

*How are you, Wick?*

I'm good, I'm good.

*What kind of a mood are you in today, Wick? Are you going to be in a good mood, or are you going to be in a bad mood?*

A good mood. I choose to be in a good mood, today.

“That’s how I start my day every day,” he told her. “Every day I ask myself that. You can be in a bad mood, if you choose to be. I choose to be in a happy mood.”

“Yes, I heard you say that in your speech,” she said. There was something cold in the way she looked at him, yet her eyes were warm. They were warmer than any eyes he’d seen in a long time, Wick thought. Her eyes never left him. She looked at his face, and she looked without guilt at his frame and at his neat legs.

“What’s your real name?” she asked him.

“Wick.”

“That’s a nickname for Wickham, isn’t it? What’s your real name?”

“It’s Wick. Wick Wickham. That’s my name.”

“Are you back to teaching yet?”

“Sure. I’ve been back in the classroom, I’ve been, it’s been four months since I’ve been back in the classroom.”

Her name was Maude, and he felt a spark. A spark. He’d grown up tall and handsome, blond and with beautiful teeth, and in his profession always surrounded by admiring women. For three years he’d picked from them almost randomly. At bars and at dinners, at picnics and at conventions he could walk into a room and feel many sparks, and much warmth, and out-and-out heat radiating to him from many angles, from many smiling centers. Rolling into a room was something different. Rolling into a room, with his neat legs, his tucked-up legs in front of him didn’t draw that kind of attention. He was Wick, and many of them still knew Wick and what poor Wick had been through, so they would talk to him, ask him how he was, pat him and smile. This Maude looked at him with eyes that had warmth. He felt a light, delicate heat inside his head, behind his own eyes. That was how it began. Wick smiled gently, because he remembered that. That was lust.

Maude taught at Walhoning River, fifteen miles from where he lived and had taught. She had light hair, an oval face, strong-looking hands. She could pass as pretty, he thought. He’d never seen her before; but he’d never addressed the convention before.

“You’re certainly an energetic speaker,” she said. “You must be exciting in the classroom. Your students must enjoy you.”

“Wick’s students love him,” said Mrs. Eyen from across the round table.

Mrs. Eyen taught history, three doors down from Wick’s old room. “He was always the most popular teacher in the school. The first year he came to us, the student body elected him Homecoming King.” Her voice rose proudly. “Of course, he couldn’t serve.”

“It was embarrassing,” Wick said. His lids fluttered; he showed his white teeth.

“They meant it for a gesture, of admiration,” Mrs. Eyen said. “They loved him right off the bat. Wick couldn’t serve, of course. It wouldn’t have been right. But they all still love their Mr. Wick. They all call him Mr. Wick, not Mr. Wickham. Don’t they, Wick?”

He knew he could wait them out, Mrs. Eyen and silent John Patrick next to her, and Rainey Wood the creative writing star from West Beverly. She’ll wait too, he thought, this Maude will wait them out, too, I know it; because he remembered how it had always worked, and because she kept sitting next to him, leaning forward to him because his chair didn’t quite pull up under the table, and later accepting his offer of a drink, a double whiskey sour he brought balanced on a paper plate on his lap next to his own double whiskey sour. It wasn’t a long wait. Mrs. Eyen was the last to go, leaning over to kiss his cheek, and murmuring how glad she was to see him again.

Maude asked him, “Doesn’t she teach in the same building as you?”

“Yes, but I don’t see her often,” Wick said. “I don’t use the lounge. They’ve been good about moving chairs aside for me to have room to navigate, but that inconvenienced the rest of the staff so much I decided not to use it anymore. So I don’t see her on a daily basis. I don’t think I saw her at all the last month of the term.” Because there was no need to explain, he thought, that by teaching, by being back at his classroom he’d meant sporadically; he’d meant sometimes, he’d meant visiting his homeroom to give a fifteen-minute recap of his accident and how important seat belts were; and how he’d navigated through the school, shaking hands, receiving many pats on the shoulder and kisses from some of the senior girls, since he was their own Mr. Wick; or how it meant even addressing the school at an impromptu assembly; how he’d had to address them in two shifts to get everybody in. He’d given them an off-the-cuff speech about positive outlook and choosing to act in life instead of reacting to life. He’d even demonstrated for them how he could move from chair to walker, and then to crutches, when he’d been told he’d never walk again. The applause had been deafening, and long. In the sustained and incredible noise he’d stood happily, smiling around at the blurred figures stacked in the bleachers, balanced on his lean motionless legs while the principal, Mrs. Klemperer, gripped his forearm, shaking it repeatedly, and saying into his ear, “You’ve got guts. Boy, do you have guts. In front of this crowd like that. You’ve really got guts,” as the students chanted, “Wick! Wick! Wick!”

