

Spin A Gentle Web
Betty Kreinik
writers' workshop

The party on West 89th was a typical, uptown Manhattan gathering. The apartment looked out over Broadway, high enough from the street to block out traffic sounds. An occasional wailing siren could be heard above the sound of the party. The foyer was large and long with enough room to hold the table heaped with food. There were cheeses, smoked oysters and octopus, caviar, fondue, roast beef, turkey, and assorted canapés. The living room, decorated in the latest Scandinavian style, roomy and comfortable, provided enough corner space for tête-à-têtes. The informal invitations said 8:30, a civilized time for this type of party. Guests trickled in, were introduced by the hostess, and handed the first drink of the evening. The early arrivals were the new-comers and the foreign guests who didn't wish to offend by being late. Tonight, there were only a few foreign types, one outstandingly attractive in flowing colorful robe contrasting his black skin. By 10 o'clock, the party was almost complete with medical, psychiatric and professorial friends of the host. On the hostess' side were the artists, the writers, the international visitors, and some non-categorized. Somewhere, in the unobtrusive background, music played. Eavesdropping, one could hear the usual conversations that evolved around doctors, the guarded talk angled at the psychiatrists. The writers argued the merits of the newest plays and novels. Artists heatedly discussed Andy Warhol and was this really art? -- punctuating the talk with an occasional "That's a lot of crap." There were people on the

fringes and actors in the center stage. In the corners, couples spoke head to head, shying away from the noise. The music went from jazz to Mozart to Casals.

Dottie arrived with the later group although she was new. Friday nights were planned for dinner with the children. They were hardly children anymore; closer to adults at 16 and 18. Her husband had called to say he'd stay in the city tonight. A big case was breaking and he wanted to be there when it happened. The years of sharing him with the New York City Police Department made this night like many nights before. His promotion to detective made it worse. He was trying to prove something, but it didn't include her. They lived in the same house, occasionally seeing each other for more than a few hours. For appearances sake, they socialized with their suburban crowd. In bed, they used each other's body for self-gratification. Eventually, their separate lives evolved.

The job at Lanvin had turned out to be a real plum. Dottie had worked herself up to sales representative. At 40, she had arrived, her own person, confident, successful, and financially secure. And she was still good to look at. Her connection with buyers from the best New York stores opened up her world. There were promotional cocktail parties, lunches at Longchamps and 21. Best of all, there were trips to Paris, to the home office. She flowed through this world, well liked and admired, a sparkling stream, refreshing all who touched her. Few people knew that she did volunteer work in the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital, 6-12 midnight. Here, a sobered, compassionate Dottie, saw the dreary side of the city. She witnessed the

results of knife fights, the beaten wife, gun-shot DOA's, and the young mother screaming the pain of a self-induced abortion.

Her first encounter of the evening was a young, hormonal writer who adored her blue eyes and statuesque height. She was kind to him, passing him to a bright ingenue standing by. She looked around the room, hearing bits of conversation, wondering what she was doing there. Someone placed a drink in her hand and introduced himself. They went through the usual dialogue designed to find an interesting subject. He was being witty, and she enjoyed laughing.

The day had not gone well for Harvey. He had to fire a clerk for dipping into the till. Finding a man to replace him took the rest of the day. The weekend would be busy and he didn't want to spend more time at the store than he had to. He went home to an empty apartment. His wife and children had already left for their weekend at Southhampton. He showered, changed into comfortable clothes, and prepared a light dinner. The invitation to the party lay on the counter. He hadn't decided to go. It most likely was one of those large parties with too many people. He didn't do well in large groups; it seemed impossible to have a meaningful conversation in all that noise and smoke. Perhaps a good book would be better. He looked over to the book shelves lining the entire wall. Old and new friends, all of them, evoking a memory of passing time. It depressed him. "I'm 36 years old and going nowhere slowly," he thought. The party would be the place to get away from gloomy thoughts.

