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People like to warn you that by the time you reach the middle of your life, passion will begin to feel like a meal eaten long ago, which you remember with great tenderness. The bright points of silver. The butter in its oblong dish. The corpse of a chocolate cake. The leaning back in a chair at the end, slugged on the head and overcome. Dory Lang had always thought there was a little cruelty in such a warning. It was similar to how, when she had a baby, people always tried to clue her in on what they were sure would befall her. Once, long ago, Dory and her infant daughter were riding a bus in the city, when an old woman leaned over and said, “May I tell you something, dear?” She had a kind face full of valleys and faults. Dory imagined she was about to describe the baby’s beauty—in particular, the curve of the mouth—and she made her own mouth assume a knowing, pleased modesty. But what the woman said, leaning even closer, was, “You will never have another day in your life that is free of anxiety.”

There was a little private pleasure to be taken in the fact that that old woman, though she was of course correct, was now dead, and Dory was not. As for the warnings about the disappearance of passion, Dory recognized the sadism stitched into the words. Because the love lives of the women who said such things had gone soft and pulpy and tragic, they took a little comfort in telling as many women as they could that someday such a change would happen to them too.

Dory and Robby felt they were exempt from such an outcome, assuming that even when they were so old that they appeared interchangeable—even when his ankles were as narrow and hairless as hers, and her lips were as thin and collagenless as his, and their pubic hair could have belonged to Santa Claus; even when they resembled those dried-apple dolls sold in the gift shops of folk museums—they would sleep together frequently, happily, and not just gently, but with the same gruff, fierce purpose as always. Around them, in other houses in their neighborhood, there would be a terrible pile-up of non-sex-having couples, all bone and tendon and indifference and regret.

Warmly, hotly, tirelessly, in their own bed they would stay.

The Langs had been teaching English at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Stellar Plains, New Jersey, for a decade and a half when everything changed. It had been an uneventful school year so far; there had been no deaths, neither student nor teacher, and not even any halfhearted, prankish bomb threats, which had become as common to suburban high schools as intramural sports.

Robby and Dory Lang began that year at Eleanor Roosevelt—Elro, everyone called it—with the same optimism that they almost always felt. It had grown tempered in recent years, since the economy

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had tumbled, and certain concrete signs of optimism were no longer as central a part of the school experience: the smell of pencils, for instance, with their suggestion of woodshop and campgrounds and the promise of some precocious kid's standout in-class essay. Pencils still lurked, fragrantly, but you had to look for them, and they seemed outnumbered by all things with a keyboard. Still, though, the Langs were hopeful; still, they thought it would be a good year.

Together they were often spoken of in one breath by the other faculty members as *Robby and Dory Lang*, or just *Robby and Dory*, or by the students as *Mr. and Ms. L*, those two married, easygoing, still fairly young English teachers who walked the halls with a genial air. There were some teachers at Elro who lived to crack down on the kids. "Where's your pass?" they would demand of a boy with a mouth freshly wet and slack from the water fountain. "Wha', wha'?" said the boy, stammering, dripping. But the kids knew that Dory and Robby weren't out to get them. Even their pop quizzes were humane.

At just past forty they were both good-natured, decent-looking, tallish, and as dark-redheaded as Irish setters. Robby wore egghead eyeglasses that had become fashionable in recent years. He had a hard shield of a chest, and he rode a bike on weekends through the smooth streets of the neighborhood. Each morning he unscrewed one of the green glass canisters on the countertop and poured himself a dusty bleat of oat and twig, pious about his intake, wanting to live a long time so he didn't miss a second with his wife or daughter.