

GEHENNA

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Edward got on the IRT downtown local at 42nd Street for Greenwich Village. The train stopped at 33rd Street, 27th Street, 17th Street and Christopher Circle. As it turned out he met his wife at this party.

It was a standard Greenwich Village all-of-us-are-damned gathering. She was sitting in a corner of the room, her feet bare, listening to a man with sad mustaches play a mandolin. Edward went over to say hello to her. She looked at him with vague disinterest and huddled closer to the mandolin player, who turned out—on further inspection—to be her date for the night. But Edward was persistent—his parents had always told him that his fearfulness was his chief detracting characteristic—and later that night he got her address.

Two days later he showed up with a shopping bag filled with gourmet food and asked her if she would help him eat it. She shrugged and introduced him to her cats. Three weeks later they slept with one another for the first time and the week after that the mandolin player and he had a fight, at the end of which the mandolin player wished them well and left her flat forever. Edward and Julie were engaged only a few days after that and during the month he married her in Elktown.

They went back to New York and started life together. He gave up mathematics, of course, and became an accountant. She gave up painting and took to going to antique shops once a week, bringing back objects every now and then. It was not a bad life, even if it had started out, perhaps, a bit on the contrived side.

Three years later Edward opened the door and found Julie playing with their year-old daughter, shaking a rattle and putting it deep into the baby's mouth. The scene was a pleasing one and he felt quite contented until she looked up at him and he saw that she was crying.

He put down his briefcase and asked her what was wrong. She told him that their life had been an utter waste. Everything she wanted she had not gotten—everything that she had gotten she did not want. She was surrounded by things, she told him, she had prepared herself as a child to

despise. And the worst of it was that all of it was her own fault. She talked of divorce but only by inference.

Realizing that the fault was all his, Edward said that he would check up on some suburbs, get them a nice-sized house and some activities for her during the day. And so, he did—all of it and they were very happy for a while if gravely in debt—until he came home from the circus one night with his daughter and found that Julie, feet bare, had drowned herself in the bathtub.

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Julie got on the IRT downtown local at 42nd Street for Greenwich Village. The train stopped at 32nd Street, 24th Street, 13th Street and the Statue of Christ. As it turned out, she met her husband at this party. It was a standard Greenwich Village we-are-finding-ourselves party and he came in late, dressed all wrong, his hands stretching his pockets out of shape. He was already very drunk.

She was there with a boy named Vincent who meant little to her but who played the mandolin beautifully and sang her love songs. If the songs were derivative and the motions a trifle forced—well, it was a bad period for both of them and she took what comfort she could. But when her husband-to-be came over and spoke to her—his name was Edward as it turned out—she could see beyond his embarrassment and her misery that a certain period of her life and of the mandolin player's was over. He wanted her telephone number but because she didn't believe in telephones she gave him her address instead while Vincent was off changing his clothes. She told him that she was very unsure of herself.

Three days later, while she was still in bed, he came with flowers and candy and told her that he could not forget her. With a smile she invited him in and the first time was very good—better than it had been with Vincent, anyway. Edward was gone when Vincent came later that evening and she told him that she had been lusting after the sea all her life—now she at least had found a pond. Then she told him what she and Edward had done. He wept and cursed her. He told her that she had betrayed everything of importance, the small reality they had built together—but she was firm. She said that lines must be drawn for once and for all between the present and the possible.

After that she saw nothing of either Vincent or Edward for a week. Then Edward came with a suitcase. He said he had moved out of his parents' home and had come to marry her. She did not marry him right away but they lived together for some weeks—one evening she found a note in her

mailbox, just like that, saying that Vincent had committed suicide.

She never found out who had sent the note and she never told Edward anything. But a week later they were married in Yonkers and went to a resort upstate, where they were happy for a few days.

They came back and bought furniture for her flat. He dropped out of astronomy and became an industrial research assistant— or something like that.

