

The Fabulist

By "Tomas Pierrot"

*"I went to bed full of whiskey and frustration and dreamed about a man in a bloody Chinese coat who chased a naked girl with long jade earrings while I ran after them and tried to take a photograph with an empty camera."*

Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

*"One of the mixed blessings of being twenty and twenty-one and even twenty-three is the conviction that nothing like this, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, has ever happened to anyone before."*

Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That"

[Prelude]

She was, in the end, a maker of tales. She told them, of course — dense, enigmatic, intricate stories. Eventually, I would be able to guess when she was getting ready to spin one: the way she changed her grip on her cigarette; how her eyes shifted all the way to the left while her chin turned in the other direction; she would hold this pose, just for an instant, for as long as it took her to decide how to begin. But to me — though I didn't appreciate this at the time, or at least not before I began to learn some of her tells — the most amazing part wasn't the telling, but the making. The words, spoken in her clear, concise voice, emerging in an easy unbreakable flow, as if she was reading them from a book. At first I would think she had already memorized them; later — much later — I understood it was all instantly, simultaneously, arranging and linking itself in her head, in the moment. It was the way her tongue occasionally tripped at the end of a complex sentence, full of subordinate clauses and parentheticals and prepositional phrases. How she paused, just for a moment, sometimes repeating the last word, or just its last syllable, as if to confirm it was the right one, the one she most wanted. Then she would continue.

Her name was Danielle but Danielle was not her name. I met her back near the end of the last century, not long after I moved to New York, and if parts of this seem unbelievable now, it's partly because things were just different then. I had never been — and would never again be — with a woman who could appear, when she wanted or needed, so ... composed. This was something I knew, even then. Even though I was still so young then, I was old enough to know there wasn't a chance of encountering anyone else who would possess and confound me like she did. It was why I tried to memorize her like I did. It is why I am writing this now. We were

never really together, at least not in the sense that the word is usually understood, but it was only later that I tried to understand it, and only later than that through writing about it, only to abandon this, at various points. Not because I had said all I wanted to say, mostly because she had been gone long enough for another woman to appear, partially obscuring the hole left behind. Then another. And so on. Except the scab of it turns to scar if you pick at it long enough — if only I had pushed her to explain herself, listened to what she was really trying to say. But it's too late for that, now. This is the only thing left. I carry her, still, in my eyes. And then, Danielle never really bothered to explain herself, or if she did it was one more thing I never heard, or have forgotten. She and I were never together but she has also never left me, and so over the years, at unexpected moments, I would find her orbiting back into view, clear enough to get me to spend an odd hour, a couple of days, scribbling out more terrible, inadequate words. Whatever I once wrote in no way resembles the real woman I once knew, however briefly. Time passing is part of it, but even back in the day, back when I was much closer to it, was actually living it, even then, I never quite got it right. I'm not going to get it right now. But I am going to try again.

Caveat lector: the things Danielle says here are (often) not what she actually said, and the things we do are (sometimes) not really what happened. All of it is still true, as true as everything else she once told me.

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The only way to really understand this is to cast your mind back to how it was in those days (and if you weren't around for those days I guess you'll just have to take my word for it). Then, you still had to stop strangers on the sidewalk to ask for directions. For years, long after I got to know New York as well as I would ever know anything, I still kept in my wallet a tiny folded-up subway map, each station marked, what line it connected to. The world, in other words, was still in essence unknowable, and yet, curiously, paradoxically, seemed in certain essential ways to be known, or at least defined within understandable boundaries. My parents didn't have cable and the nightly news, growing up, came in three flavors — Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Dan Rather. Casey Kasem counted down the weekly Top 40; Dick Clark counted down each New Year's Eve; Time Magazine still called it "Man of The Year," and in those days a lot of people still cared what Time Magazine said. You could still smoke in bars and restaurants, even in certain people's apartments; it was something so commonplace I only noticed the change — the way my clothes no longer smelled the next morning — after it was finally banned. No one will ever again know the quick mental calculations required to get change for a twenty, factoring 10% tip, for a cabbie, Chinese takeout. No one will ever again take a photograph and not immediately know what it looks like. The word "selfie" didn't exist, and not just because there weren't any cell phones. It was, I think, because none of us had this assumption that our every last thought needed to be shared with the rest of the planet, or that all of humanity's hatred and beauty and pointless mundanities, from the beginning of time to this very instant, now, could be instantly consulted, consumed — where to get the best Afghan food in Manhattan; how many fingers Django Reinhardt lost, and on which hand; if you can still catch a train from New York to LA, and if so how long it would take, and whether you have to catch different trains; the name of Anna's illegitimate daughter, and who adopted her after her mother

finally decided she had her fill of it. Then, you couldn't summon the world on a screen; you had to go out and find it.

The history of how I found my first apartment is not at all interesting, but it's illustrative (I think) in that so many of the particulars — newspapers and telephones and hotel rooms you could get by the week or the month — were even then, at their own point of vanishing. In those days, before Zillow, you either found your apartment via flyers taped to the windows of real estate offices, or from the listings printed at the back of the downtown weeklies, like the Village Voice or the NY Press (other papers had real estate sections too, but I instinctively knew where I needed to be). I stuck with the weeklies, mostly because I had no way of knowing where the real estate offices even were, unless I wanted to consult the Yellow Pages. Because you still had to pay by the word, the listings were filled with what to me were indecipherable acronyms: BR, EIK, W/D, HT & HW. Not knowing any better, I rolled into Port Authority that summer the week before I started my new job. I got the cheapest room I could find in this SRO called the Longacre Hotel, just around the corner from Times Square, which in those days had already lost much of its old peepshow "Taxi Driver" seediness but had not yet transformed into the kind of place where tourists felt safe. I spent as little time as I could in that room. With my pants' pockets weighted down with handfuls of quarters, to be fed into public payphones, I called agents, or landlords, or supers, and then wandered, mostly on foot, from one side of the island to the other. As incomprehensible as all this may sound, none of it felt strange to me at the time; it was just how things were done. My pathetic starting salary was what I had been told to expect in a "creative" industry; even so, since I'd graduated with no student loans, I set myself a budget of \$500 a month. Almost immediately I abandoned that hope. So after touring various shitholes (one still a literal crime scene, with yellow police tape crisscrossing the door), and as

the end of the week was approaching, I held my nose and signed the lease for a tiny 1BR along the furthest fringe of the East Village, as far south as you could go before crossing over into the Lower East Side, and the furthest point east before hitting the projects. I didn't know any better. I didn't know anyone in New York (and if I had known anything about the city then I might have considered other parts of it, like Brooklyn). The rent was more than I wanted to spend, but manageable as long as I didn't want to do anything else. And I was in luck, said the agent, because the place was "rent-stabilized" — another term that meant nothing to me. Even though I was able to put down the deposit (in cash, in hundreds), my parents still had to cosign as guarantors, though I made sure to never actually ask them for money. As far as I can recall, it was the last thing they ever did for me.

The building was a six-story tenement with ornate metal fire escapes and much less ornate security bars on the windows. My unit was on the ground floor at the back, away from the street. It was roughly half the size of what it had originally been (my neighbor — never seen, only heard through the thin adjoining wall running the length of the apartment — had the other half.) Every room was smaller than it had any right to be and yet just large enough to contain what it was supposed to: a kitchen with a small yellowing fridge from the 70s and a smaller 4-burner stove; a living room that was the exact width of a standard three seater couch; and a bedroom, which, oddly, was the biggest space, big enough for a secondhand queen bed, and a desk with a chair left by the previous occupant. For most of the day, regardless of the weather, time of year, the bedroom got only muted indirect light. When I sat on the toilet, my knees bumped against the back of the bathroom door. There was no W/D. There were cockroaches, which I eventually got used to, and mice, which I did not. The landlord had padlocked the fire door to the roof since junkies kept going there to shoot up.

To some, all this might have been terrifying. To some, including me, even \$500 was real money, back then. Today I'm sure plenty of people would kill for a rent-stabilized one-bedroom in "Alphabet City." But like I said, things were different, and I didn't know any better. It didn't take me long to wise up. The neighborhood old timers used to say — and an old timer, to me, was anyone who had been around for the Tompkins Square Riots — that Avenues A, B, C, and D stood for Adventurous, Brave, Crazy, and Dead. There were still a few squats down there — abandoned tenements that, from the outside, didn't look all that different from the building I lived in — occupied by homeless street kids. Certain evenings I would see them with their dogs in a local dive bar, drinking black Guinness. I don't know if they really liked Guinness, but Mona's had two-dollar pints of it on Thursday nights.

From the old Ukrainian ladies in the Key Food on Avenue A, I learned the trick to opening up produce bags: moisten the pads of your thumb and forefinger and then rub them together against the thin cellophane. To this day, I cannot sit down to a meal at a table — any table, even my own — without hunching over it and tucking my legs and crossing my ankles under my chair.

I had no way of knowing it, but I had arrived in New York during the last days before everything changed, and not just for New York. But New York was undergoing its own concomitant transformation. The East Village in the 90s was not like Paris in the 20s, or San Francisco in the 60s, or anything so grandiose. If it's noteworthy now it's only because it came at the tail end of the last time when (parts) of New York were dangerous and affordable, when whole portions of the city still felt completely lawless. Right around the corner was this liquor store I went into very occasionally (I didn't drink liquor, then, so would only stop in to grab a bottle for some event). But I still remember the setup: a room lined with dusty bottles, all of it

behind thick floor-to-ceiling bulletproof glass; the cashier stood back there with the booze and — after you paid — pushed your bottle through this revolving contraption, like the old drive-up deposit drawers banks used to have. "Get home safe" we would always say to each other, leaving a bar or a party at the end of the night, since in those days there was no guarantee you wouldn't run into something late at night, in the subway, on certain streets.

This is not a story about New York, but it is a New York story, at least in the sense that it could only have happened in this place, at that time. Or at least that's what I told myself, then. Even all the way back in Joan Didion's day — decades before my own — people would say things like, this city, it's only for the very rich or the very poor. But this is wrong. The truth, she once wrote, is that New York is really for the very young.

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She had Pre-Raphaelite hair. Strong violinist fingers, long, tapering, dexterous. Only later did I understand that most of my perverse compulsions around women — their bodies and how I regarded them — came directly from her, this complex puzzle I never managed to solve, no matter how I manipulated the pieces, studied them. Her mother, she told me once, was a music teacher, while her father, another poet, had killed himself when she was a child (later I would sometimes wonder how this linked — if it did — in her mind, in her heart.) In her twenties, her grandmother (also dead) joined the wave of shanty Irish who had washed up in Australia, by steam ship, at the start of the previous century. She had been, her granddaughter

claimed, the most beautiful woman in County Clare. It was from her, I inferred, that Danielle had inherited her hair, and her looks, and some deeper, more essential, core of her character.

There is no way I can describe her now without sounding ridiculous, without resorting to cliches. Like me, Danielle hated cliches, not because they weren't true, but because other people used them. Words contaminated through repetition. Just like me, she chose her words carefully even if the meaning, the reasons behind them, remained frustratingly opaque. If I had a photograph of her I would just print it here and be done with it. If she ever described herself, in one of her stories, I've forgotten it now. But she was probably the only one who could have gotten it right. Shall I try? I would have to start with her hair, the first thing I sensed about her: a bonfire, the flames leaping and changing depending on what feeds them, how intensely they burn. From a distance, this made her look like a valkyrie — an adolescent imagining from a paperback cover painted by a guy who has never been with a flesh and blood woman. It was only when you got closer that you found yourself wondering how she could possibly be that fierce. How I would learn. I might have said "athletic" but she was not really muscular, then I might have said "willowy" except she was much stronger than that. You just didn't see it, at first glance. Her face was almost unspeakably beautiful, and even after I got to know every inch of her as much as I ever would, I still caught myself, in certain moments, almost circumspect, facing her. I had no words for it. The one that popped into my head, that night, was "ethereal." But like everything else, it was the wrong word. Nothing about her felt that insubstantial. She was too painfully real, even while being the kind of woman I had already been dreaming about. I met her at the exact point in my life when I just so happened to be ready to meet her. Of that night I would later write: "*this is the most beautiful woman he has ever known,*" and this was actually true, would continue being true, at least about her beauty if not the knowing. I knew

her better than anyone else ever had, it sometimes felt. But I never really knew her. So how to describe how perfectly her elbows seemed to fit within her hips' hollows when her arms hung at her sides? The best I can do, now, is a relative complement, everything she was not. She was not short but she was not taller than me. Sculpted without being chiseled, slim without being slight, and not anywhere soft, not even her stomach. Her hands only seemed strong when she had something in them. Her accent came and went, a barometer of winds recollected. Even her eyes were not one or the other but an indeterminate mixture — green or hazel or somewhere between depending on the quality of the light, on whatever she was assessing.

Maybe I shouldn't try.

She once took a photo of me. She even let me see it, once. Whether or not she took it with her I don't know, only that I never had it.

We fit together so well, almost in spite of ourselves. The creature we made was some seamless amalgamation of each of our best and worst parts, severe and portentous, and probably pretentious too, the kind of thing I would have rolled my eyes at if I wasn't a part of it, if it didn't so exactly match my own particular stridency. I have never been at ease enough in the world to behave in ways other people find normal. I can't tell jokes, or make small talk, or seem to bring myself to speak, or write, about anything without it coming out like an oration. For my own reasons, I only acknowledge other people after they have acknowledged me. And if this bothered me, growing up, by the time I got to New York, two months after graduating college, I had already decided that this was the world's problem, not mine. They could take it or leave it, but to me it didn't much matter anymore. The way I was marked me as something more, I felt. I had too much of everything but no way to express it, or maybe no one around me who had the

patience to listen (and to be fair, in those days it was all twisted up, convoluted, overwrought, full of real sentiment but with words borrowed from others, that I didn't yet know how to shape). This caused endless problems except I was — still am — too pig-headed to try to pretend I'm anything other than whatever it is that I am. I am still twisted up, convoluted, overwrought — the difference now is I know it. Knowing this, I won't pretend that I've managed to capture it here, elsewhere. And yet, each intentional word I put down is as real to me as each thought and sensation and dream. For whatever reason — and to be honest, I'm no longer interested in reasons — I can only tell it this way.

