

June 22, 1981

Dear Ken,

I meant to put these comments in letter form directly after I spoke to you, but Nora's father died on the night of my birthday (of chemotherapy, not his cancer) and since she's been alone through all this, I've been acting as her agent since then. Numerous people have given me copies of his obit so I thought I'd send you one, because it's interesting both in terms of his work and the personal wreckage of his life. Jule's only natural son - the one who sold me that bad coke - is in a drug dry-out program for heroin, with, I would say, little hope of success, his first wife, Nora's mother, is a total alcoholic, and her son by a previous marriage whom Jule raised (founder of Psychology Today and now Video Fashion and once owner of The Saturday Review) could not once make it up to Boston to see Jule during the two years of his illness. So Jule has left all his money to Nora and druggo Peter, with Nora as Peter's trustee, oh my god, and Nick-the-entrepreneur is expected to contest the will, since he needs money to salvage Video Fashion. Meanwhile, ex-wives two and three are planning to attend the service today along with Nora's mother, and my job is to keep them from attacking each other, since each credits the other with the breakup of her union. So there you have it - a typical American family. Nora, on the other hand, is the very best person I know - perhaps that is not so suprising, and she's left with a hell of a mess for a family now. Jule was the only son of Russian immigrants - his father was a tailor and his mother a seamstress for MGM, - he worked with Einstein at Princeton, won every prize save the Nobel that sciene offers, and my job after the service is to keep Peter from stealing his gold medals which are worth about \$60,000. I mean, it's great. Now you may have a hint as to where my plot for Lily came from, and the funny thing is, I had made a mental committmen to doing a non-mystery version of that for my next book, with the father an astrophysicist - about to shoot the largest telescope ever made into middle space (to see what the fuck went wrong on earth?). I don't know whether I can do that now without causing great pain to Nora. Shit.

Anyway - Nora spent last night at their beach house for a rest, and she took along (at her request) Felixs. So, you are now comforting the bereaved.

I don't blame you for being high on your draft, because whilst I was reading it phonecallers were rudely turned away. It's a great read, and, like I said, it's funny. I thought the political stuff had just the right touch - I looked forward to those scenes and also *to the*

interior monologue stuff, or whatever. In fact, I wanted more of that from almost everyone - from Walden because I enjoyed his so much, and from Charlotte and Lydia because there simply wasn't quite enough there. But let me put this in some kind of hierarchy.

#### Major gripes:

Lydia is totally incomprehensible. I believed in her St. Petersburg passion - but then what happened to change that daring girl into a fear-ridden woman apparently maddened by her sexuality? I'm not saying it couldn't happen, but I need a little more evolution. She was forced into that marriage and she was rebellious to start with - would she really want Charlotte to be Caspar Milquetoast? I mean, she could hate herself because of Felix, but you don't show me why - religious guilt, okay, simple fear of discovery, sure, but she was forced into a marriage, traded by two men, might she not also think, well, fuck you? Has she been living a secret life - and if so, what kind? It would seem that is the case from her obsession with sex, but that's the only clue. If you want to play it that way, let's see more of the picture/context. Or, if her guilt/fear come from a perfect adjustment to her life with Walden, then should she hate her past self so much, or merely fear its revelation? Where does her sense of sin come from? Doesn't she draw parallels with her Russian/English situation and repression - and apply them to Charlotte more sympathetically than as "do-as-I-was-done-to" cycle? I might feel, if I were Lydia, 'My daughter is being pushed through the same sieve and I will try to protect her and counsel her if she makes my mistakes.' I think her conflicts and tensions have to be made more explicit to justify her falling-upon-Felix scene at the end. Lydia ought to be fascinating - let her speak. What does she feel when she sees Charlotte choosing the kind of life she might have had with Felix? Secret pleasure? Jealousy? Both in confusion? Is her falling on Felix a desperate attempt to re-unite her severed personality? I think it has to be that (symbolic as well as sexual) but then I need to see that conflict earlier in terms other than (inexplicable) fear. Oblomov as catalyst, perhaps, used more strongly, with details evoking memory?

