A few years ago, as sometimes happens to young people paying cheap rent in Brooklyn, I found myself suddenly driven from my apartment and furiously looking for a new one. This was February 2000, and rents were rising fast. After two weeks of panicked searching, I nearly settled in the windowless attic of an antique store on Atlantic Avenue, under the care of a ponytailed landlord who wanted me to address him as “Captain Dennis.”

Luck intervened. Out of the blue, a place found me: a bright one-bedroom floor-through apartment in Park Slope, priced at $950 a month—about two-thirds its market value. Even better, there was no credit check and no realtor’s fee. The landlady, a ninety-year-old widow who lived on the house’s first two floors, didn’t even know my last name until she saw it on the lease.

Of the two apartments that Mary rented out—one on the third and fourth floors of her maroon brick row house—one was occupied by Ben Seigle, a history teacher who was then a colleague of mine. He’s the one who saved me from Captain Dennis. When he introduced me to my prospective landlady one Saturday afternoon, she came waddling out of her ground-level door like an ill-tempered duck, well under five feet tall and weighing perhaps eighty pounds. A yellow pallor glazed her teeth and cheeks, and she wore a droopy, tattered housedress. With eyes made huge by the lenses of her horn-rimmed glasses, she looked me up and down forbiddingly until Ben finally informed her, “This is the man I told you about, Mary. For the apartment?” She motioned us to come inside.

Dogs were barking. Paint was peeling. A pungent blend of odors hung in the air: unwashed dog, stagnant broccoli water, scorched marinara. We walked
down a dim hallway. Flypapers dangled from the ceiling. At the kitchen, Mary stopped in her tracks and stared all around the room. We halted behind her.

“Where’d they go?” she shouted. “Where’d they go?” She lifted her hands in frustration. “We’re right behind you,” I offered. She turned around, looked at me sternly, and said, “Well—sit down.”

We signed a two-year lease.

2.

Seventeen months later, on a Wednesday morning in late August 2001, a few minutes after nine o’clock, I looked out the window of my third-floor apartment and saw that a moving truck had pulled up in front of Mary’s house.

I was the building’s last surviving resident: Ben had moved to Chicago, and Mary was four months dead. The men spilling out of the enormous truck and horsing around on the sidewalk had no interest in me. They’d come because Mary had died without a single living relative, and now her things—her lifetime’s collection—had to be taken to a government-owned warehouse downtown.

The man in charge of the operation, a heavyset official from the Public Administrator’s Office, which deals with Brooklyn’s uninherited property, explained to me that this would be the first of two rounds. Today they were taking only “the nice stuff,” the pieces that could be sold at auction: appliances, mirrors, chairs, and other things that family members, had they existed, might have wanted.

Two hours later, when most of those pieces had been loaded into the truck, the official said I could go back through Mary’s two floors and take any books that I liked, since they would only be thrown away. So I found myself in her living room, rummaging through boxes and kicked-over lamps. Scattered throughout the debris were dozens of books which, it would turn out, belonged not to Mary but to her husband, Russell, who had died many years before.

I was skimming through titles like *A History of Sacerdotal Celibacy* and *Sex Today in Wedded Life* when I came across a large cardboard box stuffed with litter. Its original contents had been a microwave oven, as shown in the faded color photograph along the side, but now the box held newspapers, envelopes, and some pamphlets. At the top there was a stack of yellowed newspaper clippings, mainly from the 1950s, and I dipped into them. The first headline I saw read,
SLAYS PARTNER OF 30 YEARS, AND THEN HE KILLS HIMSELF

and was followed by these:

POURS BENZINE ON SELF, LIGHTS IT, DIES OF BURNS
LEAPS OFF SPAN AS 2 FRIENDS WATCH IN CAR
DAD SENDS BOY ON ERRAND, SHOOTS WIFE AND HIMSELF
EXEC’S SOCIALITE WIFE PLUNGES TO HER DEATH
SLASHES WIFE, KILLS SELF WITH BREAD KNIFE
WIPES OUT HIS FAMILY OF 4 WITH A BOY SCOUT HATCHET

The box held about a hundred of these articles, all neatly scissored out of newspapers.

Beneath the clippings I found a pile of personal letters, all signed by or addressed to Russell. Buried even farther down in the box was a piece of white cardboard with a cartoon sketched on it in colored pencil. The cartoon showed a woman bending over, her buttocks bulky and tinted pink, her labia sagging, as a man with a superfluously large penis penetrated her. “Keep fuckin’ it,” read the caption. “Hard. Faster. Way up in me. I’m gonna go right now. Oh, you sweet fuckin’ son of a bitch.”

“Hey,” somebody said behind me. It was one of the moving men. My heart rate tripled. I shoved the cartoon back into the box.

The man passed through, and I stood there in a room full of trash, unsure of what to do. Here, in one microwave box, was the collection of a dead man’s papers—not only pornography, suicide notices, and personal letters, but legal documents, poems, to-do lists, dream narratives, journal entries, published articles, whole and fragmented manuscripts, original drawings, photographs, hotel receipts, and magazine clippings.

I could have ignored it—left it alone, to be carried out later and stuffed into a dumpster. But that seemed like a brutal choice, given the care with which the collection had been compiled. So when no one was looking I bearhugged the box and lumbered up the stairs to my apartment. The movers left around one o’clock, and I spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on my living room floor, organizing Russell’s mementos into piles, beginning the long process of piecing together the story of his life.
When I moved into the building, in March 2000, I learned within days why the rent was so low. To get to my apartment, I had to pass through Mary’s space, and despite her slowness she often managed to be standing there in the hallway, by the stairwell, to greet me with a long and unintelligible tirade. Or I would hear her shout from another room, “Who’s there?”—as though it were an awful surprise to find somebody else on the premises. “Hi, Mary,” I would call out as benignly as I could. “Oh,” she would say slowly and quietly as she finally reached the hallway and saw that I was merely her tenant, not a killer. Whether it was three in the afternoon or ten at night, the conversation would end with her saying kindly, and too loudly, “OK, good luck! Have a good night!”

