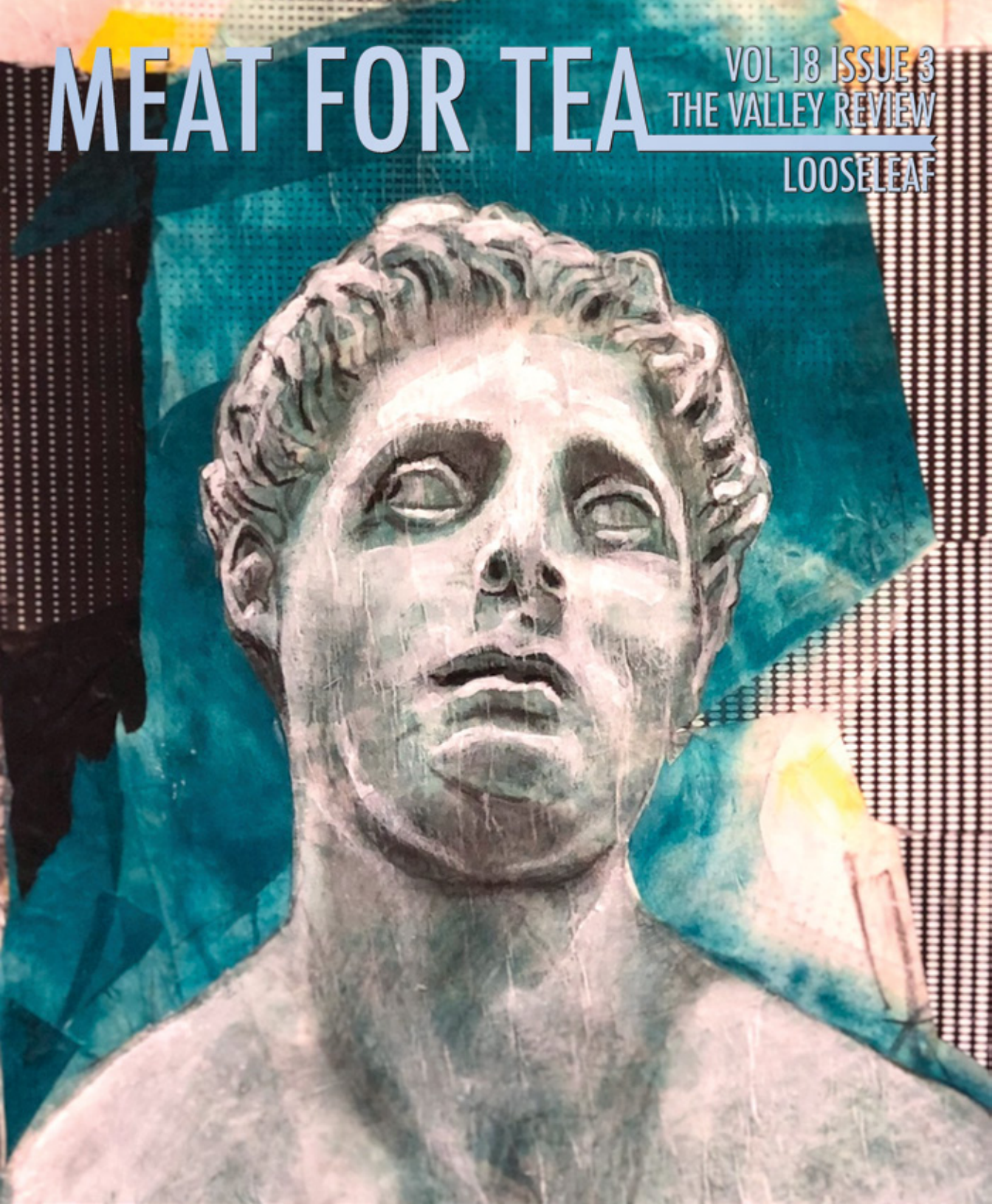
MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 18 ISSUE 3
THE VALLEY REVIEW
LOOSE LEAF



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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Guest Salutation: Four Generations' Journey and When We Were 15 or Demcracy, What an Idea.

My dear friend and mentor once told me during a heated dinner table discussion, "Did you know there are not just six of us here talking, arguing, and debating? There are at least 24 people here at the table." At first, I didn't understand what he meant. Still, he quickly explained: "Our opinions, experiences, and wisdom come partially from our parents, grandparents, and their parents. So, when the six of us are here talking, our ancestors are "standing" behind each of us and participating in the discussion." Now, whenever I have a discussion, I can't help but think about who else is in the room talking.