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Sometimes you find yourself with a woman, wondering: what is it about her, exactly, that has brought you here, to this moment? With Danielle, I never had to ask myself this question. Or rather, of all the questions I never asked — her or myself — this one, on the surface, remained blindingly obvious. Like me, she had too much of everything; the difference is that this completed her, or at least rounded her out, while for me it felt like nothing about myself ever quite fit. Maybe I just needed to be dismantled before I could be put back together. She knew exactly who I was before I did; I may not have been or seen that man yet but this was just another part of her vigilance. There were moments towards the end when I felt the same about her only later to wonder how I could have missed all the signs that might have spelled it out if I had been paying the right kind of attention. And yet, the truth — if I can speak of such things with a straight face — is that, even if it resisted naming, it was still as real as anything I've ever

known. This was why I never thought about writing it, then. I was not always sure, when she spoke, what she was saying, which may be another way of wondering how much she was able to keep all her stories straight, or if speaking them into shape was a way to convince herself it was real. At its best, it felt like I had always been a part of her, except when it felt like that piece — the same part — was what she was trying to drive out only she wasn't sure if she could, or even wanted to. In between these another thought, which may be the same thought, nagging, persistent: that maybe what she really needed from me is like what a performer needs from an audience. Does it matter who it is, if he even understands, as long as he's listening? As long as he's present, to occupy certain moments? In a way, this only made me want her more. It confirmed, in my mind, that she had, on the surface, somewhere within her, more than enough to help fill whatever I was missing. It's strange to be writing this because if you were to ask me who is filled and who does the filling when men and women come together I would say the usual things. In those days, just seeing myself getting swallowed up, filling someone else up, gave me such a riveting sense of satisfaction, of completion. Gripping my cock at its base to more accurately measure how much she could get in her mouth. Tilting my head down the length of her body, riveted, watching myself going in and out, in and out. All this — much more than this — I did with her, but what marked the measure of our enclosure — we'll skip the crude melodrama for now; there will be more than enough of that later — wasn't the typical, obvious feeling but the force, the relentlessness, always another shadow, another way, another turn. If you bury your head in the sand the whole world feels unfathomable, and this is what it was like. I only wanted the hole not the world. I only wanted to find my way into wherever she was even as I wondered if I might not ever penetrate it, even when I should have been completely within her. This osmosis, dark but indelible; our eyes so close together — neither one of us ever

stopped looking — they had blurred into a new face; our mouths so full of each other because it still wasn't enough. The sunken seeping sensation — deep in her throat, in her cunt, in her asshole (I'm not sure if it matters, but Danielle was the first woman I ever fucked in the ass, who ever ate my own ass) — which made it seem, in these moments, like my cock was some kind of syringe, that even as I was plunging down I was also drawing back out her viscous secretions, some part of her essence, spewing and swallowing, all of it coming out, flooding back into me through the same hole. If I could, in those moments, I might have actually eaten her — I don't mean her pussy, I mean consuming her, bodily, until there was nothing left, until she was inside me forever.

Is this where the darkness begins? Was it with her, with Danielle, or did that only come later? Did I snatch it from her? And if so, where did she get it?

Or was it something else she sucked out of me? And if so, what replaced it?

And yes, this is the sort of story this is going to be. One interesting part about growing older is that while most of the other details are gone — bridges of songs, dinner menus, crowded pages from notebooks and books, movie plots and other performances, long walks by the water, all the rest of the usual shit we use to fill the rest of the time — what remains, at least for me, is the sex. These are the pictures I still have in my head after everything else has faded away. Why should that be? I wonder. But then, I don't really wonder, at least not anymore. It's just something else I know, now. Whatever else that once surrounded it needs to be conjured up, but the sex is still these, pulsing at the center, bright and rich and vibrantly alive. I can even go further. Back then, while I was in college, when I first moved to New York, for almost the whole of the ten years I lived there, I spent unbelievable amounts of time and energy reading

stuff other people had written, writing stuff that always ended up sounding like somebody else, all of it useless and wrong, and yet still I kept at it, for years, like some half-assed Flaubert, futilely agonizing over finding *le mot juste*, spending hours, spending days, trying to give the exact impression of, say, the color of her hair, the sinuous, ceaselessly uplifting, downfalling undertow of her body when she was on top of me. How I labored. But now I don't read real books anymore, and yet when I write about this — and only this, all this fucking — how it all comes flowing out. I wrote my first book of stories without even knowing I was writing it, in what felt like a white raging unstoppable torrent, hardly bothering to reread one before I was on to the next. It was like a fever I kept expecting to break, and when it didn't I kept going on. How it came, so easily, so fluently — I'm not going to say it's any good, just that, maybe, after all this time, I've finally found my true calling, the pornographic chronicler of my own twisted life, something I've always lived with but could never admit to, on the page, even to myself. I didn't know any of this, back then. Back then I was still too close to it, and the unspeakable things that we did, along with my own anxious influences and thwarted ideas about what I thought I should say and how I should say it, made all my stories about her a muddle. I was too embarrassed, then, to speak about the parts that I now know to be literally integral. Whatever else she once was, I don't think Danielle was ever embarrassed to say exactly what she wanted to say. I am nothing like her anymore — and part of what first brought us together was that we were too much alike — but I am also no longer like myself, anymore. I am no longer embarrassed.

How Danielle looked — how she looked — became the model I set all others against, even the few who had come before (and fragments of her appear — sometimes deeply hidden, sometimes right there on the surface, if you know how to find them — in just about every other

woman I've ever written about). As for the rest of her ... well, that's mostly why I've decided to try this again. Even all these years later I can still precisely recall so much of what we did to each other, but who she was, what she said, what she meant when she said it, what she thought when she did what she did to me, what she did when she wasn't with me, when she was alone, or with others, what she really needed or wanted or felt she needed to do in order to get what she wanted, all this I know I still don't understand and won't ever understand, but also know that the only way to even begin to approach it, this half understanding, is to write it all down, like a transcription of another one of the tales.

[Act I]

If I wanted, I could (almost) pinpoint the date: the weekend that year before Valentine's Day (this is actually true; so much of what follows has been recast, or reimagined, simplified to make it comprehensible, at least to me; but this is actually true.) A party thrown by a guy I had never met before and — with one notable exception — would never see again. Later, this came to feel almost normal, for me, showing up at a place where I had only the most tenuous connection. A friend of a friend. But at this time, I was still learning to navigate. If I had ever stepped foot in Brooklyn, before this night, I don't remember it now. The F line wasn't one I knew yet. Consulting my folded-up map, I was pleasantly surprised to find a station not that far from my apartment.

Sometime between when I got on at Delancey and got off it had started snowing again — it had been snowing for days, and out here, in Brooklyn, it was still piled up at the ends of the sidewalks. It was much quieter than what I was becoming used to, and it wasn't just from the snow; the further I walked from the subway the more deserted the streets got. It didn't help that I had no idea where I was going. Mike's instructions had been: exit at Carroll Street, hang a left past the auto-body shop, and head towards the water — though what water I was supposed to be heading towards he hadn't made clear. Turning the corner, I stepped into a stiff wind blowing stinging particles of ice through the air. Stupidly, I had set out without hat or gloves, not expecting to need them, so I hunched into my overcoat, the bottle of wine in one exposed hand, the address on a piece of paper clenched in my pocket. There seemed to be no real apartment buildings — or at least not like the ones in my neighborhood — but the buildings weren't houses

either. Smack against one another, they ran the entire length of the block, the even line of their combined roofs lower than the tops of the bare trees shifting about. Behind black wrought-iron fences a grid of tiny front yards. A few even with little snowmen.

Eventually I found it, a handsome two-story building. Mike hadn't told me which apartment either, but all the windows up top were ablaze while the bottom half was completely dark (later, I would learn that a lot of these brownstones had a third basement unit; but I didn't know these things, then.) My hands were so cold I pressed all the intercom buttons, expecting to announce myself, but almost immediately the front door buzzed open. As I climbed the wide elaborate wooden staircase, stamping snow off my shoes, I could see on the upper landing a single large door. Taped to it, a red cartoon plastic heart with a plastic arrow struck through it. Then the door opened and a man, older than me, emerged.

"Hi there," he asked, slightly puzzled, trying to place me.

"Hey," I responded, not helping him, "is this where the party's at?"

I stepped inside, glancing about, not recognizing anyone. Behind me, the other man closed the door. "Here, let me get that for you," I heard him say, his hands already on the shoulders of my coat.

"I brought wine," I told him.

He eyed it impassively. "How thoughtful, very kind." His dark hair was carefully brilliantined, in a way I guessed was supposed to be artful but seemed fatuous for his age. I guessed he was older than I had first thought — maybe even early thirties — and aside from the hair looked almost avuncular. His warm careworn eyes were still regarding the bottle. Then:

"Why don't you leave it in the kitchen," as he made an expansive wave across the apartment's inordinately large living room. I had just taken a step in that general direction when I saw Mike emerge from the crowd.

"Hey you found it," he said, giving my arm a squeeze.

"Ismay," he called, swinging me around by the same arm and bringing me back to the guy who had opened the door, "this is my colleague from Copse."

"Oh right." The other man brightened. "Mike's told me all about you."

I shot Mike a quizzical look but he was already laughing. "You can't say stuff like that around him, he takes everything literally!"

"Sorry," Ismay said cheerfully, extending his hand. "Mike's never mentioned your name. In fact, he *neglected*" — here he gave the man in question a lighthearted nudge — "to mention he was bringing a guest. But welcome. Glad you could make it."

"Thanks. Thanks for having me."

"So," he continued, "how do you like Copse?"

"It's fine."

"Oh he's a prodigy," Mike interjected. "He's voracious. The very first day he was there, just to fuck with him, I showed him the slush pile and was like, I need all this read by next week. Two days later he comes back with the whole stack marked up!"

Both men started laughing. I shrugged, smiling. "It was mostly fiction. Fiction's easy."

"I'm guessing you're more tragedian than comedian," Ismay said, looking me up and down.

"Neither." I glanced meaningfully at Mike. "I'm poetical ... or was supposed to be."

"Jesus Christ," the other man sputtered. His voice turned mock-oratorical: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day ..."

"Thou art more lovely and more temperate," I finished.

"I told you," said Mike. "A real prodigy."

"And what do you do?" I asked Ismay, if only to change the subject.

Now it was his turn to look at Mike. "Oh," Mike said mysteriously, "we're working on something."

At this time Mike might have been my best friend in New York, and if he and I weren't really friends he was the closest I had to one, then. He was tall — even taller than me — but unlike me had this soft litheness, like an out of shape dancer. He had in fact been a child actor, and still looked preternaturally cherubic, his wry face encircled by short tufts of curly blond hair. Both of us worked at Copse Press, the tiny independent publisher (Mike's domain was the playwrights; just then he was overseeing a new translation of Ionesco, who had died not that long ago). Even though he was only a couple years older, to me at that time he felt substantially wiser, probably because he had been all over the city — and knew all sorts of people — since his college days at Tisch. He didn't take me under his wing, but I think he took pity on me. And then, aside from the publisher — this pipe-smoking fossil who had been there since the founding, almost fifty years earlier — Mike and I were the only other men in the office. I guess I should

have found the hothouse intellectual atmosphere compelling — that and all the earnest young women — but if the house hadn't yet fallen into ruin, to me it still felt severely dilapidated. Even more: I realized, almost immediately, that I had no interest in publishing, especially if it meant slogging through other people's shit. Whatever it was being created wasn't mine. It was a job I'd been lucky to get, that seemed to fit with my education, my own interests, but the actual quotidian reality of the place and the work felt very far removed from its avant-garde heyday, decades ago. In retrospect, I let all this bother me more than it should have. I had just arrived, and for the first time in my life was living on my own. I should have appreciated that, if nothing else, the job was a means to an end, even if that end often felt so precarious. But that's not how I looked at it then. I don't know if Mike knew this, but "fine" was how I described any situation that was, at best, barely tolerable. To me, at the time, it felt like my life, which in all sorts of ways had only just started, was irrevocably shaping itself into something that didn't make sense.

"C'mon," Mike was saying, noticing that I was still holding the wine, "let's get you a drink."

"Don't mind Ismay." In the kitchen, Mike set my bottle on the counter and began clanking around in the fridge. "He's a good guy. He can't write for shit. On the other hand, he's got a trust fund. So it all works out."

"What does?"

He handed me a beer. "The theater." And then topped off his wine glass, smirking. "The thee-a-tah. What's happened to the thee-a-tah?" He looked at me indulgently. "Ready to mingle?"

I should have known it was going to be like this, a theatrical party full of theatrical people. Back in the living room, Mike began bringing me around, making introductions. I immediately forgot the names (I've never been good with names; faces, on the other hand, I almost never forget). Maybe it was because the ratio of men to women was running at about 2-to-1. Or maybe because it was mostly performers, and others in that same motley: a costume designer, a choreographer. I fell into chatting with Ismay, who it turned out was working on a play for a new troupe Mike was trying to get off the ground in his spare time. Ismay was still being mysterious about it, though he did let it slip that he already had the anagnorisis; the problem was he needed to fill out everything leading up to it. He also seemed quite pleased with himself for knowing that word, even though he had mispronounced it. Then, with no apparent segue, he launched into all the hassles around sub-leasing commercial real estate, which I eventually understood was related to a vacant storefront in Chelsea they had identified for rehearsals, and eventually performances. He was more obviously interested in these intricacies than whatever he was supposedly writing, and I wasn't really interested in either, but was just grateful to have someone to talk with. The way every hair on his head stayed in place was extraordinary. I was almost tempted to ask him; I never liked how mine looked so would avoid looking in a mirror if I could help it.

An hour passed, more people arrived. By now, Ismay had returned to his host duties. For a while I hovered around Mike, but he and a man and a woman — clearly a couple even though they looked like they might have been twins — were all deep in a debate about playbill printing, of all things. I decided that at the very least I could get drunk. I even considered the stocked bar set up in the corner to see if I could get there quicker. Instead, I went back to the

kitchen for another beer. Returning, I paused at the far end of the living room, my eyes darting around, trying to figure out the next place to insert myself. It was then that I noticed her.

This first moment has always defeated me. Every time I've tried to tell this part of the story, I've spent way too much time laboring through it, word by word, none of them even coming close to capturing this moment. I nearly did it again here. But then — and only after I finally managed to get to the very end of this — did I recognize why I needed to go back and blacken it out. This ... conflagration on the other side of the room. Not seen, at first, so much as sensed. Standing next to another girl who was talking to Mike.

Maybe you think "blacken" isn't the right word either, but I have my reasons.