Then there was the matter of the smell. As the weather turned warm that spring, the unpleasant odor that I had noticed from the very beginning took a terrifying turn for the worse. It seemed that Mary was losing control of her dogs, and the dogs were losing control of themselves. Turds cropped up near the staircase. Puddles of urine oozed their way under the radiator in the corridor. My friends were repulsed as they entered the building; some refused to come inside.

At night, in the long silences before falling asleep, I could hear every now and then all of the house’s stray noises coming up the stairwell. Mary’s television was sometimes turned up too loud. She would scold her dogs. They would bark endlessly. A door would bang shut, again and again. Her microwave would signal its finished job with a ding.

One of the things I learned early on, while going through Mary and Russell’s stuff, was that he had died late in 1965—a date I gleaned from a condolence letter Mary had stuck inside a French dictionary. Since the microwave oven didn’t become a common household appliance until the late seventies, well after Russell’s death, it might well have been Mary rather than Russell who put those contents in that box.

It took a long time to get through Russell’s pornographic cartoons. There were dozens of them, they were skillfully drawn, and they had a certain perverse appeal: the women with their reddened, oversized nipples and their bright smiles said things that, for all their lasciviousness, often sounded as if they had been written by someone who was disarmingly naive: “I’m not
kiddin', I want to be fucked!” and “Oh, brother, I’ve got some lovely things to suck—want to try ’em?” and “Oh you big-peckered son of a bitch—Oh it feels good—fuck—fuck—fuck me forever—wear my piss-hole out.”

Some, though, were genuinely disturbing—for example, the father-daughter scenes. These showed tiny girls in pigtails handling huge paternal penises, letting out remarks like, “When will I have big-woman orgasms, Poppa?” The father-daughter combo was common throughout the stash; in the rarer mother-son drawings, the boy was always a scrawny eight- or nine-year-old, the mother a voluptuous redhead, and a typical exchange had the boy proposing, “I’ll do the best I can for you, Momma,” and the mother assuring him, “You always do, Son.”

Contrasting with these drawings was Russell’s more “mainstream” work—the majority of the cartoons in the box—in which he focused on radically more acceptable themes such as Faith, Peace, and Temperance. A typical cartoon, titled “Where It Rests,” showed a large planet Earth sitting on a book. Russell labeled the globe the FATE OF OUR WORLD, and the foundation it rests on DYNAMIC, INTELLIGENT, CHRISTIAN FAITH.

5.

Mary’s decline was swift. By the autumn of 2000, her life had been taken over by a nonprofit guardian agency. Apparently a neighbor had reported her to the city as someone who had lost control of her own affairs, and a judge appointed the official caretaker. (I worried that one of the pieces of evidence given for her senility had been the outrageously low rent she was charging Ben and me.) The agency took control of her money and provided her with a daytime home attendant.

Late one night in March 2001, almost a year after I’d moved into the building, a sharp new smell entered the air. It was gas, and thinking there might be a leak, I called KeySpan. Two enormous uniformed men showed up and ordered me to lead them downstairs. In the kitchen we found Mary awake—at one in the morning—standing and staring at a roaring television. A stove burner was turned on, flameless, shooting gas into the room. Her dogs were going bonkers, barking maniacally, and I had to shout over them, “Mary, you left your burner on!”—to which she cried out joyously, “That’s my dog!”

She was unable to string together a single sentence. I felt for her, but I was also furious: this one senile gaffe could have blown up the building.
Three nights later, smelling gas again, I stormed downstairs and found another burner turned on without a flame. This time ten seconds passed before she knew I was standing in the same room.

It was the only time I ever raised my voice with her: “If you do this again, we could die, Mary. We could die! Do you understand what I’m saying to you? Do you understand?”

She said, “OK. Good luck. Have a good night.”

6.

“One of the first things I learned to do at school was masturbation,” Russell wrote. “They showed me just how to do it. At Williams one day we all played with ourselves. I went home with Mahlon Kaiser and that’s what we did before we slept. The intricacies were discussed and the ways it felt best.” I found these words in Russell’s seven-page memoir about his childhood in Indiana—an unfinished, lightly annotated typescript that was well preserved in the box. Here I learned that Russell was born in 1901 and that at a young age he wanted to leave the family farm to make a career as an artist. “I could draw better than most kids of my age,” he wrote, “and probably was told often ‘You ought to be an artist.’ I had such important things to do that I had no time to waste on the farm.”

Mostly the memoir consisted of small, childlike impressions full of non sequiturs and with a special keenness for the sexual:

Someone told of a man they knew who had a penis about a foot long, or more. I tried to make mine so near that as possible. The first time sperm came I was frightened and thought I was diseased or something. I was in a wagon at the time waiting for dad.

I didn’t like Jake White. He did the most unreasonable things with his penis. One day I finally got mad enough at him to keep hitting him. The rabbit whose leg I tore off, I was sorry about this and worried for some time.

Once with one or two other boys at Potter’s Bridge I smoked part of a cigar. It made me sick and I was afraid I was going to die.

7.

Three weeks after the gas scare, on a Saturday morning in April 2001, I woke to the sound of the downstairs buzzer. Somebody outside was crying Mary’s
name. When I got down to the stoop, the weekend home attendant—a middle-aged Caribbean woman—greeted me with a desperate shout. I let her in, and when we went down to the first floor we found Mary at the foot of her bed, crumpled up and unable to move. She could only answer our questions with groans.