The third vodka martini would not go down, his dependable sign that he'd had enough to drink. It was 11 o'clock. He knew at least half the people there and doubted he needed to know the rest. Len was running on about his job at Art Digest to this young girl, trying to get his hand farther up her thigh. So far, the girl was still in command. Laurie, divorced recently, a corn silk hair beauty from Wisconsin, seemed wound around her latest acquisition, a young black law student. Joan Baez filled the minute spaces in conversation. Harvey tried to block out the sound so that he could concentrate on the body language of the clusters of people. Hands and hips punctuation; man movements of hand slowly caressing the back of a slim girl stabbing the air with an emphatic finger. Weight movements from hip to hip, shifting. Folded arms across a chest talking to a hand scratching its head. Crossed leg rhythmically swings a precariously hanging shoe. Now, a blurry Johnny Mathis sings "Misty" to himself. The Ghanaian has gone along with the other foreign guests who politely do not overstay their welcome. The room seems stark with their leaving. The party begins to thin out.

The black dress with the light from the lamp glowing around it attracts Harvey's eye; The body in it is tall, thin but ample, wearing dark stockings and black shoes. Two delicate gold bracelets, ringing gently against each other, move with the arm that is telling the story. The laugh from the auburn haired back of head is throaty and full. The head tilts back as if to laugh at the ceiling. The laugh ends with the left hand coming up to push back a strand of hair.

No wedding band. Harvey looked down at his own. He was not aware that someone was standing in front of him. A soft voice said, "You have the greatest blue eyes I've ever seen. They're ice blue. I'm Dorothy Halloran, Dottie to my friends." Harvey stood up and took her extended hand. "Harvey Bluestone's the name, and thank you." He was flustered, caught off balance. She laughed. "I'm sorry. I do that all the time and it's unfair. "Her own blue eyes smiled at him and he had to smile back. "I saw you people-watching and having a good time. I get so verbal myself that I miss a lot of what's going on. Do you ever go down to Nathan's to people watch?" Harvey's skin tightened around his mouth. He really didn't want to get involved. "This party is a re-run of a few others. I've heard most of the talk before. Watching is a distraction. I'll be leaving soon."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I thought we might talk awhile."

They were interrupted by the hostess bearing coffee and cake. "Will you stay for some coffee?" she asked, handing him a cup. "How do you take it?" He didn't have time to say no.

She started talking about her being one of the few native born New Yorkers at the party, then deftly went into her usual biographical sketch. It included information about her work, her children and husband, and ended with "That's all there is to me. Who are you, Harvey Bluestone?"

He marveled at the ease with which she handed out her

statistics, as if she were talking about someone else. He wanted to leave before it became more involved. He couldn't seem to break away. He found himself telling her of his work as a pharmacist in his own business, his family. He stopped there.

"So you're the owner of that store. It's in a good location. I've been in there. I'll have to bring you more of my business. My office is on Lexington and 60th. We're a block away from each other. Maybe we could meet for lunch one day." She said that so casually, he wasn't quite sure whether it was polite or she really meant it.

The conversation trailed on to the things they liked to do, the theater, concerts, Basin Street. She preferred piano and violin concertos; he leaned toward Haydn and Bach. They could take or leave opera and laughed at their same reactions to it. She ice skated; he skied. He liked chocolate ice cream. Pistachio was her favorite. And on and on. They knew some of the same people and compared notes. They leaned back, smiling. Harvey felt relaxed. They ended the evening with "I'll be seeing you", each wondering if they would.

The following Thursday, Dottie walked into the drug store, stopped at the perfume counter to check the Lanvin display, then walked to the pharmacy section. Harvey was preparing a prescription, counting capsules. "Pardon me, sir," Harvey looked up to see a serious Dottie saying, "Do you sell pistachio ice cream here?"

"You're a nut," he laughed. "It's nice to see you again. How

about a green cough syrup. That's the best I can do."

She wore a navy blue suit with a red and white polka dot scarf around her neck and she smelled good. "In case you haven't noticed, it's 12:30 and I haven't had my lunch. I rarely buy my own lunches, so here I am." She grinned, trying to look coy. "You will buy a working girl some lunch?"

Harvey was ready to make some excuse, but changed his mind. "I can't leave until one when the other man gets back. Meet me at Moriarty's in half an hour." He didn't believe he said that. She seemed to be carrying him along on her ride and he didn't want to fight it. It was to be lunch, nothing more complicated than that.

The door to Moriarty's opened quietly into the dimly lit bar. Dottie sat at the far end of the bar talking to Al, the bartender. She had her right elbow on the round oak bar that ran the length of the old wooden counter and she was smiling. She saw him and waved grandly.

"Al, I'd like you to meet my friend, Harvey. Harvey, this is Al. He makes the best scotch sours, from scratch."

"How are you, Mr. Bluestone? What'll you have?"

