TERRY BISSON

THE TWO JANETS

I’M NOT ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE who thinks you have to read a book to get something out of it. You can learn a lot about a book by picking it up, turning it over, rubbing the cover, riffling the pages open and shut. Especially if it’s been read enough times before, it’ll speak to you.

This is why I like to hang around used bookstores on my lunch hour. I was at the outdoor bookstall on the west side of Union Square, the one that opens out of huge crates, when my mother called. It is tempting here to claim to remember that I was looking at an old paperback of, say, Rabbit Run, but actually it was Henry Gregor Felsen’s Hot Rod, the cover telling the whole story through the hairdos.

The pay phone on the corner nearest Sixteenth Street was ringing and wouldn’t stop. Finally, I picked it up and said, “Hello? Mother?”

“Janet? Is that you?” My mother has this uncanny, really, ability to call on pay phones and get me. She does it about once a month.

Well, of course it was me: Otherwise, would I have answered, “Mother”? “Did you have trouble finding me?” I asked.

“If you only knew. I called three phones, and the last two you wouldn’t believe.” It doesn’t always work.

“So how’s everything?” I asked. It came out “everthang.” My accent, which I have managed to moderate, always reemerges when I talk with anybody from home.

“Fine.” She told me about Alan, my ex-fiancé, and Janet, my best friend. They used to call us the Two Janets. Mother keeps up with my old high school friends, most of whom are, of course, still in Owensboro. Then she said, “Guess what. John Updike just moved to Owensboro.”

“John Updike?”

“The writer. Rabbit Run? It was about a week ago. He bought a house out on Maple Drive, across from the hospital there.”

“This was in the paper?”

“No, of course not. I’m sure he wants his privacy. I heard it from Elizabeth Dorsey, your old music teacher. Her oldest daughter, Mary Beth, is married to Sweeney Kost Junior who sells real estate with that new group out on Leitchfield Road. She called to tell me because she thought you might be interested.”

It is well-known that I have an interest in literature. I came to New York to get a job in publishing. My roommate already has one at S&S (Simon and Schuster) and I called her before I went back to work. She doesn’t go to lunch until two. She hadn’t heard anything about John Updike moving to Owensboro, but she checked PW (Publishers Weekly) and found an item saying that John Updike had sold his house in Massachusetts and moved to a small Midwestern city.

That bothered me. Owensboro sits right across the river from Indiana, but it’s still the South, not the Midwest. The northernmost statue to Confederate heroes sits on the courthouse lawn. I’m not touchy about that stuff but some people are. Then I thought that if you just looked at a map, as they might have done fact-checking at the PW office, or as Updike himself might have done, looking for a new place to live, you might think Owensboro was in the Midwest since it’s much closer to St. Louis than to Atlanta. Then I thought, maybe Updike was just saying “Midwest” to throw people off. Maybe he was, like Salinger, trying to get away from the world. Then I thought, maybe he didn’t move to Owensboro at all, and the whole thing was just a mistake, a coincidence, a wild flight of fancy. The more I thought about this theory, the better I liked it. “Small city in the Midwest” could mean Iowa City, where a well-known writer’s workshop is held; or any one of a hundred college towns like Crawfordsville, Indiana (Wabash); Gambier, Ohio (Kenyon); or Yellow Springs, Ohio (Antioch). Or even Indianapolis or Cincinnati. To a New Yorker, and all writers, even when they live in Massachusetts, are New Yorkers (in a way) Indianapolis and Cincinnati are small cities. Or if you wanted to get really close to home there is Evansville, Indiana, at 130,500 definitely a “small city” (Owensboro at 52,000 is only barely a city) and one that might even attract a writer like John Updike.

With all this, I was eleven minutes late getting back to work. But what are they going to do, fire a temp?

That was on Thursday, May 18. I had the usual weekend, and on Monday night, right after the rates changed, Alan, my ex-fiancé, made his weekly call. “Found a job yet?” he asked (knowing he would have heard from my mother if I had). Then he added, “Did you hear Saul Bellow moved to Owensboro?”

“You mean John Updike,” I said.

“No, that was last week. Saul Bellow moved here just yesterday.” Alan runs two of his father’s four liquor stores. He and I still share an interest in books and literature.

“How could that be?” I said. I would have thought he was making it up but Alan, to his credit (I guess), never makes things up.

I thought about calling Janet but I am always calling her, so the next morning I called Mother from work. I was temping for an insurance adjuster with a WATS line. “Mother, did Saul Bellow move to Owensboro?” I asked, getting right to the point.

“Well, yes, dear, he did. He’s living out in those apartments on Scherm Road. The ones where Wallace Carter Cox and Loreena Dyson lived right after he got his divorce.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, you didn’t seem very excited when John Updike moved here, dear, so I thought you didn’t much care. You have made a new life for yourself in New York, after all.”

I let that go. “It sure is mighty nice of you to keep up with where everybody lives,” I joked.