There was no telling how long she’d been lying there—she could have fallen anytime after five o’clock the previous day, when Friday’s home attendant had left the house.

We grabbed an arm apiece and lifted Mary onto the bed; she was heavier than I expected. Later that day, she was taken to Methodist Hospital with a fractured leg. She would never see the house again.

8.

Looking back at his days on the farm, Russell thought he could pinpoint the one moment—his single tragic mistake—that had ruined everything. It happened one Sunday afternoon in 1918.

He was seventeen, still in high school, and he had gone nosing through his uncle’s private possessions. There, Russell later wrote, “I found a book on sex aimed at young men—a ‘horror book’ such as those written in the previous century, as this one probably was. I borrowed it, read part of it, and took it quite seriously. This brought on great conflict between religion and sex, which in turn produced a distressing symptom, great difficulty in getting my breath. It was also a frightening symptom, because when at its worst, it made me feel certain I was going to die.”

For several months after the event in his uncle’s room, Russell suffered from what we would now call panic attacks—harrowing moments when he literally believed he was on the verge of death. However, he didn’t seek medical help (perhaps because he thought he’d have to come clean about reading the sex book), and since he was still in high school, his grades dropped off sharply.

Then, quite suddenly, the panic attacks stopped. There was no explanation. Russell thought he was cured.

9.

When Mary was taken to the hospital, the only ones affected in any serious way were her dogs: Sherry, the black poodle who sniffed legs; and Judy, my favorite, the long-eared golden spaniel, still a puppy. (Judy had replaced a dog—also
named Judy—who had died the previous summer.) A guardian agency official informed me that I was now in charge of these animals.

What I found downstairs was authentically shocking. The dogs were starving, emaciated. Judy’s ribs poked prominently out; Sherry, tied to the basement doorknob, stared at her paws and refused to get up from her soiled pallet. Dried excrement stuck to their backsides in clumps. That first night they devoured three cans of wet food in three minutes, then lapped hotly at my legs; Judy, in her excitement, stepped on her water bowl and sent it crashing into the radiator.

Once when Ben and I went down to feed the dogs (and clean the floor, which they never failed to desecrate with the most amazing quantities of turds), we saw that the kitchen had been ransacked. Sherry and Judy had gotten loose from their leashes and mauled a basket full of photographs, strewing them all over the floor. Cleaning it all up, we came across some eerie pictures of Mary as a young woman—dwarfish, broad faced, and never smiling.

A week after Mary went into the hospital, Ben and I walked over there to try to visit her. Just as we got to the room, we found a nurse preparing Mary to be moved for an X-ray, and the little inert body looked pitiful under the white blanket. She was barely conscious, but there was agony in her face, and as the nurse wheeled her out of the room, I saw through Mary’s yellow teeth that her mouth, tongue, and throat were black.

On 3 May 2001, a Thursday, I went down to feed the dogs and found a note from the home attendant written on a piece of pink scrap paper.

“Hi Mike,” it read. “Mary died this morning at 9:15.”

10.

A couple of years after Russell’s sex-book incident, in the summer of 1920, a chautauqua passed through his part of Indiana.

Named after the upstate New York lake upon whose shore the first such program began as a religious retreat in the 1870s, the chautauqua evolved into a traveling edification circus: rather than clown cars, merry-go-rounds, and bearded ladies, it offered religion and history lectures, art exhibits, and musical revues.

At the Indiana show Mr. Pitt Parker, a “chalk talker”—an entertainer who drew cartoons as he spoke—caught young Russell’s eye. According to the Indianapolis Times—in an article written in 1934, when Russell was the paper’s
political cartoonist—he “got the ‘bug’ badly,” and after graduating from high school he spent several academic years at Wittenberg College in Ohio (without ever getting his degree) and the summers as a “tent man” on the chautauqua circuit.

He was an artist now, a performer. This was his boyhood dream. With the rest of the chautauqua crew he roam all over the country, and not once did the specter of those panic attacks appear—not even when his mother died early in the twenties. Russell had untangled himself from the farm.

When he went back to his home county, it wasn’t to rejoin the family but to propose marriage. My landlady’s predecessor was a pretty local girl named Helen, and Russell married her on 1 July 1928.

11.

A week after Mary’s death, when I got home from work and went downstairs to feed the dogs, I found that they’d been taken away. The agency that had managed Mary’s affairs now withdrew from the scene; their duty, they said, had only been to manage Mary’s final days. Now the city would take over the property, because there were no relatives and no friends. The agency had paid for the burial with Mary’s own money.

The fridge had not been opened for a month. The milk was solid as tofu and had to be flushed down the toilet, the potato salad was navy blue, and some pasta in a Tupperware container looked surprisingly edible. All got triple bagged.

12.

Russell had joined the Indianapolis Times in about 1931, starting out as the “lodge page editor” and rising quickly to the post of cartoonist. It was amazing good fortune. The only problem was that at about the same time his panic attacks began again.

In the peppy 1934 Indianapolis Times profile, Russell

strides down the street each morning on his way to the Times office in deep reverie. He does his thinking while he’s taking his morning constitutional and should some brazen passerby let loose with one of those piercing whistles to attract some friend, up comes his head with a jerk. He is almost a young Puritan, but his thoughts at that precious
moment are far from Puritanical. For people who whistle on the street
are his pet peeve—his only one, in fact.

[Russell] at one time expected to become a minister, but instead, has
drifted to the other extreme. He has become a newspaper cartoonist,
and now he strives for effect in his cartoons on the ‘Times’ editorial
page instead of driving home his point from the pulpit.

