

Louisa of the Angels

An original short story

by the well-known doctor-writer,

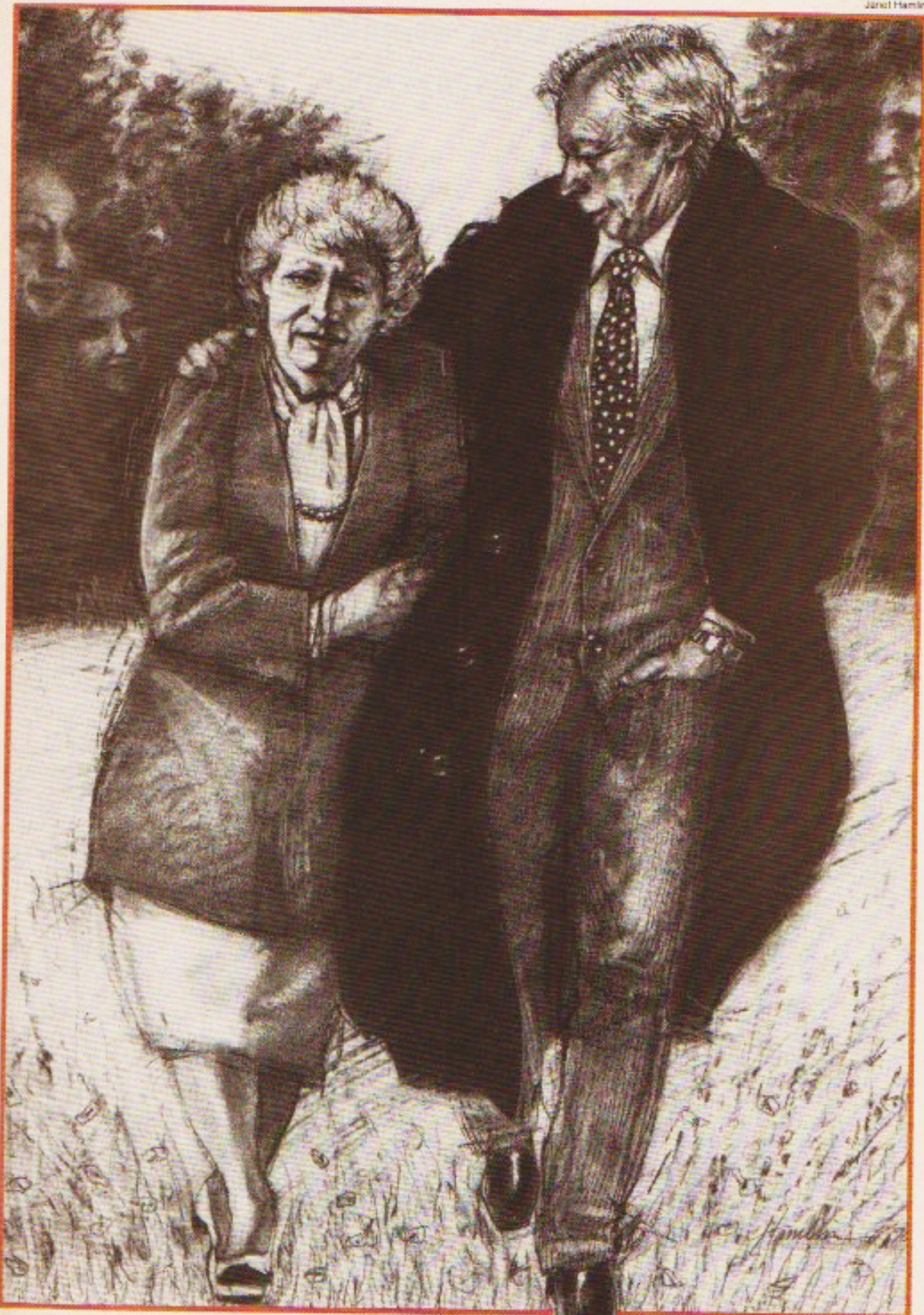
Melvin Konner, M.D., Ph.D.

Louisa and her husband, Michael, were walking together—it seemed to her that the word should be “promenading”—in Boston on a windless afternoon in early fall. The sun flashed between the buildings of the Government Center, and the paved expanse of muted red brick glowed warm in the late light. The plaza had only just been built, yet it seemed to Louisa to belong to her own world. In the nearly six decades since, an infant in arms, she had been brought to this city, there had been innovations enough—“skyscrapers,” “industrial parks,” “urban sprawl,” “mallings,” “gentrification,”—but this was the first one that did not make her angry. It reminded her of the medieval squares of Florence and Siena: a wide place to walk, to breathe, to take the air and sun. It was a place to *promenade*, and that was what they were doing, Michael and she, arm in arm, as they had while vacationing in Italy 35 years before.

