

# You Can't Come In

by [Michael E.C. Gery](#) (November 2023)



*Mourning Woman*, Egon Schiele, 1912

I knew Merel before she became famous. Then came the time while she was becoming famous. Then, of course, after she became famous we all knew something about her.

We met each other in college. She attended a private college that for many years admitted only females but by then included some males, though I didn't know any of them. My college was the state university nearby geographically but far removed otherwise. Our school did not play her school in any sports. We didn't know whether her school even played sports then. They played bridge.

In the fall of my junior year I was doing some research at her college's library. My work concerned an alumna of the college, also famous, whose archival papers resided in the library's special collections. At the library one day I noticed a flyer announcing a reading on campus late that afternoon. Faculty and students would read poetry written by women. It seemed like something I would like.

I roamed the campus as October daylight dimmed and yellow leaves matted a wet black walkway. I asked a passing student how to reach the room where the reading would take place in a stone-block building used mainly for alumni functions. I arrived before anyone else into this dark wood-paneled room that looked like a reading salon, books on shelves, sagging chairs. I switched on a lamp that sat on a table against a wall.

During the reading I was the only male in the room except two others who looked like professors and sat together along another wall. Everyone listened reverently to Edna St. Vincent Millay, May Sarton, Gwendolyn Brooks. Students read their own work, too. Merel was one of them. I don't remember if she read prose or poetry, because I was intent on just watching her. She was the only reader who paused to grin out to us as though she expected a passage to amaze us immediately. Her elegance and placid beauty were enough to hold me and everyone else,

and she knew it. Her black hair lay long, smooth and straight behind her shoulders. She read from the page, then looked up to us. The only words that I remember her voicing were "swirling slowly lower." They came to me as a liquid wave. She seemed to be an apparition.

At a reception later, hosted by professors in another room of the same building, I was not the only male student. But Merel latched onto me even as others strolled by to greet her, calling her Merel, touching her, kissing her cheeks. She spoke to me in between those passing adulations.

Why are you here? I saw the notice in the library.

Why were you at the library? For my paper on the famous woman, a political activist.

Who are you? A student at the state university, a junior.

Where do you come from? I told her.

Why are you interested in the political activist? For an American history class.

Why American history? I don't know. Maybe I'll become a teacher. Or a lawyer.

A lawyer? Probably not.

She acted as though she were entitled to ask all the questions and I should answer them all directly. It was a reception partly for her, after all, and she may have assumed we all knew about her as a star in her senior class.

We both fed on the raw vegetables, cheese chunks, lavash, white wine. She asked for my telephone number. I gave her the number at the house where I lived with other students. I asked for her number, and she gave me the address for her college post office box. I sent a letter there not long after the reception, asking among other things her idea for a good place

where I could get lunch during my times studying at the college library. I did not get a reply for maybe two weeks. Then she phoned me. We arranged to meet for dinner at an Italian place on a back street near her college. I drove there in my old Ford Taurus. She was already seated at a table by a window, red-and-white checkered tablecloth, thick candle stuck into the neck of a Chianti bottle. Her black hair fell behind her shoulders on a dove gray cashmere sweater that opened below her neck. Silvery jewelry sparkled from her.

That's when Merel told me she would be a famous writer someday. She was certain of that. She had written some stories and the beginning of a novel. Her college professors were introducing her to their literary associations.

Could I see some of her writing? "Not yet," she said.

She grew up in a well-known classy suburb and had attended boarding school. She was the only child of wealthy parents, her father a Dutch-American businessman, her mother an urban intellectual. Now separated but living in the same town, her parents expected her this coming Christmas to announce her engagement to marry a medical student named Stuart. She herself, however, expected to end the engagement and was at her wit's end how to do it.

During dinner we worked through bowls of spaghetti with meat sauce, Caesar salads, garlic bread, a bottle of pinot noir. The waiter set down tiramisu for each of us.

Did I have any advice for ending the engagement? No.

Merel's dark brown eyes welled up. Silent and weepy, she stared at her tiramisu. I ate mine then laid down cash for the waiter. She remained still for a while, then she rose and walked out. I followed her.

Still not speaking she led me by the hand along a street we knew that runs near the college library. We passed the

bookstore, the jewelry store, a dress shop all dark now. Under streetlight I could see her agile stride, black skirt snug along her thighs, some kind of jacket trimmed to her waist, plain casual shoes. She halted at a doorway that you wouldn't have noticed walking by it even in daylight. She produced a key that opened the lock. She led me up one flight of stairs to a door that opened into a hallway. Here were a set of rooms over the shops.

