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The Incident

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Title: THE INCIDENT

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December 7, 2017

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*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the
City College of the City University of New York.*

“*Whoa!* lights! and it was raised and curved, and it was sunny so you could see the city out of one window and the statue out of the other, and the platform was like elevated but we went *back* underground, and it was just you know really cool to finally get out and do it, to go somewhere I’ve always wanted to go but haven’t, but I don’t know I didn’t think too much about it.”

Well that was it, that was what he had seen, done, felt, gone through, and he described it perfectly, knowing she actually got it, actually understood the rush up and out of his body, like he was vomiting emotion, happiness, because these days those moments meant so much. She was going back with him, was becoming aware of why with everything that ruined him in the past few weeks that moment had mattered. No way she didn’t feel this. But why was she staring at him, why were her fingers playing piano on the countertop—a beautiful island countertop, the reason he was here—the pictures didn’t lie—was it marble? It was hard to tell if she was looking at him or looking through him, and he didn’t want to act forcefully because she might not appreciate that, be willing to deal with a guy who spoke in a tone like that, so he wasn’t going to beg for an answer, but all the same she should say something, not go mute, unless she was drawing out the moment because she agreed with him.

“Here as in here,” she said, thrusting her chin to indicate their immediate surroundings.

“No, no, I know,” cutting her off, covering his mistake. “It’s great, perfect. It’s got character.”

Right, of course, what an idiot, not when he came to Brooklyn but when he came to the apartment. He’d misread her but she hadn’t caught on. She hadn’t seemed too interested in him, they hadn’t made much eye contact, and she kept walking to different corners of the rooms and moving a moment later, kept motioning as if he should take in this luxury, how she described it. What of the apartment? It wasn’t a luxury but it was the opposite of his old place, it was a walk-up not a high-rise, and the living room was longer and narrower and not a small square, the windows had wooden panes and not those of industrial school buildings, the wooden floors felt like timber and not hard plastic, the marble island was the touch you didn’t see anymore, and the sun poured in through those living room windows. Little things like that. He pictured wine glasses and hors d’oeuvres and funky jazz and red and green leaves falling from the tree, tapered jeans and sweaters and everyone speaking eloquently; it was a dinner party apartment, exactly what he’d imagined, not that it’d ever happen, because he didn’t have any friends anymore, not in the city, no more college friends, they hated him, he was too embarrassed to see them; thinking about them was humiliating enough. Why even move here? Across the river wasn’t across the country, Brooklyn wasn’t Seattle, even if he’d never been to either. Because he was hearing so much about it, slice-of-Manhattan stuff, people who said they liked it better because it was low-key but close to the city, which was fine because the feeling that he was part of something important disappeared the moment *that*

had happened. All his friends within a five-block radius and his laundromat and restaurant and bar and deli and gym on the block ceased to matter. Cabs on the corner and the Empire State Building right there and the nights out over and over again and this continuation of college, this notion of cool, it all meant nothing. He needed a change, instant and drastic, at least that way they'd talk about him instead of make fun of him, not that he thought about them, he really didn't.

“Exactly, and one bedroom at this price is unbeatable,” she said and he wanted to throw something at her. They both knew there was only one bedroom, why she'd have to say it, to reinforce. She couldn't possibly know this was choice, not necessity, but she should.

“I'm not too worried about it,” he said.

She squinted, folded her arms, and what was that, a smirk? How dare she. But he had to take it or she wouldn't give him the place, that was her power, and now she was going on about the neighborhood, and it was all so phony, her silly spiel, because the truth was that the street was no quieter than the next one and the apartment was no more unique than any other, the kitchen cabinets weren't newer, the plumbing wasn't state-of-the-art, the landlord wasn't on top of his game, the bathroom's spatial elements weren't modernist—it was just a bathroom. He knew this stuff was probably all true, but to hear her fawning over these perks like they were a gift from the heavens made him sick. He wanted to interrupt her, curb her with a wave of his hand, but her annoyingness, if he blocked out what she was saying, was kind of cute. She kept tucking her hair behind her ears and looking at his chest and glancing away, and once she got going she spoke in breathless

