

Falling in Love

Ted Briggs came back from the war seven years before it ended, and in spring two years after it ended, he met Susan Dorsey at a cast party after a play's final performance, on a Sunday night, in a small town north of Boston. He did not want to go to the play or to the party, but he was drinking with Nick. They started late Sunday afternoon at the bar of a Boston steakhouse. In the bar's long mirror they watched women. Nick said: "Come with me. My sister likes it."

"She's directing it."

"She's hard to please."

"What's the play?"

"I forget. Some Frenchman. You'd know the name." Ted looked at him. "It sounds like another word. Which isn't the point. The party is the point. These theater people didn't need the sexual revolution."

"I don't have to see a play to get laid!"

"Why are you pissed off? You act benighted. You're always reading something, you go to plays." Nick motioned to the bartender, then waved his hand at the hostess standing near the front door; when she looked at him, he signaled with his first two fingers in a V and pointed to the tables behind them. Ted looked at his fingers and said: "It's that." Nick lowered his hand to the bar and said: "It's what?"

"The peace sign. I was at a party once, with artists. People asked about my leg. I told them. They were polite."

"Polite."

"It was an effort."

"For them."

"Yes."

"Hey, we're lawyers. They'll hate both of us."

Ted looked at Nick's dark and eager face, and said: "We can't let our work keep us home, can we?"

"Men like us."

"Men like us."

Ted Briggs was a tall man with a big chest and strong arms and a thick brown moustache, and Susan Dorsey liked his face when she saw him walk into the party, into the large and crowded living room in an apartment she had walked to from the theater where she had worked so well that now, drinking gin-and-tonic, she felt larger than the room. She did not show this to anyone. She acted small, modest. She was twenty-two and had been acting with passion for seven years, and she knew that she could only show her elation to someone with whom she was intimate. To anyone else it would look like bravado. Her work was a frightening risk, and during the run of the play she had become Lucile as fully as she could, and she knew that what she felt now was less pride than gratitude. She also knew this fullness would leave her, perhaps in three days, then for a while she would feel arid and lost. But now she drank and moved between people to the man with a drink in his left hand, his right hand resting on a cane, his biceps filling the short sleeves of his green shirt. Beside him was a shorter and older man with dark skin and black curls over his brow. She stopped in front of them, and said her name and knew from their eyes that they had not seen her in the play. Nick's last name was Kakonis. Ted leaned his cane against his leg and shook her hand. She looked at his eyes and said: "Did you like the play?"

"We just got here," Nick said, and Ted said: "What was it?"

"*The Rehearsal*. By Jean Anouilh."

"*That* Frenchman," Nick said.

"I like his plays," Ted said. "Were you in it?"

"I was Lucile."

"We got lost," Ted said.

They got lost in vodka, in wine with their steaks, in cognac, then Nick drove them out of the city and north. Once they had to piss and Nick left the highway and stopped on a country road, and they stood beside the car, pissing on grass. Then he drove on the highway again; they talked about work and women, and time was not important. They were leaving the city and going to the cast party. If the play started on time, the curtain had opened while they were driving out of Boston. When they reached the town and found the theater, they were an hour and five minutes late; they drank coffee at

a cafe and, through its window, watched the theater's entrance across the brick street. When people came out, Ted and Nick went to the theater, and in the lobby, among moving people, Nick found his sister, a large woman in a black dress; her face was wide and beautiful, and she said to Nick: "Asshole." Then she hugged him and shook Ted's hand. Her name was Cindy. They walked on brick sidewalks to the apartment of the stage manager, who taught drama at a college. The air was cool and Ted could smell the ocean; he felt sober and knew he was not. Outside the apartment, an old two-story house, he heard voices and a saxophone solo. They climbed to the second floor and Cindy introduced them to people standing near the door, and left them. Ted and Nick went to the long table holding liquor and an ice chest and poured Scotch into plastic glasses. They stood with their backs to a window and Ted looked at a young red-haired woman in a beige dress walking toward him, looking at his eyes, and smiling. He exhaled and for a moment did not breathe.