Now Maude pushed her chair back on the smooth taupe carpet to be even with his, and the thick white tablecloth lapped across her bare knees, and he heard

the soft sigh of her nose. He felt the heat in his eyes, and the warmth of his whole face, and it was very pleasant. She laid her hand across his forearm and said, “Mr. Wick, doesn’t it hurt?”

“Well, no,” said Wick. “Hurt? No. I don’t remember it hurting. No.”

“Your face is marked,” she said. “If a person really looks at you, they can see. I think you went through something terrible, including some extreme pain.” A tiny line had appeared between her eyebrows, an exclamation mark of worry, and he knew things would go well for him.

“Well, it was a shock, when I found out. I was trying to stay alive, so pain didn’t seem that important. You know what I did? I started focusing on how much better I felt than I had, even the day before.”

“Does it still hurt now?”

“No.”

“But your eyes hurt. They indicate that you’re in pain. When you were walking with those crutches I could see something.”

“Sometimes,” he said, “but physical pain is a walk in the park compared to the mental battle. If you win the mental battle, you can do anything.”

Oh, but he liked that line, because it was so elemental. He’d use it next time he spoke. He’d surely speak more often now, after having the excited, eager crowd standing for him in this big room, standing ovations for the keynote speaker at the last night of the state convention. He’d be in the paper, the capital city’s paper.

He'd answered questions for a reporter and had his picture taken for the Sunday edition, in tux, white shirt and brass-trimmed black studs.

“So besides teaching I'm starting to envision a whole new career for myself,” he'd told Maude in the elevator. “I know I'm not that smart, but people seem to appreciate what I have to say. They keep saying I have a gift, so maybe I have. If I'm able to motivate people, I have a responsibility to reach out. Maybe that's the reason this happened. Maybe I'll be able to reach people,” he was saying, as she took the plastic key from his hand and slid its magnetic strip through the lock of the door to his room. “Think about this. I have classroom experience, and always related well to young people. This could be an opportunity to speak to them, to really speak to the young people all over the country.”

“Here's your crutches,” Maude said. “Where do you want them?”

“Just right there. Next to those canes.”

“Where's the walker?”

“The hotel is keeping it for me downstairs.”

He watched her leaning the crutches against the wall. “Do you see those quad canes?” he asked. “I'm learning how to walk with them, now. That's another big step for me. That's a huge step. Walking with just those two handles for support is an amazing feat. People don't know what a magic feat of engineering they're executing every time they take a step. The human body is like a pop bottle balanced upside down on its lip, and every time a person takes a step it requires a miracle of muscle and balance to keep it erect. Think what would happen to an upside-down

pop bottle if you lifted one side of it. Crash! Right?" He winked at her. "Not only was I not supposed to walk again, the whole idea of me using those quad canes was an outrageous idea for somebody with my disabilities. Even after I learned to use the walker my own doctor, who I idolize, told me I could probably never do it. But I can do it. Look, bring them over here. I'll show you."

She handed him the two aluminum canes, each with its base of four rubber-tipped feet. He stood easily and held the canes firmly in front of himself. "Push the chair back for me, would you?" Wick asked her. Maude pushed the chair back a few feet, and sat on the edge of the bed. Wick felt his heart leap, and clearly felt the heat in his head move down his neck, down his back, and into his stomach. He kept a calm expression on his face, and kept his eyes down on the canes. He moved them six inches forward and took a short shuffling step, then another. "Okay," he said. He sat next to her on the edge of the bed, and stood the canes next to his shoe. "Enough of that," he said, and smiled at her. "You know, I've recovered in other ways, too. I can do lots of things the doctors didn't think I could do again."