chunks. To examine her: a female, mid-twenties, probably just out of college and living close by. Wearing not a designer suit but a cotton T-shirt with blue-and-white stripes, relaxed professionalism of the outer boroughs, the T-shirt so tight you saw the outline of her bra, and whether she had large breasts it appeared like she did, the kind of female you instantly think about wondering if it would be possible to enchant to bed, he thought, a bonus if she's pretty, which she was—thin eyebrows, thin lips, no blemishes, dark features, everything very proportional, maybe Italian, and pleasant-looking, nonthreatening; he guessed she was a role model for a younger sister.

Apparently her endorsement had ended because her hands were back on the island and she was sounding rehearsed saying, "What can you say, it's not Manhattan, but it's still New York."

"We're just living in it," he played along.

"You want to get in now?"

"Yeah?"

"I've had six people here. None had it in them. You know?"

No, he didn't. This was complete nonsense. Did she actually know anything about housing markets, trends, history, or did she just show apartments? Had he researched the realty company? Brooklyn's Homes, it sounded fictitious, a scheme run out of a basement, enticing young women and firing them after brief service. What was her service? They could pull him off the street and he'd sell this place in seconds, it sold itself, it was legit and so was the price, though who even knew where to begin with that. Real estate was a mind game. You told

people what they wanted to hear, tricked them into anxiousness, toyed with their values. She was desperate, trying to scare him.

“You’ve seemed the most interested.”

He was looking past her, at the brick wall in the living room, where he would put the couch. “Oh yeah?”

“Most people don’t inspect each shower tile.”

“What if they do?”

“A keeper.”

They made eye contact, it was awkward, they glanced at the island. That was the guarantee: here, now, in this apartment, where you could have the gall, you wouldn’t care for consequences. On his first trip to Brooklyn, the first day of his new life, to pull a stunt like that, it was a dream, it was real, it was happening—this was the small talk—and he’d have the story to tell. Except whom would he tell?

“Should I like my chances?” he said slyly, letting out his accent, which made him feel self-conscious and also for some reason feel intelligent.

“The sixth should do the trick.”

She was lying, she said six earlier, so what, now she was leaning forward, pressing her breasts between her arms, saying, “You never said why you’re moving.”

She was coming on to him. Logic dictated kiss her, but the marble island was too long, he couldn’t reach. He needed to be standing next to her, and that meant walking around the island, which he couldn’t do because she’d be watching

him and what if he was wrong, what if someone came in, not that anyone would—it was *her* apartment that she was showing to *him*—but what if there was a mistake and she got fired and he got prosecuted? That was possible? Answer her truthfully. Explain everything. Open up, put it out there. She seemed like the kind of girl who'd listen, who wouldn't make you feel badly, who would care, who wouldn't judge; he realized he felt this because he realized she was chewing gum. But what was he going to say, that a month ago he walked in his roommate slash best friend in a precarious situation with his girlfriend and fainted and woke up hours later with them nursing him and had headaches throughout the night and ate soup and crackers while the three of them sat there not saying much and wondering if this was something they'd laugh about one day or if their lives really were ruined? That he'd stayed in his parents' Midtown apartment and cried and screamed and broken things and gotten drunk and approached them at a bar and yelled at them with names and vague threats until they jumped in a cab without a word, that he'd passed out on the sidewalk and woken up to tourists taking his picture and quit his job and scheduled an appointment to visit the first respectable place in a neighborhood getting media play? Well why not. Maybe she'd pity him, you couldn't not, and he could get this thing, the revenge desire, he could get it over with. Saying it was different, though; getting the words out was impossible. He'd be admitting he was weak and pathetic and it'd probably have some alternate effect and he'd lose the place altogether. Besides, for all she knew he was a suave guy. She seemed not to care that he'd flubbed on, *What's the first thing you thought when you came here*; her stance said as much; those breasts

were his invitation to do something Marjorie had held him back from—he'd never had a one-night stand with a forty-year-old with two kids, never had his eight minutes with a foreigner in an East Village bathroom. She was retribution, that's what she was, and he just had to play it cool because he's that suave guy being propositioned by some kid real-estate agent with a seductive smile, the tiny lift of the corner of her upper lip, the breasts pressed together, like she didn't know what she was doing, right, she'd done it before, but.