“When a famous person moves to a town like this,” she said, “everybody notices.”

I wondered about that. I didn’t think people in Owensboro, outside of Alan, even knew who Saul Bellow was. I’ll bet not twenty people there have read his books. I have only read one, the most recent one. The other Janet reads only nonfiction.

The next week Philip Roth moved to Owensboro. I found out from Janet, who called me, a new thing for her since it’s usually me who puts out the effort, not to mention the money, to stay in touch.

“Guess who we saw in the mall today,” she said. “Philip Roth.”

“Are you sure? How did you know?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine her recognizing Philip Roth.

“Your mother pointed him out. She recognized his face from a story in People magazine. I’m not sure he would be considered handsome if he wasn’t a famous writer.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Was he just visiting or has he moved to Owensboro too? And what mall are you talking about?”

“What mall!” Janet said. “There’s only one, out Livermore Road. It’s so far out of town that hardly anybody ever goes out there. I couldn’t believe it when we saw Philip Roth out there.”

“What were you doing out at the mall with my mother?” I asked. “Is she bothering you again?”

“She gets a little lonesome. I go by and see her, and maybe we go shopping or something. Is that a crime?”

“Of course not,” I said. I’m glad my mother has friends. I just wish they weren’t my best friends, with the same name as me.

Mother called me at work the next day. I have asked her not to do this when I am temping, but sometimes she can’t make the pay-phone thing work. Most companies don’t like for temps to get calls, even from family. E.L. Doctorow had moved to Owensboro and was staying in Dr. Crippen’s house on Wildwood Drive, only two blocks away.

“He has a little beard,” Mother said. “He has a little dog and walks it regularly every day. He’s renting the house while Dr. Crippen and his wife are in Michigan.”

“So he hasn’t exactly moved to Owensboro,” I said, somehow relieved.

“Well, he’s out here every morning,” she said, “walking his dog. Call it whatever you want to.”

I know the house very well. The Crippens are not ostentatiously tacky the way some (indeed, most) doctors are. It was the Crippens who had encouraged me to go ahead and move to New York if that was what I wanted, when everybody else in my class was getting married. It’s not an older home, of the kind I prefer, but if you had to live in a suburban-style house, theirs would do.

All day I imagined E.L. Doctorow watering the plants and looking through Dr. and Dr. (they are both doctors) Crippen’s books. They have the most books of anybody in Owensboro. The next day at lunch I went to Barnes & Noble and looked through Doctorow’s novels in paperback. All together they made a neat little stack the size of a shoebox.

I decided I was glad he had moved to Owensboro.

It’s hard to make friends in New York. I wondered what it was like in Owensboro for famous writers. Did they ever meet? Did they know one another? Did they pay visits, talk shop, drink together? I asked Alan when he called Monday night (right after the rates changed), but he seemed embarrassed by the question.

“Apparently, they have all moved here independently,” he said. “They’re never seen together. I wouldn’t want to speculate.”

When William Styron moved to Owensboro the last day in May, I wasn't so surprised. At least he was from the South, although two more different regions than the lower Ohio Valley and the Tidewater of Virginia could hardly be imagined. May and even June are nice in Owensboro, but July and August were coming, and when I thought of Styron blinking in the fierce muggy heat, he seemed even more out of place than the urban Jewish writers like Roth, Doctorow, and Bellow. And Updike, a New Englander! I felt sorry for them all. But that was silly. Every place now has air-conditioning.

When I called Janet, she reminded me that Mother's birthday was coming up. I knew I was expected to fly home. Janet told me all about how she and Alan were planning to take her out to dinner. This was to make me feel guilty. I wasn't planning to fall for it like I did last year, at the last minute.

It is very hard to make friends in New York. My roommate and her ex-roommate had shares in a house in the Hamptons (well, almost the Hamptons) and I had been invited out for the weekend. "You can't go home for your mother's birthday every year," I tell myself.

Mother called me a few days later—a pay phone again, this one near a deli on Thirty-ninth Street where she had gotten me once before—to announce that J.D. Salinger had moved to Owensboro.

"Wait a minute," I said. This was getting out of hand. "How come no women writers ever move to Owensboro. What about Ann Tyler? Or Alice Walker? Or Bobbie Ann Mason, who is actually from Mayfield (not that far away)? How come they're all men, and all these old guys?"

"I suppose you expect me to ask them that!" Mother said. "I only found out the author of Catcher in the Rye moved here because Mr. Roth told Reverend Curtis."

"Mr. Roth?" So now it was "Mr." Roth.

"Philip Roth, Goodbye, Columbus? He's renting Reverend Curtis's son Wallace's house out on Livermore Road, and you know how Reverend Curtis won't take checks, and they saw this strange-looking man at the cash machine, and Mr. Roth whispers, 'That's J.D. Salinger. Catcher in the Rye?' Alan said he looked like some hillbilly in town from Ohio County."

"How did Alan get into this?"