Then she was there, looking at him still; her eyes were green; she looked at Nick and said "Susan Dorsey" and gave him her hand. Ted leaned his cane against his leg and took her hand. For the rest of the party he stayed with her, except to go to the bathroom; to go to the table and pour their drinks, stirring hers with the knife he used to cut the lime; to go to Nick and say "Excuse me" to the woman Nick was with; to turn Nick away from her and say in his ear: "Does this town have a train station?"

Nick put his arm around Ted and squeezed.

"You don't need one," he said. "She lives in Boston."

"How do you know?"

"Cindy told me. I might be heading a bit farther north. How do I look?"

"You look great."

At one o'clock Susan finished her gin-and-tonic and when Ted took her glass, she said: "I'll have a Coke."

She was afraid of dying young. She had talent and everything was ahead of her and she was afraid it would be taken away. This fear came to her in images of death in a car, in a plane. There was no music now, and people had been speaking quietly since eleven, when the stage manager asked them to remember his neighbors.

She watched Ted walking toward her, her glass and his in the palm of his left hand. A shell from a mortar had exploded and flung him off the earth and he had fallen back to it, alive. She wanted to be naked, holding him naked. She took the Coke from his hand, and said: "I need an hour. I don't want to drive drunk."

"Are you?"

"It's hard to tell, after working"

Her car was small and when they got in, he pushed his seat back to make room for his leg; its knee did not bend. She pushed her seat back and turned to him and held him and kissed him. She liked the strength in his arms hugging her. She started the car and left the seat where it was and only the upper half of her foot was on the gas pedal. She drove out of the town and through wooded country and toward the highway, and said: "You have very sad eyes."

"Not now."

"Even when they twinkle. You wanted to be a corpsman."

"It wasn't what you think. I joined the Navy to get it over with, on a ship. Before I got through boot camp I felt like a cop-out. Then I asked to be a corpsman and to go with the Marines. A lot of times at Khe Sahn I wished I had just joined the Marines."

"So you could shoot back?"

"Something like that. Were you good in the play?"

Yes filled her, and she closed her lips against it, and reached into her purse on the floor, her arm pressing her leg, then she put her hand on the wheel again and looked at the tree-shadowed road and said: "I forgot to buy cigarettes."

"From a squirrel?"

He lit one of his Lucky Strikes and gave it to her and she drew on it and inhaled and held it, but the smoke did not touch what filled her. She blew it out the window and said: "I was great in the play."

After he came home from the war, making love was easy. He had joined the Navy after his freshman year at Boston College, because his mind could no longer contain the arguments and discussions he had had with friends, most of them boys, and with himself since he was sixteen years old. One morning he woke with a hangover and an instinct he followed to the Navy recruiting office. When he came home from the war and eight months in the Navy hospital in

Philadelphia, kept there by infections, he returned to Boston College and lived in the dormitory. He had made love in high school and college before the war, but the first time with each girl had surprised him. After the war he was not surprised anymore. He knew that if a girl would come to his room or invite him to hers or go on a date with him, off the campus, walking in Boston, she would make love. There were some girls who did not want to know him because he had been in the war and his cane was like a uniform. Few of them said anything, but he saw it in their eyes. He felt pain and fury but kept silent.

There were boys like that too, and men who were his teachers, people he wanted to hit. In his room he punched a medium bag and worked with weights. Sometimes, drunk in bed with a girl, he talked about this until he wept. No girl could comfort him, because the source of his tears was not himself. It was for the men he knew in the war, the ones he bandaged, the ones he saved, the ones he could not save; and for the men who were there for thirteen months and were not touched by bullets, mortars, artillery. *They're not abstractions in somebody else's mind*, he said one night to a girl; and, holding her, he said aloud some of their names; for him they were clearly in the dark room; but not for her. Then looking at her face he saw himself in the war, bandaging and bandaging and bandaging, and he stopped crying. He said: *How the fuck would you like to be hated because you did a good job without getting killed*. This one soothed him; she said she'd want to kill somebody.