Also from this period was a letter written from Spelman College on the
stationery of the NAACP journal the Crisis: the letter requested that Russell
finish up a particular cartoon and then give the journal permission to run it;
the signature on the letter was that of W. E. B. Du Bois.

Clearly, Russell and Helen never should have left Indiana. They seem
to have been happy there. Russell was a local star whose opinions were being
heard. Kiwanis and Rotary clubs asked him to speak at their luncheons.

But Russell was too ambitious to stay put. His idol Rollin Kirby, who in
1922 had won the first Pulitzer Prize given for editorial cartooning, drew for
the New York Post; Russell must have figured that to hit it big, he would have
to head east. He moved to Connecticut, alone at first, to put himself within
striking distance of Manhattan. Helen remained temporarily in Indiana, and in
July 1937 she got a postcard from her husband that noted, “One of my cartoons
was carried in a Camden, NJ paper. Gotta go to NY tomorrow. We’ll get there
yet.”

13.

At the end of June 2001, shortly after Mary’s death, Ben moved to Chicago,
leaving me alone in the house. There was still no indication of when anyone
was going to step forward and do anything. No relatives arrived. No city offi-
cials either. I paid no rent. The place was mine. That summer, on vacation from
Teaching, I spent many afternoons in Mary’s backyard—reading the paper,
basking in the sun, and stretching my legs out among the weeds.

I dreamed of taking over the place—maybe a judge would just sign over
the house to me, bowing to my rights as sole tenant; maybe I would retire from
Teaching and become a landlord, if not a full-fledged real estate mogul. Maybe
I had become Mary and Russell’s heir—by default.

In the end it was the gas company that ruined my little paradise. I went
out of town for three weeks, and when I came back in early August there was
a piece of paper posted to the front door, warning that gas service in the whole
building was about to be cut off. The unpaid bill was for more than thirteen hundred dollars.

I called Mary’s former guardian agency to alert them to the bill, and a person there told me to call the Public Administrator’s Office of Kings County. Even now, it is a complete mystery to me why they had not told me to do this immediately after Mary’s death—or why they had not done it themselves.

“Be sure you have the date of death,” I was told. “They’re really disorganized in that office.”

When Russell and Helen moved to Manhattan in 1938, life must have seemed full of promise. Russell’s idol Kirby even wrote him a personal invitation to stop by the Post for advice. But one thing kept getting in the way: at any moment, without warning, Russell might lose his breath and be seized by the fear of death.

“I went from one doctor to another,” Russell wrote of this time, “who did not understand the cause of my breathlessness. I experimented with eating very light meals five times a day, fletchering [that is, chewing his food very slowly], fasting, eliminating meat from my diet, drinking hot water, holding a hot water bottle on my stomach, and for months I wore an abdominal belt because one doctor said I had ‘fallen stomach.’” He went to a chiropractor and an osteopath, tried deep breathing and exercise, and sought relief in cod liver oil, yeast, and a myriad of antacids. His condition only got worse.

Crippled by intermittent terror, he discovered that a young doctor lived in his building, and one night, in the midst of an especially hideous episode, with Helen weeping by his side, Russell summoned his neighbor and begged for help.

It came in the form of a grain-and-a-half capsule of Seconal—an extremely addictive barbiturate that in those days was sometimes prescribed to treat anxiety. When the drug kicked in, Russell was at last able to catch his breath; but he would take the drug every day for the next twenty-five years.

Near the end of his life, when he claimed to have put his addiction to rest, Russell wrote a memoir—seven pages in typescript, with extensive revisions in pen—titled “I Was a Barbiturate Addict.” This explained to me why Russell’s box had such a scant record of the early 1940s: during that time, he had gradually stopped cartooning and begun working in hotels—because
hotels had resident physicians who could write Russell prescriptions. Seconal, it turned out, was even more harmful to his cartooning career than the panic attacks had been.

No evidence remains of what Helen did during Russell's unraveling. Somewhere, there must have been a pivotal moment, maybe a public breakdown. All I know is that in the spring of 1945, Russell landed in the Pilgrim psychiatric hospital in West Brentwood, Long Island.

15.

“That guardian agency does not have a very organized office,” grumbled Mr. Hill, the Public Administrator investigator I reached on the phone. “They didn't give me the heads-up on this.” He was cranky when I told him what had happened, and he audibly scoffed at any mention of the guardian agency. I had called the right place.

Mr. Hill and his partner, Mr. Sultan—both gray haired and mustachoed—first visited the house during a mid-August heat wave, waving their badges and taking Polaroids of all the rooms. They were amiable, brusque, fact-loving men who held clipboards and wrote things down with fat felt pens. Mr. Sultan took a Polaroid of me standing next to Mr. Hill.

I learned that in cases like this, when a property owner dies without heirs, Mr. Hill and Mr. Sultan show up and set things in order. They comb the premises, searching for anything that might help the government take over the estate—a will (if they’re lucky), the traces of living relatives, keys to safety-deposit boxes, bank account numbers. Mr. Hill explained that he would make a full inventory of all the items in the house—except mine, of course; then everything would be cleared out and anything of value sold. Finally, the house itself would be auctioned off. “What about me?” I asked.

“You don’t worry about you,” said Mr. Hill, dad-like. “You have a lease—right? You are gonna be OK.”

“Do you guys do this all day?”

“Yep,” said Mr. Sultan proudly. “For all of Brooklyn.”

16.