Merel pulled open a door and drew me into one of the rooms, a garret whose narrow dormer looked onto the street. I lowered my head to keep it from grazing the ceiling. It felt like an attic in there. I noticed a straight-backed chair set at a writing table against a low wall where the ceiling angled down. The table displayed a Royal portable typewriter in mint green, spiral-bound notebooks, a spread of books and magazines (*Bullfinch's Mythology*, *The Book of Common Prayer*, *Look Homeward*, *Angel*, *The New Yorker*). A wicker basket holding clothing stood near a low-slung chair and a steel-framed cot with bedding on it. Merel removed her jacket and sat on the edge of the cot. As I ducked forward and tugged off my own jacket, she reached up, snatched it and chucked it to the floor.

On the edge of that cot we did what only can be called necking, along with some moaning and awkward shifting. As I palmed her smooth hair and her cashmere she felt soft and polished. She let off a scent of what seemed like lilac. I remember feeling that I did not have permission to ruffle her. I hardly knew her, even though by then I had yielded plenty of myself.

Instead of asking permission I laid her hands onto my knees and looked into her face. I wanted to slow down. She returned my gaze, then turned indignant. She swung her chin toward me—"Hey!"—as though I'd misbehaved by pausing. She must have expected me to carry on as though everything were okay.

As I think of it now, it very well could have been okay. But at the time, I felt uncertain and out of place. I remember just rubbing my thumbs on the backs of her hands there on my knees.

Merel said something like, "Are you scared of me?"

And yes, I was worried about what was about to happen. I probably was scared of something. It wasn't her looks. She looked wonderful, a Venus alive. I have always felt myself weaken while looking at her, even in a photograph. I have wondered if she deliberately sapped my strength or if she simply realized her superior force as it rose and let it run. I have wondered if she disarmed other people in the same way.

That night I withdrew myself from the garret as graciously as I could and thought as I left that I would not see Merel again. I have learned since then that the little low-ceilinged room above the shops was her getaway where she could study and write and who knows what else.

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The next morning Merel called me at the house where I was living three towns away from her college. She said nothing of the dinner and our time after it but instead asked me to drive her to the train station a few days later. She had reserved a trip home for Christmas.

Driving my Taurus I found her waving and grinning in front of the college admissions building just outside one of the campus gates. Like a good livery driver I loaded her hard-case monogrammed luggage with its brass clasps into the car trunk while she stood waiting in a camelhair wrap coat and leather gloves. I held open the passenger door, she folded in her coat skirt and settled into the seat.

Before driving off I glanced over at her for some sign of affection or news or a command. She just smiled out the

windshield as though thinking of something that I was supposed to guess.

She asked about my plans for Christmas and winter break. I told her I would tend bar through Christmas Eve at the hotel near my university where I worked part-time, then see my parents and various family people, then return to tend bar and continue studying and maybe begin writing about the famous political activist.

We fell silent approaching the train station until I said something like, "I hope you have a good vacation and good luck with your wedding plans."

"I'm not ready to marry him," she said to the windshield.

I did not reply. I was not interested in him or why she was not ready to marry him.

After another silence, as we pulled into a parking space, she let out a laugh and looked over at me. "Maybe *you're* better," she said brightly as though now suddenly we were in fine holiday spirits and having the time of our lives.

That made it easier for me to yank out her suitcases and carry them up the steps and through the old train station waiting room onto the platform where others already stood waiting for the train. I rested the luggage on the platform, then looked over at Merel. She took my face into her hands, kissed my lips, then tossed my face back to me, spreading her gloved hands in a finishing pose as though that was her Christmas present to me. I nodded and smiled and looked down to the platform and kept nodding and smiling as I backed away and waved her on.

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I don't know how Merel managed her life during that Christmas break. I know that she did not marry the man Stuart who at the

time intended to study medicine and become a physician. Instead she married the artist and illustrator Harvey. His full name was Harvey Colington Harvey, but he came to be known as just Harvey. Before they married, the two of them had been working in Scotland, Merel on a Fulbright grant at St. Andrews and Harvey as a commercial artist in Edinburgh. Harvey Colington Harvey began attracting attention in the U.K. while Merel was on the verge of her fame. By that time she had published fiction and poetry in American publications respected in literary circles. I learned later that she had been introduced to those circles by a novelist who taught classes from time to time at her college and with whom she may have had a romantic relationship from time to time. Whether she maintained her relationship with him or not, she had found more lasting romance with the artist Harvey Colington Harvey.

