

The Subtleties of Seduction

The morning after her father and Malcolm Turner had arranged things so that there would be no scandal, Linda Maguire awoke feeling uneasy. She had every right to believe that she had been betrayed. She had allowed herself, perhaps as a way of easing her sister Tracy's grief over the recent death of their mother, to be caught up in a most awkward situation. The entire incident had been tinted with the moral ambiguities that she abhorred and that, she'd believed, her parents had influenced their daughters to abhor.

Casting its shadow upon them all, the episode had occurred within an extended July visit to the home of her fiancé Steven's parents, Daniel and Olivia Bradford. She, her father, and her sister had been enjoying an agreeable month of summery activities radiating from the Bradfords' superb estate in Newport, Rhode Island, while her father's own splendid home a mile away on Ocean Drive was being revised by a team of architects, landscapers and interior designers. Within the four weeks of their visit in midsummer 1920, Daniel and Olivia had provided them with every resource of their hospitality that might allay the sorrow that had not left them even six months after her mother's death.

During what was for them an essential season of adjustment, she and her sister joined a small sailing party that included her always admirable Steven. In addition, there was Ryan Turner. Although he appeared to be a Harvard friend of the Bradfords' younger son, Aaron, he made himself far more available to almost every other young person within convenient miles of the Bradfords' imposing seaside property.

Ryan was a descendant of eminent Turners who had amassed their first fortunes

in shipbuilding centuries earlier. Later they had amassed a profusion of more immense fortunes in iron, oil, and steel while acquiring the status of the legendary because of heroic exploits not only in various wars, but also in law and government. With careless assurance, he had drawn her sixteen-year-old sister into an ambiguous episode that might have compromised her. That this same Ryan Turner belonged to a family that had, through so many momentous ordeals and the most grievous personal tragedies, always maintained its obligations to the highest ethical standard, only made his wild youth's indiscretions that much more dismaying. Although he was an assertive young man nearly twenty and well-trained surely in the code of behavior that men of his class were expected to represent dutifully and instantaneously (he was, after all, Malcolm Turner's son), he did not always do his part. Too often, his actions were, if not wrong in their intention, certainly ambivalent in their resolution. By so behaving, he cast a cloud upon those friends whom he persuaded to join him in his adventures.

Yet there was something altogether appealing about the imaginative ways in which he tested himself and tested others, as well. Linda found herself still liking him because of his restless and creative approach to the world. Besides, although he had initiated the wayward trajectory of those hours, he was not the only person responsible for everything that went wrong that afternoon.

During one of the Bradfords' magnificent Sundays, Ryan casually suggested that they—Steven with her in his new, rugged yawl, and Ryan alone in his sailboat—should race against each other in winds far more vigorous than those which allowed them their recent victory in a regatta. The day was warm, with pearl-gray clouds scattering toward the horizon. The wind made the air occasionally aggressive, its heat more sullen, more

palpably moist and no longer comforting.

After the day's casual rhythms betrayed their expectations, Steven's and hers, she remembered that Ryan had persuaded them to leave imperceptibly the Bradfords' grand summer party. By so persuading, he had led them to a path that compromised her sister's reputation. Unpredictable and mysterious Ryan was—with swagger so carelessly self-reliant that you believed at once the hard-bodied lankiness possessing it would treat both happiness and hardship with equal indifference. Clever and intriguing as well, he had captivated Steven and her in this first summer of their feeling they belonged to one another, though they were not yet married. He had captivated them completely, her usually reserved yet always creditable Steven and her as well, through the sheer splendor of seeing him, a vigorous youth of their class, react with such easy and spontaneous freedom to possibility's ambivalent turnings. Though several years younger than Steven and without his brutal experience of the war, he was in many ways just as knowing, just as canny about the world's bruising, addictive textures.

Subtly and plausibly he had drawn them away from the bountiful array of banquet tables with sun-gold canopies. There, in the midst of a wide expanse of greenery, visiting ambassadors and moguls, poets and scientists, and artists and philosophers mingled with crisp assurance, glad to share their hosts' ornate repast and their own animated convictions. He had led them to an enshadowed grove of lilac trees—white, lavender and crimson.

When they had arrived at the entrance to the grove, she noticed the glowing red border of berberis and verbena and amaranthus with velvety spikes stirring as if wakened to the proximities of blue agapanthus and plum-purple hollyhock and white lavaterra

which were swaying at the side of silver grasses. She noticed, too, as she glanced inside the grove, how the recessions of light-reflected shadows overtook the vigorous ripple of tree colors there, disguising essential definitions of color and distance, too, so that space—welling backwards—darkened and disappeared within rising layers of dusk.

