Lust-in-Rust

By Ken Sieben

"Well now, Estelle Biddle," George Segel says to the space on the other end of his white leather sofa, "Look what I've got now. You wouldn't like it, but I don't give a damn!" George proudly surveys his new home, a one-bedroom waterfront townhouse. Cold late-December-afternoon sleet attacks the picture window opposite, through which the view of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and New York skyline across the bay are already obscured by darkening clouds. But George feels snug. Having always liked variety in weather, he chose to remain in New Jersey for retirement, though at sixty-five he admits to feeling chilled more than he used to.

"Yes, you old biddy," he continues, "No more support payments that you never needed, no more albatross of a house on my neck.

George remembers the start of his life-long love affair with the sea. At thirteen he had been brought to the shore by his father, a German immigrant, for their first vacation together, his first trip out of Newark. The rugged beauty of the ocean, the sandy beaches, the rock jetties, the coast-line hills captured his heart even more than the tales of Captain Kidd and buried treasure and smugglers and privateers his father had passed down and the stories of the rumrunners his father recounted from firsthand experience.

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Growing up under the stern direction of his grandparents and the nuns at Newark's Saint Nicholas School, he had known his father as a flashy stranger named Heinrich who often showed up for an early Sunday dinner but left soon after. As his eighth-grade year progressed, however, his father had talked more and more of treating him to a week at the shore. They would camp out at night, fish in the mornings, and eat dinner in restaurants. But it would only happen if George studied hard and passed the entrance examination for Saint Boniface Academy for Boys. George had always found schoolwork easy but boring. He was especially good at mathematics, but hated it the most. Now, with the promise of a real adventure with his father, he began to apply himself. He graduated first in his class and came in fourth on the diocesan entrance exam, earning him a one-half tuition scholarship.

George fell in love with the sea, just as his father had predicted. They caught porgies and bluefish in the surf. George taught himself to swim and even managed to get his father to wade into the surf on

the calmest days. Heinrich's last Christmas gift from Elizabeth, George's mother, had been a centennial re-issue of James Fenimore Cooper's The Water-Witch, which he read three times, each time longing to have been born in an earlier era. Standing atop the Neversink Highlands one beautiful summer night, he tried to point out to George the exact location of the villa called "Lust-in-Rust," home to the spunky heroine, Alida de Barberie, and the spot where she first encountered the audacious smuggler known as the "Skimmer of the Sea."

In the morning Heinrich drove George from village to village up and down the coast and introduced him to old rumrunners who had returned to fishing and clamming for a living. On the last day, George helped some men launch their skiff from the beach and got to ride out beyond the breakers. It was the best week of his life.

Heinrich was so proud that he began to plan farther ahead. He would expand his territory—he was a liquor salesman then—to earn enough to send George to college. That had always been

Elizabeth's dream, God bless her memory. Although he could never afford the tuition at a private college, the state university was within his means, especially its downtown Newark campus.

"And I've got a whole year to enjoy it," George says to the space on the sofa. Four years ago, his doctor told him he'd be dead in five if he didn't stop drinking. All that he wants is to enjoy the remainder of his life in modest luxury, doing the things he has always wanted but could never afford. His income is more than adequate to cover his day-to-day living expenses, now that his wife's death has put an end to the support payments he made faithfully for twenty-eight years, even though they both knew she had demanded them just to punish him. And the sale of the house, occupied solely by Estelle for those twenty-eight years, netted George $275,000, enough to cover the purchase price of his condo, some new furniture to replace a few of the pieces he had bought with it, and a substantial down payment on a sailboat. He is not yet sure what boat he will buy, but he knows he will have one by spring.

Always a planner, George had been called a foolish dreamer by Estelle. She lacked his talent for living in his imagination a more austere and satisfying life than the one she insisted they live in that huge, drafty Victorian on the hill in Upper Montclair, the "prison" he called it, where Estelle had been born and raised and which her parents had given to her as a wedding present because they knew her husband could never afford a place worthy of their daughter.

They had married in 1945 right after George was discharged from the Navy. Though never in actual combat during three years in the Pacific, his Seabee unit had been fired at many times as they built landing piers, harbors, and airstrips and tried to stay an island or two ahead of the fleet. So George

carried as many ribbons and medals on the left breast pocket of his uniform as any other veteran. But a year of marriage taught him that Estelle had married those decorations. Every other woman of her circle had a war hero.

