

The Farms at 93rd and Broadway

One New York night, Hubert Parwinkle turned to his wife Edith, who was reading the Sunday *Times* with him, and said, “You ain’t bad.”

She laughed, then looked at him, puzzled, “What made you say that?”

“I’m thinking,” said Hubert, “that here we are. Kids’re grown, out of college, doing well and—”

“Even Sarah.”

“Yes. Whoever expected her to find money in acting?”

“I did,” said Edith.

“Anyway, Gordon is married and—”

“I don’t understand.”

“Can’t you not cut me off all the time? In twenty-eight years—”

“Thirty next month. Can’t you get to the point?”

“Never mind,” he said. He rattled his newspaper, the business section, and returned to reading about the possibility of change happening again in the prime rate.

“I’m sorry,” Edith said. “I’m listening.”

He looked up from his paper. She leaned toward him, her wavy shoulder-length gray hair falling forward. Her attentiveness for a second reminded him of when they were in their twenties. “Things just felt right there for a moment,” he said. “We’re reading the paper, and I glanced at you, and you looked content. That made me think how we’ve had our ups and downs, but now we have our coffee and the *Times* together. We’re all right.”

“Yes, you’re right,” she said. “We are. And I love you, too.”

He wasn’t talking about love. She didn’t understand. Love’s a good thing, yes, and that’s probably what he should have said, but that wasn’t his point. He was about to say something to clarify, but she was already back to reading, focused on the arts section. She put her finger on the page, reading more closely.

“Did you hear about this?” she asked. “Twenty at twenty? For two weeks, tickets for a number of Off-Broadway shows can be purchased for just twenty dollars, twenty minutes before show time.” She looked up. “Doesn’t that sound like fun? Do you want to go—in celebration of what you just said?”

He laughed without thinking. There she was, taking his words and using them incorrectly again. She frowned, and he caught himself. What did he want here—to prove a point or let it go? Maybe going out would make her happy and feel cared for. It was good to feel cared for.

He looked at his Rolex. It was just after five. “Sure, why not?” he said. “Tonight?” This is what he liked about these days where responsibilities had lessened, yet they had a good income, far better than they had had in college.

She smiled wide. “Yeah. What do you want to see?” She handed him the list.

He scanned the list of nearly thirty plays. Only one did he know anything about, one that had been running forever. “How about *The Fantasticks*?”

“Really? That’s the first play we ever saw together. Remember?” she said, looking off as if trying to recall when life was so tender and love was an ember about to billow.

“You liked it, right?” he asked.

She nodded. “*The Fantasticks* it is. You’re very romantic tonight. I like that.”

He smiled as if that were his intention. Maybe they’d roll in the hay. Now that her menopause thing was mostly over, she was actually more affectionate these days than she had been for years. You wait long enough, things can happen.

They left their penthouse, took the elevator down, and ate at the vegetarian place at 93rd and Broadway—near where they lived. They grabbed the subway at 96th, exited at 50th Street, and walked less than a block to the theatre. He and Edith had lived once in New Jersey in a house on a beautifully wooded street at the end of a cul-de-sac. They’d purchased the home after they’d sold their first co-op at a ridiculously high price. New Jersey, though, didn’t have this—the heartbeat of culture. They’d moved back to the city.

Now thirty-five minutes before show time, ready to stand in a line, they found no line. Hadn’t other people seen the announcement in the paper? A man read a newspaper behind the counter. “Where is everyone?” asked Hubert.

“Tuesday nights, the show starts at seven. You’ve missed almost half an hour. Want tickets anyway?”

Hubert blinked, trying to understand. “Why would you have a curtain time at seven? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s their play, dear,” said Edith. “They can—”

“I know it’s their play!” said Hubert, swinging around. “Did I ask you if it was their play? If I were an investor, I’d want to maximize the number of—”

“It has to do with getting enough sleep,” said the ticket man. “The cast has a matinee performance on Wednesdays.”

“See, there’s a reason,” said Hubert to his wife.

Edith glared at him, always her trick. He glared right back.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last. She left it at that.

“So which play do you want to see instead?” he asked. Because she’d apologized, he’d let her have the next choice. “We can walk fast to another theatre. Do you have the list?”