Everything about that day, in her retrospection at least, appeared disguised or dislocated. Even the wind seemed something other than itself. For when they'd paused on the emerald-rich hill leading to the sinuous path of the grove, she had believed just for an instant that the summery wind was the purest music, a melodious ornament of the air. Yet it was not the wind at all that she had heard or, rather, not the wind alone. She'd had to turn 'round, though, to discover the true-seeming source of the sound, allowing her gaze to move back to the banquet tables and sun-tinted people and back to festive images flowing in and out of the day's nebulous margins. Then, beyond those images, she saw once more the southwest corner of the Bradfords' main house. Its elegant Tudor ambiance wore exquisite shell carving along the gable trim, basketweave-and-herringbone-patterned brick, and diamond-motif leaded windows. In that corner exuberant musicians orchestrated the convivial voices and self-reflective conversations of the guests (still sauntering along the banquet greenery) with the more mellifluous intonations of piano and violin, oboe and piccolo, trumpet and clarinet and tuba.

It was that confluence of sounds she had heard. The meld of resonating music and moody wind and pulsing human voices influenced—indeed, disguised—everything that she heard. Nothing was as it was alone. Each swelling timbre appropriated vibrancies other than its own and became something apart from and more than itself, concealed as it was within the melody of the wind and the hum of human voices and the lyrical

harmonies of music.

From her implicated senses the day suppressed its accuracies, offering to her inquiring attention sights and sounds merely oblique in their truths, as if their essential reality were shunning the deepest layers of her comprehension. For the colors of the leaves were blemished by shadows in the grove. The music from the terrace was more than itself alone. Human voices floated inside soft cadences of wind. White, spumy waves tossed fitfully on the gentle-seeming ocean that flowed with glimmering ease below the hill where then she stood. And, here before her, Ryan Turner's laughing innocence flickered and gleamed like a temporary sun on the sea and just as quickly vanished. Yet each of these emblems of the day, these flourishing experiences of her senses, claimed a plausibility and justified an acceptance of the outward appearance of things.

With quiet confidence she had quickly accepted the outward appearance of things—all the palpable images of the iridescent earth and the suddenly flamingo clouds and the Prussian blue sea that had not yet reconciled themselves to the languorous drift of haze come to cover whole curvatures of space. Nor had she regarded as anything more than casual suggestion Ryan's apparently spontaneous remark that they—she and Steven—might enjoy standing upon the very promontory that had inspired the opening passages of the latest poem in a cycle which he had, for a year now, been composing.

They accepted his invitation because perhaps they wanted to retire discreetly, though only momentarily, from the gregarious fervor of that immense afternoon. Or possibly their furtive need for the unexpected persuaded them to join him. Or, more likely, their healthy pleasure in being drawn to the threshold of a young poet's

imagination influenced them to peer for an instant upon the sensuous nature of his vision. His writerly skill enabled him to re-create the configurations of inlet and bay, grove and greenscape, festive sounds and flowered scents.

That Ryan Turner chose to express in poetic lines the vigorous narrative that was his life gave her soul-quickenning pleasure. She had learned through wide travels with her parents and tutors and through voluminous reading in philosophy and history to associate authentic men, those charismatic ones who left their own firm imprints on the lacerating, rugged world, with keen-edged literary minds and self-willed heroic prowess. Her studies had, in fact, taught her to admire the youthful exuberance of Wordsworth in Paris scanning a momentous revolution, the burning wildness of Byron crying out to freedom at Missalonghi, and the prodigious Wilfred Owen daring to confront the stark blank sky at the Sambre Canal, knowing full well he had come to the end of the world.

To observe Ryan Turner whole and undiminished, his golden muscularity a summer radiance roused and compelling, was (she told herself) to witness manly assurance on the brink of new heroism and to recall once again the swiftly lived glories of those proven-brave poets. Whether he, too, would feel calm and original after the cleansing hour of rebellion or, risking all on a self-consuming deed, climb over the dark rim into early death, his steady eyes glazed in a face gone still and seraphic, only leavening time would finally disclose. But here, within the now that was this warm dissolving day, he seemed by himself alone a vivid justification for passion-wrought humanness.

“I want to find the hidden essence of things and of people,” he told them confidently, as though confidence were the husky membrane of his potency. “There’s

adventure in that.”

He had been explaining why, with its secret-furling winds and slanted whorls of light and shadows spun like wheels covering alcoves that surprised, he had chosen for the vista at the threshold of his poem a stalwart promontory which appeared to possess in full the summer-fragrant grove stirring behind it. In his eyes the promontory stood apparently indomitable while it waited for the sometimes-eddying sky and the dark, reeling waves of a storm-riven bay.