Now he was twenty-eight and it was still easy, it could be counted on; he only had to invite a woman to go someplace, for a drink, or dinner. The women decided quickly and usually he could see it in their eyes within the first hour of the date. If they felt desire and affection, they made love. Susan would too. They were on the highway now and he looked at her profile. He was drunk and in love. Nearly always he felt he was in love on his first night with a woman. It happened quickly, as they drank and talked and glanced at menus. It lasted for months, weeks, sometimes days. He touched Susan's cheek and said: "Maybe I should court you. Bring you flowers. Hold your hand in movies. Take you to restaurants, and on picnics. Kiss you goodnight at your door."

"You've got about twenty minutes. Maybe twenty-five."

Lying beside him, using the ashtray he held on his chest, she wanted to feel what she was feeling, had wanted to for a long time, this rush of love, pulling her up the three flights of stairs to her small apartment, into the bathroom for her diaphragm she had used often this year with different men, but now her heart was full, as it had not been for over a year, and she was not certain whether it was love that filled her, or so wonderfully being Lucile and ending that work with this strong man with sad eyes and a bad knee and a history she could feel in his kiss. When they made love she could feel the war in him, could feel him ascending from what he had seen, what he had done; from being blown up. Her heart knew she was in love. She said: "I like you a lot."

"But what?"

"Nothing. Am I going to see you again?"

"Has that happened to you?"

"Of course it has. I'm easy. So are you."

"You'll see me a lot. Let's have dinner tonight. French; for the play?"

"That you missed."

"We weren't lost. We drank too much. We talked too much."

"And you both got lucky?"

"I think I got more than lucky."

"You did. I wish you had seen me."

"So do I. I'll see the next one, every night."

"It's at the Charles Playhouse. We start rehearsals in two weeks."

He moved the ashtray to the bedside table and she put her hand on his chest and looked at his eyes. "After that I'm going to New York. Last month I got an agent."

"Good. It's where you should be."

"Yes. I want all of it: movies too."

"New York is just a shuttle away."

"I hope more than one."

She kissed him, she held him.

He ate lunch with Nick. They wore suits and ties. He had slept for two hours, waked at seven to Susan's clock radio, turned it off before she woke, phoned for a cab he waited for on the sidewalk, gone to

his apartment to shower and shave and dress, and had walked to his office. At nine o'clock he was at his desk. Nick came forty minutes later, and stopped at Ted's door to smile, shrug, say: "Lunch?"

At lunch Nick ordered a Bloody Mary, and said: "I hate Monday hangovers. You don't have one."

Ted was drinking iced tea.

"No. I was drunk when we left the party. But I didn't drink again and I was awake till five. By then I was sober."

"We drank."

"I don't drink for a hangover anyway. I cure it with a workout. Susan's going to New York."

"Permanently?"

"Nothing's permanent. She's an actress."

"New York's not far"

"Hollywood is."

"How do you know she's that good?"

"A hunch."

"What happened?"

"I spent the night with her."

"But what happened? Two weeks ago you said you wanted a girlfriend you saw on weekends. You may even have said *some* weekends. Even if she gets Hollywood, they take her out of thousands of pretty young actresses, that sounds like a weekend to me."

"I want her to get Hollywood, I want her to get Broadway. And I want her."

He was with her every night and, before her rehearsals started, they met for lunch and drank martinis and he was out of his office for two hours. On weekends he made picnic lunches and drove with her to the ocean. The water was cold, but the sun was warm and they wore sweatshirts and sat on the beach. At night they ate in restaurants and they made love and slept in her apartment or his. When she started rehearsals she did not have time for lunch, and all day as he worked he waited to see her. *I'm easy*, she had said, and when he imagined her living in New York, working as a waitress, rehearsing with men, he could not bear it. He knew she loved him and he believed she wanted to be faithful to him; but she was beautiful and a hedonist and there would be men trying to make

love with her, and she would feel something for some of them. Without telling her, he tried to give her license, tried to imagine a situation he could accept: if she were drunk one night in New York and it happened only that night.