In the wake of recent world affairs and domestic politics, I think about those standing behind me and seek their wisdom and lifetime experiences to understand it all. As we evaluate democracy versus authoritarian dictatorship and the potential outcomes of the upcoming elections, I reflect on my ancestors' journey, and I want to share some of it with you.

I was born in Czechoslovakia in 1962, under Communist dictatorship, which ended in 1989 with the "Velvet Revolution." By then, I had lived in exile in West Germany for eight years, where I escaped in 1981. At age 19, I arrived at a refugee camp, hoping to restart my life in a free, democratic country, away from persecution and hardship. Leaving everything behind, I was alone, away from my family and friends, most of whom I would never see again. I had much to learn about the world's complexities in the context of history, social and economic circumstances, political ambitions, and international and domestic relationships.

My grandfather was born in 1903. **By the age of 15**, he had witnessed the fall of the Austrian Empire, Czechoslovakia's birth, and the end of World War I. Czechoslovakia was conceived as a representative democracy when it was formed in 1918 after the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. The country's constitution established a pluralistic party system, a well-functioning economy, and the rule of law. Czechoslovakia was the only East European country to remain a parliamentary democracy from 1918 to 1938.

My father was born in 1933. Growing up, he witnessed the atrocities of World War II. My grandmother was born in Sudetenland, a border region where Germans and Czechs had lived peacefully together for centuries. Before Hitler invaded Poland, Konrad Henlein unleashed fierce political propaganda, forcing a wedge between the Czechs and Germans, resulting in four million people being forcefully moved out to Germany, and the Czech government confiscated all their land and possessions. They were only allowed to take what would fit in a backpack. These war crimes are still discussed and negotiated to the present time between the Czechs and the Germans.

By the age of 15, my father witnessed the end of democracy. In late February 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, with Soviet backing, assumed undisputed control over the government of Czechoslovakia through a coup d'état. My grandparents' farm of 200 hectares (about 500 acres), with all the equipment and animals, was confiscated and turned into a government-controlled agricultural co-operative. My grandfather died shortly after, and my grandmother was allowed to work as a cleaning lady at the Ministry of Agriculture. As a

child of a farmer who protested the confiscation of his livelihood, my father was blacklisted and denied education in the Communist Party-controlled school system. Considering his background, options for finding a job were very limited. He apprenticed to become a gardener, a job considered by the Communist party as "non-influential and non-problematic to the regime." As a young teenager, my father naively sympathized with the ideals of communism and was an enthusiastic supporter of the communist party. He, however, learned very quickly the oppressive practices of the regime. The party unleashed a brutal campaign designed to crush any potential opposition. Even some original founders and party members who initially voted and supported the party but spoke up against the party's oppressive practices were quickly expelled or eliminated by the leadership. After he witnessed public trials and executions of leading intellectuals and citizens who dared to oppose the party's "ideology," my father refused any association with the Communist Party and joined the movement called "Socialism with a Human Face."

A period of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia began in January 1968 with the election of Alexander Dubček. The movement composed a manifesto called "The Two Thousand Words," written by Czech reformist writer Ludvík Vaculík. My father signed it, along with thousands of intellectuals, artists, farmers, and workers, on June 17, 1968, during the Prague Spring. Threatened by these developments, the Communist Party sent a letter to Moscow asking for help to crush the movement. On August 23, 1968, the Warsaw Pact armies, led by the Soviet Army, invaded Czechoslovakia. I was 6 years old. I remember my father carrying me on his shoulders to work, passing by tanks dug into the streets, stripped of cobblestones by Soviet military vehicles. A martial law was invoked, and Russian soldiers with machine guns guarded the checkpoints. My father kept sarcastically telling me, "Pay attention and never forget; these are our brothers, as our government keeps telling us."

The period after the Soviet invasion was called "Normalization." The purge continued.

