

# Spillage

A NOVEL

**MICHAEL GROSS**

# A PROPOSAL

Eliot asks Joan to marry him.

“Oh, Eliot,” says Joan. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

They’ve lived together eight years. On the same day they signed the lease on their East Village apartment, the Yankees were mathematically eliminated from the 1968 pennant race. Joan and Eliot didn’t plan it that way. As a couple, they never planned much of anything, and besides, at the time they didn’t follow baseball. Baseball followed them.

The man who sold them their secondhand bed claimed that Lou Gehrig once slept in it on the way to Iron Man stardom. The set of dishes they bought at the Salvation Army depicted Great Moments in World Series Play before the pictures got washed out. Dugan Inc. manufactured the solid-state black-and-white television with the twelve-inch screen they bought; Admiral Dugan owns the Yankees. And before they came across the large wooden cable spool left by the phone company at the corner of St. Mark’s Place and First Avenue (they live between First and Second), someone had scrawled on it, “Ya bums! Bring back the glory days!” They brought it back to their third-floor walk-up and installed it amidst the books, records, comics, and art magazines scattered everywhere, between their semblance of a kitchen

and their dual-purpose living room/bedroom, eating their meals while seated on straw mats when they didn't eat them in bed. They spent a hell of a lot of time in bed.

While season after season the fortunes of the Bronx Bombers steadily declined, along with the Bronx, along with all of New York, along with all of the nation's cities, Joan and Eliot grew so close that in the twelve hours a night they clung to one another in sleep, they even started to share the same dreams.

This season though, while the 1976 Yankees have recaptured their former glory, Joan's been plagued by nightmares in which she's burned at the stake by the good people of Salem, Massachusetts. Crowds huddle together to watch, children shout, "She's possessed by the Devil!" What's worse, she half-believes in them, while dreaming and after. Eliot doesn't. He thinks she's watched too many afternoon horror flicks. Meanwhile, he dreams that he is Adlai Stevenson's running mate. They keep running and losing, running and losing.

Joan has no intention of marrying Eliot. In fact, she's felt so removed from him lately that she's started to wonder whether it is time to truck out. Where would she truck to? She has no idea.

Given that she rarely leaves their apartment except to visit the Welfare Office and the neighborhood bodega, it's not as though she's had a great many opportunities to make friends in recent years. Having one friend—Eliot—has satisfied her fine (she likes to concentrate her energies), and when it comes right down to it, she wishes she were still satisfied (she doesn't want to hurt him), but the facts, she thinks, are the facts, and the fact is that when she rolls out of the sag in the middle of the bed and he gives her a gentle tug she understands as "be kinder," what she feels like doing, instead of stopping and sighing, is elbowing him as though he'd accosted her.

The fact is that she wishes he *would* accost her, not physically so much as . . . yeah, well, physically. She imagines him in leather (enough of this corduroy), a whip in his hand that she's urged him to use. But Eliot would never lift a finger to hurt her, even if she asked him to.

Eliot's dark brown hair is as fine as a baby's; he parts it on the right and tucks it behind his small ears. Joan has never seen him without his beard, which she trims for him monthly when the moon is full. She used to be turned on by his delicate body, but now he seems too scrawny. And whatever happened to those soft-toned, offbeat questions his dark eyes once posed when she least expected them? Now, when she looks at him, they only seem to beg, and the sad fact is she's plumb out of alms.

He ought to know better than to propose. She feels like she's held a placard in front of his face, pointed out the inscription syllable by syllable: I Feel Alienated. She shouldn't have to speak the words aloud and she won't. This is precisely the kind of thing he should be able to figure out.

"I think it's time," he says, "we shook up our lives a bit. Explored some new territory, know what I mean?"

He runs his hand down her long back while she thinks how absurd it is that in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century a woman who fancies herself a free thinker could almost reach the age of twenty-seven having made love to only one man, even if she has done her fair share of lovemaking.