And I guess I need some additional context here. To me, one of my most shocking discoveries about New York was that it was full of women like this. Women I might have seen reproduced — if you will — on a screen, in a magazine or a poster, but never before in the flesh (Mike had a word for this, these people who seemed more physically unreal than the rest of us; "talent," he called them.) Before moving here, I had never spent any sort of time in any sort of city, let alone a place like New York. And so to see them, be surrounded by them — on crowded subways, in the parks and the bookstores, up and down the long avenues — all around me, was a source of constant wonderment, constant forlornness. Wonder that creatures like this should walk the earth, forlorn since it felt impossible, then, for me to approach them. Knowing no one, here, I was learning, was staggering; catching glimpses of them, out in the wild, was like being caught in a sudden cloudburst without an umbrella, and without any chance of ever getting one. Not so much unprepared as ill-equipped, moments that felt completely unmanageable. Even all these years later, I still have this seemingly unlosable memory from what must have

been my first month in New York. It was rush hour, on the subway, possibly the Friday morning before Labor Day weekend. At Union Station crowds surged into the car, so many that everyone was wedged into place, shoulder to shoulder. Seated, I didn't notice at first — already I had started to develop that quintessential thousand-yard stare — but then, directly in front of me, materialized this blonde girl in a sleeveless sky-blue summer dress. On the floor between her feet was a woven beach basket. One of her hands was raised, easily gripping the metal subway strap, while her other held a copy of the New York Times, folded lengthwise along the typeset columns. I had started absently reading the other side of it when I took a second pass over her dress. It may have just been the way the light, but the thin fabric had turned almost diaphanous, revealing the smooth curve of her bare hip, her string bikini bottom, every strand, every ... indentation. Stared at this. If I could get her to turn around by staring hard enough, there would be, I knew, another gossamer strand delicately threading, like floss. But she did not turn around. Back and forth went her eyes as she read, an even typewriter motion, her shiny lips parted, lost in concentration. My bent knees were as close to hers as they could be without touching. How the hairs bristled along her bare arms in the air conditioning, her nipples' protrusions — or was I only imagining it? — poking against the sky-blue cloth. How she let herself rock and sway along to the train's movements, easily. Sitting there, practically feeling the way she was displacing the air around her, absorbing the presence of her incredibly alive, impossibly real, practically naked body breathing, outlined — right there in front of me — I still could not imagine any scenario that would allow me to cross what still felt like an unbridgeable chasm, even more agitating because it was so tantalizingly close. My hands, I discovered, had begun clenching both my knees, as if they knew they needed to grab hold of something. Unable — incapable — of doing anything else, I settled back into staring, fixated on her cunt, trying

with my eyes to peel the little she had on completely away. A few stops later she folded up her newspaper, tucked it into her basket, and got off the train.

Some version of this flashed through my head as I continued to stand there, on the far side of the large living room, staring at this new pair. One of them — dark-haired — was animatedly laughing, the flash of her teeth, her hand on Mike's arm; the other standing next to them in profile, in variations of red. Unable to stop watching, my mind racing to assign some meaning to this, I suddenly realized what it was: that for the first time since I had come to New York — for the very first time in my entire life, maybe — I might actually be in a place where I could bridge that impossible distance. There were probably no more than a couple dozen people here. They seemed to know Mike, or at least the other girl clearly knew him. And Mike was my friend. So what could be easier?

But here was the other part of the problem. In those days, I had almost no normal human facility to carry on, let alone start, any sort of normal conversation. I wasn't intimidated by women, exactly, or at least I had all sorts of motivations for wanting to talk to them (ok, maybe just one motivation.) And it's not like I couldn't speak coherently; one of the reasons I had started idly considering going back to school, maybe even becoming a professor, was because I could stand up for hours, declaiming extemporaneously, about William Blake (for example). But no one gave a shit about William Blake. But then I didn't give a shit about almost anything else. It was another way I knew I was different from most people. Somehow I had missed that chapter on recognized phrases from conventional hey-hows-it-going chitchat: what's your mom up to, oh this crazy weather, so much snow, I wouldn't know about that, I don't have a dog, or a cat either, no not any pets, I'm not sure, I haven't heard that Jay-Z album, I don't even know who that is, sorry I didn't see Jerry Maguire, why the hell would I read "Angela's

Ashes," though this whole conversation is making me need another drink? It was all beyond my understanding and interest. A void so absolute I couldn't even pretend to cover it up. A language I just couldn't speak. It was like there was a part of the brain, some mysterious muscle, which everyone else had but in me had never developed, probably because growing up, mostly alone, with huge tracks of unbroken silence, I simply hadn't worked it enough. Moving to New York forced me to work it, gradually. But the way I just walked up to Romy, a few years later, still felt beyond me at this time. Every morning, standing in line for my coffee and bagel, I still had to rehearse what I was going to say to the counterwoman, even though I ordered the same thing every day.

Now my eyes were darting back and forth between them — red, black, black, red — while Mike had on an uncertain snickering look, as if the girl with her hand on his arm was in the middle of telling a dirty joke only he might not be sure if she was joking. Now I was trying to figure out how one could have made this instant impression while the other barely registered. From where I was standing, the two girls appeared to be roughly the same size, the same shape. How to explain how the smallest line, the most infinitesimal detail, can perfect or disfigure? To some, maybe most, of the other (heterosexual) men here, the other one was probably the hottest girl at the party. But because of that — and this was probably just another of my perversities — but because she was so conventionally gorgeous, because she knew this and knew everyone else did as well, it left me not cold, but ambivalent. Almost like a cliché. Now, as she shrugged off her jacket and shook out her opulent raven hair, I found myself almost clinically studying her — almost: the way her ass had been packed into acid wash jeans, her set of tits straining against a very tight and suspiciously clean punk rock T-shirt, the kind tourists bought over on St. Marks, its ironed hem a strategic half-inch from her waist. No, I heard myself muttering, actually out

loud. It's incomparable. She was the kind of woman Mike meant when he talked about "talent." A showhorse who has engineered herself for only one thing. Her redheaded friend, on the other hand, was a different creature altogether. Something .... ethereal. As I kept turning this over — by now, Ismay had made his way over to them, his arm draped across Mike's shoulders — she just stood there, in profile, listening to the other three with what looked like a little ironic smile on her lips. Then, shifting positions, she put her back to me, and as she turned her hair shifted, shocks of dark copper on top but adding lighter hues as it fell, not in curls so much as in waves, almost tresses, flickering down into the small of her back.

I seemed to be possessed with a decisive indecision, which had crept up through my chest but then halted when it got to my throat. Knowing what I had to do, rehearsing opening moves, but without being able to come to any conclusion on how to get started. Meanwhile, the words were still stuck there; I could feel them. Distractedly, one of my hands was fussing with my hair, and as soon as I caught this, I noticed that, somehow, I had already finished my beer which I could have sworn I had just opened. How long had I been standing here, staring? Let me do this, I bargained with myself, muttering again, let me get a fresh drink and then I'll be ready.

So there I was with my head in the fridge, rummaging about, when I heard a voice — a girl's voice — sneak up behind me.

"Do you have anything in there for me?"

Maybe the oddest part of this story is that before I even turned around I already knew who it was.

"Oh hey."

"Hey."

"How's it going."

"Good. Better once I get a drink."

"There's some bottles of wine in here. But I don't know if any of them are ..." I turned away, as if searching for a corkscrew.

"I'll take a cold one."

Confused, I took a step back and swung the door of the fridge all the way open, letting her see the packed shelves. "I think they're all pretty cold ... "

A low smile crept into her lips. Her indeterminate eyes, assessing. It was all I could do not to turn away from her again.

"A beer would be lovely."

"Any preference?"

"Surprise me."

And now that she was standing a few feet away from me, addressing me, I was having trouble believing she was real. From the other side of the room, with that fairytale hair, it had almost been like watching a projection, something to look at but not interact with. Her long velvet skirt looked improbably soft, the kind of crushed fabric that would flip colors if you ran your hand up it. Putting my head back in the fridge, I picked out another bottle, twisted the top off, and handed it to her.

"Cheers," she said. I was just about to reach out and clink beers when she took a long sip and then just stood there, musing, the bottle's lip at rest against the corner of her mouth.

"What do you think of the bash," she asked finally.

"It's fine, I guess. It's not really my scene."

"No?"

"My friend Mike invited me. But I don't really know anyone else, except him." I was still so distracted by the unexpected but undeniable fact that we were standing here, having this interaction, that it took me a moment longer to register her faint accent. Something I couldn't quite place.

And then: "cheers?" "bash?" What was that?

Meanwhile, she was saying, "Which one's Mike?"

"Your friend was talking to him, when you guys came in."

"You mean Karen? I think they know each other from some theater thing."

"Yeah? That's how Mike knows this guy." I waved around the kitchen as if to conjure our host out of the air. "What kind of name is Ismay, anyway."

"He's French, I think." Her face shifted one way as her eyes followed my outstretched arm, considering. Then she extended her hand, "I'm Danielle, by the way."

"Good to meet you." Her nails looked shorter than mine. "He doesn't sound French," I continued, reminding myself to let go of her. "You on the other hand ..."

"I'm Australian."

Now it made sense. "Oh," I heard myself gushing, "Australia is beautiful."

"Yes it is." She paused for a beat. "You've been?"

"Well ... no."

"Then how do you know it's beautiful?"

For some reason, as soon as I heard her say "Australia" the first thing I thought of was Men At Work, and the only reason, I think, I said "beautiful" was because it was just about the only other thing I could think of, right then, and even though I was saying every first stupid thing that popped into my head, I was suddenly at a complete loss around what to say next. For a moment I stood there, wracking my brain for anything besides a Top 40 rock band. Then I found something. "I read 'Voss' when I was in school."

"Oh 'Voss,'" she said cryptically. But not dismissively. "Go on then, did it make you want to go?"

"What, to Australia?" Now I had to recall details. "Honestly, no. But the outback parts were my favorite," I lied. Maybe that's why I felt like I had to qualify this with some truth: "I went through this phase where I was really into stream-of-consciousness. So it was good to read something so ... primordial."

She had pulled out a cigarette; having lit it, she stood there, regarding me coolly.

"Primordial" wasn't the right word, either, but it was good enough. Or at least that's what I thought until she nodded and said, "thanks again for the drink," and then went back into the other room.

Another hour passed. Every time I caught sight of her — and her hair made it almost impossible for me to lose track — she seemed to be in a different corner, smoking. I found myself wishing I smoked, at first to give myself another excuse to go back to her, and then just to have something to do with my mouth. Instead, I was well on my way to getting good and liquored up. I was just coming back from the kitchen with another drink when I found her again. This time she was on the black leather couch that had been placed in almost the exact center of the large living room; next to her was some guy I hadn't noticed before, and now that I was noticing him I saw that he was another one of the "talent." Sandy hair negligently parted and falling about both sides of his face at a negligent length. Head prominently large, with a long, roughly Gallic, nose that looked like it had been broken and bendwise reset, but in a way that only seemed to accentuate his extraordinary handsomeness. From this distance, with the music and the rest of the overlapping talk, I couldn't hear a word he was saying, and so I was concentrating on gestures, expressions. He appeared almost unnaturally animated, and his motions — in particular, the way his hands danced through the air — were smooth and constant. For a moment I was so preoccupied watching this that it took me another moment to realize that he was talking at her. Something in the way she was sitting, head drawn back, body arched, regarding him with what, to me, looked like laughing incredulity.

Then the other man got up, turned back to her, said something. Danielle smiled up at him, saying something back. Her eyes followed him as he lumbered off, the expression melting away from her face; then, as he passed through the space between us, she caught my eye. Took another sip of her beer, watching me, and then gave a small shrug. Not suggestive, more inquisitive.

I saw her eyes tracking me as I made my way over.

"Have you come to save me?" she deadpanned, before I had even sat down.

"Why, do you need saving?"

She gave an ironical, theatrical sigh. "Actors."

"You look like you can take care of yourself. Or at least you look like you can take him."

"It's harder than it looks."

"No, I know."

"I don't think you do."

"Why? Because I'm not a woman?" I considered. "Ok, that's fair." Then I reconsidered. "You know, I never really had trouble talking to women until I moved to New York. But I can almost see that invisible force field going up. I totally get it. Except I don't know how to get started anymore, or telegraph that I'm not a complete weirdo. But then I'll just sit there and stare at them."

"Like a creepy weirdo."

"Exactly." What I had just said wasn't entirely true, or at least not in this particular moment. But then I realized, now that we were side by side and not face to face, that the words were coming a little easier, now that I wasn't so completely distracted by her preposterous beauty. "Maybe I should become a bird-watcher," I mused. "Do you think bird-watchers are really frustrated voyeurs?"

"Voyeurs have their own rich secret life. Don't sleep on us voyeurs."

"Really?" I was warmed up enough to shift a bit on the couch. Her eyes, in this light, seemed more green than hazel. Her flaming red hair. "I had no idea you were one of us."

"I reckon all artists have to be voyeurs. It's a kind of ... transubstantiation." For a moment her forehead creased, dissatisfied. Then: "Besides, I already knew that about you."

"What?"

"That you're a voyeur. You told me, in the kitchen."

"I did?"

"You said you saw Karen talking to your mate when we got here."

"That doesn't mean anything. It just means I noticed you guys talking with Mike."

"Yes, but *why* did you notice us? And don't say because we're stunners."

"But that's what we notice."

"What, voyeurs?"

"No, men." I figured I could try some light sarcasm. "You know, the good old male gaze."

She sank back into the couch's black leather, looking unimpressed. "So is that all it then?"

The idea of trying to explain why I couldn't help myself from noticing her seemed literally inexplicable. Sunk there, how the patterned swirls in her blouse had compressed, outlining her chest. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the actor lumbering back with two

beers in his hand — but no sooner had I seen him when I saw him recognize that someone else had taken his place. Without breaking stride, he valiantly sailed off into another part of the room. If Danielle noticed this she gave no sign, or at least her ironic expression, half-there but in place since the moment I sat down, never wavered. I figured I'd better toss the ball back to her.

"So ..." I announced, still not sure what was coming next. Then: "We've established that you're not an actor. But you are some kind of artist."

"Am I?"

"You just told me. You said all artists are voyeurs. You said 'us.' So what are you exactly?"

At that, her expression shifted subtly. "That's very good," she allowed, with what might have been a glimmer of appreciation. "I like how you did that."

"What's that?"

"That transition. You might have just said something obvious." As she straightened back up, her shock of hair billowed and unbunched. The coral silk paisley loosely uncompressing. "But are you sure you want to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Turn it in this direction. This way leads into the real."

"What can I say? My game is totally rusty. You've got to give me something to work with."

Danielle went quiet, and the quiet went on as her eyes shifted to another part of the room.

Then: "I'm a sculptor."

"Ok, that's good, I can work with that. What kind of sculptor?"

"One who sculpts."

Less than two months before this night, over Christmas and New Years, I was in Europe for the first time, in Prague (how I ended up in Prague is another story for another time, maybe, and not important right now). Vaclav Havel was still president then, and Prague was still cool, the Brooklyn of Europe, before Brooklyn was Brooklyn. At first I was terrified, being there, renting a room from an old couple I couldn't communicate with, their building hidden in the old town's illegible Expressionist maze. But soon I felt all these fears giving way to a kind of fearlessness, almost a licentiousness. If I wanted, I could be anyone, do anything. No one understood me when I opened my mouth so I could say whatever I wanted. I had no idea where I was going so I could go anywhere. One night, I was on the metro — coincidentally dressed almost exactly the same as I was for this party: black sweater, black jeans, long black winter overcoat — when this American study-abroad student got on with his American girlfriend. I only know this because they were sitting directly across from me, talking as if they were alone, or in the back of a taxi. It was the first time I had heard English in almost a week. The student was going on about the local political situation, the dissidents, the Communist dead-enders. At one point, noticing me, he began joking to his girlfriend that if people in Prague didn't behave then the scary secret police — like this big guy over there — would haul them away to the gulag. Hearing this, silently glowering, I was incredulous, offended. But then I realized: he really didn't know. As far as he knew I was someone else, a man who had no idea what he was saying.

Sitting here, on this couch next to this girl, I instantly felt exactly the same — not that I was someone I wasn't, but that I could be something more than I usually was. That I could speak to her in a way I normally never would.