This morning they had worked in the garden. She had served a light lunch of crab salad nested in their own backyard lettuce; icy water droplets had shone on the vivid green. Although it was September they had eaten on the patio, looking out calmly over all of Hingham. Over the crest of a seaside hill and beyond the town they could just see the ocean, still and gray blue under the last-of-summer sky.

Then they had driven into Boston for their special day. This was no birthday or even a monthly outing; something had simply—and slowly—gathered through their ordinary days until they knew it was time for a visit to the city. First they went to the much-touted Quincy Market—really just a fancy mall where young people displayed their expensive,

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Her name was uttered like an item on a grocery list.

sexy clothes. At an outdoor table Louisa and Michael each drank a glass of Italian white wine with a slight sparkle, hardly thinking about the price. The pale yellow liquid in their goblets caught the sun, so that it seemed almost as if they were sipping light. Soon they joined the happy crowd that streamed past Faneuil Hall, and at last they were walking on the broad, restful plaza, she and her own Michael among all these couples, some of them even younger than her daughters.

Handsome Michael! Louisa thought, and the adjective entered her mind with a slight old hurt, from the countless times her mother had used it to describe her. But the pain was old, and today was too happy. She nearly hung on Michael's arm, looking up at his straight smile, the glitter in his dark brown eyes, and the gray arch of eyebrows that rose over his well-formed face. As they stepped out of a shadow the sun made her shudder with its sudden warmth. She sighed loudly.

"Hmm?" he said.

"Nothing," Louisa said. "This is nice."

"Yeah, isn't it some day?" He looked over at her and they smiled at each other comfortably.

Suddenly a wrenching pain tore at Louisa's left ankle. She lost her grip on Michael's arm, and her body—which had seemed so light—twisted away from his and fell heavily. The plaza turned on end and a sharp edge of the pretty brick pavement rose up and struck her in the face. As the sun blazed in her eyes, she gave a brief but loud cry, more from surprise than pain. How clumsy! she thought. Michael stretched down toward her, pulling at her, shrieking "Louisa! Louisa!" like a shocked, ungainly bird. She grasped his arm and struggled into a sitting position. She felt bloated, and wished she were ten pounds lighter. She thought that Michael was heading too far—that he must be hurting his back.

Louisa noticed that she was sitting in a patch of damp earth, against the base of a freshly planted tree. She looked up, dazed: silver maple. Thinking that she might be hurting the sapling, she tried to shift her weight when she saw that drops of blood were falling onto her yellow sweater. Touching the spots absently, remembering how she had bought the sweater at Jordan Marsh, Louisa noticed that her lips and chin felt wet. A brush at them put a crimson gloss on her fingertips. "Oh my. Oh my, Michael," she said in a voice that sounded strange to her, distant, weak, frightened.

Then she felt the pain: burning and pounding at once. And tearing, too—like a seam opening just between her eyes. She was half on her feet now, not knowing how she got that way, but the twisted ankle made her leg buckle again. Michael's arms wrapped around her.

"No, don't get up!" he said.

"Is my nose bleeding?" What a stupid question, she thought.

"It's not too bad," he said. But he looked frightened. "Sit down," he said insistently. "Sit down for one minute and let me look at it."

Louisa sat back down, feeling heavier than ever. She was in shadow, but the remaining sunlight, which she could see between two buildings, was still eerily beautiful. A handful of people had approached and they were looking down at her, speaking in concerned tones, sentences she could not quite understand.

"How does it feel?" It was Michael's voice emerging from the murmurs. His hands were on his knees as he leaned down and peered at her nose.

"How does it look? It hurts pretty bad," she said. She did not want to cry or in any way lose her dignity.

Michael gazed intently, not quite into her eyes. "You got a pretty good bump there. Gee, Louisa, I can't understand how I could've let go of you." It was just like Michael to take the blame for her clumsiness—not as a gesture, but as a reflex of his heart. He dabbed ever so gently at her wound with his plaid-bordered handkerchief, which was already soaked with the blood he had wiped from her lips and chin. Her nose swelled from inside and stung whenever he touched it, but her mouth didn't feel wet anymore, and the dripping was slower. Still, now Louisa felt dizzy even sitting.