Dottie assumed an indignant pose. "Well, you hang around the same bars I do."

"Hi, Al. I'll have a Tuborg." He turned to Dottie. "Are we drinking lunch or having something solid with it?" He really

didn't care about lunch. He enjoyed the air around her. It vibrated, making him tremble a little. She was certainly something different.

Dottie replied in her best Boston accent. "I shall have a ham and Swiss on rye with lots of your imported mustard and another gin and tonic. And please, don't forget the pickle." She stalked to one of the back booths, leaving Harvey to order the same.

"I'm a brazen hussy, I'm sure," she said. "I couldn't resist it. Your place was there and I had no plans for lunch. I did enjoy talking to you the other night. So, I walked into your store and gambled that you'd be free for lunch. I guess I got lucky."

"It's a nice break in my day. I'm glad you came by." He was twisting his wedding band and she noticed.

"If you're worrying about an irate husband finding us together here, you can relax. I don't wear a wedding band because it has no meaning. My marriage is too much of an investment now to leave it. My husband's not a bad guy and I don't hate him. I'm a free agent and he doesn't have me followed." She asked if he needed more of an explanation. He didn't.

The bar was quiet that day. At first they both felt a little awkward. Again, it was Dottie who started the conversation. She asked about the pharmacy business, showing that she knew about the pharmaceutical houses and a little about drugs and their applications. When he

questioned her about her work, she quickly went over her working with buyers, advertising, traveling occasionally to promote a new product. Over coffee, they talked about local politics and the problems of the police department since the Miranda ruling. They mourned the proposed demolition of the old New York buildings to be torn down for the World Trade Center. On the way back to the office, they walked arm in arm, feeling like old friends. They parted with another, "I'll be seeing you." They were sure they would.

Harvey tried not to think about her in the next two weeks. He needed time to think and tried to dismiss her. During his waking hours he would get flashes of her face. He told himself he didn't need a complication in his life, that he wasn't the type to have an affair. When he tried to read, he turned pages not remembering what he just read. He saw her in every tall, chic woman on Lexington Avenue and cursed himself for being a romantic fool. His normal routine of Saturdays at the zoo with the children and chess with friends couldn't crowd her out of his existence.

She called him the following Thursday to say hello and would he like some lunch. She sounded like her usual ebullient self. They met at Moriarty's. Her greeting was a soft kiss on the cheek. Over lunch, she asked him what he'd been doing while she was away and casually told him of her trip to Paris. He listened, enjoying the look of her, the soft lips, the strong chin, the way she reached out to touch his hand. There was something happening and he stopped fighting it. If he could contain her close to him for just a moment, hold her in his arms, feel the curves and

angles of her body, he would share her great vitality. Instead, he asked her to the preview of the Picasso exhibit at the Metropolitan and she was delighted. Of course she'd go. They began here.

They called themselves Pygmalion and Galatea, exchanging roles freely, She introduced him to the fashion world of New York, took him to Greek restaurants where the belly dancer flowed with the ouzo. They stole time from their lives, wandering with no place to be alone. Finally, they succumbed and borrowed the key of a friend's apartment. Here they discovered another facet of their union.

His body lived again, joined with hers, feeling a potency he thought he had lost with his youth. Guilt would not come. He could share her with so few friends. When he did, it was an offering of love to introduce her and watch her work her magic. He was in love, sentimentally, foolishly caught a willing victim.

What could he offer her? His was the quieter life with a few good friends. Socially, he was a good listener, logical and objective. He could easily be alone, sometimes preferring a good book or music. His friends pleased him, low key, thinking people. His marriage had happened because he saw no reason to avoid it. His wife was acceptable, having patiently waited for him to finish medical school. A plain girl, she had argued weakly when he turned down an internship. He wanted out of medicine. His parents would be deprived of "my son, the doctor" and his guilt was minor. They settled for a pharmacist son who would work

with his father and eventually inherit the business. "It's all very dull," he said. Dottie listened, twisting the topaz ring he had given her. She looked at him and smiled. "A doctor .. you were going to be a doctor. What happened, Harvey? You were so close. The year of internship wasn't that much of a challenge. Am I right?"