Most of this information about Merel's marriage and her various successes came from a story in the local newspaper published in the same town where I went to college. I was still living there, teaching history and civics now in the high school. The article had been reprinted from the big city newspaper that reaches the suburbs where she had grown up. It gushed about her triumphs at home and abroad, and even more about Harvey's star rising within the hip European art and literature scene. His drawings depicted hefty characters with large eyes and muscles wearing clothing you might see on rural homesteaders. They had become popular among young audiences who sought them out in books and movies made from those books. Harvey himself seemed to be grooming a reputation as a handsome and brash trendsetter. Our local newspaper added a bit to the reprinted story saying that Merel's former college would host the two of them as artists-in-residence for the coming term.

During an after-school conference with one of my students I noticed a book of Harvey illustrations that the boy had placed on the table where we were discussing his academic progress.



The book's story recently had been produced as an animated movie now popular among students, especially boys. When I asked about it, my student told me that he planned to attend a discussion on contemporary art, to be held at Merel's old college, where Harvey would appear as a panelist.

I decided to appear myself in the audience at the panel discussion so I could learn more about Merel's husband. In the days before the event, I bought the book that included Harvey drawings and had inspired a movie. The story centered on a fantastical community that lived either in the past or in the future, I couldn't tell which. Magical powers played a part. The drawings really were terrific, with colorful, detailed, exaggerated human features and landscapes. I couldn't tell what attracted his fan following more, the story or the illustrations.

I also tried brushing up on Merel's work. Her college's bookstore carried her novel, *The Vales*, published two years earlier in London. Online I found one of her short stories and some poetry. The novel drew favorable reviews and sold well, from what I could tell, though at the time of its publication I had not known anything about it. The story portrays a young American mother grappling with her life on a contemporary manor farm among the gentry in rural England. She endures her husband's cold family, fumbles with her children, entertains various lively and fiendish visitors, befriends some villagers, survives a frightening encounter in London. The publisher promised a sequel wherein the heroine and her family abide life in the U.S. The short story of hers that I read is set in the same English milieu where two young women dissuade each other, sometimes humorously, from killing themselves. The few poems I found online I would describe as dark, though I am in no position to analyze their literary qualities. By the time I attended the panel discussion at the college, I had only skimmed Merel's novel and Harvey's most recent book.

The panel—"Graphic Design and Illustration as Fine Art"—took

place in a modest performance hall within the college's new fine arts building, which had been built in the central campus on the site of the old fine arts building. Inside I sidled up to the front of the hall where I chatted with my student. Harvey was standing nearby at the dais, looking tall, beefy, jovial, and curly-headed, wearing a nice leather vest and floppy white shirt. A stack of his books sat on the table. Then I spied Merel among some serious-looking college-age females on the other side of the room. I made my way over there. As the moderator convened the meeting, I tossed a wave to Merel who saw me but showed no sign of recognition. Then she studied me a moment and nodded as I approached her. She wagged a pen and whispered something. On a page of the notebook I carried she wrote "outside after."

Near the entrance of the fine arts building afterward we hugged each other in greeting. Merel called me by name. She led me to sit on a low stone wall that ran nearby under bare young trees. During pleasantries, Merel reached into her shoulder bag and drew a cigarette from a mashed pack of Camel Filters. She crossed her legs and lit it. At first she looked lovely to me, demure I would say. Her dark hair parted in the middle now fell full to her shoulder and was held off of her face by wide barrettes. She whispered cigarette smoke off to the side and seemed more urbane than I remembered and older. Then I noticed that her dark cashmere turtleneck and slim wool skirt looked rumpled and neglected. They could have been the same clothes she wore in college. Her face appeared puffier than I remembered, her lipstick and eyeliner poorly applied. I wondered if she were trying to revive her college style and just couldn't do it.

It didn't take long for me to understand that Merel was miserable.

When she looked into me her eyes appeared almost black, and she didn't hold mine for long but instead looked down to her lap and off her shoulder. After tossing one cigarette butt to

the ground behind the wall she clasped her hands in her lap and squeezed them repeatedly, hiding fingers that also looked neglected. Then she drew from her purse a white disposable lighter and another cigarette, some British brand I did not recognize. Streaming smoke from her lips to the air seemed to calm her. I had an urge to massage her shoulders to help her relax, but I didn't dare touch her. She seemed too stiff to touch. Across her lap lay a gray raincoat made of soft cloth with a dark brown warm-looking lining. She should have draped it over her shoulders. This was November. I should have warmed her myself. But who was I to lend her any affection? I hardly knew her anymore. I wasn't one of her fans. A fan sitting next to her on that wall may have felt easier about comforting Merel than I did.