“I thought you had the list,” she said.

“Why would I have the list?”

“There’s a great comedy show next door,” said the ticket guy. “Robert White’s a stage hypnotist. Only twenty bucks these next two weeks, and he’s funny.”

“We could use some comedy,” said Edith.

“And why could we use a comedy?”

Edith said nothing.

Hubert looked back at the ticket man. “Aren’t there any good dramas around?”

“A sure thing next door,” said the ticket guy. “White’s funny.”

Hubert sighed. “Edith, you know hypnotists. They make people act like chickens.”

“He’s funnier than that,” said the ticket guy.

Hubert held out his hand to Edith. “If you think we need comedy, let’s go.”

They found a long line next door, but it was moving. It was twenty minutes before the show. By the time they bought their tickets, however, the place was nearly full. The only seats left were in the front row. Hubert wasn’t a fan of sitting close to a comedian. He and Edith had once seen David Letterman in the front row at a comedy club, and Letterman kept making fun of Hubert’s jacket, all suede leather. “It’s better than chiffon, right? Chiffon crinkles,” Letterman had said. It’d been the late seventies—what did Letterman have against leather?

“There, honey,” said Edith. “In the front row.”

They sat in the front row. They had no choice.

Mr. White came onstage a few minutes after eight, wearing a black sports coat, a black shirt, and a black tie as if he were in the Mafia. He kept bowing humbly at the applause he received. Behind him, a curtain rose, revealing fifteen straight-backed chairs. Hubert wasn’t clapping, but Edith was, and she elbowed him. He wasn’t going to clap for someone who hadn’t done anything yet.

“Thank you,” said Mr. White, who then approached the elevated stage’s edge. Looking down at Hubert, he said, “I couldn’t help but notice you, sir. I was just like you when I was in high school science

class.” Mr. White crossed his arms and looked out in exaggerated skepticism. “Oh, yeah?” he said in a deep voice. “Prove it to me.”

The audience burst out laughing.

“I’m going to need fifteen volunteers.” People raised their hands. White turned back to Hubert and pointed. “Sir, would you like to be one of them?” Hubert shook his head.

“I didn’t think so,” said Mr. White, “but that’s okay. I need to prove it to you first. Volunteers. Please raise your hands if you’d like to volunteer.”

Edith raised her hand enthusiastically. Many others around them did, too. Why would anyone want to be humiliated in front of others? “Put your hand down,” said Hubert. “You don’t want to be a spectacle.”

She glared at Hubert and wiggled her arm and hand that much harder. Was this how a matronly mother of two should be acting? This made Hubert consider walking out right then and there. Edith would be mad at him for weeks, though, if he abandoned her.

Mr. White began selecting people. “You, and you,” he pointed and bypassed Edith. “If I’ve selected you, please take a chair onstage.” He walked into the aisle with his wireless microphone and picked others, then returned as the final audience members took their seats onstage.

“Why would you want to go up there?” whispered Hubert to Edith as if he’d just witnessed a drunk person pondering crossing a busy street against the light.

“Can’t you have a little fun?” she said. “You’re turning into an old man.”

“Somehow I miscalculated,” Mr. White said, pointing to an empty chair. “Who else wants to come up?”

Edith leaped out of her chair, arm raised, and Mr. White laughed. “Okay, you’re lively,” and as she came onstage, he asked, “Are you related to the skeptical gentleman?”

“I’m his wife,” she said into the offered microphone. “I’m Edith.”

“But you’re not a dingbat, right?”

The audience laughed. Clearly they were old enough to know the television show *All in the Family* that he’d referenced.

“No, and my husband’s no Archie Bunker—I hope. He’s a dentist.”

Several guffaws burst out, and Hubert cranked himself around. Who thought dentistry funny?

“And fine teeth you have.” More people laughed, and Edith took the last chair.

Hubert wished that those who laughed would break a tooth. Let’s see who they’d call then.

“Okay, I’m going to hypnotize you as a group,” said Mr. White to those seated on stage. “We’re going to have a relationship here, and as in all relationships, it can get odd.”

People onstage laughed, some nervously.