And then: a part of me felt like she was still just humoring me, maybe even toying with me, or at least not yet committed to the game. I have never liked being toyed with. If my back was up, I would find myself saying things I knew went against my own interests, but that — in the moment — I just couldn't help.

Meanwhile, Danielle had gone quiet again. I had been waiting for her to get past her joke — if that's what it was — until I realized there wasn't going to be any more. Finally, partly out of a vague annoyance, partly because I couldn't think of another way to keep it going: "Isn't this your turn to ask me?"

"But you're doing so well," she came back smoothly, as if she had already known what I was going to say. "I'm afraid I'll ruin it."

It was like we were playing two different games. I was beginning to wonder if this is how it had gone with the actor, before. If I had known anyone else here I might have even gotten up. But her profiled face was a single uninterrupted line. Unlined fired porcelain. Its smooth sculpted shape.

"Mike's gay," I blurted out, nonsensically. "We work together. At the same place, I mean."

"That's interesting." Then: "I reckon our host is gay too."

"What makes you say that?"

"Have you ever met a straight single man with an apartment like this?"

I considered the apartment, relieved to have something else to focus on, for the moment. On the wall directly across hung a row of three large square black and white abstract prints, obviously part of the same series but with subtle variations. In a far corner was a tall marble-topped island, a couple gunmetal barstools arranged around it, Ismay behind it, fixing drinks. The sleek tulip coffee table looked like it went with the bar, though it was hard to be sure since it had become overgrown with empty bottles and plastic cups. The floor lamps were identical. A single tall leafless bamboo stalk spiked up from a ceramic, vaguely phallic-shaped planter. The stamped tin ceiling had been painted over with a creamy color only slightly darker than the pristine art-gallery white walls. The feel of the couch's leather was practically buttery.

"You're probably right," I concluded. "You should see my place."

"Should I?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Do you live around here?"

"No, the East Village."

"Oh, I'm going to be your neighbor."

"Really?" All my attention swung suddenly back. It was the first thing she had said, I felt, that was actually real, concrete.

"I'm moving down to the Lower East Side," she started — and then abruptly went quiet again, but different from before, this time with a cloud passing over her face.

"Whereabouts?"

"Rivington." I could see now that, whatever it was, was still working its way through her. Some healed-over scab now — unintentionally — being picked at.

"That's like three blocks from me," I offered. Nothing followed. For an endless moment both of us sat there, silently.

"Technically, I guess Mike's my boss," I finally said, uselessly. "Or at least he's an assistant editor and I'm an editorial assistant. I haven't figured out the hierarchies, but they tell me they're very important. Or at least they seem to take them very seriously. They also told me I was going to take care of the poetry — that was my major in college — but it's getting phased out. Mike says they're going to be acquired next year, maybe by Penguin. I've never actually worked in a office before and I don't think I like it. Maybe I'll go to grad school."

I caught myself thinking: she's absolutely right; just hearing myself say this shit is deadly. Again that flicker of irritation, like she had backed me into a corner. And then, while I had been blathering, I could feel Danielle's attention coming back, the cloud passing. Her eyes critically focused, narrowed.

"Why is it that everyone I meet is always planning to be something else?"

Something had shifted, and even though I had no idea what it was, I immediately felt the same sort of shift inside me. Now my back was up. I shrugged. "I'm not supposed to ask you your age, right?"

"What?"

"Don't people have a rule about this? For women?"

She smirked. "So you noticed that too?"

"What?"

"That I'm a girl?"

"And I'm twenty-two." It was something else I had guessed and now knew, after sitting this near to her for this long: that she was older than me. "I graduated in May. I moved to New York like six months ago. I reckon I've got some time to figure it out. But 'good on you' if you've already figured it out. Besides," I went on, mimicking her tone from before, "you already know this about me: I'm out of practice. I told you. So go on then, let's have it: how old are you?"

Her nostrils flared as she drew in a short, sharp breath. Then, almost to herself: "Love one."

Me: "What?"

Danielle: "Oh ... nothing .... it just reminded me of something from this Tom Stoppard —"

M: "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, right? Playing tennis?"

D: "Questions. It's called playing questions."

M: "Statement. Two love"

D: "Isn't it love two?"

M: "Doesn't that depend on your perspective?"

D: "Foul, rhetoric. One two."

M: "What's your story?"

D: "Haven't I told you?"

M: "What are you really doing here?"

D: "Haven't I told you that too?"

M: "Repetition. Three one. Is that game?"

D: "Don't you know?"

M: "No. I can't remember."

D: "Statement." The glimmer I had caught before in her strange, indeterminate eyes was back again, steadier. "Actually it is game. Shall we go again?"

Now it was my turn to go quiet. When I had first sensed her before, before she had become real, when she had still been standing with her friend on the other side of the room, I hadn't been able to think of a single thing to say. Now, suddenly, I had too many things, except I wasn't sure which should go first, or if any of them were even the right ones.

"Actually, you haven't told me what you're doing here," I said eventually. Morosely.

Danielle let this one pass. Then: "Where did you go to school?"

"Trust me, you've never heard of it. It wasn't posh."

"Is that what you think?"

"What?"

"That I'm posh?"

"Aren't you?"

"Am I?"

"Wait, are we still playing, or are you really asking me?"

"What's the difference?"

In spite of myself I almost called foul again. But I wasn't interested in playing with her anymore. Instead I found myself wanting to provoke her.

"Let me put it this way. Americans think all the English sound posh. That's why the bad guys in 'Star Wars' are played by Brits."

"I'm not British."

"Except James Earl Jones. He's not English. But that doesn't count, I guess, since he wears a mask."

"I'm not bloody British."

"Same bloody thing though, right?" Now, for some reason, I was doing her accent. "I mean, how did you end up in Australia? You sure don't look like a native."

A fine blade of steel slid into her voice. "And what do you know about it? Besides what you've read?"

"What, Australia?"

"Yes."

"I know it's the land of plenty." I was suddenly so inordinately pleased with my own cleverness I almost laughed in her face. Caught myself at the last moment.

"What?"

"I don't know shit about it." And I could tell she was baffled by the sudden turn this had taken, and for the same perverse reason this pleased me even more. "That's what's great about being American. You don't have to know shit about anything."

"You don't really believe that."

"You still haven't told me if we're still playing."

"We're not playing." The wondering glimmer in her eyes had slowly settled into the rest of her face. "Are you always like this?"

"Actually, I'm never like this." Then I fell quiet. To be honest, I wasn't sure where it had come from. For a moment, I wasn't sure if I even wanted to go on. But her lips had a color I couldn't quite find in her hair. "I have too many words in my head, sometimes."

Her lips turned up, different from before, beguiling. "You know what they say about people who listen to the voice in their head..."

"No, I'm serious." Before I could stop myself, I felt myself scowling. "I read too much, it's probably not good for me. All of it ends up rattling around but I don't have any way to let it out. Usually." Once again I fell quiet, this time feeling some of that obstinacy dissipate. "I loved that movie."

"Star Wars?"

"No. I mean yeah, I loved that one too. I mean, it was corny. But also ... archetypal."

"Well, of course. 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces.'"

I glanced over, something new emerging. A recognition we'd been batting around, landed. "Yeah no I meant, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. I had never even heard about it, or Stoppard. I only saw it because my ex-girlfriend rented it one night, on a whim."

I could tell she had registered the change. It wasn't that her voice softened so much as lost a bit of its edge. "Do you know 'Arcadia'?"

"No."

"It's the best thing he's written." For an instant, the steel slid back in — "They haven't made a film of it yet" — but then just as quickly withdrew. "I saw it when it played here," she went on. "I'd let you borrow my copy — "

"Mike keeps trying to drag me to shows." I was suddenly not even listening to her, the thought in my head nagging, evolving. "I don't know, there's something about actors I just don't trust."

"What's that?"

"I don't know, something ... inauthentic. Maybe even intentionally dishonest. They spend too much time pretending to be other people. Speaking words other people have written for them. It makes me wonder if they really know who they are. Or if the only way they can ever be any good is by completely erasing themselves."

"And what do you reckon, that you know who you are?"

"No. But I know I don't know. And I also know what I'm not."

"If you know what you're not, then aren't you whatever is left over?"

"Maybe ... but which part?" I paused, considering, now looking right at her, as if for the first time. "And just because you have something doesn't mean you understand it, does it?" It was not a rhetorical question; for some reason I suddenly wondered if she might actually know.

Danielle held my eyes for a long moment. Then she lit another cigarette and shifted herself on the couch. As her knuckles curled, the cigarette clenched between them, revolving around in her hand. For another long moment she just gazed down at it, as if to confirm it was still lit. Shifted again until she was side-saddle, her bent elbow resting along the back of the couch, fingers lightly pressing her cheek.

"A few years back, I was in Malta," she began. "I'd been reading this book on the Templar Knights." Abruptly, she stopped. "No. It was about intarsia — "

"What's that?"

"It's like inlaying. A technique for creating mosaics, with patterns. The most famous example being the floor of St John's Cathedral, in Valletta, which is made up of these flat inset intarsia tombstones, hundreds of them. Or at least that's what the book said. There was one tiny black and white photograph of one part of the floor, in the book." Pausing, she squinted, as if actually picturing it. "Anyway, that summer my best mate from uni decided she desperately needed to see the Mediterranean. She really didn't care where just so long as there was a beach."

"Don't they have beaches in Australia?" Some part of me must have still been looking for that ironic, bantering tone, but my heart was no longer in it.

But she kept on as if she hadn't heard what I had said, or how I had said it, her eyes now faraway. "She had this idea in her head about the wine-dark sea. The Pacific looks nothing like that. The thing you have to understand about Ozzies" — here her accent came suddenly back, accentuating the word — "is that we're like the Irish, locked on this island. We've got the same wanderlust because we're born into confinement. It's another reason why Malta ... intrigued me. The idea of it. A part of me wasn't ready to go off into the world. So I thought, maybe I'll swap one for another. It's closer to where I already knew I was going, but a manageable stepping stone." Her forehead creased again, considering. "Or maybe it was because of my grandma. I reckon she didn't have much of a choice, but she still ended up exchanging one island for another."

"Was she Irish?" I asked, still unaccountably entranced by her hair.

"Yes. Anyway, I convinced her. My mate, I mean, not my grandma. We flew to Dubai, then to Frankfurt — we had to crash overnight, on the floor in the airport. The next day we arrived."

Danielle paused again, as if gathering her thoughts, or maybe it was just to drag on her cigarette. A plume of smoke shot out of her mouth towards the ceiling. "I know you were only joking, but I don't think Australia and the US are all that different. Settled by outcasts. With no real history — I mean, not counting the Aboriginals. Sydney was barely half-built when my grandma got there. I noticed this as soon as I got to New York. New York feels older but only because it's so much denser, maybe. But I first noticed this, I mean I first really became aware

of how ... immature we are, when I was in Malta." I saw the question appear in her eyes but when she asked it it was almost like she was asking herself. "Does that make any sense?"

"Yes." It made sense. It was exactly the same, two months ago, in Prague.

"The Knights of Saint John landed there at the start of the sixteenth century, after they got run out of Jerusalem. In the sixteenth century Australia hadn't even been discovered. The Aboriginals didn't have to discover it, of course, just like the Indians didn't have to discover Manhattan. But no one knew what lay beyond it. All the maps showed were sea monsters, wavy lines. 'Terra Australis Incognita', the unknown land of the south. Cartographers had deduced something must be down there, at the antipodes, but not what it was, what it looked like."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Her shoulders gave a small shrug, just as she had before I sat down. "I don't know. Isn't this more interesting than talking about what we do?"

"Don't you think we are what we do?"

"No. I think we are what we make. Telling stories is like playing music," she went on with the same didactic certitude, "they only exist in time." She had settled her eyes back on me and the smiling had reached them. "But you know this, as a poet." Then her smile went sly. "The oral tradition. Bards and their lays."

And if I recognized her certitude, it was because I was exactly the same, at this time. It's another conviction the very young have — or at least young people like me and Danielle, the people here and the people I worked with, bright young things who knew that the whole world

and all it contained — Tom Stoppard, *Templar Knights* — was theirs for the taking. There was nothing we couldn't do, we had been told, in so many words. My parents had not ever once told me this, but still I had absorbed it, somehow. Even if I had gotten there in a very different way, this was one thing we had in common. Except, maybe because of my own perversity, I never could fully accept this. So I had, simultaneously, this yawning need to know everything — everything around and within the locus of my own peculiar interests — but with this occasional, but almost paralyzing, doubt that I'd ever be able to do anything with this knowledge.

Eventually, I felt, I would reach this limit, a limit I could see beyond, could actually measure, the gulf between what I was capable of and what I really wanted to do. Sitting there with her, I found myself feeling this, this ... deficiency. I could tell she was trying to shift it again, away from the real — that sly smile, that obvious double entendre — but something inside me wouldn't let her, just yet.

"I studied poetry, but I wouldn't call myself a poet," I heard myself saying. "Or at least I don't write poetry. Or at least not that I'd want to show anyone." While she had been speaking, I had felt that nagging moodiness shift a little inside me, a soft wind shifting clouds across the sky. Now it was back. "It would be a different story if I could write like Blake."

"That's the problem with geniuses," she replied without missing a beat. "They show us how far we still have to go."

"Yeah." Now she was picking at my own hidden scab, and maybe she knew it, not that she had wanted to, just that she had done it. All this time I had been trying to keep my game face on, but what I was feeling inside now was too strong. And now I knew I was letting her see it. Turning away, I glanced about the room, almost surprised to find the other people still there.

Across the way, the actor was doing that thing with his hands again, this time in between the incestuous twins, who were both looking uneasily at him. But I was not interested in them, I suddenly did not want to see anyone. Eventually, I felt her shift again, this time with her arm along the back of the couch, extending towards me.

"I don't know anyone here, either" I heard her say. "Except Karen. She talked me into coming, tonight. Said it would be good for me to get out of the house."

I looked back over at her, not saying anything, wondering what she was offering.

"And I feel that myself," she continued, a warmth I hadn't yet heard beginning to kindle in her voice. "I studied violin, growing up. Played it for ages. Then I met Paganini."

"Do you still play?" I asked her, almost gratefully.

"I do. Occasionally. For myself. We can't just give it up, can we?"

"No."

"You haven't given up on Blake." Said simply, not even a question.

"No." I considered. "You know, my school actually had a pretty good music program. Some famous jazz dude even recorded a famous album there, back in the day. Or so they told me." Starting to feel somewhat recovered, I went on. "I've always gotten along with musicians. At least they don't intentionally lie to you. Anyway, I'd rather hang with them," giving her a meaningful look, "then all these actors." The look she was giving me back I hadn't seen yet, either. Maybe that's why I kept working this seam, following it but without knowing where it was going to lead. "I don't think I know any violinists, though ...." And then my mind dredged this up, not because it was something I knew, just because I was still trying to keep up,

keep it going. This stray association that even as I felt it coming together I still couldn't be sure of. "Do you know Stéphane Grappelli?"