They had met at a USO canteen outside the Bayonne shipyard where George was in training. Estelle's was a classic kind of beauty, her mother later said, but George thought her angular body, pale complexion, and bony neck made her look older than twenty-six. Still, she was friendly enough in performing her social duties, and since no one else paid much attention to her or to him, they soon focused their energies on each other. At the time George had little interest in women or politics or in anything outside of his interrupted education. He was determined to complete his degree in engineering, to honor his father's memory. But on the weekend before he left for the Pacific, she brought him home to meet the family. He overheard Estelle's father tell her mother, "Well, he seems industrious, so he won't stay poor long in this country."

"And he doesn't seem very religious," she answered. "I'm sure he won't object to an Episcopal wedding."

Estelle corresponded dutifully for the remainder of George's enlistment and met his troop plane when it landed in Newark in October. George had no family to return to and no friends from before the war, so marrying her seemed logical. But he had never thought much about being anybody's husband and did not know how to act in that role. He fulfilled his own goal by completing a degree under the G.I. Bill, and he did that with a straight A. Then, so the college could serve the thousands of returning veterans, they offered him a teaching contract. Estelle was always the best-dressed faculty wife at the fall and spring teas, but she took no interest in his career. His promotion to assistant professor in 1954, a year after he completed a master's degree was, to her, merely the occasion for a party where she could show off her lovely house with all its antiques.

That was George's first and last promotion. Some people compensate for an unsatisfying personal life by pouring themselves into their work, but George lacked the drive necessary for academic success. He preferred the short-term pleasures of classroom instruction to the long-term rewards of research. He could not summon the energy to seek grant money to support research projects, either for himself or for his students. By the time he was thirty-five, he taught only one major seminar in civil engineering and three required freshman lectures in engineering methods. But by this time he had other interests beyond family and career.

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"A whole year free to do what I want." Looking out into the gray twilight, George remembers how everything began to go to pieces right after that special vacation with his father. He steps to the bar to mix a martini, four shots of gin and one of dry vermouth. He drops in an olive from a jar on the counter. Then he adds a fifth and sixth shot of gin, stirs it, and resumes his seat on the sofa.

That September, he remembers, he had started high school, and Heinrich had started the first of his final series of jobs. As the Depression retained its iron grip on the nation, liquor sales declined. Fortunately, Newark's seven breweries kept producing, so Heinrich could keep selling, but each job meant less income and more travel. By 1938 he was on the road twelve or thirteen hours a day, six days a week. If he wound up in Camden or Atlantic City on a Saturday night, he could not come home until the following weekend.

George did well in high school but made few friends since his morning and afternoon newspaper routes left no time for athletics or social activities. His grandmother died the summer before his senior year. Heinrich came home the day before the funeral and sat up half the night with George's grandfather washing down shots of rye with beer.

"Bertha was always a good woman, Otto," he heard his father say. "She was like a mother to me."

"Ja, she voss a rock," Otto answered. "I don't tink I'll liff lonk widout her."

"I still miss Elizabeth. It's been seven years, and I've never been with another woman."

"That's wery sad. I'm going to die."

"Seven years."

They were both passed out in their chairs when George awoke in the morning. He felt sorry for his grandfather, but he was shocked at his father whom he had never before seen drunk. In the months following the funeral, he was too busy to feel sad, but he missed the example of his grand-mother's stolid cheer, and he felt that his life would never be the same again.

A heart attack killed Otto right before Christmas. Heinrich was drinking too much by then to hold down a sales job. Instead, he was tending bar late afternoons at the railroad station. Walking home one March evening through neighborhoods which had sadly deteriorated during the Depression years, he was attacked by four desperate young men, and savagely beaten when they discovered his empty pockets. Though he lingered a few days in the hospital, conscious enough to see George crying, he could not summon the will to recover and died a week after George turned eighteen.

In June George graduated first in his class and was accepted at the New Jersey State College of

Engineering. Three years and 68 credits of night classes later, he enlisted in the Navy on the promise of a rating in the Seabees, which his advisor said would be valuable experience and might even count toward graduation after the war. He was also out of money and needed a job.