“This, I tell you, is a place where adventure should begin.”

He held them carefully, Steven and even more so herself, inside that penetrating look of his that pulsed at the edge of what she regarded as a playful beckoning toward near-wildness. It was his promise of the unexpected and the surprise of her liking him so intensely which first put her off her proper course.

Yet even then, just before the festive afternoon wobbled and tilted and whirled away from her control, she still consented to him as he dared her to thread her way un baffled through his rapid processes. In that hour, while her heart toward him satisfied still with its gathering fullness, she had felt a tighter breathing rising fast from an unnoticed corner of her soul. This throbbing exhilaration he was drawing out of her was unanticipated evidence that in her especially there lived a splendid array of differences she had not yet tested, though they were so much more than the difference that was her safe demureness.

So it was that he had persuaded her (as if he were there alone beside her, murmuring his approval) to parry in a playful mode his spirited remark that the rugged promontory (where flashes of the dissolving afternoon sun vibrated like vaporous silver

and where with them in seeming-casualness he stood) was an inspired place for finding a solid adventure. Before parrying his remark, she moved closer to Steven to clasp his large, athletic hands over the delicate touch of her own, so that all that she in that moment did or said seemed married to him alone. Only then did she speak the words that made her feel, in a rushing instant of newness, replenished and enlightened.

“We’ll make an adventure for you, if you can’t find one already here.”

She saw at once that her brisk words awakened their keener awareness—her reliable Steven’s, all earnest response and openness, and the far more complicated Ryan’s, engendered as it was by his finely measured ambiguity. Through a language of hands answering the appealing promise of her vivid declaration, Steven clasped her ardently, as if this fluent motion of hands might leave upon her skin a permanent imprint of his heated body. But it was Ryan who gamely tossed her way the confident reply which called out to her desire to make an adventure.

“Feel free,” he smoothly told her, his full, sensual lips once more in teasing union with a smile. That afternoon his resonating voice offered what she had accepted as a playful invitation. Hours later she would recognize it as the insidious challenge he had meant it to be—and he hardened and unflinching before the recoil of his words.

Now, in the press of desires no longer quiescent within her, his words were like wiry tendrils fastening their hold upon the secret senses inside her flesh, and not only his words, but his whole compelling presence. She accepted him entirely. She accepted, that is, the throbbing pulse of life he represented. While he was there all manly prowess before her, she seemed alone with him and complete in the sweep and push of that dissolving moment. Without waiting to feel herself lifted higher on the flow and arc of

his tantalizing nearness or to ply him once more with witty retort or to attend the marrow and husk of her faithful Steven's briskness, she had to turn spontaneously and obliquely toward a remoter, far more steady vision, her way of reclaiming a milder ease.

What she saw within the opaque-blue furling of distance, what directed her gaze to the floating pastel sky, was the umber ripple of a stray herring gull curving the dark flash of its wings against the tumescence of ponderous clouds. After an instant's pause, it plummeted with wily skill to the consenting lips of ocean water, the better to pluck for its meal a raw, ample fish or a tiny, mackerel-tinted seabird.

Though the vision gave her back what she had not sought, the imagery of danger shown natural and beautiful, she grasped comfortably its familiar message and found again her realistic measure for understanding things. Turning once more, still toward the east, she was not surprised to sight the zinc-white hang of wind-bleached cliffs glaring like the sea-tossed bones of a devoured world. She noticed, too, across and above quick Atlantic waters and on the crest of sun-glanced fertile hills—right there, at the wavering margins of the nebulous woods—a gray-blue immensity of swaying larches that apparently grew into the sky and, before her calmer eyes, joined all of heaven's restless and eerie motion.

She turned yet again, back to inspired and risk-taking Ryan standing before her and back to her essential Steven. Having so nearly reclaimed her composure, she could now permit herself to accept with concealed joy the full-bodied danger of Ryan's sensuality. Turning, she found once more what, despite her wakened need, she had not expected: the loop and list and swell of real adventure, like a dark, risen wave pitching upon them. This reckless Ryan and her rugged Steven, in extemporaneous league or

seeming so, had devised a swaggering test of unbridled courage. They'd drawn up and sealed their casual pact in the brief moments she had looked away from their virile emphasis to reflect upon the wily laws of a hovering gull and the sea-anchored gravity of sullen, white cliffs and the arrogant powers of giant, majestic larches.