“Before I start, let me explain.” He turned back to the audience. “The human mind is a powerful thing. Consider all the weird things we do as human beings. How many of you knock on wood or have lucky numbers, or some of you don’t step on cracks in case you might break your mother’s back?”

A number of people clapped and laughed. Hubert stewed.

“It’s as if such magical thinking truly has effect, right? I yell at the sportcasters on TV as if they can hear me. ‘Go, go, go!’ If I cheer loud enough, too, my team might win.”

A number of men laughed. Hubert cracked a smile.

“How about obsessive-compulsive behavior, hear of that? Some people wash their hands thirty, forty times a day. Their mind makes them do it. That’s strange, you think, but comedian David Sedaris as a kid had a compulsion to lick light switches and make high-pitched noises.”

People laughed. Hubert nodded. One of his hygienists once had to knock on the walls as she walked.

“Then there’s rationalization, our way of talking ourselves into something. People rationalize away such things as being mean to a coworker or putting down someone of a different country or religion. It’s okay, we tell ourselves. They’re not like us. The power of the mind. We invade Iraq offensively, calling it defense. Then people there strap on bombs and kill civilians, calling it good.

They’ll get seventy virgins or something in heaven, right? The power of the mind.”

Hubert nodded more. No one in the audience said a word. This guy was right, though.

“The Irish Catholics and the Irish Protestants—both believing in Jesus Christ and turning the other cheek, each sharing the same ethnicity and culture, killed each other for years in the name of their religions. Sometimes I think if we didn’t have rationalization, we’d be a better world.”

Hubert clapped with others.

Mr. White turned around and walked back to the volunteers on stage. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m pointing out the power of the human mind, and your minds are amazing things, as you’ll see. I’m going to put you under and then ask you to do things. People may laugh, but pay it no mind. Just listen to me. Put your hands in your lap facing upwards. Please close your eyes and listen.”

Edith and the volunteers did as he suggested. The lights dimmed and gentle piano music played over the PA. Mr. White spoke softly, pleasantly, telling them to allow themselves to let go, feel deeply relaxed. “Breathe deeply. Focus on your facial muscles and feel each one at ease.

“Let the hands rest in the lap and relax,” said Mr. White. “Feel your hands at ease. Make them float as if on a cloud. Feel at peace. You are at peace. Relax. Imagine a babbling brook in the woods, and you’re hearing those peaceful sounds. Relaxing feels so good, doesn’t it? Allow yourself to relax. Allow yourself the peace you need, you want.”

The piano started sounding like the rhythm of a brook. Hubert himself felt at peace listening to this.

“That’s it, good, you’re doing it. When I snap my fingers, allow yourself to go limp, but don’t open your eyes. I’ll count to three and snap my fingers. Then you’ll go limp. Ready?”

He counted and snapped his fingers. The lights snapped on more brightly, and everyone on stage went limp, including Edith, who fell over into the lap of her neighbor. People laughed. Hubert leaned forward, raised his hand, concerned.

Not noticing Hubert, Mr. White hurried over to Edith. “Sit up, dear. You’re okay.” He helped her back up. “You’re fine, just sit up.”

Hubert sat back. At least Mr. White cared.

The music of *The Nutcracker Suite* started, and Mr. White said, “Feel this music. If you want to get up, open your eyes, and dance to it as your favorite ballet artist, go ahead. Dance in your seat. Do what you want to do.”

A skinny man started conducting with an imaginary baton. Others kept their eyes closed and moved their arms and legs. Two older men arose, one portly, one bald, eyes open, and started tip-tip-toeing as if in a tutu in a ballet. Many people were laughing. Edith stood and pirouetted, flinging her arms out of rhythm. “Look at that woman!” someone said, laughing hard. This Hubert didn’t like. “Stop it,” he shouted to his wife beneath the din. “Edith, please sit down.”

The music changed to “76 Trombones” from *The Music Man*. “All right, volunteers,” said Mr. White. “When I snap my fingers on three, I want you all to become your favorite person or animal. Be the person or animal you most like when I snap my fingers. Ready?”

He counted and snapped his fingers. The volunteers instantly changed—all except the man who had been conducting; he was still conducting. The portly man was now strolling like a man deep in thought. “E equals MC squared,” he said. The bald man was an elephant swinging one arm as a trunk. Edith shouted “buck buck buck” and walked like a chicken.

