



THE MODERNIST

BY ROBERT GLÜCK



Mop of tender

the same reason as the plants—no daylight rescued them from being inert chemicals, so the landscape mirrored my story's emotional devastation like the blasted oaks of Nineteenth-Century Lit. The food was good but sad; I imagined the meat retained some of the mechanical brutality that brought it to this pass. It was just the Acme—not Andy's where you could have fun, or Hopwell's where you could be happy.

Phyllis and I ordered capuccinos at the coffee bar, paid for our own and found a table where a small glass held purple amaranths (prince's feather? love-lies-bleeding?) Phyllis tasted hers, replaced the cup on its saucer and told the coffee it was delicious. It had a clean round flavor; cinnamon, rusty, flecked the dry beige foam mounded on the flat wet surface. We were both nostalgic about food and saw this coffee as a window on capuccinos of days gone by. Phyllis wore pants as usual, and a silk shirt, mauve, a tweed jacket and a silk scarf which may have alluded to coffee shops, writers and *la vie bohème*. Her butter-scotch hair was parted and hung straight; she wore no makeup, a little lipstick.

I asked about Peter's death. She told me the story from beginning to end in clinical detail, his pulse, his blood pressure's decline and the diminishing of other vital signs—heart and respiration. Even the angle of the bullet. Perhaps she knew all this because there was so little story. She said, 'On Friday he went out for groceries in Oakland where he and Susan

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DURING JULY PHYLLIS stayed with her other son in San Diego. In August she returned, and after the Saturday workshop we met for coffee in a café on 24th St. that I always disliked. The food wasn't bad, the coffee was good, so it must have been—as the classical music d.j.s say—the *ambiance*. I'll describe the place to you just to pause a moment before a difficult scene. They had remodeled; now it was upwardly mobile, a large dim room: white walls, blue molding and ceiling, blue and white plastic tablecloths that mimed a Jacquard check and lots of verathaned knotty-pine paneling. Before it had been hippyish with a dusty jungle of unhappy plants and loud music. The music remained, the sound system was still mostly backbeat and behind it a baby still cried in listless continuum. The new colors failed for

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lived. He went to the corner store and was apparently held up and shot for a roll of eight dollar bills Susan said he went out with. I only gradually understood that it was very serious. A sure strong black doctor who had been brought in to help the on-duty doctor talked to us. It became clear that Peter was ruined. Later, Susan told me the things he said. 'I've been shot in the leg.' She said he sounded rather astonished.

'No, Petey, you're shot in the chest.' The hole in his chest showed burn and was small. He said, 'It was a blank. It was a joke.'

'And then the last thing: 'I'm going into shock.' I know how he would have said it, probably mildly, with some surprise, with full recognition and knowledge in his voice of what was happening to himself and to others.'

Phyllis talked about Peter with such respectful affection that I found myself missing him. 'Was there a police inquiry?' She supposed so but it didn't interest her. She pushed an investigation away from her in the form of her coffee cup. The bureaucracy of crime and retribution was a Tower of Babel stunned to silence by the depth that follows a catastrophe. Phyllis touched a few freckles of cinnamon on her saucer, then laced her fingers together. She said, 'He was always *open* to what was going on emotionally, quick to the current. He had the extraordinary generosity to give people their due. I could talk to him—he would be there.' Phyllis's eyes gleamed, she bowed her head and folded her hands in her lap. She's so

secure that she can sit with strangers and, if she's concentrating, close her eyes for a long time. I imaged her absorbed in mourning the part of herself called into being by Peter. She was no longer in the café. After a minute I realized that her chest was not rising or falling. An anxious smile shaped itself on my face and my eyes began to widen. Finally she raised her head and resumed breathing; her face was streaked with tears.

Then Phyllis cried, very frankly. Tears gathered and fell, gathered and fell. She didn't even bother to wipe them. She wasn't pitted against herself when she cried—no gasps or convulsions. She cried and apologized without sincerity for making a public display. She continued, 'Susan was a fine girlfriend. For years he had been with a woman who wasn't—she had a son from an earlier marriage and Peter put a lot into fathering him. I'm glad he had a glimpse of that. One day he told me he was bisexual and said he didn't understand why everyone shouldn't be.' Phyllis said one of his ex-boyfriends attended the funeral. I mentioned the blond man's 'We all loved him in our way' but Phyllis corrected me. That man had a daughter who almost died. I had taken a parent's emotion for a lover's.