Intellectuals, artists, clergy, scientists: anyone who had educated knowledge of history, economics, science, and democratic principles and disagreed with the party was sentenced to political prisons or isolated from society in mental institutions or by being moved out to rural and small villages or forced labor camps working in stone quarries, uranium mines, building roads and bridges, or as night watchmen at some factory in the middle of nowhere. Many famous artists, actors, directors, philosophers, and public figures disappeared from the public eye. Blacklisted and denied any presence in their fields of expertise, they were no longer allowed to practice their professions. Radio, TV, movie theaters, and galleries presented strictly censored and crafted propaganda, celebrating the "outstanding accomplishments" of the Communist Party's leadership. Art, film, and television featured fake and distorted images of a happy working population, smiling cole miners, proud steel workers, and singing farmers while milking cows and toiling the soil on the cooperative farms. The illusion of happy citizens dancing or shopping in stores full of goods was part of the massive brainwashing propaganda. In reality, stores were empty; the country was isolated from the rest of the world. People retreated to their homes, isolating themselves, living in fear of speaking up against the dismal state of being. Life became gloomy, depressed, and lethargic. The scarcity led to more corruption and criminal behaviors, turning citizens against each other in a competition to survive. The only way to move up in society was to become a Communist Party member, forcing many to make difficult moral decisions to collaborate or face persecution. The opposition moved into hiding and the underground movement, and in 1977, a new petition called CHARTER 77 was composed.

Now **I was 15 years old.** When the petition was published and signed by thousands, my father worked as a Master gardener. Leading a crew of 25 workers, he was asked by the authorities to openly and publicly reject Charter 77 and express support for the Communist Party. That night, he sat me down and said, "Son, I want you to know I have been asked to sign the rejection of Charter 77 and publicly express my support for the regime. If I don't sign it, you will not be accepted to study in any schools, get a driver's license, or participate in public events, exhibits, or performances. You will likely end up working a job that will not support your artistic ambitions and talents, and you will be under the surveillance of the secret police for the rest of your life." He continued, tears streaming down his face, "I am so sorry, but I can not and will not sign any of these documents or show any support for the regime. I would not be able to live with myself, and I hope you will understand and forgive me one day."

I thought this was the bravest and most amazing lesson my father ever gave me. Until I left my old country in 1981, I was actively part of the underground movement that ultimately led to the end of the Communist dictatorship in 1989. After six years in political prison, the spokesman for Charter 77, a playwright, Václav Havel, went from his prison cell straight to the presidential palace to become the new president of the newly reformed democratic Czech Republic.

This is a concise reflection of my family's journey spanning one century. The fourth generation is now living in the USA. American democracy has always been a source of hope and inspiration for my family, spanning three generations. It represents hope and a guide to freedom, a dignified, respectful, and just way of life, and opportunity. My family was granted US citizenship in 1995, and I am proud to say I am an American. I believe American democracy is the most significant human experiment, unparalleled on the planet, and I am grateful every day to be part of it.

In the wake of recent political developments, my muscle memory reminds me of where I came from and how I felt then. I never thought I would feel that way in this country. The weird anxiety and pain in my stomach, the stress and nausea, are coming back. I worry not just for me and my family but for all my American friends and people who have not experienced firsthand what life under a dictatorship and loss of justice under an oppressive regime is like.

The events of the last decade show extreme political division, hate-filled rhetoric, denial of human rights, deportations, normalized hate crimes, and the open attempt for one party's ideological dominance—symptoms reminiscent of the lead-up to the 1948 communist dictatorship. Propaganda and misinformation, driven by corporate interests, fuel further division and fear. The middle class is shrinking, small businesses are struggling, and more citizens are being pushed into corporate jobs controlled by lobbyists. The arts, education, and sciences are underfunded and attacked, labeled "nonessential" or immoral, leading to censorship and banned books. This echoes the book bans of nazi Germany and communist regimes, threatening freedom and individuality. Our educational system fails to produce a competitive workforce, hindering economic potential and keeping pace with global markets and domestic economic needs. Infrastructure, healthcare, and human services are in decline, and corruption is undermining democratic values, both left and right. Lack of understanding of the complexity of foreign policy leads to isolation and undermines national security. The list is long, and this climate fosters the illusion that a strong leader or dictator can solve our problems, risking the loss of collective consciousness and democratic principles and the value of individual and unique expression and contributions that are the foundation of a vibrant, progressive, and successful society.

Given my background, here is what makes me anxious about the open conversation today: The banning of books, deportation of immigrants, removal of civil rights, the acceptance of the rise of hate crimes, censorship of free speech, the influence of money on our politics and the justice system—these are just examples. It is not easy to hear or believe that we are slowly moving towards losing democracy. I have lived through it, and what I see around me can't be ignored.