"I agree," she says, "that the time's come for something."

"Wouldn't kids be a trip?" says Eliot. "I mean their changes would be so visible, we couldn't help but see ourselves change with them. It'd be as though we had these mystical mirrors."

"You're talking in the plural?"

"Of course, I'd need a steady job."

"Of course."

"And finding one, you know, that could hold my interest . . ."

"Your options are limited."

She hopes he works nights.

"This damned depression is for the birds," he says, raising his voice. "But I've got faith." And he kisses a clump of her thick red hair. "You want to get dressed and find a judge?"

“Not really. Do you?”

“Maybe later, I guess.”

She puts a pillow over her head.

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“Yup,” says the voice of the Yankees, Al Deep. “Today we got baseball as it’s never been seen before, baseball as only Nick ‘The Swan’ Spillage can make it, and does he ever, yessireebob. The rookie sensation, he just beats all. Twenty-six times he’s appeared on the mound since he came out of nowhere near the start of spring training to ask for a tryout, and good thing we gave him one. Might not have, you know, if we hadn’t been so desperate. But we were desperate indeed, so we gave him one, and has he ever given us back!

“Twenty-six times he’s gone the distance for the win with that unorthodox delivery you’d think would tire him out (he chants, in case you haven’t heard, and races around the pitcher’s mound before each release like some kind of whirling dervish), except he doesn’t get tired because his games don’t last long for the simple reason that the opposition can’t touch him. Boy’s something else again, got amazing stuff. All kinds of records broken—I won’t bore you with the details—and hearts too, you bet. The big thing though is what he’s done for this Yankee ball club, and I can sum that up for you in a word: he’s done miracles.

“Now don’t get me wrong. I love every one of the ragtag bunch of god-awful misfits who finished in the cellar in ’72, ’73, ’74, and ’75 like I love my own kids. But I’m honest enough with myself to admit, love ’em though I do and kills me though it does, that they stink. Or at least they stunk. Wasn’t a knowledgeable baseball man in the country who had them pegged for anything but the cellar again this year.

“This Yankee ball club was about as bankrupt before Swannie came as the Big Apple itself is, and while the long-necked, golden-curled, nineteen-year-old kid pitcher hasn’t solved the major-league problems

still facing this woe-begotten metropolis, if he could make these bums the champions of the world, then I wouldn't put it past him to do just about anything."

. . .

Joan may be the last person in New York to hear of the Swan. When she does, through Eliot, it's déjà vu: in her dream of burning last night, she dealt her soul to Satan for him, and what a trade it was! All she gave up to seal the deal was a lock of her hair, while she would have cut off her whole damned head if she'd had to for just one embrace of the Yankees' young savior. Of course, there were favors to be named later that she'd have to perform, but these were too far down the road to think about, in another dream altogether. In the meantime, life was so perfect, so filled with wonders at every moment.

Tonight, Spillage goes against the California Angels and a victory could send the Yanks into the World Series. *The Mercury* is filled with pictures of his season-long heroics, pictures that will soon be plastered all over the apartment. Eliot, who'd brought the paper home so he could look for jobs, diligently circles ads while Joan works with scissors and tape. He'd been vaguely aware of the Swan's existence but didn't give him much thought until after his father died, a victim of random violence, and he turned to baseball as a kind of therapy. Save for looking at box scores, he hadn't read the newspaper in months. Once upon a time, he'd been a news junkie, but as those twin evils, inflation and depression, worked their ever-nastier magic on the streets of New York—and as rising crime struck too close to home—his daily dose of robbery, rape, rioting, arson, assassination, suicide, infanticide, and homicide finally wore him down and he decided to kick the habit.

Joan lifts a cutout close-up of the southpaw's sweetly smiling, sweating face with a banner head that reads, "Hope for New York?" She asks Eliot if he'd mind if she hung it up.

“You think it’d add anything?” asks Eliot.

