

On Leonard Schiller  
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Leonard Schiller is the protagonist in Brian Morton's novel, *Starting Out in the Evening* (New York: Crown, 1998). Schiller is a novelist in his seventies who has been alone for many years. A young woman has contacted him to write her masters thesis on his writings. One thing leads to another and . . .

"Can we lie down?" she said,

The fact was that he wished he were alone, reading *Daniel Deronda*.

They went into the bedroom without turning on the light and lay side by side on the bed. He was ashamed of his body, ashamed of being old, as if it were a mistake he had made.

He touched her face. He had forgotten what it was to know someone in this way; he had forgotten how much you learn about someone with your hands. He could feel her youth, not only the sharpness of her features and the suppleness of her skin, but in something that was harder to define, some force that seemed to radiate from her.

He removed his hands from her face and held them in the air, still quite near her, and he could still feel that force, rising from her skin. He passed his hand in the air above her closed eyelids, and he felt their delicacy, their subtle trembling.

He wanted to take her clothes off. He didn't want to take his own clothes off. It would be too painful to expose his bloated stomach, forty years pregnant; his chest where they had cracked him open like a lobster; the scar on his leg where they had removed some of his arteries to replace the fat-clogged arteries around his heart.

She seemed to understand that he didn't want to touch her. She lay on the bed with her eyes open and unbuttoned her dress. He ran his hands through the air a few inches above her, and he could have sworn that he could feel her body as he touched the air.

As he did all this, she was watching him. She was looking into his eyes and her gaze never wavered. It unnerved him, and it thrilled him, to look unwaveringly into her eyes.

She closed her eyes. He lay beside her, propped on one arm, nervous, unsure of what was supposed to happen next.

After a few minutes he became aware of the need to urinate. He decided to ignore it. She seemed to be sleeping very lightly; if he got out of bed he might wake her. He didn't want to wake her. The experience had ended nicely; he hadn't humiliated himself in any way, as far as he knew. He didn't want to push his luck.

The need to urinate became insistent. It was odd, because he hadn't had much to drink all night. He wondered whether this was a sign of prostate trouble. Probably it was just nervousness.

He got out of bed as quietly as possible and went down the hall to the bathroom. He kept the light off and didn't look in the mirror.

He came back to the bed and got in next to her, as gently as he could.

Almost every night, for the last few decades, he'd spent an hour or so reading in bed and then gone to sleep while listening to classical music on the radio. He didn't know if he could fall asleep without his routine.

After a few minutes, he needed to urinate again. Shifting and squirming, he couldn't take it anymore. He left the bed again, went to the bathroom, and found, not to his surprise, that he didn't have to urinate at all.

He got some fat-free cookies from the cupboard.

He would remember this evening as proof of the bounty of life, proof that life keeps offering unexpected gifts. He would forget, as soon as he could, that much of the actual experience had been torture.