

Cherise Wolas

ANIMAL SELECTION

Much later, I wondered, *should* I have shooed the cats from my bed? Shaken awake the silky tangle of feline true love curled at my feet? Shut *their* bedroom door against them? Jonathan and I were reading the paper on a snowy Sunday morning. When my phone rang, he hopped from the bed and left to brave the cold for coffee (mine decaf), and plastic muffins I would not eat, and he would eat too fast with an open mouth. He would not notice his trail of blueberry crumbs left on my pristine duvet. I let the machine answer. With Jonathan gone, I dove into the *Styles* section for my fix of New York weddings slated for the weekend. I sought out the intricate stories with interesting time-lines; six months from first meeting to altar, via internet dating; a second chance fifty years in the making, childhood sweethearts whose original spouses had died. When Jonathan returned I was reading about the featured marriage of the week. The wedding had occurred some time back, the black and white was platinum-hued; she was ethereal and winsome, he, handsome and beautifully formed. I could see they were madly in love. I looked up when Jonathan pulled off his sweats and sat on my bed in his underwear. He did not look fetching that way. We had been together a year, but I still hadn't figured out what didn't work: his squat legs, a chest too broad for his height (he was a short man), or his middle, a stomach flat from swimming, but a waist that was square. His nose was strong, his lashes long, his eyes pool blue. He had a great head of hair. I tried not to judge his limited vocabulary, his heavy reliance on Howard Stern as his primary source of news, or his occasional tendency to pout. A romantic, he was a great planner, and extraordinarily pleased, jealousy-free, when other men looked at me. He loved me to my distraction. On Friday nights he drove a hundred miles so we could spend weekends together. I appreciated the effort, most of the time. He had been talking marriage, pressuring me to fully commit. In the featured marriage, the bride was an artist, a portraitist of miniatures. She had long lived in Soho, in a building of lofts, a pioneer when the area was still woolly, the drafty spaces unconverted, free of things like showers and tubs, even toilets. Wildly successful later in life, to the journalist she admitted that she never possessed any innate ambition, and thought her refusal to overtly seek the brass ring had created demand for her work. She never married, had never come close. "A traditional life didn't interest me, but I never thought that meant I wouldn't have a husband and children," she was quoted as saying. She was used to a singularly expansive life when she met her now-husband in what, now, is their elevator. She considered him her first proper date in fifteen years. However, it was subtly implied that the artist had not foregone sex during those years. He was a businessman, two decades divorced, with a banked fortune, and two married daughters with whom he was close. Newly retired, needing a "sea change," he sold his expansive Park Avenue place. He instructed his broker to look below Houston. "It was serendipity that I bought the loft above hers." Soho had long been chic; his loft had been pricey. When he said, "Our relationship moved to the cycle of business," it was noted that his eyes sparkled, his laugh, deep and true. They met and in four-month increments, cohabitated, conjoined real estate, crooned vows. She was just fifty and he was closer to sixty, but

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they looked fresh and radiant, with a certain élan. In the photograph, their bodies interlocked well. Immediately after they wed, in a splash of a party, they adopted two children from two different countries that still allowed late parental-age adoptions. His first-issue daughters were already doting aunts. The artist's painting was going well: "My brush now has a certainty hard to define." He was writing a novel. Their adopted children, named according to their origins at birth, were wonderfully adjusted and precious. The formerly single artist, now incredulously married, was given the last words. "Early on, I decided to wait for the absolute right one. Having not settled, I was unchained when he came along." When Jonathan, a lazy reader at the best of times, grew bored, he said, "If you put the cats out of the bedroom, I'll go down on you." It was something he did exquisitely well. I looked at him but said nothing. He adjusted the band on his underpants. When the cats pawed at my chest, I lifted the comforter and let them burrow beneath, into the warmth of my wishbone, and when they settled down, in for the long haul, I closed my legs around them.