She shrugs. “Something needs to be added. I’m tired of the spartan look. And besides, he’s so pretty.”

“I guess. If you like primitives.”

“I was thinking we could swing these vines down, you know, from hooks in the ceiling; pick up some jungle incense, a couple of eucalyptuses, maybe a pet leopard.”

She fools with the buttons of his clean white shirt.

“Whatever you’re into,” he says.

“You’re much too tolerant.”

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The Viennese artist Gustav Klimt left his studio one day around the turn of the twentieth century to stroll through the netherworld from whence souls originate, and there, thinks Eliot, the lucky devil spied Joan. Her eyes were closed, her full lips parted as she curled in a fetal pose atop a silken blanket, overlaid with a stream of gold sperm-and-egg shapes. Her unpolished fingernails, bitten to the nubs, seemed almost to dig into the flesh between her breasts. That the right was hidden by her sturdy thigh made the left the more delectable. Klimt wanted to roll his tongue around it; he’d center it when he reimagined it. The pink of that nipple matched the pink of her naturally flushed cheeks. And the red hair acted according to its own laws, curving like sound waves across her chin, shoulder, and arm.

When she stood, she stood straight. A serpent wound around her ankles. Her left hand held a magnifying glass, pale blue and incisive like her widely spaced eyes. In profile she became pregnant. Her belly looked big enough to hold a battalion. It ruined her posture, made her arms and legs seem emaciated. Demons floated above and behind her. She dared them. She dared Klimt.

Eliot is upset with Joan for shaving her head. She only did it, he thinks, because he shaved his beard. But at the same time, he’s

enthralled; it's miraculously smooth, impeccably shaped. And he might as well be magnanimous since he did land a job. The Burger Boat on 23rd and Second (part of Admiral Dugan's chain) just hired a new night manager.



## ENTER CHOICE

While Eliot works his new night job, Joan heads up to the East 70s in search of a bar with a supersized color tube that'll show her Swan in all his glory. She grew up in this part of town, near her father's office on Madison Avenue, but she hasn't been here in ages, so it feels like virgin territory.

The people on the street are dressed in their finest garb, looking expensive from head to toe. Not Joan. She's in rags by comparison, with her light blue turban and multicolored peasant dress, and quite likes the effect. She was never drawn to the current fashions her father promoted in the ads he created, even when he pretended to be a loving dad, and she completely turned off to everything she associated with him once his secret second family came to light.

It was October 1963, during the Yankees-Giants World Series that nearly thirteen-year-old Joan had zero interest in. She had zero interest in any sports at the time—that was her father and brother's thing, while she focused on art, music, and dance—but she remembers this Series because that's where her brother first made the discovery. At Game Three with Big Daddy in a superspecial field level box befitting his status as an advertising heavyweight (among other things, he put Burger Boat on the map, helping Admiral Dugan launch his fast-food

empire), her brother was brazenly seated next to an elegant woman her father claimed was his client but whose canoodling with him suggested otherwise, and her strangely familiar daughter, whom he told his mother when he arrived home could pass for Joan's twin.

That started the ball rolling, and it didn't take long for Joan's mom to figure the whole thing out and give Big Daddy the boot. Of course, he wanted her to figure it out, Joan's always thought—otherwise why tempt fate by bringing brother, future stepmother, and half-sister together in the first place? He was ready to leave, and he got what he wanted, as he usually did, the macho asshole, though not without the pain of a bitter divorce. Joan never wanted to see him again and never did, despite her brother's attempt years later to broker a reconciliation.

They're probably at the game now, Joan thinks with a shiver. It's been a while since she's thought about either one, and she quickly banishes the thought as she enters a bar called Fantasia, where the screen's almost movie-sized. No way they're at the game. Big Daddy moved to L.A. years ago, Tinseltown, just the place for him, and while she doesn't know his current whereabouts, she doubts it's the town he ran away from. Besides, he was never really a baseball fan. He just faked it for business reasons, like he faked everything. His whole life was a lie, including when he feigned affection for you when you were young.