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George is nursing his drink, hoping he will set an empty glass down before he falls asleep. He has not yet unpacked his dishes and utensils or stocked the shelves with food. It would be best if he falls asleep for a few hours and goes out for dinner when he wakes up sober. His eyes pan the bare white walls of the apartment. "I'm gonna hang pictures of sailboats and lighthouses on the walls, what do you think of that!"

George always hated the age-darkened portraits of Biddles, generations of Biddles, Biddles back to the Mayflower, they liked to tell people, though a colleague from the history department once showed him a document listing one Roger Biddle as an indentured servant. George kept that to himself until the next annual New Years gathering. Then, with everyone circled around the table for his father-in-law to ignite the brandy-soaked plum pudding, George called for silence, proposed a solemn toast, and informed them that they were all descendants of a white slave. Believing correctly that he had drunk too much, they chose to ignore him.

Within a year of his marriage, George had come to think his father's achievements more than matched those of the last century of Biddles put together. Most of his knowledge of Heinrich had come through his grandparents who raised him after his mother's death. Heinrich Segel was the sole survivor of a German U-boat sunk in March, 1918, off the coast of New Jersey. Heinrich managed to endear himself to the crew of the American destroyer that fished him out of the near-freezing waters, acting as cabin boy, cook, brass-polisher, and, as his English improved, teller of anti-Hun jokes. Only eighteen, he quickly learned to adapt and was soon convinced that he wanted to stay in the U.S.A.

The American officers never believed his claim to have personally scuttled the U-boat to show his new loyalties, but they admired his efforts to please. The skipper, a daring young lieutenant-commander whose own grandfather had deserted from the Kaiser's Army in 1877 and made his way to America, simply swore him in for the duration of the three-week patrol. It was outrageously illegal, but it got Heinrich Segel into the U.S.A. six months before the armistice was signed.

Heinrich had been apprenticed to a master gem-cutter since the age of twelve, so he soon found work in a Newark jewelry factory. He boarded with Otto and Bertha Franklin, the brother and sister-in-

law of the foreman, a third-generation German-American family who needed money to pay for treatment of their daughter in a tuberculosis sanatorium. Heinrich's precise and imaginative work soon earned him a raise, and he offered to increase his own board payment to the Franklins. Elizabeth, the daughter, completed her year of treatment and when she returned home to claim her room, Heinrich knew she had also claimed his heart. Otto and Bertha were delighted that such a serious, hard-working young man could care for their daughter, who was still frightfully pale and thin and might remain a partial invalid for years. They only wished that he were Catholic and not Lutheran. Heinrich, who spent most of his free time trying to conquer his new language by reading the American masters, especially Poe and Dreiser, called her "ethereal." They married on July 4, 1920. George, their only child, was born the following April.

Heinrich knew ten happy years, watching his son grow and helping his "angel" with cleaning and other house chores. He rose to assistant foreman at the factory, and everyone knew he would take over full responsibility in three more years when Otto's brother was to retire. He became a son to Otto and Bertha, not only raising George Catholic as he had promised, but also attending mass with them on Sunday mornings and vespers on Sunday afternoons. Although he never converted, no father, Catholic or Lutheran, stood as proudly behind his son as Heinrich stood behind George at First Communion.

But early in 1931, Elizabeth died and the factory closed its doors forever. No one could afford to buy jewelry. With the loss of his wife and his job, Heinrich began to lose his manhood. He drank more and more of the bathtub gin which Otto and most of his neighbors would distill a gallon at a time. It started as a sort of evening ritual of remorse shared with the old man. But in the cloudy liquid Heinrich discovered respite from his grief and was soon drinking himself to sleep every night. Otto could not bear to watch Heinrich destroy himself, so he offered him his Model A, promised a home for George, and sent him off in search of work.

A sober Heinrich could define and adapt to any situation, and he quickly discovered that bootlegging was the only growth industry in Depression America. The speakeasies of the northern

New Jersey cities were supplied by efficiently organized rum-running operations in the coastal towns. Those fishermen who had managed to hold on to their boats could earn far more by loading them with Canadian whiskey and gin than with cod and pollock. The problem of landing the illegal liquor had been solved a decade earlier. Ten thousand cases a week came in through the Neversink Hills network alone. Increases in the number and salaries of Prohibition agents, however, were making distribution more difficult. A man with a fast car and a short memory could find regular work, provided

he didn't mind the risk of being shot at.

