

THE FABULIST — Short Synopsis

An unnamed first-person narrator (“N”) has spent decades attempting to tell the story of a woman he briefly knew as DANIELLE in late-1990s New York. He is going to try again now. His disclaimer at the outset: the things she says are often not what she actually said; the things they do are sometimes not what actually happened. Most of what they did was fuck, or at least those are the pictures he best remembers.

The novel operates on two levels simultaneously. On the surface: a man reconstructing a brief, overwhelming relationship with a mysterious woman — a noir mystery, a fable, a puzzle-box, and a love story. Underneath: a dialectical architecture in which three “Acts” are counterpointed by three explicit “Dilemmas,” governed throughout by a doppelganger logic in which everything is mirrored or paired. A surface reader gets the story. An attentive reader finds the architecture inside it. Both types may wonder who the title refers to.

ACT I / DILEMMA 1: The weekend before Valentine's Day, “N” — twenty-two, hyper-literate, socially inept, newly arrived to a pre-digital New York which would be more recognizable to Philip Marlowe than to a reader today — meets Danielle at a party in Brooklyn. What follows is an extended scene of competitive, charged conversation: Stoppard, Blake, Grappelli, and her argument that Levin — not Anna — is the real subject of Anna Karenina, Tolstoy's own doppelganger. They walk out together into the freezing night. Their first exploratory sexual encounter is rendered with deliberate explicitness, the novel's formal argument enacted for the first time: the body knows what the mind cannot reconstruct. Before leaving, and while Danielle

is still asleep, “N” crosses out his name on the note with his number and writes a single word:
"Levin."

ACT II / DILEMMA 2: She never calls. The months that follow are unearthed from old notebooks — cross streets stalked, dreams transcribed, a stakeout that mistakes a red raincoat for red hair. These obsessive “observations” are interspersed with scenes: “N” gets high with a colleague to turn his mind off; his college ex-girlfriend drops in, unannounced; a meeting brokered with KAREN, Danielle's friend from the party, comes to nothing; a summer intern provides brief, Hawks-style distraction. At a SoHo gallery showing Surrealist exquisite corpse collaborations, he understands that the Danielle he has been reconstructing is grotesque — his half of the picture, drawn without knowing hers. Then, months after he has stopped looking, she turns back up. Their second encounter — in an abandoned East River amphitheater — is the antithesis of the first: violent, dissociative, an obliteration of self rather than a revelation of it.

ACT III / DILEMMA 3: The most fragmentary section, covering the period of greatest presence. The happiness — if that's what it was — produced no documentary impulse; he was too consumed to write about it. What is here has been reconstructed from a handful of vivid pictures surrounded by blur. Danielle comes and goes on her own terms, never sleeping over, never explaining. Their one dinner together, in Hell's Kitchen, is the only real conversation they have had since the party; she talks more than anywhere else in the novel, about her imaginary twin brother, about her ex-boyfriend — VENN, like the diagram — about not wanting to move in circles anymore. “N” begins to understand that Venn is his own dark reflection, a man who fully embodies what “N” senses is latent in himself. Then Halloween: she dresses “N” as a

private eye, herself behind a Venetian mask. In the parade she tells him she's leaving soon. He already knows. In an alleyway, he begins relating the third Dilemma but then breaks off — he just can't keep cranking the wheezing wurlitzer — because as soon as they finish, she disappears into the crowd. Drunk, wandering the carnival streets, he stumbles into a squat and finds Venn — the doppelganger made flesh, the two men dressed almost identically — sitting on the floor with a phonebook. When "N" gives his name as "Levin," Venn tells him that's not his real name, searches the phonebook, and informs him he doesn't exist.

CODA: Almost a year after the party, "N" attends a play — a campy, terrible noir send-up — and approaches Karen, now its femme fatale star, with a letter for Danielle. Karen bursts out laughing: "Danielle? Is that what she told you?" Every detail of the letter instantly gone, "N" takes back the envelope, crosses out her name — the same gesture he made on the note in D#1, when he crossed out his own name and wrote "Levin;" mirrored, inverted — and stands there, pen in hand, unable to decide what name, if any, to put in its place. The novel ends there.