from the computer. I turned around: because I hadn't touched a key in five minutes, the monitor had shut itself off. The house in Roseville, Kansas, had disappeared, replaced by the dark reflection of my face.

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