

A Dance On the Edge

Anne Avery

This is for my e-mail buddies, who are living proof that friendships really can flourish through the miracle of modern telecommunications. Thanks for being at the other end of the line!

Jones@tel.com

Dear Ms. Jones:

I received your E-mail. The one with suggestions for the interior of the lodge I'm building for Frank.

Sorry to say this, but you've got it all wrong. Your ideas are totally inappropriate for a timber-and-stone lodge set in the middle of upstate New York wilderness.

Now, I'm not questioning your qualifications as an interior designer. Frank showed me photos of the work you'd done for him on those big commercial projects in Manhattan. It's obvious you know what you're doing in a multimillion-dollar office building.

But frankly, Ms. Jones, that kind -of slick sophistication just isn't appropriate for a lodge that will be a second home for Frank and his family. Silk upholstery in a house with a six-year-old who carries her pet frog in her purse? Come on!

I'll be honest: I told Frank I thought he was making a mistake in hiring you for this project. He insisted. But *silk*? That's plain ridiculous!

Jack Martin

Martin@tel.com

Dear Mr. Martin,

Just because we are constrained to communicating by E-mail doesn't give you the right to be rude. You architects seem to think that a building is the concrete and glass you slapped together, and anything else is mere useless decoration. You forget that people are going to live and work inside all that concrete. Real, live people. They can't sit on your precious architectural vision!

Marlis Jones

PS. You also appear to have forgotten that you're building this lodge for Frank *and* Pat. Wives are part of the deal too, you know!

jones@tel.com

Dear Ms. Jones:

Interior designers have their place, but if, like you, they can't grasp the difference between a mountain lodge and a Manhattan office, they're better off sticking with the office.

Silk, for heaven's sake!

Jack Martin

And I didn't forget Pat- *or* her penchant for knickknacks.

Martin@tel.com

Mr. Martin:

From rudeness to outright insults. If we were in the same meeting room, I'd be tempted to throw your blueprints in your face! I should have stuck to my guns and refused Frank's request that I work on this project with you.

However, I agreed to do my best, and if that best includes trying to educate a thick-headed architect, so be it.

There is silk, Mr. Martin, and there is silk. I am not referring to the fabric used in a woman's scarf, but to the heavier raw silk which can be combined with other fibres to make beautiful and very durable fabrics that are perfect for the lodge. Fabrics that glow with colour, yet are tough and easy to care for.

The lodge can't be all rough wood and raw stone, as you seem to think. The beauty of such crude materials can't really be appreciated until they are contrasted with their opposites.

Much as it irritates me to explain such elementary principles, I am sending you some fabric swatches, colour photocopies of the watercolour sketches I've worked up for the entry, and a hand-blown glass vase that will, show you what I mean. (The vase is similar to the glassware that Pat collects and it is not a knickknack!

If you can put your personal biases aside long enough to really *look* at them, that is!

Marlis Jones

Jones@tel.com

Dear Ms. Jones:

The box you sent arrived over a week ago.

It's taken me that long to admit you were right and I was wrong. And that I owe you an apology.

Much as it galled me to do it, I set the vase on a rock shelf I built near the fireplace in my office and tossed those swathes of coloured silk over the pillows on my leather sofa. I have to tell you I felt damned silly, because I'm not a flower vase and silk pillows kind of guy.

After a week of living with them, I find I'm thinking about recovering the sofa and looking for some decorations other than the welded steel sculpture of an eagle that I've had in my office since forever.

Not that I want to get rid of the eagle, you understand.

More than that, the photocopies of your watercolour sketches made me rethink some of my original plans for the lodge. I've already talked to Frank about the changes, and he's all for it.

Providing I work with you.

Clever guy, Frank. He obviously figured out I was behaving like a jerk. Which might be due to the fact that he's known me since grade school.

He also knows I prefer to take complete control of a project, inside and out, top to bottom.

Which is why he had a hard time convincing me to work with you in the first place.

I'd call you up to offer my apologies personally, but since you insist on communicating via E-mail, the best I can do is say I'm sorry. And that I'd like to start over in terms of our working relationship, if you'll agree.

Jack

Liebe Miss Jones:

Das Paket, das Sie schickten, kam vor über einer Woche an.

Es hat so lange gedauert um zuzugeben, dass Sie recht haben und ich unrecht und ich schulde ihnen eine Entschuldigung.

_ viel als es abreiben mir zu tun es, ich einstellen d vase auf ein Steinregal ich aufbauen nahe d Kamin in mein Büro und tossed jen swaths von färben Seide über d Kissen auf mein ledern Sofa. _ ich müssen erklären Sie ich glauben verdammen dumm, weil ich sein nicht ein Blume vase und Seide Kissen Art von Kerl.

_ nach ein Woche von leben mit sie, ich finden ich sein denken über wieder.herstellen d Sofa und suchen einig Dekoration anders als d schweissen Stahl- Skulptur von ein Adler daß ich haben haben in mein Büro seit für immer.

_ nicht daß ich mögen zu loswerden rid of d Adler, Sie verstehen.

_ mehr als, d Photokopie von Ihr watercolour skizzieren lassen mir überdenken einig von mein ursprünglich Plan für d Hütte. _ ich haben bereits sprechen zu Freivermerk über d Änderung, und all er sein für es.

_ vorausgesetzt ich arbeiten mit Sie.

_ gescheit Kerl, aufrichtig. _ er offensichtlich darstellen heraus ich sein benehmen wie ein Ruck. _ welch können lieg an d Tatsache daß er sein bekannt mir seit Grad Schule.

_ er auch wissen ich es vorziehen zu nehmen komplett Steuerung von ein Projekt, nach innen und heraus, Oberseite zu Unterseite. _ welch sein warum er haben ein hart Zeit überzeugen mir zu arbeiten mit Sie an erster Stelle the first place.

_ ich werden anrufen Sie bis Angebot mein Entschuldigung persönlich, aber da Sie bestehen auf in Verbindung stehen über E-mail, d gut ich können tun sein sagen ich sein traurig. _ und ich mögen zu beginnen rüber in unser working Arbeitsverhältnis, wenn Sie werden zustimmen.

_ jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Mr. Martin:

Your apologies are accepted. And I'll apologize for my own quick temper. It seems we're both going to have to learn a few things about E-mail etiquette!

I'm really not trying to change your plans for the lodge. I feel very strongly that my role as an interior designer is not to hide or make over a place, but to discover the soul of a structure, the central force of its creator's vision, then bring it down into more human, accessible terms. To complement, rather than cover or conceal.

But this lodge is something new for me. When Frank first approached me about working on it, I turned him down. I've handled some of his biggest development projects here in Manhattan, but this just seemed far too intimate and personal. Too risky, really, although that word sounds absurd, under the circumstances.

I think I might have continued to turn him down if he hadn't shown me photos of some of your previous projects.

The incredible variety and integrity of the buildings appealed to me. They all seemed to spring so naturally from their surroundings, as if you had somehow sensed their presence hidden deep in the earth and magically brought them to life. Then Frank showed me the photos of the site and your plans for the lodge.

I decided right then and there that I wanted to be a part of this project. So I guess we're struck with each other.

Maybe both of us will learn something here.

Marlis Jones

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

Now that we've both apologized, I guess we can get on with the job.

If you don't mind, I'd prefer you to call me Jack. And I'll call you Marlis. Computer E-mail is already too impersonal. We don't need to make it worse by professional formalities.

I'm sending you some samples of the materials we'll be using on the lodge, both inside and out, so you can get a clearer idea of what the finished building will look like. I thought it might help as you're developing your own ideas. Please let me know if there's anything else you might need.

Jack

PS. I really do regret that crack about the silk.

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack:

I received the samples of stone and wood you sent. I have to admit, when I picture a whole building made of such powerful elements, I find them almost intimidatingly masculine. Raw, like the earth they've come from, yet beautiful in their own way.

The lodge is going to be breathtaking, but I'm not sure I would ever feel comfortable living there. It's so elemental. So much a part of the wilderness that surrounds it that I think I'd feel lost and overwhelmed.

I guess I'm just more of a city girl than I thought.

I hope you're not offended by my comments. I'm actually awed by your talent, but you live and work in a world that is completely foreign to me. I feel like I'm venturing out into the unknown. Which is scary and exhilarating, all at the same time.

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

I wasn't offended by your comments, but I am bemused.