From the time span of Russell’s stay at the mental institution, I found thirteen letters from him and eight from Helen, who remained in New York and visited him on Sundays. Helen’s letters try to soothe and reassure her husband,
while Russell's try to convince his wife that he is soothed and reassured. Helen refers to her visits—"I couldn't believe it when the nurse said it was time to leave"—and sometimes makes gentle jokes: "Yesterday I went to the doctor. He thinks I'll live—and I'm afraid so too." But her typical tone is serious: "Please don't worry or feel too alone out there. I can take care of things and I have the very best guidance."

Being separated strained their marriage. "I'm hoping we'll find some other way to live than we were before I came in here," Russell wrote her. "Can't we figure out a better way than we're doing now?" By the time of this letter, he had received (according to his own count) twelve shock treatments and was facing another eight before his time was up.

At last, Russell's tone gets frantic: "I certainly hope the treatment here gets me fixed up, partly because I want our status settled. I want you but if I don't get well I don't like the idea of being a burden to you any longer. Meanwhile I have more memories of your sweetness than you realize. The rest is—just life."

17.

Mr. Hill and Mr. Sultan pasted seals over the doors to Mary's second-floor rooms, but not over the door at the bottom of the stairs that led to her kitchen and bedroom. I was curious to see what they had done—and, to tell the truth, I was starting to feel that the house was my personal domain—so one Sunday afternoon in late August, I went down there to take a look.

Back in May, the dogs had done a decent job of wrecking the kitchen, chewing up papers and spreading photographs all over the floor. But that was paltry compared to what Hill and Sultan had done. The men had mutilated the place. The kitchen was carpeted wall-to-wall in speckled white paper, and boxes of knickknacks had been sprinkled on top. A barefoot person might not have escaped alive. Cracked-glass picture frames cast spider webs over smiling faces; they'd probably been knocked over when the mattress was hurled against the wall. I noticed a framed picture of young Queen Elizabeth II, resting on a Certificate of Appreciation dated 20 September 1994, from Feed America, thanking Mary for her assistance to "America's disaster victims and homeless." There, too, was her Claimant's Insurance Book from 1956, noting her departure from Gracette Lingerie on Madison Avenue and documenting her twenty years' experience as a seamstress. There was a booklet entitled "The
Truth About Constipation” by Victor H. Lindlahr. Soiled rubber gloves, the calling card of the Public Administrator, were scattered about. A lone, massive fly flew desperately from room to room.

Mixed in with the rubber gloves and the ripped envelopes were dozens of photographs. One showed Mary, maybe thirty years old, posing with neatly folded hands in front of a brownstone stoop. She wore a fresh floral-print dress and a morose expression.

The photo that interested me the most was a small, black-and-white portrait of a man. Appearing to be in his sixties, he wore a dark suit and black-framed glasses. With a visage of almost poignant benevolence, he was holding up a stick with a parakeet perched on it. He was looking the parakeet straight in the eye, and smiling.

This was my first glimpse of Russell.

That photo was the only thing I removed from the wreck. The following Wednesday, the Public Administrator’s moving men pulled up to the house for the first round of cleanup.

18.

Among the relics of Russell’s hospital stay I also came across something of more prurient interest: a sheet of notebook paper covered on both sides in pencil-scrawl. At the top he had written, “Why should strict and uncompromising monogamy be socially useful? Why—if the wife agrees—should a husband not have intercourse with a widow or a divorced woman? Why should not a wife—if the husband consents—have intercourse with a husband who is unfortunate enough to have a crippled or hopelessly sick wife? What is the virtue in denying for denial’s sake?”

Below this paragraph is a list of questions. “How serious were you when you mentioned it? What did you expect me to say?” “How would you feel if I did the same?” “What would you do if I got out in a month? You are not planning to quit. I would be willing that you go to him even on nights when I was out. I would not only not interfere. I would help wherever I could. Would you be willing that I do the same? And would you feel our marriage was over if I did?” At one point, he simply lists ten women’s names—perhaps his preferred partners, should this arrangement be implemented.

Whichever path they chose, there was no doubt that the marriage deteriorated rapidly during and after his time in the hospital. Nothing in the box
testified to how Russell got out, but there was clear evidence that by 1947, he was in Mexico, alone, still hooked on Seconal but hoping the warm weather might soothe his anxiety. Helen had stayed in New York, and Russell's father had died of a heart attack while feeding livestock, leaving his son $2,735.86—this according to a letter from Russell's brother on 1 March 1947. Russell did not return to Indiana for his father's funeral.

There's a poem in the folder that probably addresses Helen:

I gave you your chance at life, my love,
I gave you the best I knew,
And now that you've chosen the ancient groove,
There's nothing for me to do.
But I hoped for you—for I loved you much.
Now I know that it could not be.
With a chasm of centuries in between
You could not take the path with me.

Helen's last letter in the box went to Russell in Mexico and is dated 16 March 1947. Helen's old mollifying tone has vanished; she begins, “Gug! It's been a helluva long time since I got around to writing you. Missed me?” She's angry. She relays the advice of an accountant regarding Russell's tax situation: "Uncle Sam would let you alone as long as you felt Mexico was better." The letter ends: "It snowed here again last night. It's cold and sunny today. Some people would say it's a nice day. For me I'll take the snow and blow and rain. It's alive.”

In a postscript, she mentions coolly, "Jim was in town one night last week. I had cocktails and dinner with him. We always laugh as though things were funny.” And that's the end of Helen.

19.

Late in the afternoon of 18 September 2001, after getting home from work, I spent several hours watching a crew of men load a dumpster with the refuse of Mary's house—the second wave of cleanup. One of the mattresses still had a price tag on it, $79.50; an old man passing by stopped and thought about taking it. The woman in charge of the garbage operation—a wrinkled, chain-smoking blond—begged me to take some pots and pans.