Now, that the fourth generation of my family lives in the US, I hope they will never have to experience what my ancestors endured. While perfectly aware of human nature's flaws, challenges, and imperfections, Democracy is a fragile experiment. Now, discussing it with my ancestors around the table, I still value and choose democracy at any time as the best idea we currently have in the evolution of our species, and I urge you to pay attention and do the same. Thank you for your time

Vitek Kruta,
Concerned citizen.

two more years

Shawn Mitchell

Sometimes it's not grand accomplishments, but the little things in life that give unexpected pleasure. Watching two cardinals engage in an early morning feud over who gets the tastiest beetle, or spotting some whitetail deer cautiously grazing in the bareness of a freshly harvested cornfield. Maybe a stranger lending a helping hand when your groceries escape the bottom of a brown paper bag. Or, perhaps watching your neighbor keel over on the side of his garage, and upon coming to his aid, you are just in time to hear his death rattle clatter up from his lungs and out his gaping mouth. Skin cool and sweaty — *diaphoretic*, if you prefer technical jargon. His pupils relax and expand as if his soul is waving goodbye. It *is* the little things.

Now, wait a second, let's back this out of my head, out of that recurring fantasy, and into the realm of nonfiction. I hate my ignorant asshole of a neighbor. Ahh, there we are. Firmly in the domain of truth — as honest as the day is long. Though I am not a journalist, I do write things occasionally and will adhere to a personal sense of journalistic integrity, whatever that means nowadays. As such, my neighbor will hereafter be referred to as Boomer — as he did not consent to his actual name being used in this work of nonfiction. Boomer is on the wrong side of seventy-five, and the wrong side of history in nearly any viewpoint he holds dear. He's the kind of guy who thinks, "I was in Vietnam " is a witty icebreaker. How the local police could function without his prominently displayed "I support law enforcement" yard sign, is anyone's guess. At this particular moment, Boomer has crossed the property line and is damn near goose-stepping toward me. Fueled by liquid courage and half-baked notions of what the world "should be," he recklessly closes the distance between us.

Earlier in this sunny, late Autumn afternoon, I was gazing out my picture window observing the sea of dried leaves stretching across my property. Oak, birch, maple, and beech — the common New England species are well represented. Encouraged by southern winds they flip, roll, and tumble like acrobats toward the barren astroturf of my neighbor's property. Oh wait, I mean Boomer's property. Or, err, maybe it's Boomer's girlfriend's property. They've been dating for over thirty years but she did inherit the place before meeting prince not-so-charming. Although, Boomer does work seven days a week during the fall making sure a dry leaf never rests for more than an hour on that acre of land. Maybe that makes it his property. Maybe that makes him an idiot. Regardless, let's get on with it.

Marijuana can take the edge off but also leaves me a bit foggy and slow. For these reasons I seldom find myself getting high. Certainly not like I used to. I've grown to value the clarity of sobriety in recent years. But, something about working outside or in the garden makes me think settling into a blissful state of confusion and paranoia is a good idea.

Surveying my garage from the vantage point of my staircase I spot a joint nestled between a chop saw and a small blow torch. For my purposes, a few puffs will do. The triangular blue flame of the torch ignites one end and I drag pungent silky smoke out the other. White smoke gliding over the ceiling finds its way to the outdoors and I'm right behind it. I gas up the backpack leaf blower, flip some switches, pull a cord, and the little engine comes alive. Soft orange earplugs will block out the unpleasant whine of the motor; I swing the backpack over my shoulder and get to work near the front door of my house. Oh look, here comes my still-alive neighbor.

Bunches of dry leaves close to the house are the most difficult to deal with. They easily become entangled with the lavender and blueberry bushes. Disturbing the spearmint causes their oils to release into the air and reminds me of the chewing gum my grandfather used to give me. My indulgence in the natural world insulated me from the excess and stress churning outside of it, in all their various forms. Yet, some prove to be as persistent as they are foolish and insist upon their entitled selfishness. Boomer is standing before me and his curled, nicotine-stained lips are moving about, desperately attempting to communicate the big feelings he has inside. Yet, this unpleasant whine is silenced by the orange foam in my ear. Of course, Boomer doesn't notice this because Boomer only thinks about Boomer and anything outside of Boomer's tiny world is of no consequence to Boomer. Anger challenges my high. My thumb depresses a trigger to quell the hum of the engine, and I remove the soft plugs from my ears — my jaw clenches.

"Ya know, it would be great if you could pick up these goddamn leaves."
Hmmm. Tactful opening, I think to myself. His timing is truly masterful. Boomer has chosen to confront me about not picking up leaves … At the exact moment, I am picking up leaves. Responding to such foolishness can be tricky so I do my best to not escalate a potentially volatile situation.

"What the fuck does it look like I'm doing!?"