No, that's not completely mm. I'm downright confused.

Natural materials like stone and wood are intimidating? The lodge is overwhelming? I can't see that at all.

I spent my youth roaming these hills, shinnying up trees and climbing on rocks and wading through streams as cold as ice. The lodge is simply an extension of that world. The world I've always known. The world Frank grew up in, just like me.

I see architecture as a way of melding our created environment our homes and shops and offices into the natural world around us. It isn't masculine, it's real, and that's what I'm aiming for.

And I hope I haven't offended you by saying that. Cities like New York are a separate creation altogether!

Anyway, that's not the real point of this post, which is to tell you that the contractor has begun excavation at the site.

I wish I could be there to see it, but that just isn't possible any more. Not that it really matters.

I've worked with this crew in the past and know I can depend on them to do things right.

If you have the opportunity of visiting the lodge once it's closer to completion, you can tell me what you think.

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,

It's a good thing you understand this natural world of yours. When I look at the photos of the site, all I can see is raw stone and an undisciplined tangle of trees and bushes. It's not until I compare the photos with your drawings that what seems a shapeless hillside takes on a form and a life I wouldn't have imagined possible.

It's never been quite so difficult when dealing with the professional buildings I usually work with. You can't even begin to imagine a skyscraper being a part of its surroundings, as your lodge will be. Skyscrapers create their own world. Dwarf them, really. Unlike the lodge, they'll never on a human scale---they wouldn't be skyscrapers if they were-and that's what I like most about them, their sense of being apart of standing alone. I confess, I'm more comfortable with them than with your smaller, more intimate structures, which are so closely tied to the earth they spring from.

I guess I'm too much a city kid. I was born in Manhattan. This is my home and I can't imagine living anyplace else. I like the energy. I like having everything I want right here when I want it-- the museums, the art galleries, the bookstores. I like knowing that I don't have to be bothered with my neighbours if I don't want to, that I can shut my door against the world and have my own carefully ordered sanctuary. And I like knowing I can open that door when I'm ready and see everything still there, waiting for me.

This lodge is the first thing I've ever worked on that was intended to be lived in. Besides my own apartment of course.

I was very hesitant at first-I think I told you that already-but I'm finding it an interesting challenge, especially since your style and mine are so different in so many ways.

I'm delighted to hear the crew has begun work already. I won't be visiting the lodge itself. I don't know if Frank told you, but that was one of the essential conditions for my agreeing to take on this job.

My work is mostly here, you know, and what with everything- well, I just said I couldn't make it on site.

I'm a little surprised to hear you won't be overseeing the construction, however. I assumed you'd be keeping a pretty close eye on it since you and Frank are old friends and you seem to be so passionately connected to the project.

Not that it's any of my business, of course. We haven't even met, for heaven's sake!

Marlis, who should get back to work instead of sticking her nose in other people's business.

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

We may not have met, but somehow I feel I know you.

Funny, isn't it, how you get to feel that way about the person at the other end of an E-mail connection?

Frank sent me some promotional brochures for that new complex he's been working on. I spotted the picture of you right off. Marlis Jones, well-known interior designer, it said. But you probably know that all ready. You worked on the complex!

Somehow, I figured you'd be bigger and I don't know-tougher-looking, I guess. I certainly wasn't expecting to see a petite strawberry blonde in high heels! Must have been my built-in wariness of big city folk kicking in, I guess.

I don't think I could stand to live in New York like you do. When I used to go into the city, I'd wander around the streets if I had free time. The place terrified me. Still does, actually, though it's been a couple of years since I spent much time there. It's an exciting place, but it's not natural. Even its parks and open areas are carefully cultivated and thought out. There's no sense of discovery or wondering what nature will spring on you next. In fact, the only thing you worry about New York springing on you is a thug out to grab your wallet!

That, and being deafened by the constant racket in die streets. The noise in the city is enough to drive a sane man mad, and my friends don't consider me sane. I prefer the rustle of leaves and the sound of the wind through the grass.

Anyway, that's neither here nor there. Back to business.

The contractor called this morning to tell me they've started pouring the foundations. That's always an exciting stage for me, the first real step in transforming an idea into reality. Wish I could be there. Guess we'll just have to settle for some photographs every now and then.

I'm looking forward to seeing more of your sketches!

All the best,

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,

Sorry it's taken so long to get back to you.

I've been visiting the design showrooms to look at furniture and fabrics and what not. I've pulled a number of fabric swatches and am sending samples to you later today. I especially love the raw silk blend with its cool, slick texture and the subtle imperfections of its surface. Like rock under water, I think.

You probably think that's a silly comparison, but I have to tell you how foolishly I behaved. After I'd found the fabric in all those gorgeous autumn colours, I stuffed the samples in my purse and rushed off to a meeting in another building. But I got side-tracked by a fountain in the atrium. It was huge. The fountain, I mean. Made of natural, uncut stone very similar in colour and texture to the stone you plan to use in the lodge.

I don't know what got into me, but when I saw that fountain I thought about the rocky hillside where the lodge is being built, and I thought about you and how you roamed those hills when you were a boy. I could just see you clambering on rocks and plunging your hands into those icy streams you talked about.

Some crazy imp must have taken possession of me, because right then and there, without paying any attention to the stares from the passers-by, I took off my heels and climbed up on the rocks and ran my hand through the water spilling over the stones. I've seen kids doing that, but I've never even dreamed of trying something that-undignified.

It felt wonderful. Absolutely wonderful! The water was cold and battered my fingers, and the rock underneath was slick, yet retained its rough texture, just like the silk. For the first time I got a hint of how you must feel when you're climbing around those hills. It helped me understand a little more clearly your vision for the lodge and your reasons for choosing the materials you did.

I admit I got a few strange looks when I showed up at my meeting five minutes late with wet spots on my hose and my hands feeling like ice. But the experience was worth it, despite the damage to my reputation.

It certainly convinced me that the silk is the best choice as the central upholstery material. We can make throw pillows and cover sofas and chairs in that exquisite range of colours, with the fabric texture itself, its relationship to your stone and wood and stucco walls, the unifying touch. I really do think it will work well!

The furniture I'm less certain about. Nothing I've seen so far seems to fit, not even the "rustic" styles, but I will keep looking. I know what I want, and I find it's often more difficult to work that way than if you're just waiting for something to catch your eye.

I haven't even started looking at carpet, but my little adventure on those rocks got me thinking about the possibilities of making even the carpet echo, the experience of being in a forest.

When you were a boy, did you ever go barefoot through the woods? What does it feel like to have the grass and the fallen leaves and the cool earth between your toes? I relished my climb up those rocks and paddling my hand in the water, but I couldn't quite bring myself to walk barefoot in the garden planters!

Now I'm getting absolutely silly. That's not like me. I suspect something about this E-mail breaks down the normal barriers between people. I feel like I'm talking to you, but it's safer, somehow, because you can't touch me or see me. And I can't touch, or see, you.

Silly, as I said. I'd best get moving. I want to send those swatches to you today, and I'm going to miss the mail if I don't hurry up.

All the best, Marlis

Jack Martin cursed and pushed away from his desk so violently that he ran into the black Lab sprawled across the floor behind him. Julius grunted and scrambled out of the way, then sat down a safe distance away and stared at him reproachfully.

"Sorry, old fellow." Jack couldn't stand to look at Julius's accusatory stare, but he couldn't stand to look at the computer screen in front of him, either.

He'd found it difficult to write of his youthful explorations in the woods, even harder to read her description of her scramble over the rocks in that building in Manhattan. But to have her ask him what it felt like to have the earth and the cool grass beneath his feet...

God! Could any question have been crueler ... or more innocent?

With one hard, angry shove, Jack swung his wheelchair around, then rolled it over to the wide wall of glass at the far side of his office.

Outside, just beyond the deck, wildflowers painted bright splotches of blue and pink and yellow among the tall meadow grasses. A wild tangle of trees and brush at the far edge of the clearing marked the beginning of the forest that lay beyond.

How many hours had he spent staring out these windows during the past year? A hundred? A thousand? He didn't know and didn't want to figure it out. Even going out on the deck could be torment because it was an ever-present reminder of the new boundaries that hemmed his world.

But to be reminded that he would never walk through the meadow again, never hear the soft crunch of gravel beneath his feet, or dangle his feet in a brook until his toes felt cold enough to drop off...