Instantly, Danielle's whole face lit up, in a way that can only be described as rapturous. Bringing her hand off the couch, she gripped my arm, just over the wrist. "Oh, he's an absolute god!" For a heartbeat she looked completely lost in some reminiscence. Or maybe just listening to some music in her head. Either way, she was instantaneously more alive, even more real, than at any other point since we started. I was still trying to figure out what I had done when she said, "I don't know what it is but there's something about his playing that gets me right here." Here, her hand letting go of my wrist but then gripping my sweater, right over my heart.

This wasn't, of course, how it actually went, either this part or any part before it. But this is exactly how it was — this apartment, this party, these subjects. This girl: it wasn't just her fantastical look, and it wasn't just this fantastical conversation, it was some combination of the two, and added to it, this sense that even if she wasn't as impressed with me as I was with her that we were nevertheless, and maybe even accidentally, making more and deeper impressions into each other. It really was like a tennis match, each of us at our baselines, at first, winding up and rocketing the ball back and forth, trying to wrong-foot the other. Only later did we settle into an easier rhythm, still probing, but with a different, emerging intent. At moments, all throughout this long conversation, we would take turns going into the kitchen for more drinks. Each time I got up I found myself wondering if she would still be there when I got back, and each time she left I would wonder if she was going to return. But each time she was, and she did. And then, as I sat there, frozen, with Danielle still clutching my sweater, her palm pressing into my breast, I suddenly realized we were going to be here, together, for the rest of the night. Or at least that both of us knew we were now, finally, playing the same game.

She was still holding onto me, like that, when the black-haired one — Karen — sauntered over, the snide remark already formed in her mouth: "Well aren't you two cozy?" I felt the hand fall away as she turned on the couch. The other girl had bent over and was whispering into Danielle's ear, the one further away from me. I sat there, intentionally not looking at either of them, and definitely not at that rounded rock-steady ass packed into those jeans, hovering there just out of reach. Scanning the room, I eventually found Mike between the potted bamboo and some new guy with his back to me — a late arrival, probably. As soon as Mike caught my eye, his eyebrows shot up mischievously.

Then I heard Danielle saying, "Fine." Then Karen straightened back up and slunk away.

It got late, and then it got later. The party continued, all around us, but no longer touching us, as if the couch had become our own private island. Maybe Malta. The booze was practically gone, even the rotgut wine I had brought. Eventually she and I were down to the last beer, passing it back and forth, taking turns sipping from it, making it last. At some earlier point, I had told her she was a pretty good drinker. With a fixed and solemn dignity — though I could see only half-truthfully — she informed me that she hadn't yet met an American she couldn't drink under the table. That seemed to be where we were literally headed. As we got drunker, we had gradually slipped lower and lower into the creamy leather, slyly leaning against each other, shoulder to shoulder, old cohorts, co-conspirators. Still we kept talking. The words flowing out like from a dam with several deep fissures. Who could say where it would go next? From time to time, but especially when she laughed, she would bring her hand up and let it rest on my arm. Each time she did this, I found my eyes dropping down: the unpainted nails of her long dexterous fingers at rest, her lean wrist sliding out of the loose paisley sleeve, whatever else of her I could make out without having to move my shoulder away from her shoulder. The way

she was slouching — backside perched on the very edge of the cushion, her legs thrown out straight in front of her — had created this smooth concise shape stretching away. No part of her in it could be seen, not even suggested — but her wrist's polished leanness had already told me everything I needed to know. The velvet skirt, taut and smooth, went evenly all the way to her ankles, somewhere inside her black leather boots. I guess I'd supposed to say that the shape of her reminded me of a violin, but that's not what I thought. As I sat there, gazing down, and still wondering if it would flip colors if I dared run my hand up it, the only thing I could think of, for some reason, was a surfboard. That's how drunk I was. I could almost feel the shit-eating grin hammered onto my face. As it went on, it seemed — though I may have just been imagining it — that her accent had become more pronounced, coloring her words, turning them provocative, almost a proposition. Now, though, we'd fallen quiet, but a different sort of quiet from before, one we were now making together. To be savored. Something I found myself not wanted to decipher.

"Who are all these people?" she suddenly asked, in genuine disbelief.

"Just look at them," I agreed.

"What do you reckon they're saying to each other?"

"Surely nothing as intelligent as this."

She had groped her way back up into a sitting position and was squinting at me. "Tell me what they're saying."

"What?"

"Tell me a story, what's that bloke's story?" Her chin jutted towards that actor, now prowling around another older woman perched up on a barstool.

"Him? That's simple. He just wants to get in your pants."

Danielle blew her lips, making a rude sound. "That's not a story, that's motivation." Her frown deepened as she shook the last cigarette out from her pack. "And I'm not wearing pants." Crumpling the box in one hand, she tossed it onto the coffee table. As she inhaled then deeply breathed it out, her eyes seemed to clear, becoming strangely precise, no longer looking at the other man but at the abstract prints directly across from us on the wall. Something on the far side of it, maybe.

"He's a man who's come to the capital from the hinterland to ... find a woman. And not just any woman. He has a particular one in mind, the sister of his friend's wife, a mate from his childhood. He's a hopeless romantic and doesn't care for the city, except his beloved lives here." For the briefest instant she paused, then corrected herself "lives there." Took another long drag on her cigarette. Then she continued: "But the city is too ostentatious, too ... artificial. He's always been too much in his own head; he spends too much time reading books. He doesn't know it yet, but what he really needs is ... simplicity, like the place he's come from. The land, the seasons' natural order. These are the only things he can really be sure of." She didn't stop in mid-sentence but she might as well have: her mouth hung half-open in a way that would have looked slack-jawed except it was her mouth. A loose ball of smoke revolving around inside it, two loose tendrils drifting up into her nostrils.

"That sounds ... familiar," I heard myself muttering, though in the moment — and maybe only because of all the beer — it didn't sound familiar at all.

She shook herself, blowing it out. "I'm re-reading 'Anna Karenina,'" she explained, emphasizing the first 're.' "It may be my favorite book in the world."

"Because of the heroine?"

She made another rude sound, only this time not with her lips. "Heroine? She's not heroic. Tolstoy already knew what she was going to do before she stepped off in Saint Petersburg. You can't just go through life — "

"Going through life isn't how — "

"You can't just go through life," she went on brusquely "like someone else is pulling the string. I get it, believe me, how it can feel ... seductive. The urge. How you just want — the only thing that makes sense — is to go along, or check out. But I'm not interested in people who take the easy way out. The harder, the real, the more interesting question is what it takes to hold yourself together, to contend with the weight of your choices. Didn't she choose it? Or was it a trap? All she can tell us is beautiful doom, you look at her and think, there she is, the caged bird, but she built her own cage!" She had taken an emphatic drag on her cigarette, the smoke pouring out with the words. "It's not Anna, why I keep reading it, it's Levin. It's the fight, the ... duel for survival. How to live with the rubbish." Then she frowned again. "Or maybe it's not even him, maybe it's just his notion of salvation."

I'm not sure I can explain it, but I felt this flash of reluctance, odd but acute — were we rewinding to this? Even so: rummaging woozily, trying to recall what might make Levin so fascinating. All I could find, from a freshman lit class, were the endless pages on farming.

Then, for some reason, I found myself trying to remember how Anna had ended up losing all her magnificent hair.

And then: What color had her hair been?

Meanwhile, Danielle was still lecturing, except now with some real vehemence, the cigarette sending up jerky smoke trails as her hand waved about. "It's the same problem with 'Voss.' Laura is far more interesting, like Levin is more interesting." It was all coming too quickly now for me to keep track. "People say him and Kitty are only there to be the reflection, the counterpoint, to Vronsky and Anna, but that's flat-out wrong. It's the exact polar opposite. He's the whole reason for writing the book."

"Who?"

"Levin! He's Tolstoy's ... doppelganger." All at once she was back. Noticed the butt burning down between her fingers. Gripped my wrist again, this time with her short nails coming out. "You don't have any cigarettes, do you?"

"No, sorry."

I only saw the next thing as a blur out of the corner of my eye — but all at once there was a tremendous metallic bang together with a high-pitched wailing, which continued after the sound of the bang was over. Abruptly, the music stopped, and various people were in frantic motion. On the hardwood floor was one of the barstools, tipped over, with the older woman splayed next to it, blood already gushing out from her nose.

For a moment the two of us just glanced over at her, impassively.

Then Danielle took a last drag and dropped the butt into the empty beer bottle still in my hand. Gave an almost imperceptible nod. "That's it," she announced. "I think that's my cue."

"Oh yeah?" I was, momentarily, still staring at the woman on the floor, wondering if she might be Ismay's older sister, and trying to make sense of what had just happened. I decided to ask Danielle: "So what's happening now?"

"Why don't you give me — "

"I'd really like to see you again," I kept on, as if she hadn't been speaking, "Can I call you sometime?"

"I don't have a phone yet but —"

All my attention snapped suddenly back. I looked at her, incredulous. "Really?"

"Like I said —"

But just as quickly, all my suaveness seemed to have abandoned me. "You're really going to do me like that?"

"I told you," she said, deliberately patient. "I'm moving to Rivington."

What else could I do? I got out my pocket notebook, wrote down my name and number and then handed her the torn out page, full of sinking resignation. For a moment she held it up, as if committing it to memory, and then carefully folded it into halves and tucked it into a pocket in her skirt.

"You're not going to leave me hanging, are you?" I asked, suddenly, desperately, serious.

She rose from the couch and then — turning and bending at the waist — brought herself back down to me, using my shoulders for balance. Put her mouth to my cheek. For a moment, still sitting, I just held onto her, clumsily. At sea in her hair, in this gesture, what it meant, and the faintest trace along her bare neck: something clean, like rainwater. "I'll bring you that book, next time," I heard her say, very low, in my ear. In the moment I had no idea what she was talking about; I only remembered it later. Later, I would wonder if that was what she actually said. Then she straightened back up and walked over to Karen.

No sooner had she left when Mike appeared. "So how'd you make out?"

"I'm not sure," I said slowly, watching her and her friend on the other side of the room, deep in hushed conversation.

"Want to stick around?"

For a long moment I kept studying her, them — black, red — fixedly, like she had been looking at the paper, a moment ago. Finally: "No. I just need to hit the head."

I had to wait for the bathroom, then hunt around for wherever Ismay had put my coat. By the time I got back — and I could have only been gone a few minutes — a good part of the crowd had cleared out. The older woman who had fallen off the barstool was now on the couch where we had just been, her head thrown back, pressing a wet towel under her nose; next to her was the actor who had been sitting in the same exact spot, except with Danielle, however many hours earlier. Ismay had started puttering about, tidying. Mike, bundled up, was at the front door. With him were the two girls who had been with him right before everything started. At first I was surprised to see her still there. But then I wasn't surprised. In the first part of that split second, I almost didn't recognize her. Was I that shit-faced, or because I had only been

seeing her one way? Standing there, now, she had on a light fuzzy crop jacket, with most of her hair contained and drawn back by a round knitted dark cap. Still that same velvet skirt. For some reason, it occurred to me that just about everything in Ismay's apartment — the leather couch, the marble coffee table, the abstract prints on the wall, and their frames — was either black or white. Was that why I had first sensed her? Karen and Mike had been in the middle of talking about something, but as soon as they saw me approaching they abruptly stopped. Danielle caught my eye but then just gave me that same wordless shrug as before, though this time I couldn't tell if it was a question, or a suggestion. If it was directed at me or just for herself.

Outside, the snow had stopped and the temperature had dropped precipitously. The air still and sharp and our foggy breath in the air almost solid, with body. The cold was bracing; all at once, feeling it clap to my face, I felt myself waking up, becoming more alert than I had been in hours. As we filed down the stairs and out of the brownstone, Mike and Karen picked up their conversation, their voices suddenly overloud in the empty street. I was going to say that I was trying to think of something else to say to her, but I'm pretty sure that's not true. After all, hadn't we already said goodbye? Or had they been waiting for me? I wondered. And if so, whose idea had it been? All questions I had no way of answering. And yet she was still here, walking alongside me, eyes fixed straight ahead, with what might have been that same little ironic smile set back on her lips. So what did that mean? I might have asked her, but the others were right there in front of us. Their voices drifting over their shoulders, filling the silence.

We came to the corner, above us a streetlight. Karen and Mike squealing and squeezing each other. Finished, they half-turned, half-glanced at us, and then began conspicuously drifting

off in separate directions, Mike down the block, Karen crossing over to the other side of the street, both switching back into shadows as they stepped out of the weak cone of light. Once again, just the two of us on our own island. Then, simultaneously, we both did that wrong-footed stutter-step, like when a stranger suddenly appears right in front of you on the sidewalk. Even so: closer, facing each other, one of her hands still lightly holding onto one of my arms, as if to steady herself. But still looking hesitant — it may have been the first uncertain thing I had seen from her all night — and as I stood there I suddenly felt how cold it was, felt it all the way into my bones. Unbuttoning my overcoat — maybe it was her light jacket, maybe the weak glow turning her even paler, or maybe it was just that look on her face — I put my hands back into my pockets, lifted the long flaps and wrapped them around her, drawing her the rest of the way to me. As she stepped into it, her face fell forward, the knit cap pressing into the base of my throat, exposed. Still this very small space in between us. The unbridgeable chasm. For a moment she stayed just like that, her face completely hidden under her hair, and whenever I find myself back in this moment I am certain that, inside her, she still hadn't — couldn't — decide what to do next. Finally she lifted her head, gazing right at me with this look in her eyes that even now I can't name. Something that looked like desire and happiness and pleading and fear, asking me to because she was afraid what would happen if it was left up to her. Looking back on everything following, I sometimes wonder if it might have been better to have left her right there. But I knew then, just as I knew after, and now, that even if I had known the rest of our story, in this moment, there was no way I could have ever just left her. I had never before been this close. As she lifted her face, her eyes were asking and telling me what to do next. She was so close I could taste the lingering smoke around her mouth. It wasn't even a kiss, yet, just my lips softly brushing hers. Then I felt her arms burrow around as she pressed herself all

the way into me, and maybe it was the supple sudden vehement strength of her body but it suddenly felt like I was melting into the curl of a wave, an irresistibly warm, almost liquid, pressure. The kiss that wasn't quite yet a kiss but was quickly becoming one — it was still only lips — grew stronger, hungrier. Mouths opening, deepening. Then abruptly she drew back, far enough to search me again with her eyes, and then finding her answer pressed forward again, kissing me quickly, stronger again, but then again coming away, only this time with her head going back, the deep breathsmoke steaming out of her nose and her mouth. As if to catch her from falling, I closed the flaps of my coat more tightly around her, drawing her back to me, wrapping her into a cocoon. Her face upturned, looking up at the streetlight, the side of my face against the bare length of her neck, in the deep waves of her hair.

We squeezed each other, against each other, just like that, as if, wordlessly, we were still trying to tell each other something else that couldn't be named.