Charlotte is mostly good and interesting. Two complaints: Her naivete about sex & babies, yes. But if there breathes in any century an eighteen year old who has not discovered pleasure in their bodies - in the bath with a washcloth if nowhere else - I would be surprised. Maybe she has made that discovery and is trying to connect it with....??? Could make for an interesting oblique feeling-out conversation with her cousin, er, figuratively speaking, that it. My other question is about her capitulation to Felix - it's too quick. I would say, at eighteen, 'but if you tell people, won't they listen? Let's expose this, etc, etc.' And then I think she needs an objective reason - some kind of violence or callousness from Oblomov, to tip the balance.

If he were an unknown Russian prince, maybe. But since he's been in her house, and all, and he's so bloody likeable (maybe he should kick-a-dog?) I don't think she could be quite so coolly rational about him. Or maybe she should taste violence more personally - get beaten in the demonstration, get blood on her hands, or something. Or maybe Oblomov was (or Felix pretends as a symbol that he was) more directly involved in Felix' torture - he shows her scars. The way it is now, I respect and like Charlotte, and then she turns into an air-head. She stops questioning both Felix and herself. At the end, she and Lydia both get a bit stupid - and how can they be so strange to each other, don't they have any real perception of each other at all? Women puzzle and puzzle about their mother's lives, and mothers look for their own reflection in their daughters.

end major gripes.

Felix is very good indeed, I would only want a bit more of the Czar's atrocities explicated. And, I was surprised that he initially wanted to kill Walden as well as Oblomov, since it would seem that would jeopardize the Russian immigrants in England. But maybe I read that wrong. I'm not sure if it's clear how much the assassination is meant as sheer obstruction, or how much as political statement.

Bridget and Annie are terrific, and their juxtaposition likewise.

Questions:

Would Felix really think that Lydia betrayed him? When they were having such a good time? Why would she do that? I would think he would have assumed she had been betrayed.

Would Felix really recognize only a scream after twenty-odd years?

If you want the footman to go home naked, I think you should tell us then rather than later why he did not appeal to the palace servants.

Would Lydia really not recognize the name Levin? With Oblomov around and the lid coming off, I should think it would make her jump a mile.

You have Charlotte reading newspapers, and yet never having heard of suffragettes - going about town and not having seen them. Perhaps this is one place she should have been lied to - about their real motives and issues. By the way, all the suffragette stuff is absolutely great - and Mrs. Pankhurst's speech makes me think you should have gone into politics. Splendid. My blood ran hot.

The fire is also great. I loved it.

On p. 191. - the womens' throw was 'innaccurate'? Yeah, we women don't throw so good. Howabout , 'because of the crush' or something.

On the train - you have Felix seeing 'ginger colored whiskers' and then figuring out what ginger-color is. I would have gotten who the guy was without the use of 'ginger' explicitly there.

One prejudiced stylistic criticism: I think you use the device:

Felix thought: or, Walden thought: A bit too often. I think when I see that: the author is trying to tell me something. It's too much like short-hand. Could be softened simply by inserting, 'No,' Walden thought...' I humbly suggest that you save the balder version for rare moment of insight.

I'm sure a lot of this stuff is simply first-draft Follett-writes-quickly jazz you already know about. My main gripes are Lydia, Charlottes capitulation, and the end part where everyone is running around the house being stupid. And Walden could be given more depth by a sense of the fragility of his happiness, as you mentioned in your last letter, but that I suspect will tie into what you do with Lydia - what the quality of their relationship has been, what her secret emotions are and to what extent Walden susses them out. I might like to see Oblomov a bit more clearly too, just a few telling details. I like very much the fact that I can sympathize equally with Walden's and Felix' world view. No moral safety. And Churchill is great fun.

Well, Kenny, you've done it again, damn your pink little eyes. Another quick story - I almost wish I hadn't seen the outline, given how much I chuckled over the Churchill twist at the end which was news to me. If Nora, who knows nothing about the story, had pithy comment, I will forward them immediately.

I'm sorry to have taken so long to answer - you've always been so good about sending your deliberations right off - but I'm sure you understand the reason for that. I wish we could have talked much longer on the phone, but three days at the cancer clinic left me something of a blank emotionally, and I was late as the devil as it was. Let me know what Al and Pat say, so I can learn the odd thing or two, I feel like such a dunce right now. Again, thanks for the books. I'm starting with Lives of a Cell - the easiest, of course. It's a delight. I love you, little cabbage.

M.