If he had any sense, he'd move away. Either that or put a tall fence around the deck--do something to stop the hurt of staring out at those woods day after, day.

The trouble was, he didn't know if he could endure living anywhere else. At least from this office he could watch the slow change of the seasons. He could lie in bed at night and listen to the soft rustling of the leaves and the hooting of the owl that had made its home in a massive old oak nearby. Here, at least, he wasn't completely exiled from the wilderness he'd loved for as long as he could remember.

Marlis couldn't have known what raw nerve she'd touched, and he wasn't about to spoil the rapport developing between them by bringing up his disability or the anger he felt about it. Especially not when he was beginning to feel the same strange sense of intimacy in this electronic exchange that she evidently did. If her comments inadvertently triggered unpleasant memories, he was just going to have to learn to live with it, just as he was having to learn to live with everything else.

Jack glanced at the computer with its insistently blinking cursor. Nothing frightening there. Nothing he couldn't handle.

Nothing, that was, if he could ever come to terms with the limitations that now shaped his life. He hesitated a moment longer; then, ashamed of his fear, he abruptly swung his wheelchair around and rolled it back to the computer.

Jones@tel.net

Dear Marlis,

I can imagine your business colleagues' shock at seeing you march into that meeting with wet legs and cold hands. Your photo in that promotional brochure certainly doesn't make you look like anyone who would ever consider climbing on a fountain in the middle of Manhattan!

On the other hand, it probably made them wish they'd had the courage to do something like that. Too often we get ourselves trapped in rigid expectations about who we are and what we can and should be doing in life. I'm beginning to think it's a good idea to try out something different every once in a while. That way, when life forces us into a different path, it's not quite as difficult as it would be otherwise.

If that makes any sense, which is probably doesn't.

Never mind. I'll be looking forward to seeing those swatches.

Jack

Jones@tel.net

Dear Marlis,

Remember, in your last post, you said something about the carpet "echoing" the experience of walking in a forest?

You probably don't. It was a throw-away comment, I know. The kind of thing a person says without thinking about the broader possibilities. But it got the thinking.

What if the lodge were designed to "echo" the world in which it's placed? Not just physically, or in terms of texture-which is what you were referring to-but in terms of sound, as well?

The small fountain that will divide the lodge's entry from the living room will sound like a brook tumbling down a steep hillside. The entryway is paved with stone, so it will "echo" the sound of footsteps on a rocky path. But surely there must be other things that might bring the sounds of nature indoors.

Trouble is, I can't think what those would be. Carpet that, instead of muffling sound, repeats the shush of bare feet across grass? A decorative mobile that sounds like autumn leaves rustling in the wind when it's touched?

I've always considered sound as an enemy, something you work to eliminate by designing thicker walls and adding extra insulation. This would be different.

Of course, we'd have to be careful not to make the sounds overwhelming or annoying, just soothing and natural. But the idea offers so many intriguing possibilities that I'd like to explore it a little further.

Any ideas or suggestions?

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,

Please forgive my long delay in responding to your last message. I've been trying to come up with the right words to explain my situation.

No, that's not true. I've been trying to find the courage to tell you that I am deaf.

I don't remember ever having heard autumn leaves rustling in the wind or the sound of water falling on rocks, I don't know what footsteps on stone sound like, or how that's different from the sound of footsteps through grass. I can't imagine these sounds as a backdrop to human conversation, because I have a hard time remembering what human voices sound like.

I wasn't always deaf. I lost my hearing when I was six. I'd been sick with one thing after another, which led to repeated severe ear infections that the doctors couldn't control.

Eventually, I lost the ability to hear.

I remember the sound of traffic, the honking of horns, and the roar of cars and trucks going past. I remember laughter, a little. But I can't remember what human voices in conversation sound like. I certainly don't remember any of the natural sounds you're talking about even though I must have heard them whenever my mother took me to the park or the zoo or whatever. In my memories, those kinds of sounds were long ago drowned out by the noise of the city.

I had to be taught to speak again. It isn't as hard to learn for those who were once able to hear as it is for those who are born deaf or who lose their hearing before they start talking, but that

doesn't mean I sound like a person with normal hearing. I know I don't, and I know that it can make others very uncomfortable.

I can read lips, but I usually arrange to have a translator present if I'm in a meeting with more than two other people. One of the reasons I climbed up on those rocks, that day was because I was putting off the meeting I had to go to.

I hate being in a group, but not part of it. I hate sitting at a conference table knowing that everybody around me is busily engaged in conversation and I can't follow most of it. I don't know who will be speaking next so I can't turn to watch their lips. If several people are talking at once, I'm totally lost.

I prefer sign language to lip-reading or speaking, but not many hearing people have ever learned it, and usually then only when someone in their family is deaf and they're forced to. That's why I like working alone, why I like having my apartment where I can shut out the world. And that's why I like the city. Because the little I remember of sound is a part of the city, the racket and roar and rumble. It's what hearing people hate but I cling to, because the memory of it is still there, echoing in my head.

I don't remember what a forest sounds like. I can feel a forest. I can smell it and see it. But I can't hear it. I can't even imagine hearing it. And so I stay away, just as I'm staying away from the lodge. I stay here, in New York, where I know the world and the sounds it makes. -

I'm sorry. I'm going on and on and you don't care about any of this. It doesn't have much of anything to do with this project.

It certainly doesn't have anything to do with our professional relationship because we can do everything by E-mail, where it's only words on a screen and you don't have to be frustrated because you can't understand what I'm saying and I don't have to be frustrated because you forgot I can't hear and looked away so that I couldn't read your lips.

It's not self-pity. It's not! It's practical. It's knowing that things are so darned difficult because I can't hear and the hearing world has a hard time accepting that or adapting to, it. To me. And so I concentrate on my work and I use E-mail and watercolour sketches and swatches of fabrics and glass vases to speak for me, instead of, trying to speak for myself.

I'm sorry. I can't help you with your questions about repeating the sounds of the natural world in the lodge. But just because I can't help in that respect doesn't mean I can't do a good job or respond to the changes you'll be making in the design. I'll work around it. I always have.

Marlis

Martin@tel.com

Jack,

Please, please, please. Delete that last post. Please. It was late and I was tired and I should never have sent it. Would never have sent it if my day hadn't been so frustrating. Trying to work with a client who has been nothing but trouble since we started because he seems to think my deafness is some sort of incredible handicap and he's being kind to the handicapped this week by hiring me.

He's like so many people. He feels guilty, somehow, because he can hear and I can't. The trouble is, he doesn't like feeling guilty or uncomfortable, so he either over-reacts by trying to talk slowly and simply, as if I were an idiot child, or by forgetting I'm there and looking away so I miss what he's saying.

I've worked with people like him before. It's difficult and immensely frustrating, but it's also part of the job, just like working with people who change their minds every time you turn around, then blame you if a project goes over budget or isn't ready on time.

I usually cope pretty well with such frustrations, but after a whole day of it, I just wasn't ready to get your post about using sound as part of your design. I'm afraid I went a little overboard. I certainly didn't mean to. I thought I'd waited long enough so I could make some sort of cool, rational reply, but I couldn't. The minute I started talking about it- all right, writing about it- it all came pouring out.

I've never done that before. Certainly not with the people I work with. Something about this electronic relationship we have came between me and my common sense. I felt like I could share all that with you, and now I'm embarrassed that I did.

So, please, delete that message and forget about it. Okay?

Marlis

Jones@tel.et

Dear Marlis,

To quote you, "please, please, please" forget about it.

No, that sounds rather patronizing. No, that *seems* rather patronizing.

And if this seems rather stupid, forgive me. I never before realized some of the unfortunate associations that come up with words. "Sounds" to the deaf, questions like "See my point?" to the blind. So much we take for granted, without ever thinking there might be another way to look at it. And I didn't even think, about that I "look" until after I wrote it.

I suppose you're used to that kind of verbal clumsiness. I'm just beginning to find out about it.

And I'm saying all this because I'm finding it hard to tell you- write you- that I understand at some of what you're feeling because I'm confined to a wheelchair and have been for the past year. Ever since an auto accident left me paralyzed from the waist down.

I'll never walk again and I've had- still have- a very hard time accepting that fact.

Does it ever get any easier? You've been deaf most of your life. Do you still find yourself wondering what if?

What if someone, somehow, had done *something*, so you wouldn't be deaf?