She said that Peter's bisexuality was one reason my writing interested her, so she could better understand love between men. Her candor struck me as a pedigree. We were closer now than we had been during the two years of the workshop. She thought I

hadn't liked her. I countered, 'You always deflected my attention. Besides, you write beautifully.'

Phyllis protested, 'Why should I *want* to be a writer? Why isolate myself? I could go to Europe this summer—maybe for the last time—although that's what I've said before every trip since I was fifty. Why stay home and write?'

'It beats me. If nine-tenths of the writers I know were going to quit, I'd say with Grace Paley's Aunt Rose, 'Good-bye and good luck.' But I have an impulse to colonize you. (Here we laughed.) Yes, colonize. Phyllis, you are an island, a very nice island, but wouldn't you be better with a little pineapple plantation—produce, produce!'

138 Phyllis flashed a big rectangular smile, chin up, as though she were sprayed with water on a tropical day. '*Past the salt!*' she announced rather startlingly. It turned out to be instant slang for agreement. I enjoyed her voice, sweet/sour, able to italicize with drama, a vertical quality with all consonants pronounced. She was laughing now. I related a piece of gossip Ed, my ex, told me about his cousin Sonny and Sonny's mother, Aunt Dot. It was public knowledge in Ed's family that for forty-five years the mother and son, who were both obese, had slept together in the same single bed. The thought tickled me. I wondered if my story were daring but Phyllis laughed and said, 'How delicious, like two baked apples.'

I wanted reassurance that Phyllis would be

all right. I had no illusion about who was receiving solace. We returned to Peter, kept returning. In any case, we were close and it couldn't last so we filled the brief time with an urgent rush of confidences—our families, our mutual friends, our boyfriends—caffeine hurrying us up. Although I turned Jack and me into a joke, she paid me the compliment of taking us seriously. I had thought she was rich, referring to her sons in public, she used their nicknames. I learned her glamorous familiarity came from sharing a literary life with the husband she later divorced. I liked to imagine Phyllis as the hero of her own life. She looked out for herself and her current beau was no exception; he didn't make demands and kept himself small. Phyllis admired my pink sweatshirt and silver and lapis ring. 'Bob, you've had your colors done,' she laughed.

We discovered that we both loved delicatessens and cafés so our conversation turned to French fries, chili, falafel, pizza, stuffed grape leaves to go, Dragon Burgers, baloney on white from food mobiles parked outside suburban office towers, fish burgers, Jim's superburgers, EAT. In downtowns and the suburbs I want to stop at every café and diner. It's the nearest I have to a religion. In Red's Java House I eat frosty blue twilight, the Big American Sadness. Doesn't nostalgia intrude between me and French dip? I pour nostalgia over crushed ice and drink it. I live in a country whose military budget is thirty-four million dollars an hour; I squeeze that fact out of a

ketchup bottle. We noted distinctions and culinary shadings from melancholy to cynicism to abstraction. Red's serves old mortality but in McDonald's we eat the void.

I wanted to extrapolate from Phyllis to Peter. If he resembled her he must have been very fine. I imagined loving him, being his lover, waiting at a window of longing for him to arrive. I felt that by

desiring him I was beginning to understand his death. Phyllis said, 'I found caches of his cigarette butts around the house, I hunted for them, and even though I don't smoke I smoked them all.' I had a shock of recognition. So, I thought, a parent's love for a child is not different from the love between lovers, not merely as intense but cut from the same cloth.

The last swallow of coffee contained the most sugar. I bade the amarantus a mental adieu. When we entered the Acme it was sunny. A salty 4:30 wind had come up, dark and bright. A pending rain gave everyone in the street a conspiratorial feeling that registered as tremulous sexuality. We opened our eyes wider, quickened our awareness. Phyllis and I walked down 24th to her bus stop at Dolores just as the bus swung over and folded its yellow doors. It came faster than we thought. I embraced Phyllis and kissed her on the mouth. The kiss surprised us. I think she held out her cheek. Drawing back, I looked at Phyllis's lips where my lips had been and then at her eyes. They were lowered, bashful or embarrassed, but later I realized that she was just looking at my

mouth where her lips had been and if she had glanced up I also would have appeared bashful, eyes lowered. My kiss was for Peter as much as Phyllis. It struck me as important that we looked at each other's lips like mirrors although I can't say why. Maybe it was that our surprise showed in precisely the same gesture and for an instant we spilled into each other. Phyllis climbed into the bus which immediately lumbered away down 24th St.