A few weeks after this night – at the tail end of the last unbelievable century — I made my first attempt at this part of the story. That version and this one are dramatically different (my prose was even more turgid then, and, tellingly, almost always done in the 3rd person). But most of the particulars, the plot points, are exactly the same: first seeing Danielle with her friend at this party in a stranger's apartment; how she snuck up behind me while I had my head in the fridge; the way we spent hours on that couch, shoulder to shoulder, impressing each other, trying to, with every pretentious, ridiculous thing that came into our heads; how we said what we thought was goodbye after that woman fell off the barstool, but then later, as if by design, found ourselves leaving together, out onto the empty streets, somewhere in Brooklyn, the weekend before Valentine's Day. Of this precise moment, under the streetlight, I once wrote: "*He can't*

*say how long they linger like this ... He feels as if time has stopped him in his prime, that he has never been and never will again be as alive and invigorated as he is at this moment."*

They say time is a circle. I don't know if that is right. I don't know if any of this is right. All I know is that, somewhere, I am still standing there, lost, on that street corner, with her.

[Dilemma #1]

Above us a streetlight, for what felt like forever we lingered there, on that corner. Both of us knowing now that there were only two ways this could possibly go. Feeling her, I was almost emboldened enough to ask her, no, tell her: this is what's happening next. But before I could figure out how to say it, I felt her arms drawing back. Letting go, I opened the flaps of my overcoat so she could step aside. Gave a small wordless wave — to the other girl, I suddenly realized, still waiting on the opposite corner, in darkness, a discrete distance away. For a moment, it almost looked like she was going to come back to where we were standing.

Then I heard one of them say: "I'll call you tomorrow."

I had already fallen into step alongside her as she turned again and resumed walking. Remembered that Mike had also been waiting, but by the time I glanced back down the block he was already gone.

Soon we were in Gowanus (I didn't know this name then, I only found it out later). We walked, not talking, no longer touching. We had spent the entire night talking, and both of us knew we were done with that now. I remember becoming aware of not touching her, though. My tongue was still holding onto it; it was still rolling around in my head. Like mine, Danielle's hands were thrust in her jacket pockets, and my ears had gotten so cold it felt like they had their own heartbeat, burning. What shape this was going to take wasn't clear, but a part of me had apparently decided to push it away. Maybe because this part still couldn't believe this was actually happening, and that to speak — or even to think — of it, might be enough to knock it off course. Better, instead, to focus on something else, as if examining your feet, your

surroundings, can help keep you steady. Keep it on track. It was settled now, wasn't it? It didn't feel settled, but, somehow, incredibly, it was approaching, and the longer we walked the more it steadied. An uncertainty that was almost becoming a curiosity, nervy or nervous or both. Realizing that I had completely forgotten there had been a moment when I might have been looking at her for the last time.

Which was curious, since this wasn't how I usually was, at this time, at all.

Over here the snow on the sidewalks had been tamped down into sheets of ice, so we walked in the street, which was utterly deserted. Here, there were no more denuded trees or wrought-iron fences or tiny snowmen, and the sky appeared to be drawing closer as the buildings changed, separated. What remained was almost back down to human-scale while at the same time appearing uninhabited, built for some other use. Single-story warehouses, a parking lot surrounded by braided barbed wire and full of utility vehicles. The air and everything else — the frozen water below us as the street turned into a lowered drawbridge — was so cold and so still I had this sensation of being inside a snow globe, the moment before it's shaken.

A drawbridge. A canal. A dark waterway stretching away, creating this sudden vista — low rubble structures on either side, glittering skyscrapers at the distant horizon. It looked like it had been painted on glass. The whole unexpected scene so surprising — nothing about it resembled any part of my picture of New York — that I actually stopped, staring at it.

Danielle, meanwhile, had continued on until she came to an old red and white crossing gate pointing up in the air. As she glanced back, her hand fished around in her jacket's pocket before coming out with a lucky rabbit's foot keychain. Behind her was a weathered warehouse with what looked like a set of bare metal stairs jutting out from its otherwise blank face. I was

still trying to make sense of it all — the steps in the wall, the rabbit's foot, the frozen water and crossing gate — when she turned again, climbed the stairs, and then stopped in front of what I could now tell was a weathered door painted the same color as the brick.

As soon as I stepped inside she reached out, brushing past me, and pulled the door closed.

Now we were standing inside an enormous shadowy room. Next to the door we had come through was a stove and a sink and a retro fridge all in a row. At the far opposite end, a wall of huge latticed windows. To the left was what looked like the start of a maze: a large entryway with freestanding angled dividers just beyond, and beyond those, through a half-open door, what might have been a clawfoot tub. All over the dusty wood floor were smudged untrackable trails of footprints, boot prints. I was so momentarily taken aback by the size of the room that I didn't notice, at first, how empty it was.

"This is your place?"

"Yes."

"You don't have any roommates?"

For a moment I imagined that hesitation again. Glancing about as if she too was seeing the place for the first time. "Not anymore." Our voices echoed, but even though the ceiling was far out of reach, I could sense its enclosure. Something held in the air now, conclusively, in a way it hadn't been under the streetlight, even while we were walking here. The realization, maybe for both of us, that the two possible ways were about to become one. Felt it, quickening. I couldn't quite make out her face's expression, but I could see the cold had colored it in, darkening it. I was just about to reach for her when she said, "Can you wait here? I just need

to ..." Her voice trailed off as she glanced away, already stepping towards the mouth of the maze.

So I waited, surveying the room's empty vastness. Aside from a bed — which, like the couch in Ismay's apartment, had been placed near the center of the floor — the only other furniture was a cheap halogen floor lamp and a cluttered utility table. Like the room, the bed was enormous, with a massive ornate fleur-de-lis headboard, like a cathedral's stained-glass window missing all its colored glass. The floor lamp was turned off and there didn't seem to be any overhead fixtures, but the latticed windows were large enough that a wan light from outside was casting itself across that part of the space. The panes were mostly soaped over, but as I moved along them there were small swirled sections that gave a view of the canal, directly below. A huge heavy comforter of some light indistinguishable color was heaped up at the foot of the bed. After sitting for most of the night, I didn't really mind standing, but the longer I stood there the more I began to feel .... unmoored, at sea in all this space. I needed, I realized, to anchor myself to something. Wandering back, I sat on the edge of the bed — a sudden creak, overloud — now facing the spot where Danielle had disappeared. Had it been a minute ago? More? I was still wearing my overcoat and it seemed silly to keep wearing it, especially now that I was sitting — but no sooner had I taken it off when I felt how cold it was in the room. I glanced about, then tossed my coat onto the floor. I looked for some books but there didn't seem to be any. Or a violin, or its case, or any art, or any evidence of its making — tools, or clay, or molds. Isn't that what sculptors used? Maybe packed away in one of the cardboard boxes near the sink at the other end of the room. Maybe at one of the dead-ends of the maze she had turned into. If I had been more sober I might have kept track — it was definitely minutes now. Then wonder what this meant, if anything. Then start to worry and wonder about what to

do next. But now that I had hitched myself here — that part of me still trying to keep it steady — even this pricked restlessness wasn't enough, yet. Just the opposite: all night I had been circling around it, and now a thought was intruding, telling me I was right at the edge of the heart of it, now. On their own, my hands had started clutching at my knees — caught this, moved them off — and as I shifted the bed made another small, almost plaintive, sound, and when I touched the tip of my nose I found it was almost numb. Details. On the utility table was a camera with a long lens, its cap off, its black convex eye shining. Next to this, a silver ashtray, and a torn open carton of cigarettes, and a CD player slash alarm clock, its blue angular digits glowing faintly. I could tell from the accumulation of dust — or more specifically, the lack of it — that the bed had once been in a different place, and on the closest brick wall was a large discolored rectangle that might have been evidence of a removed painting or mirror. The only reason the table seemed cluttered was because there was nothing else in the room. I was finally about to stand back up when I heard what sounded like a toilet flushing, followed by the low liquid squeak of old plumbing. I cocked my head. I may have even held my breath. Eventually the pipes grew quiet, and as that sound withdrew this other one took its place. A faint murmuring. At first I thought it might be someone outside, passing under the windows. But then I remembered the canal. I was still straining to hear it, understand it, when it was overtaken by clapping footsteps, decisive, getting closer.

A moment later Danielle reemerged, without her jacket or knit cap, but still in her boots. Seeing me sitting on the bed, she paused. She seemed very far away.

"Were you talking to someone," I asked. The words echoed.

Even though she hadn't changed, something about her felt different. Maybe because she was just standing there on the far side of the room, exactly like when I had first sensed her, before. When I had still been trying to separate her from the other so that I could figure out my first move. But now, not only was the board almost cleared, it was an entirely different board. Was it possible that all that had already happened earlier this same night? It didn't seem possible. Her hair, in the shadows, seemed immense. Then she shifted her face, her chin pointing away from me. I heard her say, "Yes."

"Is someone else here?"

"I told you, everyone's gone."

"I thought you said you don't have a phone."

The shadow of that low smile crept back into her mouth. "I said I don't have a *new* phone, for my new place. The one here's still working. For now." Again her face shifted, this time towards my coat on the floor. "I could give it to you, if you want, but ... " She was too far away, and the light over there was too dim, for me to read her eyes, but I could tell she was still gazing about, contemplating the endgame, and that any earlier hesitancy — if that's what it had been — was gone. Or maybe I only felt that because I was suddenly aware of my own pulse, stepped-up. Everything had stepped-up, my breath held, and the buzzing heat that kept on swelling up into my head. I must have lost her for a moment — my hands holding onto the edge of the bed to have something to hold onto — because now she was at the table. She had crossed unfathomable distances, elliptically, and the CD player's round speakers were glowing blue, catching her and adding soft light to this part of the room. The sound reached me, low and steady, like a muffled heartbeat held inside an electronic ocean, sonorous, synthesized. For a

long moment she remained there (she is still there, this last moment), inclined over and eyes closed, absorbing the sound with her hand.

"I know," she was saying, as if intuiting the question I hadn't asked. "It's not what you were expecting. Do you mind?" And then, before I could answer: "It helps me sleep better."

She had moved into the music, suddenly directly in front of me, close enough to reach if I put out my hand. I still couldn't put out my hand. She was so close I had to lean back on the bed to see her face.

"Are we going to sleep now?" Trying to get something back, but I don't think I managed to get there. Gravelly, and coming from some place outside of myself.

And all at once, in that instant, the same image flashed back: the subway, the sky-blue summer dress. I was sitting, she was standing, our knees as close as they could be without touching. And yet somehow, improbably, this enormous ravine was finally about to be crossed. Was it possible? For an instant, everything stopped. Danielle's arms at her sides, motionless, molded to the curve of her hips. Then her hands, coming together, went to her waist, one hand fastened to the skirt, the other finding its hidden zipper. Then her hands came apart as she pulled it down. Then she stepped out of her skirt and stepped into me. Then we got started.

Even back in the day, back when I was still living in it, I don't know if I could have ever fully recounted — or even counted up — the couple handfuls of times she and I came together. At first I was going to say "slept together," except she never slept over. Then I was going to say "had sex," but what we usually did went far beyond that. "Fucked" comes closer — and much of it was just that, pure animal fucking. But this night wasn't like that, or at least not at first, or at least that's not my dominant impression now. And for this part of the night, this is what I still

have: a set of impressions. A few vivid, the rest largely a blur. So much of a tumult, even then, in the moment, that I'm not even going to try to reconstruct it all here. I almost did it again.

But I won't. It's stranger than that.

Let's get started. First, falling over each other — grappling and tumbling — getting ourselves entangled in the comforter. Then the weight of it, over us. I have no idea how we got our shoes and the rest of our clothes off, just that they ended up all over the floor. But the first feel of her hands on my skin. How her hands were so cold I actually yelped, and hearing this how she jammed them into my armpits, a sharp burst of answering laughter. Pinning me with her arms, all her strength pressing down. The vehemence I had felt before, under the streetlight, reasserting itself as she amplified over me, but with the comforter over her, over both of us. So cold in that room neither one of us ready to get rid of it, yet. So dark under there we could hardly see anything. Recollecting all the fucking, all these years later, is part of what first made me want to try this again. To pin it down, to perfect it, so that I can see her. Bring myself closer, back to her. I need to remind myself that not everything happened at once. That not everything means something. Someone told me that, once. It's really true that I need other people to point these things out, sometimes. How time and tenses revolve, unscrewing, unstuck. Remember: pace yourself. There is much more to come. That there are moments when one part doesn't even go with the other because now they've been blurred together, in memory, in dream. So maybe it's better that it started like this, when we still could have been anyone. When I was, momentarily, unable to catch her. A part of me still wondering how to fasten on, about the two ways. I was with her under a streetlight. I was with her on that black leather couch. No, she was actually here, somewhere, under the covers — how was it possible? I had been saying every first ridiculous thing. I had been following my feet, just trying to keep myself

steady. Maybe that's what I need to keep doing, now. First one, then the other, then eventually you'll figure out what you're doing. Or maybe it was because I was still drunk, even if I no longer felt drunk, even as I could feel my whole body beginning to sweat it all out, begin filling itself with something stronger. And part of what makes this so strange to me, now — though strange is still not the right word for it — is how ... playful it felt. I can't remember the last time I've felt that, with a woman. But I do know it was all very different back then. When did it all become so fucking complicated? Maybe it's just one more thing that's been lost, like the ability to tell time by the position of the sun, or how to find your way through strange streets without a map. Or maybe — and this has only occurred to me as I am writing this now — maybe staying hidden, at first, was the other side of that playfulness. A way to cover up our own giddy nervousness. She might have been older than me, but we were both still so young. We might have wanted to be knowing and hard, but that didn't mean we still couldn't be shy around strangers. So maybe the only way for us to really get started was like this, safe in darkness, pretending we didn't care, really, that it was all still a game. Consider the word "foreplay," consider it literally: playtime before the irreversible happens. That's where we were -

- Danielle, unseen, but in contact everywhere, still holding me down, her hands thrust into my armpits like they were mittens, but her laugh turning into something else that made everything quicken. Felt a burst of shivering go through me, then go all over her and when it was gone it was suddenly warmer, not much, but a bit — I had tossed her over and leapt on, only for her to keep the momentum and roll us back, on top again but so much closer, all our clothes somehow gone, her mouth working warmth into mine, her body beginning to mold into my hands, her smooth limbering strength. Again we rolled over and again she ended up flattened on me, and I was trying to hold her in place as she squirmed, concentrating, except — the size of

the bed, how we could not seem to find the end of it — and then the comforter — how could we still be there, under it? An insulated pocket of darkness, an almost unendurable intimacy, thickening with the trapped heat of our breathing, the air growing moist with sound, and the sticky sound growing urgent. The sense of bodies warming from that friction, rubbing together, trying to catch fire, as we tumbled and grappled. Hands warm enough now to touch other parts that were still growing warm. This impression: that giddy warmth, ignited -