It's a waste of time and energy, I know, yet I play the game over and over and over again. And still I find myself getting furious with those well-intentioned people who either bend over backward to ignore the fact that I'm confined to a wheelchair, or make it impossible for me to forget by being so damned solicitous that I want to hit them. Just ball up a fist and paste them one, right in the snoot. My physical therapist tells me I'm, going to have to live with it, that their discomfort is their problem, and my discomfort with their discomfort is my problem. If that makes any sense.

I guess none of this is making any sense, but I still haven't straightened it all out in my mind.

And you're the first person I've ever talked to about it. Really talked to about it, I mean. I didn't much like the psychologist I was sent to at the first, so I just stopped going. I've mentioned some of my frustration to my doctor, but she just tells me that frustration and anger are normal. And I don't want normal, damn it! Not in that way. I want things back the way they were.

Oh, hell.

If I had any sense, I'd delete all of this, but I'm not going to. If you have the guts to admit that your deafness can be frustrating, I guess it's okay for me to admit that I'm not being very grown-up about my problem.

Jack

Martin@tel.net

Dear Jack,

I've started this message a dozen times and deleted every attempt. I, of all people, ought to know the right, words to say, but I don't. .

I never told you, but Frank, when he was trying to convince me to work on the lodge, gave me a bunch of articles about you and your work. There were the usual things from Architectural Digest and Country Living or whatever, but the article that caught my eye was one that Newsweek did on you. There was a picture of you, standing on an outcropping of rock, grinning that lopsided grin that seems to fit on your face so easily. Your shirtsleeves are rolled up, the wind's ruffling your hair, which needs a trim, and there is dirt on your hands and your khaki pants. You don't look very dignified, but you do look happy. You look as if you're ready to, leap off that rock and right into whatever adventure lies ahead.

No one would guess that the adventure was trying to learn to live life in a wheelchair.

I won't offer my sympathy. You don't want that.

But I do offer all my understanding.

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

I know the article- and the picture- you're are talking about. We were looking over a really rugged site that was being considered for a college research centre. Even though I was supposed to be working, I couldn't resist the temptation to climb the rocks that would the backdrop for the building. A friend took the picture after he'd hiked up the back of the formation.

Climbing, hiking, camping--those have been an important part of my life ever since I was a boy. They're at the heart of my work, because whatever I've learned by my ventures into the mountains affected my professional vision, too.

I tell myself I should be grateful for having had all those years of physical freedom. That adjusting to the damned wheelchair is just a matter of learning to explore, the world in a different way.

God knows I'm trying to adapt, but every time look out my office window- which is about a hundred times a day- I see the woods out there. A couple hundred yards away, maybe.

They might as well be in another world.

Friends tell me I ought to have a path made my property. That I should get one of those cross-country wheelchairs they make these days because there are a lot of trails being built that will accommodate people in wheelchairs and that I should take advantage of the m.

Makes sense. Any sensible adult, any sensible human being, would say it makes sense.

But it doesn't make sense to me. It makes me angry all over again. Angry at the drunk who swerved in my path. Angry at the doctors who couldn't keep me from being crippled. Angry at my friends who try to understand.

And most of all, angry at me, that I haven't been able to handle it better.

Double hell. I just keep on blathering, don't I?

You're right. There's something about this sort of communication that makes it easy to say things you wouldn't otherwise. You can't see me in my wheelchair thumping my fist against the glass doors in the middle of a temper tantrum. I can't see you frowning at my cry-baby whining.

It's crazy. This computer is just a glorified typewriter, really. A telephone with no sound transmission. So why am I doing this? Why am I saying things I haven't said before, discussing things I haven't discussed before, not even with people I've known for years? Jack, who wonders if he's going crazy.

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,

You're not crazy. Most of the time I don't even think about my deafness because I've learned to work around it. But every now and then I'll get so frustrated that I want to scream or throw something or kick someone. Anyone!

Not because being deaf is so terrible, but because it's so hard for the people around you to accept it and adapt to it, and that reminds you that you're not quite like everyone else, and they can't always accept that, fact.

Sometimes it's the little things that hit the hardest. Like when a friend is excited about a song, and can't share the excitement because you can't hear music.

I'm sure you've experienced the same sort of thing.

And you've had a lot less time to adapt to it than I have.

At least through E-mail, neither of us has to with any of that. Here, we're equals, you and I.

I don't mean professionally, though we are. I mean- oh, I don't know exactly what I mean. Or at least I can't find the words to say what I mean. But I know you understand. We wouldn't be having this crazy, deeply personal, and totally unprofessional conversation if you didn't.

I think I'll give up right here, before I make a fool of myself.

Marlis, who really does understand.

Jones@tel.com

Oh beautiful lady who understands,

Thanks.

And I mean that.

Really.

Actually, I had a tasteless joke here, but I erased it. I'm being flippant because it's less embarrassing.

And I'm embarrassed.

I don't usually take my petulance and self-pity out for a walk. Sorry about that.

And that's three sentences that begin with "I". Guess it's time to get back to work.

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Jack,

I'm not quite sure how to say this, so I'll just come right out and say it: Your last post was rude.

You admitted you were being flippant, but it was more than that.
What you were really saying is, Whoops! I made a big mistake. I told a woman I don't even know how I really felt. How terrible! I can't trust her to understand. She might think I'm not a big, strong he-man! She might think I'm human!
And, boy! wouldn't *that* be a terrible thing to happen! After all, a *real* man's not supposed to be human, is he? He's a *man*!
Frankly, I don't think much of that attitude.
And that's putting it as politely as I can.
Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,
You're right. I owe you an apology for my last post. I said I was being flippant, but even *that* admission was- well, flippant.
In case you didn't know, one of the unwritten rules in the he-man code of honor is that it's better to have people think you're a jerk than that you're vulnerable.
You deserved better.
Anger is so much easier to admit to than vulnerability. I told you I'd mentioned my frustration and resentment to my doctor. That wasn't completely true.
I've grouched at her. Shouted at her. Raged at her for things she couldn't do anything about.
But I've never really admitted I'm afraid.
There. I said it. I honestly don't know why, but I felt that I could say it to you.
Hiding behind the computer, I guess.
At least you'll understand what I'm saying and not hold it against me. And if you think I need to grow up and get on with life, I hope you won't tell me. It's surprisingly comforting to admit that I'm neither as brave nor as adult as I'd like to think I am.
And by the way- thanks for listening. In spite of my bad manners.
Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,
I'm glad you sent that last post. I did think you were being a jerk. On the other hand, I understand all about hiding behind anger.
I remember being scared. I remember when I was about seven or so waking up in the night and screaming, then being even more frightened because I couldn't hear myself scream.
My mother and father would come rushing in to quiet me. They'd turn on the light and they'd hold me and try to tell me that it was all right. But it wasn't all right because I couldn't hear their words of comfort. And then they'd start to cry.
I think sometimes it was because they were angry. Angry at me for being deaf. Angry at themselves because they hadn't been able to protect me. Angry at the doctors and fate and the world in general.
And I felt exactly the same.

Sound familiar?

It's going to take time for you to build a new life for yourself and for you to feel comfortable in that life. You have a right to feel angry and afraid right now. Honest.

Just don't take it out on me.

And don't pretend you're not feeling any of that. Not with me. Okay?

Take care,

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

I'm sorry it's been so long with no reply, but I've been busy.

Your message made me do some hard thinking about anger and frustration and about how I haven't been dealing with either too well lately.

Used to be, I'd work it out by going for long hikes. That's obviously not going to work any more, so I figured I needed to find something else that would work as well. Took me a while, but I think I found it.

For the past few days I've been trying to clear the path through the meadow behind my house. I haven't used it for over a year- not since the accident, anyway- and it had almost disappeared under the grass and the wildflowers that have grown over it.

In those past few months after the accident I didn't care because I didn't much want that particular reminder of how much things had changed. But after talking to you, I suddenly found I felt differently. Don't ask me why. I'm not sure I could explain it if I tried, but then I don't imagine you need an explanation.

Anyway, I dug out an old machete, the one I used to use to keep the honeysuckle under control, and started hacking my way through that grass. I quickly found out that's not something you do from a wheelchair! Eventually I abandoned the chair and worked my way forward on the ground. It wasn't much for dignity, but at least I had room to swing the machete.

I've been working out there every day since, clearing and broadening the path. Can't say I'm progressing very quickly, but at least I am progressing. My goal right now is to clear the path all the way to the edge of the woods. Once I reach the woods . . .

