

Mindlessly, mindlessly, mindlessly—pushing our shopping cart through the market, and late in the afternoon sipping cocoa in bed, and every few nights watching Marge let down her whirly blond hair to be washed. I would be sitting on the edge of the tub translating *Beowulf* to her while she leaned across the sink wearing her half slip and raising luxurious bubbles on her scalp. With her hair combed out straight, the wet strands just touching her back, she would turn to me with a look of perfect well-being and satisfaction. "And yet I don't feel I have to marry you. Isn't that something? I didn't think I could feel so liberated." There were nights when it was charming, but there were other nights too, and then the girl at the sink and I on the tub seemed no more facts of this life than those impossibilities, Hrothgar and Grendel, whose words and deeds I had just been trying to comprehend.

Margie soon came down with the grippe and was very hard to deal with. In bed she took to wearing my pajamas, and posing in them. She wanted to hear about all the girls I had made love to, and then I could hear about all the boys who had wanted to make love to her. She would not sleep with the lights out, and finally when she did sleep and I was alone, I had to face the fact that she was not much different sick from what she was well: the strain was simply purer, that was all. On the third day of her illness I was at last able to tear myself away from her by way of the necessities of shopping. Leaving our casino game, I drove to the supermarket under threatening winter skies. I knew that when Margie was fully recovered, strong and bouncy, we would have to arrange a parting; I was no gray-haired Chicago investor, no left-wing Jewish intellectual, and I could not continue to serve as either, or both. Nevertheless, because I was at the time as weak in the face of loneliness as in the face of pleasure, I shopped for two for the week, buying in the drug section of the market four bottles of Breck and three jars of the dainty underarm deodorant she used, and later the chocolate drink she was so fond of. Then as I was rounding an aisle by the meat department, I saw Libby Herz pushing a cart toward my own. I ducked away, but a few minutes later we collided in front of Detergents.

"Hi," she said.

"Why, hello—how are you?"

"Better. How are you?"

"I'm fine. What's the matter?" I asked. "Were you sick? Or are you just feeling generally better?"

"I had a fever."

"There's one going around."

"It's gone now," she answered cheerily; too cheerily, for looking at her I saw the after-effects of illness still in her face.

"How's your husband?"

"He's fine."

We both did not know where to go from there. She must have heard, as I did, that I had not called Paul Paul.

"You must come see us some night," Libby suggested.

"I've been very busy."

Philip Roth, *Letting Go* (1961).

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