So Heinrich, who no longer cared if he lived or died with Elizabeth gone and George provided for, spent the next two years picking up twenty cases of hard liquor each night at a different beach location and delivering them to buyers in Newark, Jersey City, and Elizabeth. Otto knew how he earned his money and, though fearful of losing his son-in-law, quietly approved his profiting in defiance of a foolish law which no German-American could ever fathom.

Heinrich, for his part, learned to enjoy his work. He liked to toss a shot or two with the strong, proud fishermen he met each night. They would compare the relative importance of their jobs and sometimes joked about trading car for boat. But Heinrich had not stepped aboard a boat or in the water since his discharge from the American Navy in 1918. He loved the beauty of the sea, though, especially when he drove up the coast on a moonlit night. His favorite spot was Hudson Hill, with its commanding view of New York Harbor across the bay, and the city's skyline beyond.

Sometimes he would arrive before sunset to stand beneath the short-wave radio tower which he and half the residents of the town knew was the source of communications for the entire illegal network. Three hundred feet below lay the village of Waterwitch, peopled by clammers and fishermen for more than a century. Now, vacationers from the cities spent summers in rented tents by the beaches, the men hoping to brag on their return that they had caught a glimpse of some local fisherman/rumrunner/hero narrowly escaping a Coast Guard cutter.

On December 5, 1933, the twenty-first amendment brought an end to the Great Experiment and to Heinrich's job. But he owned his own car now, a black 1932 Buick, and he knew all the varieties of alcoholic drinks as well as who had the cash to pay up front. He stayed on the road, as a sales representative for legitimate liquor distillers. He earned considerably less money, but it was more than most of his contemporaries, so he counted himself lucky. Soon after liquor was legalized, Heinrich stopped drinking it. His son's promising future had renewed his interest in life, and his new job had brought a new respectability.

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George is surprised to discover his glass empty. He tries to rise but apparently changes his mind. Instead, he looks at the opposite end of the sofa again. "And every stick of furniture is gonna be modern—all metal and glass," he announces. "And pictures of naked women over the bed."

George had hated the rococo parlor furniture with its arched backs and medallions and other

uncomfortable features bequeathed to Estelle by her maternal grandparents. And he hated even more the silly faces carved into the walnut frames of the Louis XVI dining room set purchased by her paternal grandparents in 1870 for their summer house in Long Branch. He never could tell if they were cows or oxen, so he usually thought of them as Biddles.

But the piece George hated most was the piece most loved by Estelle—their bed. It was a long-neglected Sheraton four-poster ordered by her great-great-great-grandfather Horace Biddle for his bride in 1795, and restored at the expense of Estelle's mother as a surprise gift for her daughter exactly 150 years later. George might have derived pleasure from seeing such a bed in a museum or historic house, but he found little sleeping in it for twenty-five years with his wife. It creaked and groaned when he moved, so she therefore objected to movement.

Fortunately, George had never been a highly sexual man. The priests at Saint Boniface had told the seniors that, if they disciplined themselves to avoid impure thoughts when they were young, one day they might find joy in married love. His knowledge of sex had come through overhearing the narrated exploits of his Navy buddies, and it shamed him to imagine his parents and grandparents performing such filthy actions.

So George entered marriage a virgin, more grateful to his bride than in love with her. They consummated the marriage dutifully on their wedding night, though the next day Estelle confessed doubt that she could ever enjoy sex and hoped he'd understand. George found the act pleasant but hardly Earth-moving. From the start, he followed Estelle's lead in personal modesty; she was, after all, five years his senior. They dressed and undressed in the dark and wore flannel pajamas to bed.

Two years and three miscarriages later, the Biddle family physician privately informed George that Estelle was physically and emotionally incapable of completing a full-term pregnancy.

After that George hardly ever bothered her, unless he was feeling nasty from too much gin. On those occasions he would remind himself how terrible she was to deny him his rightful pleasure and then he would feed his anger with thoughts of revenge. Once he entered the bathroom while she was showering and pulled the curtain back just as she bent to shut off the water. She screamed and called him a "drunken animal." Shamed, he slept alone that night. He apologized the next morning, blaming his behavior on the liquor, but for many months he found secret pleasure in summoning to his mind's eye the image of her frightened face and cowering body.