Well, I'll worry about that when I get there. Right now, I'm just enjoying being out there every day, doing something physical, something constructive.

While I was clearing that path, I finally decided to do what friends have been urging me to do for months. I ordered a lightweight wheelchair designed for "off-road" use, so to speak- a jazzy little go-buggy in fire-engine red and black. It's not like having two good legs, but it should be better than the Model T I'm driving now.

With a wider path and a more versatile wheelchair, in a couple more weeks I'll even be able to manage a guided tour of the meadow for city slickers who can't tell raspberries from ragweeds.

I can see myself now, showing guests around place, very much the master of the manor in my brand new chariot, expounding on the propagation of, say, *helianthus annuus*. (That's common sunflower to botanically challenged. I looked it up this afternoon ... he says with a smirk.) I can easily imagine some of those guests would be working on a project with me. Say, an interior designer, for instance. A petite blonde from Manhattan, for a special instance. Which is a roundabout way of saying I'm inviting you up here for a visit.

Remember your post a while back, about climbing on the rocks of that fountain and wondering what it would be like? Well, why not find out? I can't take you everywhere, but I can show you where to start.

There's a guest room waiting and a whole mountain behind my house, if you care to give them a try.

Jack, who, isn't too great with giants, but who's death on weeds, for sure!

PS. I promise not to take my bad temper out on you in the future. Cross my heart and hope to die.

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,

I cheered your last message and laughed out loud, when I got to that part about death on weeds. But I'm a city girl, remember?

What in the devil would I do on your mountain?

Marlis, the Manhattenite

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

Ditch Manhattan, girl! There are hundreds of things you could do around here. Thousands!

Wade in the creek, climb a tree, pick flowers.

I didn't tell you I've been keeping that blue glass vase of yours filled with flowers from my meadow, did I? Every day I bring them in fresh. And every day I think about how much more I'd enjoy picking them if you were here to enjoy them, too.

Getting up here's easy. Just grab the train. I'll pick you up at the station.

If you need an excuse, just tell yourself we'll be working on Frank's lodge. We might really work on it, too- if we can find the time! (It's going so well, maybe we won't need to bother!)

Jack

PS. You realize, don't you, that you're not getting your vase back unless you retrieve it personally????

Martin@tel.com

You're an unscrupulous wretch, Jack Martin!

Threaten to hold my vase hostage, will you? Well! If I had the time, I'd storm your little fortress- and redecorate your office while I was at it!

Ruffles, I think. Lots of ruffles. All in pink. And a few lace throw pillows, just for good measure. (Picture me grinning here!)

Unfortunately, I can't get away. One of the down sides to success is that you get busier and busier, and busier and...

But thanks for the invitation. Just sniff a few flowers for me, will you?

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,

If there's going to be any flower sniffing done, you'll have to do it yourself. And I'd be willing to wrestle you on that redecorating plan. Best three throws out of five.

Actually, I wouldn't mind a little intramural wrestling, period.

These past few days when I'm outside working, I find myself picturing you out there with me. I can see you in short shorts and a T-shirt running through the meadow or wading in my creek or picking my blackberries.

Did you know you look very good in short shorts and a T-shirt? It's the truth. Trust me. My imagination never lies.

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Jack,

I'm curious. Just what is it you're raising in that meadow of yours, anyway? Seems like you're getting livelier by the hour.

In fact, after your last post, I have strong suspicions that instead of sunflowers, you might be indulging in some sort of- ummm, controlled substance. If you get my drift.

You're obviously off in fantasy land.

Marlis

PS. I don't own any shorts, short or otherwise.

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

I'm disappointed in you. No shorts? Not even one skimpy little pair with patches in strategic spots? What a waste. It ought to be a crime!

I can dig out a pair for you in the stores around here, if you like. Size six, right?

Jack, the ever helpful.

Martin@tel.com

How'd you know about the size six?

Jones@tel.com

My dear Marlis.

I'm disappointed in you. All these years working with architects, and you still haven't figured out we have a very good eye for dimensions? Tsk, tsk. Size six it is, then.

Jack

PS. It's so gratifying to always be right.

Martin@tel.com

Jack.

Don't you *dare* buy me a pair of short shorts! That's ... well, that's indecent!

Besides, do you have any idea what all that prickly grass and stuff would do to my legs? I'd be a mass of scratches and welts before I'd gone ten feet. Not to mention the sunburn.

And didn't you mention blackberries? Have you forgotten they have thorns? I'm just a city kid, but even *I* know that!

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis, My dear

Don't worry about the scratches on your legs. When I was little, my mother showed me how to handle things like bumped knees and scratches. You just kiss it and make it better.

Now, I'll admit my mother isn't always around she and my dad have a little farm farther upstate but I'd be happy to stand in for her as chief kisser. Honest. Even in that stodgy business suit of yours, it's clear you have great knees.

Though I want to stress that I wouldn't do it for just anybody.

As for the blackberries...

I wasn't thinking about the thorns. I was working more from the angle of the berries, you see. Sweet and plump and warm from the sun. Perfect for eating right there in the berry patch. If you've never tried them, you don't know what you're missing.

Now, I'll grant you that the thorns are a problem. You can wear jeans for the berry picking, if you like. Nice, snug, size six jeans. Yes, sir. I can picture it now. Jeans. would be just fine, too.

And, yes, blackberries do tend to stain. Fingertips and lips, especially. But I had some rather specific ideas about how I'd help you deal with that little problem.

Care to find out what they are?

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Jack, Jack, Jack, Jack, Jack.

That's the best I can do for shaking my head in despair. But please consider it being shaken.

Even assuming I was crazy enough to raid your berry patch (and that's a pretty wild assumption!), what makes you think I'd need your help in dealing with those berry stains?

You mentioned a creek, as I recall. Water ought to work just fine, thank you.

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,

Ahhh, darn. I didn't think you'd hit on that part of my plan.

You're right. Water-especially ice-cold water like the creek--does wonders. Especially when T-shirts and beautiful women in short shorts are involved.

Jack Who is trying very hard to be helpful.

Martin@tel.com

Jack,

I read your last post and you know, I swear I could hear you laughing. I told you, didn't I, that I can remember the sound of laughter? Well, I heard you laughing and I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing myself.

Thank heavens there wasn't anybody around but the geranium to hear me. They'd have thought I'd gone off the deep end.

Which, come to think of it, is probably what you had planned for me as far as that creek goes. Just put me in that T-shirt and shove me in over my head...

Which is exactly where I am right now. Over my head.

This exchange is getting downright ... dangerous.

Marlis, who is going back to work right now.

Jones@tel.com

Marlis, you clever lady, you!

I hadn't planned on dunking you in the creek, but now that I think of you and that T-shirt and lots of cold water ...

I'm glad I made you laugh. If you can only have a few memories of what things sound like, then one of the sweetest has to be the memory of laughter.

But you know, the more I think about you up here, roaming around my meadow and ravaging my wildflowers, the more I think it's exactly what you ought to do. You'd like it, if you'd only give it a chance. You'd find yourself laughing from the sheer joy of it.

Come on. What do you say? This Friday on the 4:38 train. Is it a deal?

Jack

PS. You're a city girl. How come they always have silly times for trains like 4:38? What's wrong with 4:30? Or 4:45?

Martin@tel.com

Silly Jack,

4:38 trains are always scheduled for 4:55. If you arrive early, that is. They leave at 4:30 if you're running late and not going to be at the station until 4:37. It's an unbreakable Law of Life.

Not that it matters, because I am not going to be on it, regardless of when it actually gets going.

I told you. I'm a city girl. I happen to like the city.

In fact, I've got a great idea. You come here and I'll show you all the things you seem to have missed around here. (You had to have missed them, or you wouldn't avoid New York like you do.)

Bring that new hot-rod wheelchair of yours. I figure the best place to start is at the top of the Guggenheim. Just think of it. I give you a good running start and away you go down all six floors of that crazy spiral. If you get up a good enough head of steam, I bet you could sail right on into Central Park!

Let's see you try and top that!

Marlis, who is making plans.