"He was standing in line behind them at the cash machine," Mother said. "He just happened to overhear."

On Monday night, Alan told me Philip Roth had seemed as surprised as the rest of them to see J.D. Salinger in Owensboro.

“Maybe they had all moved to Owensboro trying to get away from him,” I said, trying to be funny.

“I doubt that,” Alan said. “Anyway, it’s hardly the kind of question you can ask.”

It’s Mother who should marry Alan, not me. They think exactly alike.

As Mother’s birthday approached, I tried to concentrate on my upcoming weekend in the Hamptons. I knew what I had to guard against was the last-minute temptation to fly home.

When I called Janet later in the week from a lawyer’s office—they never watch their phone bills—she said, “Do you know the movie Bright Lights Big City?”

“Michael J. Fox has moved to Owensboro,” I said, astonished in spite of myself.

“Not him, the other one, the author. I forget his name.”

“McInerney,” I said. “Jay McInerney. Are you sure?” I didn’t want to say it because it sounded so snobbish, but Jay McInerney didn’t exactly seem Owensboro caliber.

“Of course I’m sure. He looks just like Michael J. Fox. I saw him walking down at that little park by the river. You know, the one where Norman Mailer hangs out.”

“Norman Mailer. I didn’t even know he lived in Owensboro,” I said.

“Why not?” Janet said. “A lot of famous writers make Owensboro their home.”

Make Owensboro Their Home. That was the first time I’d heard it said like that. It seemed to make it official.

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Janet’s call made me think, and for the first time since I broke up with him, I called Alan. At least he knew who Jay McInerney was, although he had never read the book. “The other Janet said she saw McInerney and Mailer down there at the park,” I said. “Does that mean the famous writers are starting to meet one another and hang out together?”

“You always want to jump to conclusions,” Alan said. “They might have been in the same park at totally different times of the day. Even when they do meet, they don’t

talk. The other day at the Kmart, Joe Billy Survant saw E.L. Doctorow and John Irving both in Housewares, and they sort of nodded, but that was all."

John Irving? But I let it go. "Housewares," I said instead. "Sounds like folks are really settling in."

"We're taking your mother to dinner at the Executive Inn for her fifty-first birthday Friday night," Alan said.

"I've been invited for a weekend in the Hamptons," I said. "Well, almost the Hamptons."

"Oh, I understand," he said. Alan likes to imagine he understands me. "But if you change your mind I'll pick you up at the airport in Evansville."

Evansville, Indiana, is thirty miles from Owensboro. It used to seem like a big city to me, but after eighteen months in New York, it seemed pathetic and insignificant: all trees from the air, and hardly any traffic. The one-story terminal looks like a shopping-center bank branch. You climb down out of the plane on a ladder.

There was Alan in his sensible-with-a-flair Olds Cutlass Supreme. I felt the usual mixture of warmth and dismay on seeing him. I guess you might call it warm dismay.

"Who's that?" I asked, gesturing toward a bearlike figure at the USAir ticket counter.

Alan whispered, "That's Thomas M. Disch. Science fiction. But quality stuff."

"Science fiction?" But the name was familiar, at least sort of. Although Disch isn't exactly famous, he seemed more the Owensboro type than McInerney. "He's moving to Owensboro, too?"

"How should I know? He may have just been here in Evansville for the speedboat races. Anyway, he's leaving. Let's talk about you."

We drove back home on the Kentucky side of the river, through Henderson.

That whole weekend in Owensboro, I only saw three famous writers, not counting Disch, who is not really famous and who was in Evansville, not Owensboro, anyway. Tom Pynchon was at the take-out counter at the Moonlight, buying barbecued mutton. He bought three liters of Diet Coke, so it looked like he might be having a party, but on the way home from the Executive Inn we drove past his house on Littlewood Drive and it was dark.

For dinner, we had steak and salad. Mother was a hoot. Alan insisted on paying as

usual. We were home by ten, and by ten-thirty Mother was asleep in front of the TV. I got two cans of Falls City out of the refrigerator and sneaked her Buick out of the garage. I picked up the other Janet, just like in the old days, by scratching on her screen. “The Two Janets,” she whispered melodramatically. She said the cops were rough on DWI (Driving While under the Influence) these days, but I wasn’t worried. This was still the South; we were still girls. We cruised down Griffith, out Frederica, down Fourth, down by the river. There was hardly any traffic.

“Has Alan asked you to marry him again?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

“Well, if he does, I think you should.”

“You mean you wish I would.”

The streets were still and dark and empty.

“Sure isn’t New York,” I sighed.

“Well, nobody can say you haven’t given it a shot,” the other Janet said.

At midnight we went to the all-night Convenience Mart at Eighteenth and Triplett for two more cans of beer. John Updike was looking through the magazines (even though the little sign says not to). At 12:12 A.M. Joyce Carol Oates came in for a pack of cigarettes, and surprising us both, they left together.