- Then another, this one a bit clearer. Danielle squirming away, lower down on the bed, pulling one end of the comforter with her. Felt her weight shift. The hidden humped shifting shape as she moved. But when I started to lift its corner — to see her? to give her more light? — she grappled it back down, but with a low indecipherable sound escaping, throaty and tricky and thicker than her laughing, before. Alternated, no longer so playful, and her hands not so cold anymore. Felt her pulling (not every last thing needs to be said. Or does it? Does saying it somehow illuminate everything else?) How my arms, as if on their own, giving up all control, threw themselves out, like I was falling backwards into the sea. Parts of me completely exposed, in the bracing cold air. How I can still feel it, as I fell. The blue wordless music still playing. The drag of her hair. The hidden humped shifting shape as she moved -

- Followed by, suddenly, her face reemerging, a fiery black sun thrusting up out of the darkness, her wide open mouth mashing mine, her tongue filling my mouth as she flung herself back. Hot and urgent and wet. Her mouth was enormous. Everything was enormous. Now I can feel, down below, her weight settling in place, hips beginning to grind, searching. Now it begins to fall in place. Begins to get clearer, or closer, step by step, inch by inch. How my hands flew to her, through the mass of her hair, down her flanks, gripping her ass, starting to help get her higher, except I didn't want her to unstick herself yet, so I began arching my whole body

back into the mattress, trying to create the space needed. How she kept clasping as if afraid to let go. Our mouths welded together, her tongue still pushing in like she needed to tell me. Searching and grinding, down below, all around, the enormous heat building, the room starting to breathe like it too was holding its breath. I could actually hear her growing wetter, I didn't need to feel it, as I arched myself back, as she craned herself up, until finally, without even using our hands, I felt us find the right angle, the right spot. Pressing, pushing, up and forward and down, loosening, smoothening. In. A new weighted motion, gradual, hesitant, joined, but not yet in tandem, still trying to find the beat in this new rhythm. But in. How it hit, the enveloping shock of her warmth, then her face went away as she stroked herself higher, and I had just started to sit up — her mouth, right above me, hanging open and letting out steam — except she already had me by the shoulders, pushing down, everywhere, the deep thrust of her breathing as she centered herself, letting loose another deep steadying breath, and as she straightened up on me the comforter went away with her: one moment it was hanging about her like some kind of robe, the next it had begun falling away. Not at once, in this slow-motion avalanche: from her shoulders, to the small of her back, then her hips, lifting her as it fell. Then gone. And now, for the first time, I can see her — really see her — every inch of her flush with the music's glowing blue light. Head thrown all the way back, facing the ceiling, hair shifting behind her. Color like what the clouds take from the bright winter sky behind them, and with the blue light comes the cold air again, but invigorating now, all that hothouse sultriness swept away until the only thing left is her stark body's strong silhouette, perfectly upright. Hips beginning to move around in my hands, in small circular motions. Stomach tensed, a dark wishbone, beginning to strain at both ends. Darker still, rooting -

Steady now. Tenses.

But in this moment, it is all so outlandishly etched all I seem able to do is lie there and stare at her. Her face had come level and was facing away again, like before, but her eyes were the same glowing blue as the rest of her, focusing, closed. Concentrating. Determinedly pushing herself all the way down, and then instead of climbing again she begins ... unfurling in place. Rolling up along me before rolling back before rolling forward again. I could feel her hands holding on somewhere, balancing, but overpowered by the deep pull of her cunt, pulling me with her, shifting the air, her salty tang spreading, the bed starting to creak and to sway like it was the one moving. Still staring, unblinking, at her but my eyes beginning to burn, then burn more, and when I finally gave in to it for an instant everything flashed, became polarized, like a negative. And as the dim color crept back in this picture resolved: in the backseat of my parent's car, my bent arm stuck out the rolled-down window, summer now but with the same bright blue sky behind it. How my arm moved, catching the wind, feeling it lifting and shifting and forcing it down, exactly the same, not just the waving sinuous motion but its sheer inescapable unequivocal force. Transfixed — I don't know if I need you to see it, but I need to describe it; I have never been able to stop myself, ever — her inner thighs stuck to me, her inner warmth flooding through me, her powerful pulse, stomach tensing, relaxing, the wave and the undertow, her breasts barely swinging, uplifting, downfalling, nipples sharper than arrowheads pricking through her hair's tangles, shifting, unfurling — it's almost as if I close my eyes she will disappear again, be erased, so I need to hold onto her, my hand is at her face, at her mouth, pulling down on her lip, hoping that she will understand what I'm doing, and she must, or she does, either way she is doing it, pulling two of my fingers into her, bringing her face back around, and when she finally looked down, right at me, the shadows back in her eyes, when she drew my hand out of her mouth, out of her came the smallest imaginable possible moan.

Then we really went at it.

At points in our life we discover that, somehow, we have learned things. Here's one: back in school, I had figured out that drinking and cumming were, for me, incompatible. And yet, I almost never threw up; when it came to drinking, at least, I had discovered where my limit lay and kept myself on the other side of it. But what this meant was that I could stay hard indefinitely — this remained bottled up too — which in a perverse way was almost better. Seeing myself fill her up, being swallowed up, the feeling not of a final outburst but a fulfillment I didn't want to end, ever.

Because now, all at once, with Danielle still transfixed on me, her mouth hanging open, I felt my whole body surge, a sensation so overpowering it was like I had been emptied out before instantly refilled with something stronger, sharper. Unconquerable, almost, and now so deeply riveted, rooted, my cock felt like it might snap. Again we fell on each other, grappling and tumbling before slotting into position again, but now that we're finally free from the comforter the air begins filling up with new sounds, different heat. Now we return to the blur, but one we are creating with speed. Almost from the start I had felt this force coursing through me, only now it has become a livewire, leaping out. All passages opened up, all the pent-up breathing let out, its wet sibilance. No, so much stronger than that, a ... liquidation. Now I needed to see her, to feel her, to take her, consume her, in every way possible, or at least what I thought of as possible, then. Later, I would learn, then keep learning. We think we know things, but whatever I thought I knew then was nothing like this. Once we really got going we went at it for an hour. Hours, possibly. And then, some unconscious part may have been telling myself that I had to make the most of this night since I had no way of knowing if it would be repeated, with her. Somewhere, dimly, in back of my mind's tumultuous heat, her barely overheard voice

from before — murmuring — kept playing, rewinding, unspooling. Unable to catch it, I didn't know what it meant, except that, even then, in the moment before, she had been speaking to someone else. But what did this mean? But if it meant anything — if it was to be just the once — then this part of me had apparently decided to let this go and to get and to give as much as I could, to take her every which way. And since I could so I did. It went on for an hour. More than one, probably. It's not just your ungovernable body. You lose time too. The bed creaking erratically, like a broken clock, and if it hadn't been so big more than once we would have knocked ourselves out of it. Skin that has become salted and slick, all that playfulness long since ferociously fused, galvanized. Headboard rocking — first it was here, then it was there — like it was about to shake loose from its frame before snapping back, every which way, until it was no longer my breath or my body or my heartbeat I was feeling — it was hers. Some part of me still trying to fix her in place, even then. It was telling me, spelling it out: you're not yourself anymore. You're something else. It just wouldn't stop — I didn't want it to stop — and maybe because I could feel her matching me, blow for blow, giving as good as she got. The surge and the seawall — except which was which? Cleaved but neither subdued, but both becoming overwhelmed. Getting there. A goal heaving into sight, surging towards it. Now it is coming unsprung. Still anchored, but with the rest of the room frenetically spinning. This relentless velocity, as I drove into her, as she drove into me, both of us crashing into each other, repeating the crashes, like we were trying to smash our bodies into some new combined shape.

I could see it in the way her face's expression was becoming determined. Her sharp eyes glazing over, unfocused.

Abruptly the blur, whirling unstuck, assumes its next form. Spinning off, coming into focus as it breaks unexpectedly. Danielle, jettisoned, crawling, hands and knees, to the foot of

the bed, then flattening the comforter as she falls, like she is facing Mecca. Not coiled, but curved inward, and at rest, trying to steady her breathing. Unstuck, still in motion, I was already up on my knees, grabbing and pulling her back, and she let me shift her a little, but not much. Her deep slippery weight, hibernating. Her dizzying stillness beginning to converge itself back into me. Felt it start to settle, my breath and my heart, her warmth burrowing back. Felt my body come back to myself. The whirl unwound, dissolving as it spins, dissipates. The sweat I hadn't even noticed before, my own, down my back, in my eyes. My hands are so wet. She is so low on the bed that now I am practically cradling her. Shifting, but carefully, still on my knees. Pausing, but for what? Maybe to see if she'll raise her head, glance back, possibly even tell me what I'm supposed to do next. Is she moving, or is it just her hair settling, hiding her face? In this moment, both of us still, I am so deep inside her, molded to her, I can feel her body's innermost pulse. Felt it throbbing. Finally eased my cock almost all the way out before slipping back, but slower this time, and waited, and felt it again, and then felt her cunt clench around me but without moving a muscle, seemingly, pulling me deeper. Without letting go, my fingers clenched at her hips open up, my body falling into a new rhythm. One, it occurred to me, not unlike when she had first gotten on top. Focusing for the first time since then. The impossibility of even beginning to describe this sensation: a fluency that matched my body's own indomitable steadiness. Nothing escalating, nothing held back, nothing aching but not sinuous either, not even sensitive. As if the world had collapsed to a point that I still couldn't quite feel except in the way I was holding it, carrying it. Heard her deep breathing resume, not a pant, something ... periodic. Summoning. Felt the change in the friction, her cunt continuing to clutch and to pull at me each time I thought I was coming up to the end. And all at once I suddenly know — I who knew nothing of women, then — that she needs this now, exactly like

this. That everything else had been pushing and pulling, any which way — fighting almost as much as fucking — but now she has fallen, not surrender or even a truce. Laying down a condition: that this is the place where she needs to stay. It doesn't need to be faster or harder, just constant. From the neck down, the entire curved slope of her back glistened with sweat, and from somewhere under all that hair, now, a low hum, a pressed whine, almost complaining, except I knew — in the same way I now suddenly feel I know everything — that it's not a complaint but a plea: whatever you do just don't stop doing this, exactly like this. Willing herself into stillness, concentrating everything down to this point, and the stroke, uninterrupted, has become so slippery, so smooth. Glistening, that's how thoroughly she is coating me. Pungent shadows, shivering as they rise. Skin pulling taut over her ribs as she keeps drawing breath, deeper, letting it build, the dark complex lines as her shoulders tense, her massed hair trembling, face down on the bed. This rhythm, clapping, unchanging. Stirring it, spurring it into life. The only part moving under her own power: her long fingers, both hands clutching, re clutching the comforter, desperately, shadows threading into her fists. And I know: I have no idea how long it will take her to get there but I will stay here forever, for as long as it takes.

The blue wordless music still playing.

I need to come back to myself — but where am I now? Beyond, the blueness is spreading and meeting the wan light from the soaped-over windows, and I am no longer hearing it, listening to her, but I feel the indefatigable beat start to lull me, and find for the first time my eyes drifting away. I am not leaving her yet. Except there, at the place where the brick wall and the wood floor come together, the weird shifting shape of our conjoined shadow. For long moments I just stare at this, almost spellbound, wondering how it has been summoned up, and feeling, oddly, completely at peace. As if its existence — this irregular creature shifting across

the floor, up the wall, back again — is somehow more real than what our bodies on the bed are still doing. That our bodies have somehow been set free from their own constraints, their own limitations. Inside, still, with this unconquerable energy — it doesn't matter how many strokes there have been, how everything in her is pulsing and clenching, furrowing, siphoning — none of that matters. I know: in the way that most matters, it has all been released.

The next impression. Emanations. Danielle, still in the same prone prostrate position, but her whole body totally slack. The feel of her unloosening around me. Face fallen sideways but still mostly hidden under her hair's disheveled tangles. Fingers spread in the comforter but no longer clutching it. When it came it had detonated deep inside her, not with sound but an explosive swell of breath, contained, and now being released in deep waves. Her hair fluttering away from her mouth before settling back into place. Fluttering. Only when this evened out did I ease on top of her, joining her stillness. Her warm breathing body under mine, adding warmth to her warmth, the side of my face against her damp shoulders and facing the wall. After gliding down some steep glassy slope, this new irregular shape has come to rest, at the bottom of an enormous ravine. How can I leave her here? I remember wanting to ask her, but it seemed like the wrong thing to ask, in the moment. In fact, there were no longer any words in me, at all, not for anything. But I still knew: separating meant some sort of definitive end. The silhouette, still there, between the floor and wall, means we are real. I am just as hard now as when we first started. But for the first time in hours, not a sound from the bed, only us. But already I can feel her, underneath me, start to stir. Time may have collapsed or it may have expanded; it was like trying to account for time passing in a dream. It takes so little to say it — I was here, and then I was there — but the act can take minutes or months. It takes time to understand the enormity of what happens between those two moments.

Next: in the kitchen, rummaging in one of the cardboard boxes near the sink until I came up with a pint glass (how did I know where to find it? I can't remember.) Filled it with cold water from the tap and took a couple long swallows, suddenly incredibly thirsty. Drank most of it off, and then filled it again. By the time I made my way back, Danielle was already wrapped up in the comforter, smoking, with the silver ashtray on the mattress beside her. For a moment I stood there, looking at her, then at the ashtray. A moment later she picked it up. Exchanged objects in a wordless pantomime, before lying back down.

She took another long luxuriant drag, exhaled a longer sigh of smoke, loose strands of hair still stuck to her forehead. Then: "Do you want some of this?" It was the first articulate thing either of us had said since getting into bed, however many hours before.

I'm not sure why — maybe it was the look on her face, softened, sensual, satisfied, but still watchful, appraising — but I took the cigarette from her. Across the way was the halogen floor lamp, still off, next to the table with the camera whose long telescopic lens was pointed right at the bed. For a moment I glanced at these, wondering if either might be able confirm what I had just seen. If I could go back to that room, I wonder if I would get up, do any of it differently. But I didn't feel like moving anymore, just then. She was still snuggled inside the covers, so it wasn't that, not exactly; more like the comfortable impression of her warm nearness, at rest. Only her shoulder lightly pressing mine, side by side. So I lay there on my back, thoughtfully puffing. She had nestled the water glass between us and replaced the ashtray on my bare stomach. Its cool circular weight. The damp mattress still holding onto that phantom warmth. The enclosed ceiling, far above, an unreachable black sky, starless and moonless.

"You know," I heard her say, "this is probably the last time I'll get to use this bed."

I couldn't tell if the music was the same track, or if the disc had ended and restarted again, or if the tide had gone out. "Where's the rest of your stuff?" as I handed the cigarette back.

"Already moved. Not that there's much of it. And this ..." she trailed off, even as her foot under the covers made a movement, hard enough for the springs to give a small creak "... was sort of ... inherited." For a moment, I wondered if that cloud was passing over her face again, but in the dimness I couldn't be sure. "But it doesn't fit anymore."