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis, who is planning.
The Guggenheim is good. *Very* promising, in fact.
But that's not the point. I've been to New York. You haven't been up here.
And I asked first.
So ... What do you say? Quit trying to change the subject and just say yes. Yes. Y.E.S. Yes.
You can do it, can't you?
Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,
Honestly, I really can't get away right now. Don't push it, will you?
Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,
Package on its way. Details at ten.
Jack

The package contained one pair of size-six jeans shorts and one extraordinarily lightweight T-shirt. The kind, you could almost see through even if it *wasn't* wet.
Marlis stood at them in their nest of gold tissue in the expensive gold-foil and ribbon-wrapped box that Jack had sent them in. The ribbon she'd ripped off in her haste dangled from her fingers like a heavy gold chain that bound her to the box and its contents. Bound her to the man who had sent the shorts and the T-shirt in full awareness of the message they conveyed. The message he'd intended her to receive.
She let the ribbon slide from her grasp as she carefully folded back the tissue. The glistening paper was smooth and cool beneath her fingers. Like water from a creek, she thought, only this was something she could hang onto. If she dared.
She pulled out the shorts first. They were indecently abbreviated. The kind that revealed the soft curve where thigh merged into buttock, even when the wearer was standing up. Marlis's cheeks grew warm at the thought of what would be revealed if she ever bent over to pick one of those fat, juicy blackberries Jack had teased her about.
With deliberate care, she refolded the shorts and tucked them back into the box, then started to fold the tissue paper over them.
The T-shirt stared up at her mockingly, as if daring her to hide it away in its ridiculously inappropriate wrappings.
Marlis stared back at the T-shirt. It didn't move. She chewed on her lower lip, worrying the question of whether or not she was brave enough--or foolhardy enough--to accept Jack Martin's challenge.
Silly question. It was just a T-shirt, after all. It didn't have to mean anything she didn't want it to mean.

Marlis snatched it out of its shiny gold nest and held it up by the shoulders. "The Berry Best" it said in lurid purple lettering above an oversized blackberry with a bite taken out of one corner.

She frowned, studying the art. The crude design could just as easily have represented an oversized, misshapen, dark purple pinecone-assuming people ever snacked on pinecones. Purple? For a blackberry? The corners of Marlis's mouth twitched, then spread wide in a silly grin.

With sudden decision, she dropped the T-shirt and started unbuttoning the blouse she wore. Her tailored skirt pantyhose, and, after only a moment's hesitation, lacy pink bra followed until she was standing in the middle of her living room clad in a pair of high-cut, pink silk underpants and not one stitch more.

She tugged the T-shirt over her head. It wasn't ready as tight as she'd thought it would be. It wasn't baggy, either. The thin cotton-knit fabric clung to her, soft against her skin. All except for the front, just above her breasts, where the fabric paint had hardened. Jack had applied the paint with such enthusiastic liberality that the fabric was stiff enough to rub against her nipples.

Marlis could feel her nipples peak at the slight irritation. Or was it at the thought of whose hands had applied the paint and what the artist had been thinking when he did it?

Don't think about it! Marlis chided herself. It was just a T-shirt. A joke. A silly gift designed to tease her, nothing more.

Well, it was teasing her, all right, but her reaction didn't feel like any joke. The muscles in her back and belly and buttocks tightened at the intimate roughness against her nipples, the soft caress of cloth along her sides. Jack had chosen this silly shirt, painted it, sent it to her. She could almost imagine-his scent lingering in the cotton. Which was absurd, of course.

Absolutely absurd.

The shorts were a tad tight. Tight enough so she had to take a deep breath to zip them up and fasten the metal snap at the waist but not so tight that she couldn't move once she had them on.

Marlis didn't move. She stood frozen in the middle of her normally well-ordered living room, heedless of the untidy heap of discarded clothes at her feet. Not once had she ever worn anything this ... indecent, this revealing.

It wasn't just the roughness of the painted cotton against her breasts. The very air in her apartment felt unexpectedly cool on her exposed thighs and the lower curve of her buttocks, cooler than it had ever felt even when she was stark naked and fresh out of the bath. The shorts were taut across her belly, stiff where the zipper and placket traced a direct line from waist to crotch.

Marlis's cheeks flamed. What was she thinking? She closed her eyes and pressed her palms against her cheeks. As if that would make her unsettling thoughts go away.

With sudden ferocity, she tugged at the T-shirt where it was tucked beneath the waistband of her shorts, then stopped just as abruptly. Before she took off these absurd ... garments ... she wanted to see what she looked like in them. Wanted to see what *they* looked like on *her*.

No, that wasn't quite true. What she really wanted to know was what, exactly, Jack would see if she were ever foolish enough to dress like this in front of him.

She turned toward her bedroom.

Not there. Not with that broad bed reflected in her mirrored closet doors.

The entryway, then. She'd covered both walls of the tiny space with mirrors to make it seem larger and brighter than it really was. The entryway was safe.

Wrong again. The shorts and T-shirt were even more indecent than she'd thought. Magnified by the double reflection, they were. . . .

Marlis groped for the words to describe her appearance, but nothing came. Silently, she stared at herself, shocked by the wide-eyed wanton who stared back.

This woman with the tousled hair and the revealing T-shirt wasn't her. Marlis Jones was a serious career woman, a skilled interior designer, a professional. She would never appear in public in shorts that covered rather less of her than some of her sensible underpants did. She wouldn't wear these shorts in the privacy of her own apartment, for heaven's sake!

Yet here she was in her own foyer, twisting around to check on just how much of her fanny hung out beneath the bottom of the shorts. Bending, just a little, to see if her underpants showed. They did.

And Marlis, to her dismay, couldn't help wondering if she ought to buy one of those thong thingees, or if Jack would prefer the lie of shocking pink that was almost more depraved than the shorts themselves.

Worse, she found herself taking inordinate pride in the way her breasts gave a decided bounce to the tacky T-shirt and her torso curved in to a tiny waist, then flared out again to hips that, thanks to good genes and lots of exercise, hadn't an ounce of excess fat on them. Indecent the shorts might be, but there was no denying she filled them in all the right places and in all the right ways.

What had Jack said? That he had a good eye for dimensions?

Well, he'd gotten hers down to the quarter inch, and Marlis couldn't repress a feeling of shock at the admission. The trouble was, she wasn't sure what she should do about it.

She knew what she *ought* to do, what she *ought* to say ... and none of it bore any relation to what she *wanted* to do.

And that was the most shocking- and frightening- part of all.

Jones@tel.com

Marlis.

Well? Did you get my package? Do they fit? Tell the truth now.

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,

Yes, I got the package. I haven't the slightest idea whether they fit or not. You really didn't think I was going to try on anything as absurd as those shorts, did you? In your dreams!

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,

Actually, those shorts were in my dreams. And in my waking fantasies, as well. Some of them, anyway.

Some of my fantasies didn't involve shorts. (He says with a leer.)

No, forget I said that.

Don't wear the shorts.

But don't use them as an excuse not to come!
I'll behave myself, I promise. Scout's honor.
Jack

PS. In case you were wondering, I was a *very* good Scout-and I have the merit badges to prove it!

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,
You might have been a very good Boy Scout when it came to things like chopping wood and lighting fires and that kind of stuff, but I have serious reservations about the honor part now that you're supposed to be all grown up.
Very serious reservations.
Marlis

PS. And I have serious doubts about the all-grownup part, too!

Jones@tel.com

Marlis, Marlis, Marlis.
You're just trying to dance around the real issue, which is that you're afraid to come.
You said it yourself. You know the city. You remember the sounds of horns and traffic. You know the racket that a million people make, but you don't remember the sound of the wind in the leaves or of water running over rocks.
So what? Does that mean you can't see and feel and smell and touch and taste? Does that mean you can't try to fill in the little bit that's missing the sounds you can't hear-through imagination?
Come on. Give it a try. Give me a try!
If nothing else, do it out of pity for me. I need to show off my meadow to someone who can really appreciate it. The leaves are just starting to turn and the wild asters are blooming like crazy. In a couple of weeks it's going to be knock-your-eyes-out beautiful around here.
Jack

PS. If you wait too long, it will be way too cold to wear those shorts.

Martin@tel.com

Wait a minute, buster. Fall leaves. Asters. Have you been conning me? Trying to get me up there on false pretenses?

A couple of weeks ago you were talking about blackberries. I just remembered-they don't grow this late in the season, do they?
And don't try to lie to me. Even if none of my city bred friends know beans about berries, I have ways of finding these things out. Trust me on that!
Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,
Now that's not fair. Expecting me to trust you when you won't trust me.
If you won't believe me, why don't you come up here and find out for yourself?
You'll never get a better chance to model those shorts, you know. Or find a more appreciative audience.
Jack, who never claimed to be a botanist.

