My wife had, by her count, eleven boyfriends before she married me twenty years ago. The way she tells the story, it starts with a hockey player in high school who groped her at the prom and ends with the guy she lived with for five years before me. It includes such characters as the guy she was dating who made a pass at a friend of hers, a guy she dated for four days in Texas, a guy who used to take her to the beach and photograph her naked for artistic purposes, a guy who dumped her for a girl in his Bible class, a guy who ran a steam shovel, a guy she went out with because she liked his mustache, a guy who turned out to have another girlfriend the whole time she was dating him, and some other guys. She doesn’t count guys she had crushes on who didn’t have crushes on her, of which there were several, and I don’t think she is counting guys with whom she made out once in the movies or in a basement for an hour, but I don’t ask about that, because who am I to ask, and there are certain levels of detail you don’t actually want to be up on, so to speak, you know what I mean?

Over the years she has told plenty of stories about her boyfriends, many of them funny stories, although some of the stories, especially the
ones she tells a lot, are not so much funny as cathartic and ultimately self-explanatory, the sort of stories you tell about other people when you are really trying to tell a story about yourself. Stories about how you came to be who you are, which has a lot to do with the lovers you used to have. If you look at the whole boyfriend and girlfriend thing with a long view, you see that the system is a total mess; basically you screw up time after time until you get married, if you get married, and then you screw up on a major-league basis and can’t quit as easily.

Sometimes you go out with people you know aren’t right for you because you want to see what it’s like to go out with people you know you shouldn’t go out with, and sometimes you go out with people because they like you and you like that, even though you don’t like them, or because they have cool cars, or because there’s sex in the air, or because they’re not at all like the boyfriend you just had and someone not like the last boyfriend looks pretty good when you are reeling from dumping or being dumped. And sometimes you go out with someone because they asked you to and you can’t think of any good reason to say no; and sometimes you go out with someone because that’s the only person who said yes when you asked, and sometimes you go out with someone for the feeling of going out with that person, which, if you think about it, is really a way to see how you feel rather than any serious attempt to see how they feel, which is why that particular kind of relationship is doomed.

Anyway, over the years my wife has told me so many stories about the boyfriends that after a while I began to think of them as real people, which of course they were, and one day by purest chance I ran into one of them—I’ll call him Nine—who turned out to be a good guy, a little regretful that he’d had a chance to marry my wife but didn’t grab for the brass ring, but that was many years and many miles ago as he said, as he bought me a pint. We got to talking about her other old boyfriends, whom he too had heard stories about, and after we had
two pints each he proposed that we convene an old boyfriends meeting, gathering the twelve boyfriends, including me, for what would certainly be a peculiar and humorous event, and really it would be a celebration of my wife, when you think about it, he said, because we had all in our various ways loved her, and, really, when you think about it that’s a terrific compliment to her, that not one or two but twelve guys all thought she was the coolest thing since sliced bread, at least for a while, and in two cases, mine and Nine’s, for years at a time, not every woman could say that, eh?

This seemed like a good idea at the time but the next day I concluded it was nuts. Unfortunately, Nine did not forget about it and a few months later he called to tell me that he had tracked down four of the other boyfriends, all of whom lived within a hundred miles, and they were amenable to some sort of minor event, from sheer stupid male curiosity, so I made an effort and tracked down three of the old boyfriends myself, so that left three to find—the hockey player, the mustache guy, and the guy she went out with for about ten hours total over the course of four howling drunk days in Texas. This last guy turned out to be in Uruguay, and the friend of a friend who told me where he was also pointed out in no uncertain terms that this boyfriend—I’ll call him Seven—was a complete and utter ass and thief and snake, so I decided not to invite him, and Nine and I turned our efforts to finding One and Ten. You would be surprised how easy it is to find somebody once you really put your mind to it; you wonder if maybe you should be a private detective on the side and make a little cash finding old boyfriends for various purposes. It’s something to think about.

Anyway Nine found One, who turned out to be a professor of entrepreneurship at a community college, and I finally tracked down Ten, who turned out to be gay as a three-dollar bill and in a stable relationship and not at all interested in reviewing the past. So Nine and I decided to go with the ten guys we had, and after talking about possible
venues for a while we settled on a bus trip, you know, like an Outing, which would give us a chance to talk a bit but would not be so formal an arrangement as a dinner or anything, and neither Nine nor I thought that a weekend away made much sense, for one thing who had the money, and for another can you imagine explaining to your wife that you are forsaking her and the children for a weekend away with a bunch of guys you don’t actually know and the only thing you have in common is that you have all kissed the same woman deep in the thickets of the past? I think not.

So we rented a bus for the day, a small bus, sort of half a bus, what my kids would call a little-kid bus, and we hired a guy to take us out in the wine country, and as we boarded the bus, grinning a little nervously, I remembered my grandfather telling stories about the outings he used to go on when he was a boy in Ireland. All the men in his village would pile into an old lorry and go drinking for the day, even the boys would have a pint or two and get all sozzled, and the men would drink like heroes and warriors, and end up in the bushes, and everyone would tell hilarious stories the rest of the year until it was time for the outing again. It seemed like an odd custom when he told us about it, always with high glee—he would laugh so hard he would get short of breath and have to lie down—but as I boarded the bus with the boyfriends I saw how it could actually be a lot of fun. You would spend a lot of time just sitting with the other guys telling stories and jokes and it would be a grand day absolutely, as my grandfather liked to say.

Anyway we all got sozzled, the other nine boyfriends and me, and all day guys were ribbing me for having won her hand. I was elected president of the bus and got to make decisions about which wineries to stop at, and in the end it was sort of poignant. Each guy’d had a whole subsequent life after dating my wife, and he would struggle to tell about his life in short order, which is not easy to do, and each guy too said with genuine affection and respect that my wife was a wonderful woman
absolutely, an unforgettable woman, that his time with her was really a highlight of his life and after they’d broken up he’d kicked himself for having lost such a princess of a woman, but life goes on, you know, and you meet other people, and there are blessings in sadness, and he would have never had the kids he had if he had not broken up with my wife and met his first or second wife, and things like that.

We ribbed the driver for not having gone out with my wife, and when people at the wineries asked politely what our group was we would lose it laughing and not be able to explain, and there were a lot of funny stories of all sorts, and we all agreed by voice vote on the way home that this had been a terrific thing we should do only the once for fear of losing the spontaneous zest of it. But what I will remember from the day isn’t the laughter, of which there was a lot, which is a good thing, but a moment of silence on the way home when I am pretty sure that every guy on the bus, including the driver, was thinking about how you take certain forks in the road in your life, and one fork leads to another, and while this is totally natural and we all accept it and even savor it, especially guys like me who somehow end up with the princess, isn’t it strange how one decision going the other way would have put you into a whole different life, with a different wife and different kids and a different dog? We hardly ever think about this and there’s no percentage in thinking about it, but for a moment there on the bus every guy thought about it, and no one said anything for a while until Nine said hey, does she still change her mind every seven seconds or what? And that set us all laughing and telling stories again until we got back to the place where we had all left our cars. We got off the bus laughing like little kids and laughed harder when Eight dropped the bottle of wine he was taking home to his wife, it exploded with a terrific bang, and then we all shook hands and said goodbye and that was the end of that.