Merel asked where I was living and working. I told her. "Are you happy?" she said with a slight Anglo-British lilt. "In love?" I said yes, then I turned the interview on her. I felt I had a right to know more about her. I should have known more about her all along.

She and Harvey had lived near Glasgow then moved to the Crouch End area of London, Merel said. Harvey had steady business and engagements in London while Merel tried elevating her literary stature. She admitted to not working on a second novel. "I do not feel like I belong there," she said. In the U.S. now they were scouting places where they could land and work for a while. Closer to her parents? I asked. She shrugged. Her father did not like Harvey Colington Harvey. Her mother had been sending her long worried letters. Maybe she'll look around the towns where her parents live, she told me.

Merel had twice miscarried. "I've given up," she said, sulking into her lap. I assumed she referred to carrying a child. Then she added, "I put it into poems." I thought back to the few poems I had seen and realized I would have to read more to understand this. I didn't know anything about the poems.

The event indoors had disassembled, and people were leaving the building in pairs and small groups. Harvey was among the late ones to amble out. He didn't look our way but instead leaned into conversation among young women. To redirect Merel's attention I pointed there. "Yes," she said. "They follow his scent." Watching them go along a campus walkway, Merel said, "I won't see him for a while." Then, "Where can we go?"

From the well of my mind I drew the vision of the ardent undergraduate Merel that night years ago leading me by the hand up to her nest. The same yearning overcame me. I was within her vortex again. I raised my hands to comfort her shoulders in their soft cashmere giving off a smoky perfume. But I held back and instead framed her visage with my palms. I saw a different character altogether from the one who beckoned me that night in college. This was Merel forlorn and unsteady, not someone familiar, but instead a dream lover sad, lonely and scared.

The college had placed Merel and Harvey in a guest house near the campus. Can we walk there? Yes. She cloaked herself in the raincoat and its lining. Along the way I resisted the urge again to hold her hand and give her some affection. She listed toward me then awkwardly away. Did she even realize that I was there? She stopped short and gazed around unsure of where to go.

It was a white clapboard cottage of some historic significance on a side street. We both looked at it from the walkway out front. A corner porch with rocking chairs over the years may have presented a tableau of guests in pleasant weather watching people strolling to and from the campus. But on this late afternoon, chilled air and a heavy gray sky boded rain. I myself felt a chill. Merel finally said, "You can't come in."

"Is he in there?" I wondered.

"No," she muttered. "You just can't come in."

That was it.

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During the next week or so I read her novel, *The Vales*, and its laudatory reviews. ("Classic literature fully rendered for intelligent contemporary readers" ... "sweet, strong, honest.") Critics hopefully anticipated Merel's next novel.

I tried picturing her at receptions, book signings and interviews. The Internet carried a photo from a couple years before showing her grinning among adoring young women, the center of attention. In photos of her and Harvey together he was the center of attention, including hers as she looked up at him. None of them showed her in the dark mood she carried that November afternoon at the college. By then Harvey Colington Harvey had attracted far more publicity than Merel had. He commanded star celebrity, probably because of his growing association with popular movies. Scant online information spoke of their life in the U.K., none of it hinting of anything amiss, a publicity photo of them hand-in-hand somewhere in the English countryside.

Finding Merel's poems online was not so easy, just the few I already had read. You had to buy the book, titled *Slowly*. She died before I got around to buying it.

Her death made news, too, of course, even though I learned later that Harvey tried to keep it quiet for a while. I'm still not sure how the news first came out. Nobody announced publicly that she'd died. But such things have a way of spreading these days—more than one way of spreading, and most of them crooked and cruel. I myself didn't have a way of learning what actually had happened. I didn't know anyone close to Merel well enough to ask or to be told. The story accepted among local news and the literary world, including her college, attributes her death to a car accident on a local

highway. She drove into an oncoming truck. “Wrong side of the road,” I read somewhere. Harvey wasn’t involved in the accident apparently. They had been living in the town where her mother lived, where her mother still lives. It is the town she traveled to the day she kissed me goodbye at the train station. A stone in the cemetery there bears her name. I have not gone to see it, but from what I’ve heard it’s becoming a destination for certain devotees of her poetry. They study “Slowly” and a more recent collection published posthumously, and they believe that Merel wrote blunt, resonant poems of loveless struggle and misery. I suspect that I am not alone wondering how I might have brought some joy into her life when she could have benefitted from it. What could I have done?

We can see the poems—and *The Vales* and parts of the newer novel that she abandoned, along with magazine pieces and anthologies containing her writing—in an elegant reading room of her college library. A quiet alcove there named in her memory smells of wood and paper and feels like cashmere.

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