The most thrilling sexual experience in George's life occurred in May, 1968. A female student in his engineering seminar, a pleasant twenty-two-year-old named Leah Hunter, entered his office one

evening without knocking, just as he had poured himself three fingers of gin from a bottle kept in a desk drawer. He had first seen her the previous fall at a peace demonstration on campus where she carried a "MAKE LOVE NOT WAR" placard. He remembered observing at the time that she, like many of the other female students that year, didn't seem to be wearing a bra, and he had mentally compared her apparent zest for things physical with Estelle's forbidding frigidity.

His first response to her offer to "do anything" for an A was an attempt at a fatherly smile, but she locked the door and removed her sweater, exposing small but very real white breasts that made as direct a political statement as any placard she could carry. "I'm quite serious," she said. "I know you'd like to ball me. I can tell by the way you look at me in class every night. Just tell me when and where."

George came instantly erect. "Well, I have a place at the shore. Would you care to meet me there on Saturday?" George had purchased a little summer bungalow in Waterwitch back in 1955. He used his own savings for the down payment and the rent for July and August covered most of the expenses. He went there by himself on weekends in the spring and fall and sometimes spent his Christmas and Easter breaks there. He liked to fish on the party boats and was soon on a first-name basis with all the skippers and mates, as well as half of the bartenders in town. Estelle never cared for the shore. The sun dried her skin, the salt water was too sticky to bathe in, and the working-class crowds frightened her. Each year George made improvements, including running hot water, a wood stove, an outside shower for rinsing off after a swim or fishing trip, and a steam pit for clams and lobsters. Of course, he would have preferred to be right on the water instead of three blocks away, but he could see the bay between the trees from the sun deck he had built on the roof. Actually, he had everything there that he had ever hoped for.

But a weekend with Leah was more than he had ever dreamed of. He had given her directions but doubted she'd appear. True to her word, though, at three o'clock Saturday afternoon she knocked on his rear door. "Hi, Professor Segel, I sure like your pad."

Not wanting to appear as nervous as he was, George tried to be charming. He escorted her for a walk on the beach, where she removed her sneakers and socks, rolled up her jeans, and waded into the water. She screamed at the cold. "It's only about fifty degrees, you know," he said. It's still early May."

"But the sun is so warm!" she answered. They walked for miles, talking about the horrors of the Vietnam War, the freedom of the terns, the War on Poverty, and the near-extinction of the ospreys. Leah was reasonably well informed, George mused, though probably a member of the cause-of-the-month club.

Back at the cottage after watching the sun set over the bay, they made a fire in the wood-stove to offset the evening chill. Then George broiled them each a steak while Leah tossed a salad.

They split a bottle of Burgundy with dinner and Leah fell asleep on the bed while George did the dishes. She looked so young and innocent that he could not bring himself to wake her. Instead, he covered her with a woolen blanket and stretched himself out on the sofa with a martini for company.

Sometime in the middle of the night, George became aware that his chest was being lightly touched and his lips were being kissed. Leah was naked, bending over the arm of the sofa nearest his head, her shoulder-length rust-red hair covering his face and neck. Seeing him awake, she slowly moved her hands downward, until they were stroking his belly, inner thighs, and genitals, and her hardened nipples were pressing his dry lips open. Never in his life had he known such pleasure.

They made love again in the morning, after he massaged her body and brought her to climax, which had never happened with Estelle, and again in the afternoon. In between, George cooked pancakes and sausages while she explained "Consciousness III" to him. Late in the day they walked to a seafood store where Leah bought two dozen oysters—"a natural aphrodisiac," she insisted. They shucked and ate the raw oysters in his back yard, washing them down with cold beer and tossing the shells into the garden.

They spent the chilly night in bed, holding each other as he once thought married people would do, and they made love again in the early morning. Around eight o'clock Leah dressed for her drive back to the city. For the first time in twenty-two years, George called in to cancel his classes.

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George goes to the bar to mix another drink. Glancing out the picture window, he spots Darlene Kaye, the buxom beauty who sold him the condo, dashing through the sleet toward her own place next door. From this distance she looks as young as a college senior, but he knows she's well into her forties. He has liked her from the moment he met her, when she called him "Georgie." She is cheerful and knows exactly what she wants out of life. He also likes watching her move. She has the muscle tone and control of an athlete, with the curvaceous body of a wartime movie star. She reaches her front porch and seems to fumble in her purse for a key. It drops and she bends forward to retrieve it, stretching her hand to the ground without bending her knees. He tries to imagine her naked, doing calisthenics. He proclaims to the sofa, "And I don't give a damn what the neighbors say! This is my house!"