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,
You want to know what your problem is? You need to get back to work. I mean really get back. On site. Right in the middle of it. Maybe have a good shouting match or two with a construction foreman or a supplier or something.
Forget asters and blackberries and those darned shorts.
Get to work!
Marlis
Who is getting to work!

Jones@tel.com

Ms. Marlis.
I'm hurt. Get to work? What do you think I've been doing? Twiddling my thumbs?
As proof, I'm sending you the photo the construction foreman on Frank's lodge sent me. It's really a lodge- and I Wnk it's beautiful!
A dream is taking shape up there, and we're responsible for making it real. You and me. That's a good feeling, isn't it?
Jack (And there's that path through my meadow ...)

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,
It's a beautiful feeling, and a beautiful lodge.

So when are you going for an inspection? I thought architects were always on site at this stage.

Marlis, who really wants to know.

PS. You aren't afraid, are you?

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,

What! Me? Afraid of facing a construction crew from a wheelchair? Hah!

Nervous, maybe, but what's a few nerves between friends?

I finished clearing the path through the meadow this afternoon. All the way to the edge of the woods. Nice and broad and not too bumpy, considering. Should work just fine for that racy new wheelchair I just got.

In celebration, I picked an especially big bunch of wildflowers and stuffed them in that vase you don't seem to want to retrieve. The flowers add a nice spot of color to my office, but I have to admit the arrangement looks a little ragged.

Why don't you show me how it should be done? In person.

Jack

Martin@tel.com

Jack,

Are you just naturally persistent, or are you trying to annoy me?

(You're definitely succeeding on the annoying part.)

Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,

Actually, I was hoping that if I persistently annoyed you, you'd come up here and let me have what for.

But if that's not going to work, can I tempt you with a visit to our lodge instead?

I've set an appointment with the contractors for the day after tomorrow at three in the afternoon. That way, I know they'll be there, and you'll have plenty of time to catch the morning train so I can pick you up and we can drive up together. What do you say?

Jack (Whatever you say, don't you dare say I set that appointment just to prove you wrong!)

Martin@tel.com

Jack,
I'd never say something like that.
Think it, maybe. But I'd *never* say it.
Marlis

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,
This is your last chance. Do I pick you up at the train station tomorrow morning or not?
Jack

Martin@tel.com

Dear Jack,
I can't possibly get away, but I want to hear all about it when you get back. Everything. The lodge. How far they've gotten on finishing the inside. How great it was to be out there again. When you're planning on going back.
I'm betting I'll have to wait for days for you to come back down to earth and get on the computer!
Marlis, who's cheering for you.

Jones@tel.com

Marlis.
So you want me to tell you about it, huh?
I've got one easy word for it. Humiliating.
I should ~~never~~ have listened to you, damn it! Why did I listen to you? You, who keep so nice and safe in your city and your private little world. What do you know about humiliation? I mean, what do you *really* know about humiliation?
I can tell you about it. I've just had a bellyful.
I'm sitting in my car parked in front of the lodge. Drove up this morning. Hour and a half-the longest drive I've managed on my own since I got out of the hospital.
Impressive, huh?
I used to do that just to pick up a hamburger from my favorite greasy spoon.
Found out my new little go-buggy doesn't do too well on a construction site. I hadn't been here a half hour when I rolled off the edge of one of the outdoor walkways, they'd just finished laying.
It was just a five- or six-inch drop. Not even worth thinking about ... if you have two good legs. Wheelchairs don't like six-inch drops. Especially when you hit them crooked and there's soft ground at the bottom to grab the wheel and twist it.
Jack Martin, architect extraordinaire and all-around, tough guy, fell out of his chair like any two-year-old.
Not on my ass. I was already sitting on that. Flat on my face.

Every architect should fall on his face in front of a construction crew. Makes him seem like one of the guys, don'tcha know? Even better if he ends up flopping around on the ground like a stupid fish out of water. Then everyone can have a good laugh about it.

Of course, everybody was much too polite to laugh in my face. No! They rushed over and asked, if I was hurt and could they do anything. A dozen maiden aunts couldn't have been any more concerned for my welfare.

I couldn't even get back in my chair without their help. And doesn't that make a sweet picture, the crew having to pick up the project's architect and put him back in his wheelchair, just like a baby that fell out of its high chair? Very dignified. Very professional.

Like hell!

Next time you go getting any great ideas, just keep them to yourself, okay? I don't need any help making a fool of myself.

Jones@tel.com

Marlis,

It's two o'clock in the morning and I can't sleep.

I was a jerk. Go on. Say it. Jack Martin is a jerk. You can even put it in all caps if you want. **JACK MARTIN IS A JERK!**

I'd suggest a whole bunch of more appropriate terms, but you don't seem to be able to write the word damn, so I don't imagine you'd do very well with the words I'm thinking of. What's worse is, I remember promising never to take my frustrations out on you. That's one promise shot all to hell, isn't it?

At least lying in bed staring into the dark gave me lots of time to think about this afternoon and the way I reacted and the damn message I sent you.

Actually, it gave me too *much* time to think about that message.

I know. I should have thought before I sent it.

That's the trouble with laptops and modems and cellular phones. If you really want to be a jerk, there's nothing stopping you. Just sit in your car, plug in your phone, and have at it. No waiting. And no thinking required.

Ah, the wonders of modem technology.

You were right. I did need to get out on the site. I'd almost forgotten what paint and new lumber and raw earth smell like. I'd forgotten the sounds. Hammers pounding and saws buzzing and workers' footsteps echoing on bare floors.

Actually, it was the sounds that got me in trouble.

I was out there on that path, drinking in the autumn sun and the breeze and listening to the construction noises coming from inside. And I was thinking about you, and how I would describe those sounds to you, and wondering what you would see that I was missing. I was picturing the breeze tossing your hair about your face and into your eyes. I was wishing you were there with me, sharing in the excitement.

And because I was thinking about you and not paying attention to what I was doing, I rolled right off that damned sidewalk and onto my nose.

There must have been times in my life when I've made a bigger fool of myself, but I can't remember ever *feeling* more like one. Of course, I dealt with the situation in an eminently mature fashion-I took it out on you.

So kick me. I deserve it. *I'd* kick me if I could get out of this wheelchair to do it. But to get a fair swing at me, you'll have to come up here.

If you think about it, you'd realize that's not such a bad idea. You can clobber me for being an obnoxious, self-centred, self-pitying so-and-so, and then you can let me show you around the lodge.

It's almost finished, ready for your touch to bring it to life. And it is beautiful. Afterward, you can let me take you to lunch at a really expensive restaurant I know of less than an hour away. I am going back, you know. And I'm going to keep on going back. The way I figure it, if I could survive this afternoon's humiliation, I can survive anything. And so can you.

So, what do you say? Will you come?

Or are you looking for a manual on boxing so you can take a really good swing at me?

Jack, the jerk who is very, very sorry for it.

Jones@tel.com

Dear Marlis,

Have you decided to punish me by refusing to talk to me? You know I didn't really mean those things I said.

Please come. I'm going back to the lodge tomorrow, and the day after that, as well. We could go together.

I promise to be on my very best behaviour. Scout's honor, remember?

Jack, who is giving away his laptop and modem, first chance he gets.

Jones@tel.com

Damn it, Marks, talk to me!

Jack

Jones@tel.com

Marlis? Marlis! Please. Talk to me. Swear at me. Call me every filthy name you can think of, then call me a few more. I had no right to say those things and I know it. But don't cut me out of your life. Not like this. I won't *let* you cut me out. If I have to drive into and camp outside your door, I will. I'll drive your neighbours crazy. I'll drive your doorman crazy. I'll drive you crazy until you break down and to me and tell me you forgive me.

Please say you'll forgive me.

Jack

Jones@tel.com

My beautiful Marlis,

It's almost four in the morning and I've scarcely in the past three days, waiting to hear from you.

It's been a long wait.

T's even longer in the dark, lying in a bed that's far too big for just one person. Thinking of you.

Wanting you.

Does that sound strange? Another one of my self-indulgent fantasies? It isn't, you know.

Just because I can't walk doesn't mean I can't make love to a woman. Whatever else I lost in that accident, I didn't lose that.