She accepts an offer of a seat at the bar, orders herself a double tequila, downs it without the aid of lemon or salt and laughs as it goes through her like fire.

In the top of the first, Nick Spillage goes through the fearsome Angel order like a buzz saw through plywood, which is what their bats appear to be made of when they manage to make contact. Back in 1963, the last time the Yankees made the World Series, the announcer points out that they did it with a cast of aging stars who were swept by the Giants and never the same after. That won't be the case this year, he says—no siree, not with Swannie—and Joan agrees. That was the end of an era, she thinks, and this is the dawn of a new one.

It was all downhill for the Yankees after their 1963 Series debacle,

an unprecedented dozen-year decline for baseball's most storied franchise. And it was all downhill too for Joan's mom, a former model who met her father on a commercial shoot, then gave up her professional ambitions when she had her first child. A distant cousin of the Kennedys (or so she claimed), she was prone to drink, depression, and delusion even before her marriage dissolved. When JFK was assassinated a month later, the double whammy drove her completely over the edge.

She consumed herself with cosmetic surgeries, which gave her face a masklike quality Joan hated. Another big fake! And she gobbled up conspiracy theories, in her home life as well as the world at large. At home, she tried to get Joan to testify in the divorce proceedings that Big Daddy was a monster who abused her repeatedly. While admitting he could be creepy, Joan refused to go that far, which didn't do wonders for the already tenuous mother-daughter relationship. As for the world, Dear Mother insisted that the Russians, Cubans, and Chinese all had a hand in JFK's demise, as did the Mafia, the CIA, LBJ, and Big Daddy's client Richard Nixon. She joined wacko support groups and subscribed to even more wacko newsletters in a never-ending quest to prove her case, contending with ever-increasing ardor that it was all one big plot, and she was the ultimate victim. The fact that Joan couldn't make the connection (any of her connections, really) created an even greater rift between them, until they were barely on speaking terms. Mercifully, Dear Mother moved down to Miami Beach to perfect her face-mask tan with her plastic surgeon boyfriend and fellow conspiracist around the time Joan entered college, studying art downtown at the Parsons School of Design, so they could stop having to try.

And this, thinks Joan, is the wonderful world of marriage that Eliot wants to usher her into! With these screwed-up parents as role models, how could we possibly have a happy one? Eliot knows the story, but he just plunged right in. And it's not like his own parents, Mr. and Mrs. Geek, the professors, were any great shakes either, though they stayed together until the very end. Somehow, they found each other, while failing at every other social connection they attempted, including

with their only child. The odds are so long against us having a happy marriage, she thinks, it's not worth betting. What's wrong with that man, anyway?

Nothing wrong with Spillage, who strikes out ten before giving up his first hit in the fifth inning. He's beautiful, Joan thinks, unbelievably beautiful, as she remembers back to her first crush, George Harrison of the Beatles.

Joan rebounded from her parents' breakup by throwing herself into Beatlemania. She was one of three thousand screaming fans who greeted them at Kennedy Airport when they first arrived in America in February 1964. A year later, she was one of fifty thousand screaming for them from the stands when they performed at Shea Stadium, the only time she ever went to a major league ballpark.

For Joan, the Beatles represented four distinct types of men. There was John, the Genius; Paul, the Beauty; George, the Soul; and Ringo, the Goof. She fell for the Soul—tall, dark, quiet, with an inner strength and calm that gave her peace. During her teenage years, she had many suitors including each of these types, but in real life, Big Daddy's actions made her deeply distrustful of all men and she never had a serious relationship until Eliot came along.