But it would not be one night with one man. By now he had seen her in the new play. She played the youngest sister, Beth, in a large family gathered at the mother's home while the mother died. Beth was the one who had not moved away; had stayed in the small town and lived near her mother, and cared for her when she was sick, as she had cared for her father. The others lived far away and were very busy and usually drunk. Beth was twenty-nine and Ted believed the playwright had given her age and her not having a lover more importance than they deserved, as though she were Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*; but Susan made Beth erotic and lonely and brave, and you knew she would have a lover, in time, when she was ready, when she chose to; and Ted knew that, unless Susan was very unlucky, she would work in New York and in Hollywood. So it would not be a one night drunk with one man; Susan was going on the road for the rest of her life.

She had a toothbrush now in his apartment, a robe, a nightgown, a novel she was reading. Two weeks before the play closed she had a yard sale, let go of her apartment, and moved into his. It was large and from its living room he could see the Charles River. When the play closed, his pain began; but he was excited too, about week nights and weekends in New York, and about Susan acting there. And he believed she had greatness in her, and he wanted to see it. On a Friday afternoon near sunset they stood at his windows, looking at the river and Cambridge. She said: "I have to do something before I go to New York. I'm six weeks pregnant."

He looked at her eyes, and knew that what was falling inside him would not stop falling till it broke. He said: "No."

"No what? I'm not pregnant? Did you think you were shooting blanks?"

"No, don't do it."

"I'm twenty-two years old, I'm going to New York, and you want me to have a fucking baby?"

The falling thing in him hit and broke and he trembled and said: "Not a fucking baby. Our baby, Susan. Our baby."

He had to look away from the death of everything he saw in her eyes.

She looked at the river. Since seeing her doctor in the middle of the afternoon she had felt very unlucky and as sad as she had ever been; now Ted was begging her to marry him. No one had ever asked her to marry, or even mentioned it, and Ted was begging for it. Finally she looked at him. She said: "It has nothing to do with marriage. I can't even think about marriage. I don't want a baby. Why can't you understand that?"

"Then have it, and give it to me"

"Have it? *You* have it"

"Seven and a half months. That's all I'm asking"

"You think it's numbers? A calendar? You want me to go through all of that, so you can have a baby? Go find somebody else to breed with."

"I did. Now you want to kill it"

"I don't *want* to kill anything. What I want is not to be pregnant. What I want is never to have fucked you"

"Well you did. Now it's time for some sacrifice. Okay? Maybe pain too. And what's new about *those*. For just seven and a half months. Of your life you think is so significant."

She raised her hand to slap his face, his glare, his voice, but she did not; all the bad luck and sadness she had felt till she told him filled her, and his face enclosed her with it, and she felt alone in a way she had never felt alone before. She did not want to be alive. Then she was crying and with her raised hand she covered her eyes. He touched her arms and she recoiled, stepped back, wiped her tears, and opened her eyes.

"You don't know anything," she said. "You think I could have a baby and not love it? Are you that stupid? I can't love a baby. Not now. I thought I could love you. That was enough."

"You don't love anyone."

"Yes I do. And I didn't mean I wished I had never fucked you. But I won't fuck you again. War hero with your cane. Sacrifice. Pain. Don't ever think I don't know about those. Don't ever think you're the only one in pain. Do something for me. Leave. I'm going to Cindy's. I don't want you here while I pack. Lurking around and crying and

asking me to change my life. Okay? Just leave. Go drink someplace. You're good at that."

She wanted something different. She could not imagine what it was: some transformation, of Ted, of herself, of time. He said: "You're good at evicting."

He walked out, and she phoned Cindy, and said: "Cindy?" then sobbed.

Soon she was in New York, but for a long time a desert was inside her; it was huge and dry and there was nothing in it. Someday she would get an intrauterine device, but not now; maybe later in the summer, or in the fall. First she needed work to flood that dry sand.