"My God, I don't understand how this could have happened," Michael echoed. For the moment, just the sound of his voice was a blessing. Now his hands—and some strange ones, for which she also was grateful—were helping her to her feet. Michael was speaking soothingly, lifting her off her hurt foot, guiding her to the taxi that had been hailed by an unknown hand. When Louisa looked up, the sun's glow on the burnt-sienna bricks made the plaza seem almost holy. And when she looked down, the blood spots on the yellow wool of her sweater blinked up at her like poppies in a late-summer field.

In the emergency ward waiting room, the sights and smells were hideous. This was "Mass General," the most famous hospital in the region—maybe in the country. She knew she should feel lucky to have been brought here, but as she looked around the dingy hall, all she could think was, Why do they let this kind of people in? My face hurts so much, somebody please help me. And please, just a few minutes of privacy.

Across from her bench a man with wild black hair was rolling his eyes and moaning. He dipped a grotesquely gashed hand into a pot of brown liquid—antiseptic?—removed it, put it in again. Something white—bone?—flashed in the red hole in his hand. Nearby, a young couple, both skinny and ghostly white with stringy, dirty brown hair—Louisa could hardly tell which was the boy and which the girl, which the patient and which the companion—were clutching each other and speaking in low, fast, rueful, loving, conspiratorial tones. To Louisa's left an obese ▶

 "We'll send her up to Plastics.

 They've been slow."

elderly woman in a wheelchair sat with a propped-up swollen foot—mostly purple—jutting out like a pier into the waiting-room sea.

There were other patients farther away from Louisa's seat, but they became a blur. The whole room seemed to be rattling, as if everything in it were loose. The smell was of filth and foulness steeped in iodine. The wall paint was sickly green and thick with dirt. Signs warned about sexual diseases and drunken driving. Another, engraved and permanent, warned about long waits.

Intermittently, Michael sprang up from the bench and leaned over Louisa like a pigeon brooding nearly hatched eggs. He clucked and shifted and watched and pecked and bobbed and feinted and clucked some more. "They won't make us wait much longer," he said, tapping that inexhaustible well of groundless Michael optimism. He looked around slowly at the others and a grimace flickered across his fine face. Then he looked back at Louisa, his face full of anguish.

They waited another two hours, with nobody even hinting at how long it would be. Finally a young man in white who had appeared many times before came out of the important door and walked toward them. He was thin, of medium height, with reddish curly hair, freckles, and horn-rim glasses that kept sliding down his nose. To Louisa he looked for all the world like a high-school boy, but he introduced himself to her as "Doctor."

He uttered her name as matter-of-factly as if it had been the announcement of a train departure or an item on a grocery list. (No, he was certainly too young for any of her daughters.) He pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. He looked so tired that for a moment she forgot her pain and anger and began to pity him. Michael helped her through the important door and into an area that the boy called a bay. A curtain was drawn as she climbed onto a hard, narrow bed. Michael now was talking in soothing tones. Louisa became aware again of the throbbing in her face. And suddenly it occurred to her that Betsy and Antonia must have felt the same pain.

All three of the girls had been beautiful as children, with the energetic glow and symmetry of features that made everyone bend, coo, and pat. Yet only Carla, the middle one, had kept Michael's beauty through adolescence. The other two had been cursed, from the time they began to be women, with Louisa's own hawkish beak. Although, to be sure, her sisters had better figures, only Carla became a center of male attention—a beauty of neighborhood renown. Louisa loved her, but Carla belonged to her father. Louisa herself felt much closer to Betsy and Antonia; she felt responsible for the unkind landscape of their faces. And the word "handsome"—which she had passed on to them from her mother—burned in her throat.

Then Betsy came home one day from Boston College babbling about some girl who had come back from vacation

with a bandage over her nose and two fat purple shiners. Louisa remembered standing in their yellow, Colonial-style kitchenette, watching as Betsy shifted from one foot to the other, scratching at the Formica, describing the girl in a rushed, half-mocking tumble of words ("teenage incomprehensible" was Louisa's description of the language). But from the start there was a hint of something serious, something Betsy couldn't say—or ask—right out.

A month later the classmate's bandage and shiners were gone, and a change came over Betsy like a rising of the sea. She had seen the other girl transformed from a creature of shadow to one of light. She did not need to count the boys who were now drawn to the changed girl; she could feel it in her body as she gazed at the girl's face.