Hubert grimaced. She was doing this to mock him.

A younger man, well-built and looking a bit like Tom Cruise, strutted like her, hands on his waist and swinging his elbows out like wings. He shouted, “Cock a doodle do!” Edith saw him, smiled and strutted around him flirtingly. The audience laughed uproariously.

“Edith,” shouted Hubert.

The young man got behind Edith and tried mounting her. The roar of the audience rose. “Hey!” shouted Hubert. “Edith! Goddamn it, you’re not a chicken. Edith, stop that. That’s disgusting. You are not a chicken.”

Edith stopped. She looked around baffled, then saw the rooster behind her babbling “buck buck buck,” and she looked embarrassed. People were laughing even harder at this, and Mr. White, only now seeing what was happening, ran over to her. He whispered in her ear. She nodded, thanked him, and walked toward the stairs off of the stage.

As she was taking her seat next to Hubert, and as people were laughing at what was still happening onstage, Hubert looked at her sternly. “You made an absolute fool out of yourself. Happy?”

“As a matter of fact,” she said. “I was. You’re really stuffy. In your previous life, I think you were a jackalope.”

“There’s no such thing as a jackalope,” he said. “That was just a stupid card we saw at Stuckey’s.”

“Then you were a grinch.”

He was ready to say there were no such things as griches either, but she’d burst up from her chair and started striding up the aisle, out of the theatre. “Edith,” he said, following desperately, which only made those nearby laugh at that, too.

Behind him, Mr. White said, “Sir, sir? Did I prove it to you?”

The audience erupted, and if humiliation could be water, Hubert was under a tidal wave.

When he caught up with Edith outside the theatre, he said, “Come on, now. I’m on your side.”

“I saw your face,” she said.

“I was concerned. I only want the best for you.”

She continued walking quickly toward the subway entrance. “Yes, best like an SS officer wants the best.”

“That’s unfair,” he said. “That’s completely unfair to use the Holocaust in anything.”

“You’re not fair.”

He kept quiet as they pushed the rest of the way to the subway. She had her own Metro card, and he anticipated she wasn’t going to let him use it as she had on the way to the theatre. Indeed, she ran her card at the turnstile, stepped through, and didn’t look back. He quickly grabbed his wallet and found his own card.

Once they were on a train going back, holding a pole because the train was so crowded, he whispered, “So you were having a good time onstage, was that it?”

“Yes, I was. I felt relaxed. I was enjoying being there, whatever I was doing.”

“You were acting like a chicken.”

“I like chickens,” she said plainly. “In a previous life, I was a chicken.”

Hubert gasped, then saw a seated older woman’s mouth fall open. “Mind your business, all right?” he told the lady. “We’re rehearsing a play, *My Life as a Chicken*.” He turned back to Edith and said, “Ix-nay the Ikin-chay.”

“You’re sweeping me off my feet with Pig Latin?”

“What do you want?”

“You have a narrow little mind, Hubert. And we have a narrow little marriage, which I’m starting to rethink.”

Hubert turned to the woman again, “A powerful line, don’t you think?” He returned to Edith and said, “Just stop it.”

She made no reply. Back home, striding through the front door, she announced, “I’m going to bed.”

“Me, too. That’s what we do this time of night.”

“Maybe you should sleep in the guest bedroom tonight.”

“For what? For being concerned about your well-being onstage?”

She moved her head chicken-like a few times, turned into the bathroom, and locked the door.

“Criminy,” he muttered and grabbed a new set of pajamas. He dressed in the bedroom, used his finger as a toothbrush in the guest bathroom, and crawled into their bed. He wanted to be in bed when she emerged. He had a right to be there.

Hubert listened for her movement in the bathroom. First he heard a scratching sound like fingernails on tile—whatever for? Next, she was opening and closing drawers as if looking for something. Then the water tap ran—and water splashed. She must be washing her face.

The tap cranked off and Edith brushed her teeth. He pictured it, her vigorous brushing up and down creating foam at her mouth. As her dentist, he'd told her dozens of times over the years that that wasn't the best way to brush. She wore out toothbrushes quickly, but instead of listening to his advice, she'd recently found a new dentist, “her own dentist,” as she said. Even he said she was a little too vigorous on her gums.

