

VERONICA. I'm very interested in that part of the world.

ANNETTE. Do you have any other children?

VERONICA. Henry has a nine-year-old sister, Camille. Who's furious at her father because last night her father got rid of the hamster.

ANNETTE. You got rid of the hamster?

MICHAEL. Yes. This hamster makes the most godawful racket all night, then spends the whole day fast asleep! Henry was in a lot of pain last night; he was being driven crazy by the noise that the hamster was making. And, to tell you the truth, I've been wanting to get rid of it for a long time, so I said to myself, OK, that's it, I took it and put it in the street. I thought they loved drains and gutters and all that, but I guess not, it just sat there paralyzed on the sidewalk. Well, they're not domestic animals, they're not wild animals, I don't really know where their natural habitat is. Dump them in the woods, they're probably just as unhappy, so I don't know where you're supposed to put them.

ANNETTE. You left it outside?

VERONICA. He left it there and tried to convince Camille it had run away. But she wasn't having it.

ALAN. Was the hamster gone this morning?

MICHAEL. Gone, yes.

VERONICA. And you, what field are you in?

ANNETTE. I'm in wealth management.

VERONICA. Is it at all possible . . . forgive me for putting the question so bluntly, that Benjamin might apologize to Henry?

ALAN. It'd be good if they talked.

ANNETTE. He has to apologize, Alan. He has to tell him he's sorry.

ALAN. Yes, yes. Of course.

VERONICA. But is he sorry?

ALAN. Gingerbread, delicious . . . Well, at least all this has given us a new recipe.

VERONICA. I'd have preferred it if it hadn't cost my son two teeth.

ALAN. Of course, that's what I meant.

ANNETTE. Strange way of expressing it.

ALAN. Not at all, I . . . (*His cell phone vibrates, he looks at the screen.*) I have to take this . . . Yes, Murray . . . No, no, don't ask for right of reply, you'll only feed the controversy . . . Are you insured? Mm, mm What are these symptoms, what is ataxia? What about on a standard dose? . . . How long have you known about this? . . . And all that time you never recalled it? . . . What's the gross? . . . Ah, got it. I see . . . (*He hangs up and immediately dials another number, scarfing clafouti all the while.*)

ANNETTE. Alan, do you mind joining us?

ALAN. Yes, yes, I'm coming . . . (*To the cell.*) Serge? . . . They've known about the risks for two years . . . An internal report, but it didn't formally identify any undesirable side effects . . . No, they took no precautions, they didn't insure, not a word about it in the annual report . . . Impaired motor skills, stability problems, in short you look completely retarded . . . (*He laughs along with his colleague.*) They are grossing one hundred and fifty million dollars . . . Blanket denial . . . Idiot wanted to demand a right of reply. We certainly don't want a right of reply, on the other hand if the story spreads we could put out a press release, say it's disinformation leaked two weeks before the shareholders' meeting . . . He's going to call me back . . . OK. (*He hangs up.*) I haven't had lunch.

MICHAEL. Please, help yourself, help yourself.

ALAN. Thanks. I have no manners. What were we saying?

VERONICA. That it would have been nicer to meet under different circumstances.

ALAN. Oh, yes, right. So the clafouti, it's your mother's?

ANNETTE. Well, if you ask me, everyone's feeling fine. If you ask me, everyone's feeling better. (*Pause.*) . . . Everyone's much calmer, don't you think? . . . Men are so wedded to their gadgets . . . It belittles them . . . It takes away all their authority . . . A man needs to keep his hands free . . . if you ask me. Even an attaché case is enough to put me off. There was a man, once, I found really attractive, then I saw him with a square shoulder-bag, a man's shoulder-bag, but that was it. There's nothing worse than a shoulder bag. Although there's also nothing worse than a cell phone. A man ought to give the impression that he's alone . . . if you ask me. I mean, that he's capable of being alone . . .! I also have a John Wayne-ish idea of virility. And what was it he had? A Colt .45. A device for creating a vacuum . . . A man who can't give the impression that he's a loner has no texture . . . So, Michael, are you happy? Is it somewhat fractured, our little . . . What was it you said? . . . I've forgotten the word, . . . but in the end . . . everyone's feeling more or less all right . . . if you ask me.

MICHAEL. I should probably warn you, rum drives you crazy.

ANNETTE. I've never felt more normal.

MICHAEL. Right.

ANNETTE. I'm starting to feel rather pleasantly serene.

VERONICA. Ha, ha! That's wonderful! . . . Rather pleasantly serene.

MICHAEL. As for you, Darjeeling, I don't see what's to be gained by getting publicly smashed.

VERONICA. Kiss my ass. (*Michael goes to fetch the cigar box.*)

MICHAEL. Take one, Alan. Relax.

VERONICA. Cigars are not smoked in this house!

MICHAEL. These are Cuban, Cohiba, Monte Cristo number three and number four.

VERONICA. You don't smoke in a house with an asthmatic child!

ANNETTE. Who's asthmatic?

VERONICA. Our son.

MICHAEL. Didn't stop you buying a fucking hamster.

ANNETTE. It's true, if somebody has asthma, keeping animals isn't recommended.

MICHAEL. Completely **unrecommended!**

ANNETTE. Even a goldfish can be risky.

VERONICA. Do I have to listen to this fatuous nonsense? (*She snatches the cigar box out of Michael's hands and slams it shut brutally.*) I'm sorry, no doubt I'm the only one of us not feeling rather pleasantly serene. In fact, I've never been so unhappy. I think this is the unhappiest day of my life.

MICHAEL. Drinking always makes you unhappy.

VERONICA. Michael, every word that comes out of your mouth is destroying me. I don't drink. I drank a mouthful of this shitty rum you're waving about as if you were showing the congregation the Shroud of Turin, I don't drink and I bitterly regret it, it'd be a relief to be able to take refuge in a little drop at every minor setback.

ANNETTE. My husband's unhappy as well. Look at him. Slumped. He looks as if someone's left him by the side of the road. I think it's the unhappiest day of his life too.

ALAN. Yes.

ANNETTE. I'm so sorry, Woof-woof. (*Michael starts up the hair dryer again, directing it at the various parts of the cell phone.*)

VERONICA. Will you turn off the blow-dryer! That thing is toast. (*The telephone rings.*)

MICHAEL. Yes! Because it could kill you! That medication is poison! Someone's going to explain it to you . . . (*He hands the receiver to Alan.*) Tell her.

ALAN. Tell her what? ...