Heading out that evening, around nine o'clock, I caught one of the workers peeing on the front of the house.
In another of Russell’s many unpublished memoirs, this one called “My Emotional Escape to Mexico,” he says he went down south to recover from his shortness of breath—leaving out any mention of the barbiturate addiction, the ineffectual hospital stay, or the dissolving marriage. The memoir is a long-winded description of Mexico, with special emphasis on the citizens’ sexual attitudes and practices.

The most bizarre piece of evidence from Russell’s Mexican adventure is a document dated 24 September 1948 and marked “Requirements for Marriage License in Arkansas.” It is an application for marriage between him, “age 47,” and one Maria Luisa Contrera-Romo, of Nuevo Leon, “age 34.” So it’s possible, though hard to believe, that Mary was actually Russell’s third wife. Poor Señorita Contrera-Romo did not turn up anywhere else in the microwave oven box.

Finally, gutted of everything but me, the house was ready for auction. The next Saturday and Sunday, a soft-spoken court officer opened up the building, and about seventy sets of people had a look. They had learned about my house from an ad the Public Administrator had put in the newspaper.

Many were frightened by the urine-logged carpets, the sagging ceilings, and the comically unstable staircase. A few were probably turned off by my presence, since a tenant can slow down renovation. But for the most part the mood was convivial: people moved through Mary’s empty rooms, flushed her toilets, ran her faucets, chuckled at her flypaper. They pointed out details in the fireplaces and ceilings; they argued with one another about the building’s dimensions; they speculated on the place’s value and on how much repair was needed.

I talked to dozens of people. Many were feeling me out, maybe to see if I was a reasonable tenant; my lease wouldn’t run out until the following March, and whoever bought the house would be stuck with me until then. Neighbors came to see the inside for the first time. “What a tough cookie Mary was!” somebody said. “Look, she put the radiator right in front of the fireplace.” “What’s going to happen to you, Sweetie?”

It seemed that whenever I found myself alone in a room with one of these strangers, before long I was listening to a confession of the most personal
information. One man, probably in his late sixties, told me about his childhood in Poland, his family's flight to Siberia during World War II, and his return home to find everything destroyed. Then he suddenly frowned, said “I never talk about this,” and left.

A hardware store owner explained to me his new philosophy of life. “I’m starting over, Mike. I have a new woman, and a new life, and I think this house—this house is it.”

22.

Mexico was a bust. When Russell returned to New York in 1949, he moved into the Hotel Chesterfield on West Forty-ninth Street, where the McGraw-Hill building now stands. His marriage finished, he briefly aspired to go abroad; I have a letter from the Government of India’s Ministry of Education, dated 19 July 1949, informing Russell that “it is regretted that there is at present no suitable post to be offered to you.” (Mrs. Asghar, education officer, kindly tells him, “We are glad to know that you have a special interest in India.”) Probably living off what was left of his small inheritance, he began to draw cartoons again, took a class on magazine writing at City College, and wrote “My Emotional Escape to Mexico.”

A letter from a professor at the University of Chicago, written in May 1951, begins, “In answer to yours of the 25th, I think the most authentic statement on the chances of going insane is to be found in . . .”

23.

The morning of the auction I called in sick, then showed up early and took my seat in Room 319 of the Supreme Court building, that drab edifice on Cadman Plaza in downtown Brooklyn. I wasn’t there to buy the house, of course; I was there to stay on top of things, to defend my interests, to know who my new landlords were at the very moment they assumed the role.

The courtroom was standard looking, except that instead of a judge up front there was a wide panel of clerks and accountants. About two hundred people trickled in and lined up to register for the neon-green cards that would let them bid on any of the nineteen lots for sale. I recognized many people from the open house, including a pair of siblings named Suzann and George, the bidders I liked the best; the hardware store owner; a tall guy with a baby; a couple of chipper newlyweds; and a duo of obese Hasidim in black suits.
The hardware store owner, eyes closed, was praying by the back wall, moving his lips visibly.

24.
The last verifiable artifact from Russell’s pre-Mary era was a note-to-self scrawled on a sheet of lined paper—maybe a page torn from a diary. “I have nothing left,” he wrote. “No job, no wife, no home, no friends, no education, no religion, no money. I don’t even have clothes. . . . Today I have been worried, wondering whether the relatively good days will ever return. Will I ever be able to think again?”

The good days would return soon enough. Sometime in the winter or spring of 1952, Russell—fifty-one years old and broke—met a short, severe-looking forty-two-year-old seamstress named Mary. She had grown up in Brooklyn and, according to the custom for unmarried Italian women, still lived with her parents. I don’t know how the two first got acquainted, the microwave box providing no record of the event. But in June of that year Mary wrote Russell two letters that ended up in my hands. Her stationery was pink, her spelling erratic.

The first letter, written Sunday night, 15 June 1952, begins, “Darling: This is my first letter from me. This is a confession. You did not know how serious it was for me to be in love with you.” She says that Russell is “7 or 8 miles away”—he must have found summer employment outside the city. “I’m willing to drop out of existence, + find myself in your arms next Sunday instead, giving you my love. I can easily give you my life, + you know it, will you ever find it out, you took me so innocently. Please don’t run away from my life. I love you so much more now that you are away. Write as often as you can, + remember darling, I love you, I worship you—I idolize you + you know it. I send many many kisses. Don’t forget me darling.” She signs off cryptically, “Enclosed you find my picture. You know the reason.”

I don’t know if he ever wrote her back—of about a hundred letters in the box, not a single one was from Russell to Mary.

25.
My house was first on the list to be sold, and the upset price, where bidding begins, was set at $500,000. The auctioneer, a middle-aged man in a sharp double-breasted suit, said, “Do we have five hundred?” and after a few seconds
of hesitation, the first card went up—Suzann. Then the tall guy, the hardware store owner, the chipper newlyweds. Neon-green cards were popping up all over the room—everybody wanted Russell and Mary’s house.