For a long time her days were simple—they were, as a matter of fact, exactly like the days she had known just before she met Edward—and the nights were good, pretty good anyway. Then she became pregnant in a different sort of way and eventually the child, Ann, was born—a perfect child with small hands and a musical capability. Edward said that they would have to find a real home, now—he was very proud—but she said that the old life could keep up, at least until Ann was ready for school. But one night he came home early, very excited and—just like that— told her that he had found them a home in the suburbs. She told him that this was fine. He said that he was very happy, and she said the same.

They moved to the suburbs and were content for a while, what with car pools and bridge and whatnot, as well as good playmates and a healthy environment for Ann. But Edward, for no reason, began to get more, and more depressed and one morning when she awoke to find his bed empty, she went into the bathroom to find him slumped over the bathtub, him, wrists open, blood all over the floor, a faint, fishlike look of appeal in his stunned and disbelieving eyes.

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Vincent got on the IRT downtown local at 42nd Street for Greenwich Village. The train stopped at 37th Street, 31st Street 19th Street and Christ Towers. As it turned out, he lost his girl at this party. It was a standard Greenwich Village look-how-liberated-we-are kind of party and it was a strange thing that the two of them went separately since the 42nd Street stop was the nearest to both of their apartments. But she believed in maintaining her privacy in small, damning ways.

She was sad that night, sad with a misery he could not touch, much less comprehend. It had been a good time for both of them—they had been going together for the four months since she broke off with his closest friend—and he played her songs on his mandolin—promises of lost and terrible loves, promises of a better future, songs of freedom and loneliness—and she loved his mandolin. She told him that she found her whole soul in his music.

So he was playing songs for her at the party this night, not even wanting to be there, hoping that they could go back to her flat and put the mandolin beside the bed and make their kind of love, when he saw that she was looking at another man in the corner of the room—a man of a different sort from the rest of them, since he was the only one who was not already drunk. The man was looking back at her and in that moment Vincent knew that he was quite doomed, that he and Julie were quite finished.

To prove it to himself he left his instrument on her knee and went to the bathroom. When he came back they sprang apart like assassins and he knew that the man had her address. There was nothing to do, of course, but to leave the party and he helped her with her coat, put his mandolin over his shoulder and led her down the stairs. Halfway to the street he told her that she had betrayed them. She did not answer, later murmured that she could not help herself, much less another person—but she would make this night the best of all the nights that she had ever given him.

And so she did, all night and into the dawn while her cat stroked the mandolin making wooden sounds, rolling the instrument around and around on the floor. In the morning he left her—and took his clothing—and then he did not see her at all for a few days. When he came back there was a different look on her face and the man was in her bed, lying next to her.

He did not care—he had lost any capacity for surprise when she, had come from his closest friend, broken enough to need him. He only wanted to meet the man named Edward (who might become his closest friend too) but the man did not want any part of him at all and there was a very bad scene—a scene that ended only when Vicent knocked the man to the door and smashed him there to the floor.

But he never saw her again, victory or not. He had no need to—everything that needed proof had been proven. But he thought of her often and many years later, when he killed himself by leaping from a stranger's penthouse, his last thought as he felt the dry wind and saw the street coming at him was of his old mandolin, her solemn cat and the night she had given him her best because she had already partaken of his worst.

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The child Ann—who had very sensitive and gentle hands— became a young woman who was drawn at odd moments to the windows of pawn shops in which she saw old mandolins—and once, for a week, she took

flute lessons. But she had no money and less patience—that last was her biggest fault, along with a lack of assertiveness—and she dropped them. Now she is going to a party in Greenwich Village. She does not know what will happen to her. The night is still a mystery. She is still young enough to scent possibilities in the, wind—tonight may hold some finality, although one never knows. See her, see her—she is in the Times Square stop of the IRT—the engineer sounds a song in the density.

She counts the stops and waits. The train stops at 34th Street, 28th Street and 14th Street. Now it is at Christopher Street and Sheridan Square.

The End