It wasn't the work". He really didn't want to get into this. "I just couldn't face the prospect of playing God to people I might be able to help. I could never develop a bedside manner. The research field needed more schooling, more time. It was more than I could handle. I've had a good life. Money is no problem and I can always talk to my friends who are doctors if I get curious about medicine. I can see surgery if I want to." There was a wistfulness in his voice. "It's past history." He waited for Dottie to say something. She was quiet.

To change the subject, he asked her about the Eliot collection he had given her recently. She quoted a few lines that had stuck in her memory and they talked about poetry. She had become a voracious reader, eager to learn as much as she could. He gave her books; she considered them treasures. They talked in small coffee houses, little quiet bars, and on the Staten Island ferry.

Within six months, they had established a pattern of life. With planning, they could be together for whole nights at a time with proper reasons to their spouses. There were phone calls to quietly convey love messages and notes with flowers. A small circle of friends protected them, sensing the specialness of their relationship. They felt the

abundance of life. The future would take care of itself.

On one of their Thursdays at Moriarty's, she arrived with a manila envelope. He recognized the excitement in her. She waited until coffee was served before she pulled out the papers and said, in a business like tone, "I've been doing a little research, talking to some doctors at the hospital and a few others. I have a suggestion I want you to listen to. You're not to interrupt me, no matter how much you want to. Agreed?" He nodded.

"Here's what I found out. The city hospitals are harder to get an internship from because of the big demand made on them and because they have to accept a certain number of foreign students. You know, Indians, South Americans, some Europeans. Most of the bigger hospitals have the same problem. So scratch Bellevue, Mount Sinai, and Columbia Presbyterian. But, they are good for refresher courses for people like you and practicing physicians. Most of these are given in the late afternoon and evening and the selection is varied. All you have to do is go and pay for them. You're not so unique. There are other men who did exactly what you did but want to go back. It depends on what you want for the rest of your life. I think that if things were slightly different then, you would have gone back sometime sooner. I think you should consider going back now." She leaned back in her seat.

At first Harvey was speechless. Then anger took over. "For God's sake, Dottie, you have to be out of your mind. Do you realize what you're saying? I'm to chuck my life at 36 and go back to becoming a doctor? Do you know what

the competition is? I'd have to be a student again. I can't do it. I can't crack the books like an undergraduate. Do you think my wife is going to be overjoyed with less than a husband than she has now? You're in another world. Forget it. It's insane." A panic came over him. He wanted to get out of there, away from her.

Dottie placed the papers back in the envelope and slid it toward him. "There's a list of the hospitals giving the courses, the name of one of the doctors at St. Vincent's who'd be glad to help you, and the name of someone at Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital who can help you apply for your internship. Please take it, file it away somewhere. You may want it someday." She got up, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and left.

Harvey sat alone, letting his anger subside. He was confused and becoming miserable. He left, taking the envelope with him. At the store, he shoved it into a drawer. He couldn't throw it away and he didn't want to see it.

A week passed with no contact between them. When he began to miss her, he called the office only to be told that she was out. He suspected she would be out until she was ready to talk to him. Dottie would give him time to cool down; he knew that. For Harvey, the sense of being manipulated stayed with him. He rebelled against that.

The following week she returned his call, giving no explanation for her absence. He accused her of having found someone else. She laughed lightly, saying, "No chance lover. You're stuck with me." They arranged to

meet in the Village.

Greenwich Village at night was a good place not to be seen. The uptown crowd came to see the new acts breaking in at the Village Vanguard and the Gate. So, Harvey and Dottie went to the small Italian restaurants and the little jazz places away from the tourist spots. They met at the Half Note. She greeted him warmly, hugging him and saying it was hell to be away from him. They talked around the subject of medicine, making plans to do something spectacular the following week. Dottie had a key to her friend's apartment. They spent the rest of the night in each others arms. She was different; perhaps she was contrite.

They spent the next few months consciously getting to know their city. They blended in with the out-of-towner at the U.N. building, listening attentively to the tour guide describing the various aspects of the building in her very British accent. At the Cloisters, they were properly reverent amid the statuary and the stained glass windows. The gardens gave them a sense of serenity. Below, the Hudson River flowed blue, carrying an excursion boat up to Bear Mountain. A miniaturized Circle Line boat glided toward the Palisades of New Jersey, a toy in a bathtub. They planned to come back to the same spot in another season.