Michael of course was the obstacle, with his endless *I love you the way you are* and *You're just as pretty as anyone* and *Those boys should get down on their knees to you and beg you for the time of day*. But Louisa's heart was already allied with Betsy's, and Betsy's was set indeed. Finally, Louisa drew out Michael's Uncle Richard during one of his rare, unannounced evening visits. Richard, a sixth-grade teacher who sang in the church choir, had never married. (Once, as a young man, he had nearly become a priest.) He was good-humored, slow-moving, plump, and wise, and Michael respected him. Tentatively, indirectly, Louisa broached the subject. Richard took her meaning. He glanced over at Michael with that twinkle in his eye and nodded sagely at nothing in particular.

"You know," he finally said. "God did the best He could. But he couldn't quite fix it so that His creatures would love one another the same way He loves them. Is it really such a sin to improve on His work a little bit?"

So Betsy became a beauty, and two years later, Antonia too. Watching them change before her eyes, Louisa was awestruck. It was not at all like improving on God's work. It was as if God had had a second thought about the special trial of living as a woman—as if He had touched their faces with a great bruising finger, striking out and repairing the work He had not done quite perfectly. Or as if God had decided to give them back the symmetry of their lost, childhood selves. "Do you realize what those damn things have cost?" Michael said amiably one night, gesturing at the girls' faces during dinner, and Louisa knew that his opposition had ended.

Now all three grown daughters had their health, and some kind of happiness. And when Louisa thought about Betsy and Antonia, the beauty of their childhood flowed seamlessly into their womanly beauty—skipping the "handsome" girlhood, which was blotted out of her mind.

She had plenty of time to think about all this, because the boy-doctor had left her lying in the bay on the aluminum cot with wheels—he called it a stretcher. He had asked her a few questions and dabbed at her nose with an alcohol wipe—God, it was painful—and then went off to take care of "an

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urgent case." Michael was gently, patiently stroking her hair and forehead. Blessedly he had run out of words, whether soothing or shocked or sorrowful, and she lay back and let her thoughts swell. The lives of the three girls, by far her most important accomplishments, moved across her consciousness like figures in a dream.

"Michael," she said suddenly, as if waking herself.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Is any—anything wrong?" The words tumbled out so clumsily she almost started to laugh—but laughing, of course, would hurt.

"No, nothing's wrong, Michael," she said indulgently, as if to a child. "Don't you know I'll be alright? It's just that . . . I have an idea."

"What kind of—?"

Before he could finish there was a rustle of the curtain and a clinking of instruments, and the boy-doctor with the slipping glasses was there again. Behind him, also in white and with a green name tag, was a big burly man with a thick brown mustache. Dr. Alfred was not much, but a little, older. They prodded again, together, at Louisa's smashed, engorged nose and cheeks, making her cry out in pain—for which she apologized.

"Yup," said the doctor with the bushy mustache. "Yup, it's broken."

"What is? Excuse me," said Michael.

"The nose," said the doctor, glancing at him. "Nothing else, though."

"Well, that's good. I mean, it *is* good, isn't it?" Michael's tone was awkward, relieved, confused, and apologetic at once.

"Yes. We'll fix it right up," said the doctor with total confidence.

"Here? Now?" asked the younger doctor. He sounded almost as naive as Michael.

"Nah, we'll send her up to Plastics." The doctor with the mustache was already grabbing at the curtain. "They'll set her right away; they've been slow all afternoon." He drew the curtain and disappeared, the younger man following him.

"Wait!" Louisa said urgently, glancing once at Michael. The word "Plastics" had given her an extra bit of boldness. "Doctor. Please."

The boy-doctor turned and pushed his glasses back on his face. Louisa glanced at Michael again, wishing she could have discussed the matter with him first. But she knew this was the moment.

"Excuse me, Doctor, could I ask you a question?" Her cheeks flushed—but not because of her injury.

"Sure," said the boy-doctor with another push at his glasses. He seemed kind, but terribly pressured and tense.

"When . . . when they do this . . . reset my . . . fix my nose . . ." She looked furtively at Michael, who appeared puzzled. "What I mean is, a lot of young girls . . . when they have their noses fixed, they pretend like they broke it first—you know, by accident, and—oh, forget it, it's silly."

The boy-doctor fidgeted with the curtain, clearly eager to leave. Michael said, "What do you mean, Louisa? Go on. Come out and say it."

Now she spoke to Michael instead, clearly, so that the doctor could hear, though she blotted him out of her head. "I mean, if they could make it a little better when they fix it. You know, Straighter." She looked back at the doctor now, studying his boyish face.