Bidding moved swiftly through the five hundred thousands and into the sixes, driven up by amateurs too eager to restrain themselves. You could spot the experienced bidders, because they entered the fray late and would only raise their cards when the house was almost in someone else’s hands.

By the high sixes only three bidders remained—the tall guy, the Hasidic duo, and a stranger with a menacing real-estate-mogul expression. Naturally I rooted for the only amateur standing, but alas, he was done in by the menacing stranger’s bid of $700,000. There was then a moment of quiet; the crowd glanced at the Hasidic duo, then at the menacing stranger, then back at the duo. With a second’s hesitation that I suspect was only for dramatic effect, one of the Hasidic men bid five thousand more, and his rival crumbled.

“Sold!” cried the auctioneer.

By October 1953 at the latest—the date of a congratulations card I found in the box—Russell and Mary were married, and by the following year they had moved into the Park Slope house.

These middle-aged newlyweds kept a distance from their neighbors: the ones who were still around in 2001 couldn’t tell me much about either of them. In the twelve years of their marriage, Mary kept working as a seamstress, while her husband stayed home to draw cartoons, care for his pet parakeets, and write articles for tiny Christian publications. He did not, apparently, contribute to the purchase of the house.

In fact it isn’t clear how Russell made a living during these years, if he did at all. He had, in the past, been a full-time cartoonist; now he was an armchair intellectual—an amateur psychologist, ornithologist, and poet. In the tranquil realm of his second-floor living room, he must have regularly perused his heavy tomes on abnormal sexuality and psychology. He wrote letters to public figures, including one to Jawaharlal Nehru of India congratulating him on “keeping the peace.” He pitched articles to national magazines. He sent a letter suggesting ways to improve the shuttle bus service at Idlewild Airport. He wrote to prominent scholars asking them complicated questions, the renowned geographer Ellsworth Huntington of Yale University writing back to refer Rus-
sell to part 3 of his *Mainsprings of Civilization* and its explanation of climate’s influence on North American robustness.

He also wrote verse:

I strolled this afternoon beneath the old and rugged pine  
Where one sweet evening years ago I asked you to be mine  
I think I found the very spot where we were sitting then  
And, ah but it was good to sit and reminisce again!

Meanwhile, Mary brought home the bacon. In 1951 Russell was a drug addict with no prospects; by 1954 Mary had transformed him into a drug addict with a spacious Park Slope house and no need to work. He had his books, his wife, his parakeets, and of course his pills.

Mary gave Russell shelter—which, unfortunately, leaves him open to cynical evaluations. He was a fairly desperate man when they met. Did he really fall in love with this homely old maid, or was it that he found himself conveniently in the arms of a woman with a house to share? (There was almost nothing in Russell’s box to provide information on Mary’s parents, but documents from Mary’s destroyed kitchen showed that the house, purchased circa 1953, belonged only to people with Mary’s maiden name.)

There’s a love poem in the box which, in my kinder moments, I like to think is Russell writing to Mary. It’s a first draft written messily in pencil.

I lived a lifetime in one glorious week  
That lifetime started when I first kissed you  
And I had such love as all men seek

How could such a fragile lovely  
little thing as you  
Become a lighthouse, strong and high  
to shed its beams  
Upon the turmoiled waters of my life?

After two illegible lines, the poem ends:

I’d trade the rest of my life dear  
for one more night with you
It *could* be referring to Mary. There was no doubt, even to me, that Mary had rescued Russell. But the poem's tone seems a little inappropriate for such a thoroughly attainable object of desire as Mary must have been.

This mattered to me. I wanted Mary to be Russell’s savior. He may have been an awful poet, but I wanted him to be a good man. I wanted him and Mary to have been happy. And how could they not have been? Russell, who had recently been wandering the East Forties high on Seconal and dreaming of India, and Mary, who had never lived apart from her parents and had toiled as a seamstress for two decades without finding a husband—they had found each other, they had joined together in a life of shared solitude.

And, according to a poem written late in Russell’s life—in typescript, with corrections in red pencil—they had conceived a child:

> It was dusk when we began our long journey homeward,
> And I noticed Mary leaned a little more
> On my arm than when we started from the village,
> And she walked a little slower than before.
>
> As the years go by we both are growing older,
> And I know we haven’t very long to stay.
> Then we’ll tread the path that Bobbie took before us
> And we’ll meet him in some other world some day.
>
> And I think perhaps the Lord will let us have him
> As our little boy, our little man again.
> And we’ll have him with us there again forever,
> In a land devoid of sorrow, tears, and pain.

Mawkish lines, I know, but they made me put aside my suspicions and my cynical conclusions. They made me ready to believe in Russell and Mary’s marriage, in their persistent, childless, weary love. He had washed up, nearly drowned, on her shores, and she had been there, as he said, like a lighthouse, shedding her beams on him. Bad metaphor, maybe, but this was still a love story—though Russell spoiled the mood by vandalizing his poem. At the top he angrily scrawled **BAD**, and then at the bottom under the last line, **AMATEURISH**, in red pencil. Whether he was disavowing the poem’s form or its meaning, I will of course never know.
The box had not a single other trace of Bobbie, Russell and Mary’s “little man.”

27.

I imagine it this way: When Russell died in 1965, Mary discovered the collection of relics from his first life, the one she was never part of. She found that in the place where Russell kept his precious possessions, much more space was reserved for Helen than for herself. She found that in his free time her husband was drawing cartoons depicting grown men having sex with children and that all along he had been watching the suicides of the world with a fascination that bordered on envy. No wonder she was a mean old woman.