We passed water and cigarette, back and forth, in silence for a while. The steady beat of the sound. Each time she inhaled, the glowing tip briefly illuminated her face, the funnel of smoke from her mouth changing color as it came out, spread about. It occurred to me that I should have been tired, but wasn't, and then that she wasn't either. And then: even though everything had separated, parts of my body were prolonging it. Aware of a deep steady pulse in my balls, not entirely unpleasant. My index finger, on its own, absently winding, unwinding itself around the trailing ends of her hair, feathering it over onto my chest.

"So ... you're moving," I began.

"Hmm."

"When?"

"A couple days."

"Where on Rivington?"

But Danielle had already handed what was left of the cigarette back to me and gotten up and wandered over to the table, shaking another one loose from the pack. For an instant, the

flick of the lighter caught her, then brighter as the flame held her before subsiding into a soft glow as she inhaled. She turned in place. Turned again, her negligent curtain of hair covering half of her, almost. "It's different," she said.

"What's different?"

She had lifted her head, looking off towards the wall of windows. "It's not like this. This isn't ... wasn't mine." She went quiet, inhaling again. I still had the other cigarette, and was about to take another drag, but instead ground it out. The blue wordless music still playing around her. "I just needed something that wasn't so ... "

"Spacious?"

By now she had come back to bed, lying back as before but with her eyes still fixed on the window — already somewhere else. "When I was in uni I did a semester in Italy." She paused to blow a funnel of smoke out the side of her mouth. "Did you ever do that?"

I felt my attention start to diverge, wondering where this was going. "What, study abroad, or go to Italy?"

"Well, I meant the first, but either I guess."

"No."

"No to which?"

"No to both of them."

"The thing I loved," she went on as if she had already forgotten her question, "was how you could just hop on a train and be in another country in hours. We can't do that in Australia.

Or here either I guess. New York is no good for getting lost in. It's too ... angular." Again she paused, thoughtful. "It's romantic though, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Picking up sticks. Isn't that what they call it? Riding the rails? My grandma used to have this old 45, the Andrew Sisters. Played it over and over. She was a lot of things, but a singer wasn't one of them, but that didn't stop her from trying. She was intensely ... unapologetic about this." Her voice had gone wistful and candid. The flick of her thumb, at intervals, knocking the diminishing glow into the ashtray, the metal catching its glow. "I must have been seven? Maybe six? I feel like I was always six. But I would lie there on the rug in my living room, listening to her belt it out in her brassy terrible voice, and none of it ever made any sense to me. It still doesn't make sense: 'the whistle blowing eight to the bar'? What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

"But that was the allure. 'Chattanooga' might as well have been 'Timbuktu.' An impossibly distant place, full of mystery, likely imaginary. Does Chattanooga even exist? The only thing I knew about it was you could only get there on a train. It left Pennsylvania Station." Her eyes flicked over to me, stayed there for a long beat, before drifting and settling on the ceiling. "I actually went looking for it when I first came to New York. No one told me they'd torn it down."

"It's not that easy, anymore," I said for some reason.

"Nothing is." For a moment her mouth hanging open, like there was more to this. Her eyes moving restlessly. Then just the soft crinkled burn of the cigarette back between her pressed lips.

(Whether Danielle ever used this bed again is another mystery I never managed to solve. Months and months later, though, in my own bed one afternoon, I would hear another, somewhat different, version of this story.)

"You know," I started again, "I live in the East Village."

"I know. You said before." Again, nothing followed. I figured I needed a different, more direct, tack.

"Who was on the phone?"

"What? When?" Her perplexed tone of voice sounded so real the point I had been heading towards began slipping away.

"Before ... I heard you talking before ..."

Finished, Danielle ground the butt out, pressing the ashtray's cool metal down into my stomach. Swallowed the last of the water, exhaling another soft satisfied breath. "Oh. It's not what you think."

And I was just about to ask her what she thought I was thinking when she turned and set the objects on the floor next to her side of the bed. As she rolled back, the comforter fell away again, partly, leaving her reclined on her hip so exactly like an odalisque I had started to think it must be deliberate — the side of her face in her cupped hand, the other resting, at ease, along her flank — except no sooner had she unfolded herself when I lost that thought, and the other one

too. Unfolded, uncovered, like this, all her curves had become more pronounced. I could see — but more than see, I could feel — her eyes running over me, making me feel like I was somehow more naked than she was. Aware, once again, that my whole body was still entirely wired, steadily pulsing. Prolonging it, still. A look of bemusement settled over her face, taking over the rest of her expression, a faint smile creeping into her lips and her eyes. Bringing her hand off her hip, she began — very light, almost aimless — scratching around in the place where the ashtray had just been. Even just that — not even her fingers, just her nails' smooth laminate — was enough, and as I lay there, staring down as my cock stiffened up, resurrected, I knew she had noticed this too; it was the tone of her voice, the same indulgent bemusement, "What am I going to do with you?" She had turned her hand over, her short nails starting to wander — combing through, grazing round, meandering up — and when her hand took my shaft it was with the same aimless, idle grip, like it was something she had just found but wasn't sure she wanted to keep. "You don't have to do that," I overheard myself say for some reason, but already I could feel her grip growing surer, pulling, already she was leaning up from her lounging position, falling the rest of the way out of the covers as she brought herself over me, onto me. The faint smile still on her lips, now a low drawn-out whispering coming through them, it sounded like *shush*, and her eyes had turned into slits, and her mouth was still cool from the tap water, only that's not what it felt like as she began moving my nipple around with her lips, her tongue flicking against it until it was pricked so tight it felt like it might burst. *Shush* she kept saying, aimlessly crisscrossing my chest like she was still considering which way to go, pulling small plots of skin up into her mouth, between her teeth. You see, I'm doing it again. Except this part is somehow still so effusively clear, its minute sequence. Except already I am starting to lose sight of her. Hair bunching, unraveling over my stomach as it follows her down. Splits,

separates — for a split second, a gust of cool air breezing in, everything stiffening — but then descending, the brushing weight of her hair, the pushed warmth of her body as she settled, pushing my legs further apart, and she was still whispering *shush* until she was no longer whispering anything. Pulling me up into her mouth, just the tip, circling it with her tongue, rolling the warmth back and around the same very small spot. Now with her gaze level and fixed, not running but centered. Watching her watching me, I suddenly realized — even after everything earlier — that this was the first time she had put her mouth on me, and then caught myself wondering: what for, and why now? A moment later, I glimpsed an answer. It was the liquid look in her eyes, her lips moving around me like she was still trying to form words, only this is what she really wanted to say. Not to be taken in, but an offering. (Weeks from now I would torment myself: how could I have been so fucking delusional? Months and months later, though, I would understand that I had been right, in this moment, in a manner of speaking, all along.) It said: all hail the conquering hero, the one who has somehow managed to bring me safely through the gate — your reward. Is this why this part is still so unexpectedly clear? That she fixed it in place with that look, with that breath? Measured, intent, but also in search of acknowledgement. When I said I still carry her in her eyes, this is part of what I mean. I've always been too much in my head to think through what it means to give, to receive. How, somehow, we've been built to fit together — except when I glanced over to see if the silhouette had returned, over there, on the wall, I could no longer see it, lying down, and by the time I glanced back Danielle had already reasserted herself, climbed over my leg, like my cock was so unbelievably hard she could only work around it. Still slanting away, she had dropped her eyes, following them, going down, and I had a stray thought about making a grab for her ass but it was too far away, unless I was going to get up, except I did not want to get up, I could not even think

about getting up, it was almost like we had exchanged places from before, everything concentrating down to a particular point. Now it felt like she had found a better angle, because now I could feel her starting to work, moving her head in this swift, almost galloping, motion. Pulled off, but only to wipe at her mouth, and when she came back she was arched, cupping my balls with her wet hand, and I could have told her, I had started to tell her, before — there was no way anything was coming out of this thing tonight — except, once again my arms have abandoned me; once again, all I seem able to do is lie there, stupefied. Not just what she is doing, not the feeling — even if I was capable of articulating it, now, I had gone insensate — but the way the shadows were shifting along her flank — rippling, reforming; back sunk, shoulders arched — how she had sprung up, out, perpendicular — tattooed by the music, the deep-breathing shape of her smoothed into blue apparition, the room's inky dimness.

Take a deep breath.

Writing this, I'm realizing that I've reached the limit of my vocabulary, because each time I rewrite it, the picture — still there — remains obdurately incomplete. I've had to strike the rest, but know: nothing comes, except that's not what it feels like, it feels like she's trying to melt stone by slinging water on it — the sheathed feel of her possession, impelling — and if it had been for me, at the start, it's not like that anymore. Because now I can tell that she is really starting to feel it, that she has decided to keep it, and knew what she wanted it for, and knew how to do it. Has the bed started creaking again? If it is, I can't hear it, because now it's like she's trying to pull me straight up off the bed, except she keeps driving me down. She had moved her hand — the strength of her grip — but I had pried it away, then left my wet fingers there, measuring, like I did, my other hand drawing her hair back — before it had been shifting along with her but now it was everywhere — except no sooner had I done this when she tore herself

off, something deeper than a gasp escaping as she threw her head back, her eyes almost as wide as her mouth, glistening. Not an offer this time but an appeal — desperately ardent, ravenous almost — except I didn't even need to finish reading her look to know what she wanted since I suddenly wanted it too. Maybe the strangest part of all this is that everything else had been completely extemporaneous, or at least it had been for me: I had followed her lead, or had led her but without knowing exactly where we were going or how we would get there — but now, for the first time all night I knew exactly what I wanted to do before I did it. Enfolding her — how I can still feel her folding into my arm, supple and quick — I swung her body around the rest of the way, right on top of me. Pulled at her hips and felt her hitch back, backing herself right into my face. Pushed at her to make space, clamped and spreading her open as wide as I could, and as soon as I found her I realized, again — even after everything earlier — that this was the first time I had put my mouth on her, only this time I didn't wonder why. I just knew. What I wanted to do, and what needed to be done — she had had a head start, so to speak — and so I had to make up for lost time. So engorged I could barely move my tongue through her though that didn't stop me from trying, my mouth already so full of moisture I had no idea who was making it — briny and warm and filling my lungs with its heat, its deep saturation — and the only way to keep breathing was to keep opening my mouth, as my tongue went on drilling, my lips slobbering her lips — it was like I was making out with her cunt — my face buried so deep I couldn't see anything, hardly hear anything, and only barely aware that down at the other end she had fallen back on my cock, the thrum of her throat, pivoting, throttling. In my mind now this part has no interval — you lose track of time — no limit or moment separate from another, all of it compressed into a ball, humming as it revolves, as we kept going at it, just like that. Still blind, surrounded by her, trying to suck all the shadows out of her, but when I finally found her

clit it was almost by accident, and I might have let go, only she suddenly let loose this low moan, a keening almost, and even though I no longer knew what I was doing — how I would learn — I knew enough to keep holding on. Pulled it back between my lips, kept it there, even as she mashed herself harder back into my mouth, even as her breathes went on growing quicker, unmeasured, even after she went back to gulping me down, but now like she was trying to find a way to stuff the sound back inside her. If it was only going to be this than this was how it was going to be: the back of my neck not even feeling the strain, my face plastered but still working her over, until finally, from the backs of her thighs, up the length of her sides, her whole body began quivering, tremors building, transmitting themselves through my fingers, my nose, then abruptly released. Because as she hitched forward, I suddenly heard her again, this panting murmuring gasp as she collapsed, somehow still on her knees, her sopping cunt flaring open in front of me, palpitating, actually dripping, still close enough to smell but no longer in reach, only I didn't need to anymore, because she had come down into her hair, her face tumbling onto my leg like it was a pillow, overcome, so to speak, murmuring, not to me, to herself, "I just can't anymore."

Danielle just like that — half-rigid, half-limp, upside-down, splayed atop me — is the last part of this I remember. Sometime later — not much later, still dark — I woke up, my body curled into a tight fetal position on the bed. Every extremity — my feet and my ears and the tip of my nose — felt like different-sized pieces of ice, and when I turned over I saw that she had pulled practically the entire comforter around her. If it hadn't been for her hair, I don't know if I would have recognized her, or even known anyone was under there, that's how deeply buried she was. Try as I might — and I didn't really try very hard, some part of me resistant to waking her up — I couldn't seem to get any corner of it away from her.

The wordless music was no longer playing, though the speaker's blue light was still on.

I glanced at my watch — I hadn't even managed to take off my watch — and saw that it matched the clock: 4:51 AM (this particular detail is another part of this that is entirely true, though how, or even why, I remember this is anyone's guess). Getting up, I felt the hangover drumming in back of my eyes. Faint cigarette smoke between my fingers, other stuff not so faint and stuck in my nostrils. The glass I had gotten before was still on the floor on her side of the bed, so I filled it back up at the kitchen sink, swishing, spitting. Still, a taste like some sort of sour citrus mixed with some sort of paste. Also, my jaw ached, but not the rest of me, curiously. There was no towel in the bathroom, and apparently no hot water either, so I splashed my face with freezing water. Pissed in an insistent continual stream, as if my body was trying to empty itself out. Blankly fixated on my cock the whole time, not erect but alert, as if it might tell me where it had been, or where it was going. As I came out of the bathroom, I noticed again the dark entryway to the darker space full of freestanding false walls. Wandered over, not even sure what I was looking for — maybe the place she had disappeared into before, a habitable room with her cap and fuzzy jacket — and immediately found myself in a kind of warren. One windowless room after another, some with what looked like peeling squares of foam egg cartons stuck to the walls but otherwise equally empty. Except one — I kept going on even though I had started to feel like I might not be able to find my way back — the same as the rest, except in one corner a rat's nest of unplugged power strips and extension cords entangled in a small pile of snaking black rubber cables, or ropes.

The enormous room has detached itself from the rest and she is still where I have left her, in the enormous bed, hidden under the piled-up comforter. Somehow I have found my way back and my whole body is humming, but very different from before. Recollecting, but not with

pictures or words, just a low idling undertone. The air in the room, somehow, even colder. Like a meat locker, or a crypt. I picked my overcoat up off the floor, put it on me, but then continued to stand there, gazing at the jumble of hair. Then, for a while, I surveyed the blank space between the brick wall and the wood floor. A sentry, on the night watch, waiting for something to happen. Or for someone else to arrive, to relieve me. How long did I stand there? Without being conscious of having made this decision, I found myself sifting and separating the clothes on the floor. When I got to her skirt, I realized I still had to know what would happen to its crushed velvet color if I ran my hand up it. I was stilling fooling around with it when the folded-up piece of paper fell out. I hadn't been looking for this, earlier, but it occurred to me that I hadn't seen a telephone, anywhere. Maybe in some other part of the maze. I have one last impression, very clear, except it doesn't make sense: when I pulled out my pocket notebook, the pen that went into its spine was missing. But then, when I turned the notebook around once in my hands, it was there. For a long moment I looked at the pen, in the same way I was looking at everything. I knew I needed to leave some other note but had absolutely no idea what to write. So I crossed out my name on the paper but left my phone number and then added one word: "Levin." That seemed to be enough.

On the subway back into the city I fell asleep again, sitting up, and whatever I dreamed about I lost as soon as I woke back up.