"For God's sake, Louisa. Please," Michael interrupted. "You just had a terrible accident. What's this talk about changing your nose? Please. I love you the way you are!"

"This is not about you, Michael!" Her own words and tone of voice shocked her. She stared intently, even a little plaintively, at the boy-doctor's eyes, framed by the curly red hair. His glasses had slipped again.

Michael started to speak again.

"Please! Michael!" she blurted out, her voice full of emotion.

The doctor seemed to suppress a smile that played around his nervous mouth. He no longer seemed impatient. "I'm not sure I understand you right," he said, unconvincingly.

Louisa took a deep breath. "I think you do," she said. She was piling boldness on boldness.

"It seems pretty unusual," the boy-doctor said thoughtfully. "I mean, I never heard of it. But it does seem like it might be possible." He no longer had a trace of a smile. He did not seem to care much whether or not she changed her face, but he was thinking intensely. Was she looking for some judgment from this harried, scrawny boy? she asked herself. There was none, but he was clearly curious. At last he said, "I'll have to ask Dr. Alfred."

As soon as he pushed the curtain aside and disappeared behind it, Michael leaned down over her, whispering, yet shouting. "Louisa! What is this all about? I can't understand why you'd want to change the way you look." He was not angry, but rather deeply surprised, even disturbed.

On the other side of the curtain amid the clinking of metal and glass, the eerie hum of fluorescent lights, and, more distantly, the sound of a young girl sobbing, was a conversation Louisa strained to hear. She tried to tune out Michael—which was always safer than shushing him—but still there was too much other noise.

" . . . think . . . want . . . rhino . . . "

Yes, that was the word she remembered. Rhino-something. Because they thought you looked like a rhinoceros.

" . . . kidding . . . rhinoplasty?"

Rhinoplasty, that was it. Yes.

"Louisa, listen to me," said Michael, looming over her.

" . . . sure . . . " said one of the voices behind the curtain.

"You've got to get this damage fixed; that's the main thing," Michael droned on. She could not shut out his voice, and she couldn't tell him how much, at this moment, she detested it.

The doctor with the red curly hair came into the bay ▶

again, tangling himself briefly in the curtain. Michael continued talking, full of spousal anxiety. His voice made Louisa's face hurt. She wished she could make him disappear, even for a second. The ceiling lights hurt her eyes. She focused intently on the boy-doctor.

"I talked to the Senior," he said with a thoughtful, satisfied look on his face. "They can't do it. It's a totally separate thing."

Louisa couldn't understand why he sounded so pleased with himself, as if he'd made an important discovery. He explained that they would reset her broken nose with a big set of pliers that they would stick up into her nostrils, then let it heal back into its old shape. Later, if she wanted the rhino-something they would break the nose again in a certain special way. They would do it in two steps

He lectured on, but Louisa didn't hear any more of it, even though she lay there nodding. Michael was nodding too, gray brows raised in a sage, studied expression. As Louisa watched the two satisfied men her heart sank slowly, like a headstone sinking in a soft patch of soil—not deeply, but enough to set it awry. The two men's words, full of common sense, burbled distantly like a half-clogged drain. But then, in her reverie, she imagined the sound of a stream—a clear cool stream that bathed and cleansed her of all vanities and passions. How silly of her to have acted like a thoughtless girl!

A sleepiness came over her, suddenly and heavily, the way the mist in Hingham sometimes came in from the sea. Louisa stiffened herself against it, but it was all around her, pressing into her body, until she did not want to keep it out any longer. She had fought all afternoon—against pain, humiliation, the wish, the disappointment. Now she could rest and let her thoughts run free. The doctors would do their work on her, just like the boy-doctor said. In the surgical place, people in white would surround her, but she would not be there. She lay back with her eyes closed, the numbing pain becoming dull again.

She was taking a walk with Michael—it seemed to her that the word should be "promenade"—in a beautiful park where they would be when all this was over. She was young again, and as slim as she had been 35 years before. She looked a blend of her own three daughters, except that her skin had a strange, creamy glow. Michael was his ageless self, graying but full of strength. But as Michael gazed at her, his face bore a troubled look—a surprised, intense longing. If they stopped for a moment she would have heard his heart pound in his chest.

In the sunlight in the grassy field, they passed among all the friends of their lives. The delicate perfume of the summer grass and trees filled her nostrils, and the blue of her favorite flower, star-of-Bethlehem, her eyes. Their friends greeted them, but Michael paid no attention. He only stared at Louisa. The friends nodded, full of respect, and Louisa smiled and nodded back calmly. ■

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