Eliot was a Soul, like George. A sweet, unassuming Soul, devoid of swagger and pretentiousness, the total opposite of Big Daddy, the Evil Genius. She trusted him from the moment they locked eyes under the arch at Washington Square Park, where they'd gone for a rally to protest the Vietnam War. She still trusts him, she thinks. She still loves him. But it's time for something utterly different. Time for a Beauty! She stands up and cheers as her golden-curled Swan escapes a bases loaded jam in the sixth by notching his thirteenth strikeout.

By the time she met Eliot, Joan had moved beyond the Beatles, though she still bought all of their albums and knew much of their lyrics. She developed crushes on more edgy rock and rollers like Jim Morrison of the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, Lou Reed of The Velvet Underground, Grace Slick of Jefferson Airplane, and her all-time favorite,

Janis Joplin. Eliot, a pretty good guitarist in his own right, shared her passion for music. Wrote poetry and dreamed at one point of being a songwriter. Together, they frequented the Fillmore East in its late '60s heyday, along with several Village bars and clubs where emerging talent strutted their stuff. They spent three glorious days and nights at Woodstock, tripping on magic mushrooms. And they even formed an act—with Joan doing lead vocals and the tambourine, while Eliot strummed away and harmonized—which they took to the subways to make some extra cash after the stock market crashed, the economy tanked, and Big Daddy's checks stopped coming.

We had some amazing times, Joan thinks, and who's to say they're over? They're just not in the here and now. She recalls a Beatles song they had fun playing, a little ditty called "When I'm Sixty-Four." She sings it under her breath as the Yankees widen their lead to 3-0 in the bottom of the seventh. They used to joke in bed about growing old together, like the couple in the song. But eight years is a long time to be tied to someone, she thinks, never mind the more than forty-five it would take to achieve the song's late-life bliss. People change, they grow apart, especially when they start living together at eighteen, she tells herself. You just need to go solo sometimes to find out who you really are. Even the Beatles, who made such awesome music together, broke up after eight years. It could happen to anyone.

Throughout the game, she's been fending off guy after guy butting up against her at the bar to make approaches. It feels like one an inning, at least. Uptown guys, she thinks, of no interest whatsoever. Mini Mad Men, she imagines, Hollow Men, Tin Men, trying to fake their way through life with their catchy slogans like Big Daddy. Go peddle your cigarettes, your sugary drinks, your deodorants, and your gas guzzlers. Go hook America on whatever destructive crap you can get away with. Just get out of my face. Take your hand off my turban.

But when Spillage finishes twirling his three-hit gem, sending the Yanks to the World Series with a 5-0 victory, a more intriguing fellow comes into view. As she raises her glass to toast Swannie's

accomplishment, it clinks against the scotch of a tall, athletic-looking Black man who says, "I'd rather toast you, momma."

"You're on," says Joan.

He's an out-of-work Shakespearean actor who calls himself Choice and is brilliantly bald, with riveting green eyes and a megawatt smile. Joan likes his style as they make conversation. Now here's a man who's authentic, she thinks, a one-of-a-kind, who knows who he is, what he's made of, and how he comes across, which is powerful, yet playful. He's a Beauty . . . and maybe a bit of a Goof too. He's played kings and princes and looks the part, though a bit frayed at the edges. He's not trying too hard to impress, like Big Daddy; he's just naturally impressive, so much so he makes light of it. And he's not begging like Eliot; he doesn't need you, just wants you. Just wants a good time, as you do, to celebrate the Yankee win. Poor Eliot. He's working way too hard and it's not at all attractive. Slogging away in the bowels of the Burger Boat, his only wish to make you happy.

Screw it, she thinks. Can't let Eliot hold me back. If he were here, he'd understand (which is part of the problem). A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, especially this girl, who's been through so much. Burn me if you want to. I don't give a damn. Got to find out what I'm made of too.

Giddy with victory and ready for adventure, she suggests to Choice that they find a new scene, and he gladly agrees.

"Your place or mine," she says with a wink.

"If you got one," Choice says, "you're one up on me."