On a summer evening Ted went to dinner with Nick, then to Fenway Park to watch the Red Sox play the Orioles; it was a very good game, well-pitched and intense, and till the Red Sox lost in the ninth, with the tying run on third and the winning run on second, Ted's sorrow was not deep; was only a familiar distraction like his knee, which kept his leg in the aisle. He had drunk martinis with Nick before dinner and wine with dinner and they drank beer during the game. Then Nick walked with Ted to his apartment and they rode the elevator upstairs. Ted poured two snifters of cognac and held their stems in his left hand and brought them to the living room, where Nick stood, looking out the open windows. Ted said: "That's where she was, the last time I saw her. We were looking at the river."

He felt alert but his left knee bent now and then, on its own, and he knew he was drunk. When he drank a lot, he drank standing: his right knee was useless as a signal, but the left one warned him. The sounds of car engines rose from the street, and faint voices of people walking. Nick said: "What's it been? A month?"

"Five weeks tonight."

Ted raised the snifter and breathed the sharpness of the cognac, tasting it before he drank; then he drank. He looked over the glass rim at Nick, drank again and looked at light reflected on the dark river, looked across it at the lights of Cambridge. He said: "Then she went to the abattoir. 'The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes and no . . . The little children are freezing to death . . .'" He knew Nick was watching him, but he could not feel Nick

watching; he felt the lucidity and eloquence of grief let out of its cage by drinking. “ ‘ I want to have time to look for my children and see how many I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead . . . I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever. ’ ”

Closing his eyes he saw Susar's face, felt that if he opened them quickly, but at the right moment out of all the night's moments, her face would be in front of him; she would be standing here. Nick said: “That was good. Chief Joseph.”

Ted opened his eyes and said: “I used to know the whole thing” He looked away from the river, at Nick, and said loudly: “You know what I say, Nick? From where the sun now stands I will ejaculate no more forever in the body of a woman who will kill our child,” and saying it, and saying it loudly, released all the grief, as something he felt he could see, touch, in the air before his face, and now he felt only rage, and the strength and conviction it brings; it filled him, and his arms and cognac and cane rose with it, his mouth opened to cry out with it; he saw Nick and the windows but he did not see them; then it was gone, as the flame of a candle is blown out, and the gentle breath that dispelled it was a woman's. She was many women, she was any woman whose eyes, whose touch, whose voice, whose lips would draw him again, and he closed his mouth and lowered his arms, lowered his head. He looked at Nick's brown loafers, feeling only helpless now; and ashamed, knowing what a woman could do to him, knowing she could do it because he wanted her to. Then Nick's hand was on the back of his neck, squeezing, and Nick said: “You've got to start dating again. This time get one on the pill.”

Ted looked at him, tossed his cane onto the couch, and held Nick's arm. He said: “The pill isn't a philosophy. I need a philosophy to go out there with. You know? I can't just go out there with a cock, and a heart. Maybe I need a wife.”

“Wives are good. I'd like a wife. I'm two baseball seasons from forty. Do you know at the turn of the century, in America, the average man lived forty-seven years? For women it was forty-six. Maybe a wife is what you need.”

“I need a vacation.”

“You've been on one for five weeks.”

“Not from women. From women too. I mean two weeks

someplace. Mexico. Alone. I don't speak Spanish. I can order from a menu. But I won't understand the rest. I'll be alone. I need to think, Nick. All I've been doing is feeling. Find a village near an airport. Something in the mountains. Bring some books, have one drink before dinner, maybe a beer while I eat. Hole up, walk around; be silent. Look the demon in the eye."

Nick rubbed his neck and said: "Drink bottled water. Peel the fruit. Don't shit your brains out"

"If I did, all you'd see in the bowl is water"

"Stop that. It's just something that happened. And leave the demon here. You've looked at it enough."

"No. I haven't looked at it. I've fucked it. Now I'm going to look at it; talk to it"

Holding Nick's arm, he closed his eyes and pressed the back of his neck into Nick's hand. □

Andre Dubus is the author of many books. His most recent is *Broken Vessels*, a collection of essays. "Falling in Love" will be included in a forthcoming short-story collection, *Dancing After Hours*, from Knopf.