It might have been easier if I had.

I've lost track of the number of times I've wakened in the night, hot and tormented from dreams of you.

Every time I look out my office window I can see you there in the meadow, your arms heaped with flowers and your hair blowing in the wind. It doesn't matter that the meadow's empty or that you're lost in the racket of New York.

You're here with me because I want you to be here. I want to touch you, kiss you. I want to make love to you, over and over and over again. I want you here in my bed and in the tall, sweet grass and in the midst of a thousand wildflowers in my meadow where I've cut a path for you to come to me.

I want you now. Today. This minute. And I want you tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that.

I could teach you, show you. Oh, so much! And you could teach me.

Teach me, Marlis. I want to learn how to drink in all the color and taste and smell of you. I want you hot and hungry and naked beside me. I want to hear your little cries of pleasure and your sighs as you drift into sleep afterward.

I want ... everything. Everything!

Is that so impossible? We are so much alike, you and I. And yet we both have so much to give other, if only we try.

I want to try. I want to give you my world- the world you gave me the courage to go back to.

And want to share in yours. If only you'll let me.

Meet me. Here, at the edge of my meadow.

Will you come? Will you let me make love to you? And will you make sweet love to me?

Ah, Marlis! I'm sure you didn't want to hear of this. So ignore it, just as you've ignored all other messages. It's easy, isn't it? Just a couple clicks on a couple of keys of the keyboard and you can make all of this- all of me- go away. Poof! Just like that.

Don't you wish the rest of life were that easy?

Nothing. Not even a short message to say, "Drop dead, Jack."

Jack barely stopped himself from hitting the monitor. Trashing an eleven-hundred-dollar, wide-screen monitor wasn't the smartest way of eliminating its "No messages waiting" message. He settled for snapping off the computer's power, but even seeing faint phosphor glow disappear brought no comfort.

How long had it been since he'd made an obscene of himself? Two days? Three? And still no word from Marlis.

She was probably still too scared to touch the computer for fear of what she might find waiting for her- and all because he hadn't been able to keep first his temper, and then his damned fantasy sex life in control.

What kind of insanity had possessed him? Since when had he become a computer sex fanatic?

Since he'd fallen in love with Marlis.

Jack froze.

Love?

He jerked his chair back from the computer and just missed running over Julius's tail. Julius lifted his head, blinked, then sighed and went back to sleep.

Jack's hands clenched on the cool steel of the rim of his wheelchair.

He was in love with Marlis.

Why hadn't he realized?

His mouth twisted in a grimace. Because he was a thick-headed lunk, that was why.

But Marlis might forgive him for that. She'd forgiven him for a whole lot worse. Up until now, that was.

With sudden desperation, Jack stretched to reach the power button for the computer, too impatient to roll his wheelchair back into place first. While the computer cycled through its warm-up drill, he drummed his fingers impatiently on the keyboard. The minute his communications software blinked ready, he started typing.

Jones@tel.com

I love you, Marlis.

Jack

Still no answer.

He had sent his simple message every hour for the past two days. He'd even wakened in the night to send it again. And still no answer.

Marlis wasn't going to respond. Not now. Not ever. He could chase her into New York, camp outside her apartment as he'd threatened, hound her like the madman he was, but he couldn't call back the words that had frightened her away.

Suddenly caught between anger and despair, Jack spun his wheelchair away from the computer and rolled it to the open patio door and the bright fall that was pouring in across his floor. He stopped, at the edge of the deck, staring across the expanse of wild grass and fall flowers toward the lush autumn foliage.

The sun felt good against his skin, hot with the wild heat of a dying summer. The faint breeze stirred the grass, making the drying stalks and stems of the meadow rattle slightly. A lost cricket chirped somewhere from beneath the deck, taking advantage of the warmth. In the trees, birds chattered, and from far away he heard the sharp cawing of a crow.

He closed his eyes, listening to the soft sounds. For her. He would have to tell her ...

His hands tightened around the rails of his wheels, and his face scrunched up against the pain. She wasn't coming. She'd received his messages and deleted them, too angry with him to answer.

He forced his eyes open, but this time the autumn world looked blurred and out of focus. It took him a minute to realize it was because he was crying and his eyes couldn't focus through the tears.

He blinked, angry again, and forced himself to shut out the sounds, forced himself to stare at the forest that was so near and yet so very, very far away.

At first he thought he was imagining her. She stood at the edge of the meadow, half hidden in the shadows, and stared across the grass at him. Her arms were full of wildflowers and branches heavy with bright autumn leaves. She was dressed in jeans, but Jack could swear there was a patch of bright purple on the T-shirt she wore, just visible above the mass of foliage she held.

She started to move forward, then stopped abruptly and tilted her head up and to the side so she could stare into the spreading, fall-drenched branches above her.

His heart skipped a beat, then started pounding in his chest. His hands trembled on the wheel rails. The binoculars were there on the table where he always kept them, but he didn't reach for them. If he was dreaming, he wanted the dream to last just a little while longer.

He wasn't dreaming. Her head came down and she turned once more to face the house.

That's when she saw him. Across the sweep of dying grasses and autumn flowers, their eyes met and held, and his tears spilled over his lids and down his cheeks unheeded.

And she was no longer standing still, no longer hiding at the edge of his narrow little world. She came walking, slowly at first, then faster and faster, as though with each step she left behind the doubts that had kept her in the shadows.

Jack rolled his wheelchair out onto the deck. He stared to manoeuvre his way toward the ramp, then stopped suddenly and set the brake on his chair instead. It had taken enormous courage for her to come so far. It would take even more to cover these last few hundred feet that separated them, because they both knew that she was doing far more than crossing a flower-strewn meadow. She was crossing the meadow to *him*.

Beside him, Julius started barking- that loud, deep, terrifying bark that drove away unwanted visitors and delighted the children who loved him. She didn't heed the barking, of course. She simply came walking through the meadow with her red-gold hair, drifting around her face in the breeze, glorious as the sunshine.

She was the most beautiful thing Jack had ever seen, the creature of his dreams ... and more. So, ranch, much more.

Her arms were filled with the gifts she brought- cattails and the branches of oak and scarlet maple; red sycamore leaves mingled with purple-blue asters and the heavy, golden fronds of a dozen wild grasses. Heavy in their massed radiance, they dipped and bowed and bounced in her arms with each step she took, precious treasure stolen from a horde he'd thought forever beyond his reach.

She, who had never before ventured out of the city on her own, had brought his lost world back to him.

And then she was there at the foot of the ramp leading up to the deck, then climbing the ramp. Not once did she take her gaze off him, not even when the breeze blew her hair into her eyes. She stopped a short distance away from him, just far enough that he couldn't reach her unless he rolled forward. He didn't move.

For the longest while, she neither moved nor spoke.

The wind caught her burden, fluttering the leaves so they clattered and shushed against each other, ruffling the delicate asters and setting the cattails to bobbing.

She merely clutched her booty closer against her chest, as if it were the anchor that kept her safe against the tempest.

"You were right," she said at last, softly, hesitantly. There was a curious flatness to her tone, yet Jack thought he had never heard a sweeter sound. "I was afraid."

Her chin came up as she said it. Just a little.

"I'm still afraid, but I thought. . . if you could go back, then I could try ... that I could ... I wanted..."

Her words trailed off and floated away, lost on the sighing autumn breeze. Her grip on the branches tightened even more and she pressed her lips together tightly. Then she swallowed and said, very clearly and firmly, "I wanted to hear you say the words you wrote me."

He could see the quick, subtle movement of her eyes as she shifted her gaze from his eyes to his mouth and back again.

Jack smiled and opened his arms and said, "I love you, Marlis." His smile faded into an intense frown of concentration as he carefully made what were, to him, the most important of the signs he had learned with such care over the past few weeks.

With the fingers of his right hand tucked in except for the pinkie, which stood up straight, he brought his hand toward his chest. - I.

Both hands closed, he crossed his arms over his chest as if hugging himself. - Love.

And then he pointed at Marlis. - You.

I love you.

A frozen instant, no more, then she gave a quick, glad cry and dropped to her knees in front of him, heedless of the tears in her eyes or the awkward, rustling bundle she held. It didn't matter. Jack's arms were more than long enough to enfold both her and her treasure.

He leaned forward eagerly, drawing her as close to him as he could before he claimed her mouth in a kiss that had no need of words nor ever would.

- End -