"Let me move these," Maude said. She stood and took the canes, and took the aluminum crutches from against the wall, and laid them all into the seat of his wheelchair. Wick watched her, at first curious. She stepped behind the chair and pushed it across the room, past the luggage rack and the closet, and into the taupe-tiled bathroom. Then she pushed it all the way in, and shut the bathroom door.

"Wait a minute," Wick said.

"They're in the way," Maude said.

“In the way? This is getting interesting.” He smiled a sort of uncontrollable, irrational smile. “What do you have in mind?”

“I want to see you walk.” She came to him, lifted his big dry hands from his lap, and pulled him forward.

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute.” Panic struck him immediately, but only for a second. “I guess I can do this,” he said. “I guess if I can walk with those canes, I can walk holding onto your hands. I did this at the rehab center, you know. I walked there with the nurses, a lot. They were waiting in line to take me for my walk.” She pulled him up and he balanced easily on his invisible, unfeeling legs. With his bent forearms pressed onto her forearms, and holding her elbows, Wick took three steps after her, into the middle of the room.

“This is where you get off,” she said, and pulled her arms from his.

“Wait.” For a long second Wick stood on his own, in the middle of the softly-lit hotel room. He had a perfect glimpse of the corner of the peach-colored bedspread, and in the mirror half of his own tuxedoed arm. Then he fell to the floor.

He caught himself on the palms of his hands and the corners of his hips, and looked up for her in astonishment. Maude stood fifteen feet away from him by the door that led into the hall. “Show me how you can walk, Wick,” she said.

“Walk? What the hell are you talking about? I can’t walk on my own.”

“That’s not a very positive attitude, Wick. Have a positive attitude. Get up and walk.”

Already he was about out of breath. It was hard to hold himself up without hamstrings or much in the way of abdominal muscles. He lowered himself face down onto the floor. The carpet was hot and dusty under his mouth. "Come on," he said after a space. "Okay. Point well made. Bring the chair back. Help me get up. Okay?"

She came toward him, but stepped over the hand he raised to her, and reached over him. Then he realized she'd taken his wallet out of his back pocket. He didn't feel it come out but after a second she dropped it, and it landed near his head.

*She's robbing you, Wick*, he thought briefly, then he saw the green edge of his money still tucked in the nylon billfold. "What are you doing?" he asked dully.

"John," she said. "So your real name is John. Why don't you just call yourself that? It's a perfectly good name." His driver's license dropped to the carpet; it landed on edge, and stood up against his forearm.

She stood by the door again. He wasn't looking at her. From the position of his head on the carpet he could see a good bit of the black sleeve of his jacket, and the bottom of his thumb, a nice tan color, and the white edge of his cuff, and the gold of his watchband. "Why don't you just call yourself John?" she asked again.

"John," he said.

She opened the door. "Wait, wait." Wick raised his head. "I can crawl over to the bathroom if you really want me to, but I'm going to have a hell of a time getting the bathroom door open from down here." But she had already gone out. The door shut behind her.

He drew his arms in and with an effort lifted himself and balanced on his forearms. For a moment he let his forehead rest flat on the floor, then set his teeth and dragged himself a few inches forward. The legs of the dresser, the legs of the bed were out of his reach. Pulling 180 pounds of body by the strength of his forearms was hard. It was very hard. He rested his forehead flat again and breathed into the carpet. His breath came up very hot and dry into his own face. "Wick," he said. He laid down flat and turned his face sideways, his cheek on the carpet and his eyes closed. A strong memory from childhood swept him, of lying on his mother's living room floor in the sun. The TV had been on somewhere behind him. The sun had felt good on his back. He heard his mother's voice talking on the phone, then calling his name, but he didn't answer her. The sun's heat felt wonderful on the backs of his legs and on the bottoms of his bare feet.

He opened his eyes to see the hem of the peach-colored bedspread. There had been many months of pain. There'd been nothing else at first, just pain, in his consciousness and under it. He'd emerged from that Wick again, but fearful. He admitted it, he was afraid.

*Listen, I know I can't walk. I know it. Do you think I don't?*

The carpet was warm under his cheek. His shoulders hurt badly, and his back. Below that he couldn't feel. He gave himself a couple more minutes.