Six months before their silver anniversary in 1970, Estelle had ordered George out of their house

and filed for separation. George had, without warning or explanation to her, resigned his position a week before the end of the semester. A few discreet calls gave her the information she sought. It seemed that one of his female students had complained to the Dean that George, while obviously drunk, had demanded sexual favors in return for a passing grade. The Dean, who had chosen to ignore the rumors about George's behavior that had recently been circulating around the faculty lounge, was forced to act.

He broke the news to Estelle as gently as he could, giving her no details of his final confrontation with George, who denied ever making sex a condition for passing his seminar, but admitted to having enjoyed relations with eight different students over a two-year period. "But how could you do that, George? I've known you more than twenty years, and you were never like that."

"It's very simple, Harold. Girls nowadays know how to have fun. They made it fun for me. Do you know I was forty-five before I ever really knew what sex was all about? I'd been missing out on something great all my life."

"But for a teacher to take advantage of his students is wrong, George. It's immoral."

"I never forced any of them. In fact, it was always their idea. I feel regret for having to end my career this way only two years short of a full pension, but I feel no guilt about the girls. Except this last one."

"Why is that, George?"

"Well, Harold, because I could tell she was scared. She'd probably never done it before and chickened out. I should have known better."

"Why didn't you?"

"It seemed so easy, Harold—I couldn't resist."

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George continues to stare out into the darkening sky, nursing his second martini, still hoping he won't mix a third. The sun must have set behind the clouds and the sleet seems to have stopped. To the north, by the flashing red light of buoy 2 marking the entrance to the Neversink River channel, he sees four clammers motoring towards the depuration plant a mile upstream with their day's hard-earned harvests. The swift outgoing tidal current almost negates their progress.

A man whom George does not recognize is walking briskly past his house. He is wearing a tan parka and no hat. His hair is dark, almost black, and George puts his age as about thirty, noting how

much the man resembles the male soap opera stars George sees on the covers of supermarket magazines. The man takes the four steps to Darlene's front porch in two strides, knocks twice, waits. The door must have been opened immediately for the man is now smiling and speaking. From a bag he removes a bottle, probably wine or champagne, and holds it up in front of him, then disappears through the door.

After George resigned from the College, he moved into his Waterwitch bungalow permanently. During the first summer he hung around the municipal harbor a lot, filling in on the party boats whenever a mate failed to show up. He also helped timid new boat owners maneuver their trailers up and down the steep ramp and rescued fishermen whose engines had failed or run out of fuel. Long after the summer crowds had departed, he was still winterizing motors for the marine mechanics and setting boats in their cradles with a forklift. His engineer's approach to problem solving, theoretical knowledge of the properties of materials, and practical skill with tools made him indispensable.

During the bitter cold winter of 1971, when the bay was frozen over to the tip of Sandy Hook for a month, George spent most of his days drinking coffee with his cronies around a pot-bellied stove in the office of old Honus Payne, the harbormaster. Payne, a strict non-drinking Methodist as old as the century, had been a fisherman since he was ten, never stopping even during

Prohibition when he could have earned a fortune transporting booze. As reprehensible as he found the illegal activities of his fellow fishermen, he remained loyal to them and would decoy every new federal agent hot on the trail of a friend with a boatload of innocent smelly fish that would take an entire night to search through. He was first appointed harbormaster in 1940 and, regardless of which party was in power, reappointed every year thereafter.

Before their first meeting had ended, George discovered that Honus and his father had been friends in their first bitter years of widowhood. Honus' own wife had run off with the Unitarian minister's son and drowned in a sailing accident. It had been Honus who persuaded Heinrich to stop drinking, and now he started working on George. Supported by a petition signed by all the party boat skippers and boat yard supervisors, Honus managed to get the municipal council to appoint George his assistant.

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"He's kind of young for her," George says out loud. "What she needs is an older man. Maybe next summer I'll get her out in my sailboat."

Then he turns to the sofa and adds, “And don’t think I won’t. I can do what I want now. I’ve got two pensions and I own this townhouse free and clear!”

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