This does not send Boomer back to his one-acre fiefdom. The juniper on his breath tells me there's gin in his blood, reducing his critical thinking skills from poor to non-existent. This is not going to end well, it's just a matter of how bad it is going to get. Now pointing at me with his yellowed finger he lets loose a short tirade:

"Those fucking leaves will blow over into MY yard, and I'm fucking sick of it. I KNOW LAZY WHEN I SEE IT," he yells.

The jab/cross is a classic boxing combination. The lead hand is more of a distraction, a set-up. When the jab makes contact or drops their guard, you pull it back hard, plant your back foot, and release a thundering cross that could drive railroad spikes. That's the idea at least. A quick shuffle of my feet ensures he is within striking distance, and I am outside of his. Thankfully, the marijuana has taken some of the edge off — slowing me down. I quickly recognized that I could not allow this confrontation to get physical. There is a real chance that a man his age wouldn't survive even a not-so-well-placed cross. Boomer is like a brittle old leaf — so I treat him like one.

"Get the fuck off my property. Now!" I bellow

Flicking my thumb up towards the little rabbit icon on the throttle the low humming engine rips into high gear and I point the concentrated thrust of wind right in Boomer's puckered face. He retreats and I follow, escorting this crinkled leaf of a man to where he needs to go. The hard plastic blower pressed into his head, neck, or back, the whole way. He slinks into his garage and disappears.

Several years ago, that incident marked the beginning of a tradition—an exercise of pettiness. I rarely address the leaves on my property, and being surrounded by hundreds of trees there is no shortage of leaves to address. But, when I do, I corral them onto one side of my yard and leave them there. That cool Fall breeze ushers them into enemy territory each year. Watching from my picture window, coffee in hand, I witness the multi-colored leaves charge across the lawn like soldiers from some feudal empire; they bravely go forth to defend my honor. It *is* the little things. The average life expectancy for an American male is 77 years old.

quest

Eileen Kennedy

smoke and scent
aromatic vixen
stealing the rose color for my cheeks
tinting my eyes with coneflower
Sweet Artemisia
xeriscaped flowers
dream maker guiding my thoughts
spinning in center a web
through the heart of the circle
thirteen points phase the moon
where vision and prophesy come
bowing perfumed charm
I sleep, I sleep, I sleep

daisy chain

Eileen Kennedy

shocking white flowers
interconnected and wild
gathered by their stems

related events
legislative postponement
frustrating stalemates

chain in an orgy
Emperor Tiberius
people front to back

computers talking
connection of network nodes
laptop interface

a common flower
know the effortless daisy
many things to few

the emissary

Don Noel

The voice on the phone was Rory's. His first words were cryptic: "Mother, I just wanted you to hear it from me first."

"Oh, hello, Rory. Hear what?"

"Margie and I are splitting."

"Wh-a-a-t?"

"I mean, divorcing."

Trudy looked around the living room of her cozy apartment, wishing she could somehow will him to be here, in front of her, not just a disembodied voice. Out her picture window, the sun was setting into a nice purple bruise that somehow seemed appropriate. She stifled a twinge of anger: Didn't a 78-year-old mother deserve a half-hour's drive to deliver news like this face-to-face? He knew his way around Harmony Acres – not that he came very often – and her apartment wasn't far from where he could park.

She pushed her sewing glasses down her nose, settled her needlepoint project into her lap, and skewed right on the sofa to contemplate last year's family photo of Rory and Margie and the collegiate-looking kids on the end table. Fact was, she allowed herself to think, she liked her daughter-in-law better than her son. She loved Margie as much as she loved her own daughter Sarah. Rory was – she searched her mind, surprised at what she found there – too much like his father.

There. She hadn't allowed herself to think such things in the dozen-plus years since Robert's death.

"Mother? Are you still there, Mother?"

"Oh, yes. Just taken aback, is all." She realized that her eyes were moist. *He* ought to have tears rolling down his face, she thought; but he didn't even sound sad. "That's terrible," she finally managed. After a moment she added, "Whose idea is it?"

"I guess it's kind of mutual."

That's unlikely! she thought. One hardly expects a couple married three decades – well, all right, only 25 years, but that's almost half an adult lifetime – to suddenly just up and forget it, does one? Agree to wander off toward old age by themselves? At just the age when a comfortable companion is worth more than well-broken-in shoes? Worth more than sex, although Rory might not be smart enough yet to understand that.

She said it aloud: "That's unlikely." And then added, "Is there someone else?"