The other side of Harvey's life went on with dinner at an old friend's home. This was the friend of his youth, a doctor who had a practice on the Lower East Side. He seemed to be thriving on the experience he was getting

and the money was adequate. Harvey listened to the stories of the ghetto neighborhood where people still thought hospitals were places for dying. Alone, the men talked about everyday things. Stan quietly asked about Dottie, fully expecting to get Harvey's interpretation of how wonderful she was. He hardly answered the question. It seemed a good time to test Stan. "I'm going to say something laughable, but try to keep it down to a chuckle." Harvey was nervous. "What would you say if I told you I was considering going back into medicine?" He waited for the look of disbelief. Instead, he heard, "It certainly took you long enough. You've been wasting a lot of talent. I think it's great, Harv. What are your plans?" He mumbled something about having no plan, only to hear an offer of help from Stan whenever he was ready.

This was the first of the feelers. The answer from friends was usually the same. His accountant was pleasantly surprised. He drew up a list of assets and liabilities, offering to help him select the stocks that could be sold for a decent income. Harvey was opening the door.

Dottie and Harvey saw each other as much as possible. He said nothing about his inquiries; she wanted to avoid another blowup. Harvey seemed more animated than usual, then became irritable, as he felt the need to end the indecision. He decided to try.

He registered for the refresher courses. His credentials were good. He had been a top student in medical school. The explanation to Dottie was that he was using these courses to find out where he stood. He told her not to

count on anything. He had already started making inquiries into possible internships and kept this to himself. His nights at school would mean time away from her. She encouraged him, jokingly saying she might be forced to go back to school herself.

At home, his wife accepted the story that he was taking courses at the New School. When classes were drawing to a close and Harvey found that he wasn't doing badly, he told his wife of his plans to apply for an internship. She was shocked at first. Through all the years of their marriage, Harvey had been predictable and dependable. She listened to all the financial details, finally asking for a few days to think it over. A week later, she consented, somewhat charmed by the idea of being a doctor's wife.

The hospital called to set up an interview. The groundwork had been laid with friends of friends vouching for him, a case of knowing the right people. He hoped it made a difference. The interview went well in spite of his nervousness. He began to doubt he could go through with it. Waiting was all he could do.

Keeping it from Dottie was becoming more difficult. She hinted that she knew something was going on, but didn't press. She felt like an onlooker, waiting for the scene to unfold. Something had changed in the relationship; they both felt it. No one would give it substance by saying the words. The day he received the acceptance letter, he called her arranging to meet at a friend's apartment. He was abnormally calm.

Dottie arrived at the apartment on time, looking lowlier than he had noticed lately. She saw the champagne. "It's not a birthday and neither of us is off on a trip. What's up?"

"It's a surprise," he said. He sat down next to her and took her hands in his. "I think you know what I'm going to say." He paused, not quite sure of the best way to tell her. "I've done it. I applied to Flower Fifth and they've accepted me. I've done what I said was crazy, and sometimes I still think it is. But I've done it and i feel great. I'm the luckiest man in the world to have you. It would never have happened without you."

Dottie stared at him for a moment. She put her arms around him and slowly said, "Oh, Harvey. I'm so happy for you. It's marvelous. What a lovely surprise." There was a hint of sadness in her voice. He didn't hear it, his jubilation carried him into a flood of words of gratitude to her, regret that he couldn't tell her sooner, elation at the future. They spent the rest of the evening drinking champagne, dreaming of the wonderful doctor he would be. Dottie knew that it was Harvey who had come between them and it was simply a matter of time before there would be no room in his life for her. She said nothing.

The year of internship was one of little leisure time, much work and great satisfaction for Harvey. The days of lunches and rides on the Staten Island Ferry were gone, just as the telephone that linked them together when they couldn't meet. In the precious time together, the conversations were mostly about the hospital, the cases he was working on, how much he was learning. He was

happy and owed so much to her. Whenever possible, he'd sneak her up to his quarters and they'd make love under the strain of discovery. She felt the space between them widen.

The end of internship was followed by residency in psychiatry in one of the hospitals in upstate New York. They said their goodbyes in Manhattan with his promising to call her as often as possible. He would try to make arrangements to have her come and visit him. At first he called every few days. Then it was once a week. She did go to see him, saw the doctor he had become, the friend, no longer the lover. Neither spoke of the good times of the past. They had ended somewhere along the way. Toward the end of his residency, he wrote a paper which was to be published in a medical journal. He sent her a copy. On it he wrote, "To Dottie, With My Love. Thank you. Harvey."