“Mary was a terrible bitch—forgive me, I know she’s dead, but it’s true,” said an elderly man named Tom, who lived a few doors down and who approached me once as I sat on the stoop of the house during the Public Administrator’s cleanup. “Mary’s husband was a very nice man,” he went on. “He kept birds in the house.” But Mary was mean. She screamed at tenants. She harassed passersby. She never cooperated with the block association. “Look here,” he said, pointing to the thirty-foot-high tree in front of the house. “She didn’t even want this tree to be planted. She screamed and screamed when we planted it!”

One time, he recalled, when one of Mary’s tenants needed some plumbing repairs and Tom volunteered to look at the problem, she saw him in the house and shrieked, “Get the hell out! I don’t want no Greeks in this house!”

I said to Tom, “Well, isn’t it still sad that her stuff is being carted out like this, and that she had no family or friends?”

“But you have to be good!” he shouted. “You have to be good in life! You can’t be a bad person!” His face was turning red.

28.

When I got home from the auction, I looked at my desk. It was covered in Russell’s stuff.

His porn was discreetly concealed in its folder; his letters were overflowing theirs. Photographs of him, with and without parakeets, lay scattered here and there—under a dictionary, leaning against my telephone. His books were stacked on my dresser: Theodor Reik’s Psychology of Sex Relations, Wilhelm Stekel’s two-volume Impotence in the Male, the unexpurgated Lady Chatterley’s
Lover with its forlorn midway bookmark. And I know it may sound odd, but for the first time during all of this, I felt embarrassed. These things didn’t belong to me. They didn’t even belong to Mary. They were the remains of someone I had never met—the secret registry of all his feelings, his ambitions, and his terrors. Did anyone else, anywhere, know about these things? It felt unseemly—it was unjust—for me to know things about Russell that no one else had known.

I had begun to let myself believe that when I’d finished studying all the scraps of paper, I would *know* Russell. I had started to believe my own theories about him, and he had taken form in my mind as a gentle, even meek man, talented and upright, but given to panic and eager to withdraw into a reclusive space where he cared for tropical birds and dabbled in perversion.

In truth, I knew nothing. Russell had died nine years before I was born. He could have been saving the suicide clippings for an article he was writing, could have been drawing pornography just to pay the bills. His love for Mary could have been totally free of financial motive. I could have had him all wrong. There’s no way I *couldn’t* have had him all wrong.

It was right then, as I surveyed Russell’s stuff laid out on the desk, that I decided to go look through my own closet and drawers, my files and boxes. I had a chastening couple of hours, pretending to be some young man rummaging through my things in the 2070s. There were so many buffoonish photographs, inexplicable ticket stubs, letters girls wrote me when I was in high school. (“I love airplanes! Can you believe they really stay in the sky?”) There were dozens of callow, petty poems, differing from Russell’s only in their lack of rhyme. It was easy to laugh at Russell, with his cartoons and his strange ideas, but at the end of that laughter lay a grim realization: any life, examined this way, looks ludicrous. We put ourselves at the mercy of whoever survives us, and I hope I am luckier than Russell.

And yet, was he really unlucky? If I hadn’t gone down there and stolen his stuff, it would have ended up in a dumpster—rained on, ripped up, or strewn in the street. Neighborhood kids might have made off with the sketches of naked women, but the remnants of Russell’s mind would have been snuffed out forever, his little electrical current grounded. As it happened, he crossed somebody else’s mind.

I had postponed Russell’s *second* death—the one that occurs as soon as none of the minds in the world still harbor you. Russell got remembered—and that, a hundred years after his birth, was not such a bad end.
A few months later, I left Mary’s house. I spent a year and a half in Cobble Hill, living in a garden apartment owned by good friends who charged me less than the place was worth. Then I got married and moved into an apartment in Boerum Hill, where my landlords were brusque neighborhood butchers. Finally, about a year ago, my wife and I moved back to my old neighborhood in Park Slope, just around the corner from Mary’s old house. Walking by at night, I can see that the place has been completely renovated, the insides gutted and replaced.

I still have Russell’s box. It sat in a corner of my bedroom in Cobble Hill, then in the bottom of my closet in Boerum Hill, and now it occupies a space in our basement storage bin. A fresh new plastic storage container holds the withering old cardboard microwave oven box. I really ought to throw the thing away; it’s taking up more than its fair share of space, and I’m a little concerned that its contents might one day be mistaken for my own belongings. But I can’t quite bring myself to get rid of the thing.

Inside the box, on the surfaces of papers, people are still talking to each other, and to themselves. The parakeet man is still annotating his margins. Wives are still writing their husbands. Editors are still rejecting articles. Poems are still rhyming. Seconal is still being prescribed. Men and women, in all the colors of pastel, are still making love in the midst of the most outrageous exclamations.

Whenever I take out the box—and I do take it out every now and then—I find their voices lingering there, interrupting each other and blending together:

*I seem to hear you knocking at the door and you’re not there.*

*I have slept little the last 2 nights being exerted with sexual thoughts.*

*I am sorry to hear that you have not had the best of financial luck but of course that is the way it’s always been with artists.*

*More trouble with their phallic parts for a longer period than any other group in history!*

*I feel I will be able to cut down a lot on the seconal.*

*I’m comin’! I’m comin’! Stick it in as far as it will go!*
We danced a lot last night. The girls were over for around 3 hours. Miss Scotty was on. I have been helping Miss Bigelow in the grain room.

Oh darling, it feels as though it was almost touching my heart.

My dream. I was somewhere in Mexico.

It’s really swell having you in the family.

But there is a great deal of hope in this. I feel a new and freer life is opening up.