

MILTON TEICHMAN

INFLUENCE

"It's not that I don't enjoy the children," Debra said to David on Sunday morning during her weekend visit in Rhinecliff. They had returned from a scenic walk along the Hudson River and were now finishing their breakfast. The fall semester was soon to begin, and Debra was anticipating returning to her kindergarten class in the city. "It's that the classes are so large I can't possibly give the children the attention they need."

David listened. He could hear the frustration in her voice.

"Would you believe it, David, there's been a cut-back in teacher aides? I'll have less assistance in the classroom this fall than I had last year."

David shook his head sympathetically.

"I hate to be complaining this way. It must be boring."

"Not at all, I want you to be happy." He remembered telling her more than once that her happiness made her all the more beautiful. He was saddened by the predicament in which she now found herself. There was a solution to her problem, he thought. Debra would find it. Her good cheer would return.

Who would have thought that at age fifty, a year after the pain and disorientation of divorce, he would meet a kindred spirit, a woman his own age, a woman who loved the arts as he did—literature, painting, music—who had a generous spirit and a loving heart and welcomed intimacy in the fullest sense. Two wonderful years together. He remembered their many walks in the city until they were drunk with fatigue, their hikes amidst the beauty of the Hudson Valley, their hours together at concerts and museums, their conversations about the things they loved and the things they wished for. Though Debra lived in Brooklyn and he lived north of the city in Rhinecliff, the distance between their homes was not an impediment. Debra loved Rhinecliff on the Hudson. To her, living her entire life in the city, this quiet hamlet was *the country*.

Soon after they met, he told her about his work as a college teacher of English, about the breakdown of his marriage, about his son Edward, who was now on his own. She told him about two long-term relationships that ended. She spoke about her disappointments in a matter-of-fact manner, without sadness or bitterness. "I've been *almost* married twice," she said, a gentle smile on her face.

Now, sitting across from her on this late-August morning in Rhinecliff, he witnessed a mood of dejection in Debra that saddened him.

"And there's all the clerical detail that's expected," she continued, "daily lesson plans that have to be turned in—despite the fact that I've proven myself as a teacher for thirty years."

"As a teacher myself, I can imagine how you feel."

Debra paused, as if unsure about continuing. She looked down at her coffee cup and then up at David. "I care about the children, David, and I know I can give them something . . . But I guess after so many years I'm just depleted. I want a new work experience—a real change in my life."

"I can understand."

"If I stay on the job another five years, I can get a larger pension—but I don't want to be carried out." She laughed nervously. "If I leave, I should do so while I'm well—while I can bring energy to whatever else I choose to do."

"What would you like to do, Debra?"

She ran her fingers through her close-cropped brown hair. Her hazel eyes that David loved to look at, seemed to take on a richer coloring.

"I think I'd like to take a year or so to get a second master's degree."

"It's a great idea!"

"There's a master's program in the humanities at the New School. It's designed for adults who want to expand themselves. I could take courses in music, art, literature, philosophy . . ." Her face brightened as she spoke.

"You'd be terrific in such a program, Debra. For you it would be a form of recreation."

"Nice of you to say that, David." She chuckled, a sound David was pleased to hear. "But I need to be realistic, too. I haven't been in a classroom for twenty-five years. I'm excited, but I'm apprehensive also."

A week later, on the telephone, she told David that her plan was to take a single course at the New School while she continued to teach during the coming fall semester. She could get credit for that course toward the degree. If she continued to think positively about full-time graduate study, she would