Enough of this crap. No more talking about chickens or previous lives or going to stupid comedy clubs. She needed some rules if this was going to work. They perhaps had twenty to thirty years left together. He realized then that, hell, they might only be at the halfway point of their lives together. Another thirty years?

The door opened. Edith emerged in a black nightgown. He forgot everything. “I didn't know you still had that nightgown,” he said. Her breasts beneath the sheer black material swayed. She'd always had well-proportioned breasts.

“This is not what you think. I can hardly have sex with you tonight, now can I?”

“I think you've misunderstood me.”

“I just want to feel pretty, and this does it for me.”

“But do you even understand me?” he reiterated.

“Does it matter? I'm not the right wife for you. You should have a new wife.”

“Or, right, like it's time I go to the wife store or something?”

“I don't care what the hell you do. I'm moving to a farm.”

“A farm? You couldn't even take New Jersey.”

“I have to return to my roots,” she said, getting into bed.

“Your roots? Let me just say here and now—”

“I don't want your bullying anymore. Tonight I remembered my previous life. It all came back. I lived on a farm as a chicken.”

“Listen—”

“I was a white chicken,” she said seriously. “Don't laugh. Or laugh, I don't care, but I remember the land was flat, and the farmer spoke a guttural language. Maybe it was Danish.”

“You were a Danish chicken?”

“Your skepticism is poison—it always has been.” She glared at him, grabbed the blankets, and turned away from him.

“I don’t see—”

“Please shut up.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll listen.” He felt stupid saying it, but if it’d make her feel better...

“I remember there was death there.”

“Where?” he asked.

“The farm. The pigs squealed most loudly when the farmer took his axe out, and my father, a rooster with a powerful strut, took me to the barn where there was blood in the dirt. I didn’t quite understand, but maybe beneath it all, I did.”

This was ludicrous. She turned onto her back and stared into the ceiling, perhaps picturing the farm. He realized she believed she’d been a chicken. The hypnotist had done something terrible to her mind. He felt his stomach drop. He needed to help her. How? What if he could get her to Dr. Arkmenian in the morning? They’d go to the clinic. But what if she didn’t want to go? Flu shots—they needed flu shots. He could get her to go for that. They had great insurance. Still, he had to do something fast.

“I was a rooster in my previous life,” he heard himself saying. It sounded all right. Funny how it’d popped into his head and now he was saying it.

“Stop playing with me,” she said. “I’m tired of it.”

“I was a rooster,” he repeated, “just like your Dad,” and he looked off the way she had done. “There were hills on my farm, and it was very green and rainy all the time. Maybe it was Wisconsin. I remember a lot of mud. But it was so green there, I loved it.” He could picture just such a place. Maybe he’d been to the farm as a kid.

“A chicken’s life is good,” she said. “You can run around.”

“Yes. And—” He stopped because he pictured a little girl. She had ponytails.

“What?” said Edith.

“A little girl was there, and so was a wheelbarrow that she played with in the yard. That little girl made me her pet. I walked with her

everywhere outside, right behind her and that red wheelbarrow.” He gasped, and as he did so, he felt a sense of darkness, of something sad. He couldn’t tell what at first.

“What?” asked Edith. “What happened?”

The farm was so visible to him at that moment. A man was getting out of a car, a man with a felt hat from a very old car, a Model A perhaps. “A man came to the farm, and he had a bag with him. I don’t know how I know this, but he was a doctor. He walked from the car through the mud into the house. There was a light rain outside, but my brothers and sister and I walked near the window to watch. I could see him in the little girl’s room with her parents. The doctor stared out the window at us at one point. He shook his head. At that moment—”

He felt a tear rolling down his face. He wiped it, and he could feel himself shake. This was truly crazy—what the hell was his mind doing? Yet he felt so deeply sad.

“What?” asked Edith.

“The little girl died,” he said. “I don’t know why.”

He did not understand what was going on. Was he as insane as Edith? Or did it have to do with needing sleep? He cried as if he had no choice. As he did so, Edith held him under her wing, and she said, “You’re all right.”