Their daring plan seemed to belong to both of them, so compatible with Ryan did Steven's sudden inclination toward risk make him. Yet it was Ryan, she surmised, who had first expressed the thought that, playful and unyielding, they should ride the wind-raked swell of the sea to test their fiercer capacities. During the previous week's lively regatta they had harnessed to the spirals of their own mastery the summer water's more temperate powers. That was a compelling reason to push themselves beyond the tight strictures of the ordinary. Racing against that afternoon's imminence of storm, they would confront with laughing camaraderie the sea's arduous, tangled restlessness. Or so, she learned upon turning back to them, Ryan had casually suggested. The even timbre of his affable words (she imagined later) modulated like sun-flecked shadows the glare of his hardened carelessness.

Their aim, he quickly explained once she had turned back to them, was to bring Steven's new, streamlined yawl into the afternoon's uneasy waters. Its vibrant-swift force would be poised against the sturdy, proven craft that Ryan intended to navigate. If the local Coast Guard station had issued prompt warning of the weather's uncertain temperament, that was not sufficient cause, Ryan said, for postponing what promised to be a lively competition. The race would be a realistic calculation of their seamanship and of the stamina of the boats whose speed they would command.

Call the experience an exhilarating complement to the day's festive atmosphere,

he suggested, or a confident summoning of the courage required for a rapid skirmish with the sea or, perhaps, their conscious shaping of an episode worth the telling in his poem. Call it, they must, as they liked, he shrugged before both of them now, moments after she had turned back to them. But they should not, through a habit of safer propensities, forfeit the pulsing capacity they held within themselves—each of them—for venturing bravely into the immense world’s shifting possibilities.

Ryan spoke as if for all of them. Yet she understood at once that his words, a brisk way to glance at self-defeating reticence, were meant for her alone. For long ago, she suspected, he had left behind with laughing disdain the hesitation which stymies or trammels brave-hearted enterprise. In these few weeks of their knowing him, he had already witnessed Steven’s capacity to confront the unknown without the circumspection that too cautiously measures probability, the over-refined analysis that diminishes or deflects both force and originality. Sailing in a formidable regatta, he and Steven together had winningly demonstrated the symmetry and sweep of authentic daring. So it was she toward whom he had just then directed the vigor and shape of his words.

Because, perhaps, he meant to validate her intuition, he held her firmly, as though they alone were there together, within the throb and tension of his gaze.

“You’re joining us, of course,” he told her. His self-assurance generated quite naturally the coiling rhythms into which he was drawing her.

If she paused, it was only for an instant, to tally the cost to her safe ease of his startling invitation. Then, casting aside all her familiar reckonings and most of her misgivings, she accepted the freefall into his challenge.

“What a grand idea,” she found herself saying. The sheer pleasure of being in

dangerous flight with him was new and exotic.

But no sooner had she done so, no sooner had she entered without open chute or ballast of any other kind the thrilling plunge into all that he was offering her, than she looked with delicate inquiry toward Steven. It had become her habit to interpret through his studious eyes her subtle effect upon a scene. How often she had sought out and found among a mingling concourse of guests and during their brightest repartee his beaming consent to whatever words or gestures she had chosen for that moment to define herself. She had sought out, as well, amidst graver matters, when she in his presence was able to stand reliably alone before the lacerating betrayals of a day's serener promises, his quiet approval that held at bay the show of every response except civility.

Today, though, when the stillness that held Steven's features tight came now to watch with him her curious alterations, he offered her neither consent nor dismay. His was the courtesy which quietly beholds the different tint or sudden, complicated traceries of a young woman's character. So long, or so it seemed, did he pause inside his stillness, so fraught with anticipation did he render her art of waiting, that without receiving his assenting expression or the vibrant reply which, though unaware of how much he gave her, would tell her he had not noticed her sinuous yearning for Ryan, she spoke the thought that broke the spell his silence was casting upon them.

"Oh, Steven," she declared with affecting optimism. "We're going to have such a splendid time."

But even now, in the genteel sight of her influence that was (she permitted herself to imagine) like no other influence upon him except, perhaps, her cool, reviving touch or fragrant-soft elegance, he stood as one alone within the pensive shadings of his stillness.

He held his ruddy lips firmly together in some honest covenant or studious alliance that shaped from a smile's vestige and the moment's anchoring stillness a sturdy young man's discomforting apprehension. Though he might from time to time, as an invigorating release from obligations wound like a tight shroud about him, welcome into his own life the perilous unraveling of chance, he saw (apart from the charm of it) her desire to be one with him and with Ryan as well in their plan to soar—reckless and proprietary—above foam-capped waves and clouded, swirling waters as the folly of unjustified risk.