“I guess you could say family” (why did he say that, it wasn't true) “and I just feel comfortable being here. After being in Manhattan for so long.”

“So you have been here before.”

“Yeah—no. Well.”

“And you said you're how old.”

Her nerve, he was older than her. Not that he looked down upon younger people, but in this situation there was something about being shown up by a younger person—a real quote “estate” agent—that made him crave her authority. It also had to do with the lighting in the room, sunlight that was pouring through the window in the living room and illuminating the whole space. The first thing she'd said when they came in was *This place gets so much sun*, and it was true and was the first thing he'd noticed and was, after a quick glance around, enough; but he could tell by the way she'd said it she thought she was professing grand knowledge that she the agent possessed, and each time he realized he loved the apartment because of the light, he felt a sense of inadequacy with his entire life

that makes nonviolent people think about inflicting pain. Upon the world. How long if he took the place till he stopped thinking about her each sunny morning?

“Doesn’t matter, it’ll be on the lease,” she said.

The procedural talk was killing the mood. The faint smile gone, and the shoulders came down, the breasts no longer smashed, though she was walking toward him and if there was a time, it was now, except they were somehow already so close to each other, he could smell her shampoo, it smelled like shampoo, he would bring his neck above her shoulder and wait to hear her breath, he could only see her sandals, and still she needed to be a step closer, just a step, but she was gone—did she pirouette backward? did he imagine that?—leaning against the counter, arms crossed, her look business, her tone friendly.

She asked how long he’d been in Manhattan, and he admitted only two years, not that long, and she asked where he was before, and he wanted her to stop asking questions but he got sheepish—she knew maybe what he’d tried?—and said, “College.” “Where?” “Indiana.” “No way.” “Yeah.” He wanted to leave. Someone else could have the place. “Me, too. Same year.”

She was showing him up, she knew Marjorie, knew about him, his relationship, his meltdown, she’d always have it on him. Had he given her his name? She asked where was from.

“Long Island. You?”

“Pittsburgh. Camp friends went there, the campus was beautiful, I loved it.” Past happiness to latch on to, to share with a stranger, it made her day.

“How’d you end up there?”

He wasn't prepared for this, some girl from some place wanting to talk about a choice he'd made years ago.

"I don't know, bunch of friends."

"What are the chances?"

She said it like it meant more, she played the name game, none registered, and though she said wasn't that strange, she believed connection, however slight, led to privilege: she was offering the place at a reduced fee, and though the money wasn't the issue he couldn't come out and say he would've taken it anyway, and he was locked into an apartment he wanted but didn't want her to know he wanted.

He followed her down the two flights of stairs and the whole idea back up there seemed like it had not happened. How long until move-in? Ten days, she'd told him, but if he asked again maybe it'd be tomorrow.

"When's move-in again?"

"Ten days, I think."

"Right, I remember now."

They stepped outside, very hot for early April, finalized next week's signing, parted—his back was to her—and she called out: "Don't forget, it's Rachael *Wasserman*, not *Wasserstein*. You wouldn't believe it but that's one of my coworkers."

She said it so lightheartedly and turned so quickly she was flirting. Thirty minutes ago, after her introduction, he'd forgotten her name. Now he wanted her.

She was leaving probably to an afternoon, a few more showings, drinks with friends, something fun, enjoyable, tolerable. Could he join? He didn't have afternoons anymore.

The subway station was in the middle of the neighborhood. Maybe there weren't too many people around but there was something about being here. He didn't want to go back to Manhattan. He wanted to sleep in Brooklyn tonight. He wanted to move in now. He wanted his old life back. He wanted to wake up with Marjorie and have her toast ready, even though he hated the unspoken expectations. She had called to see if he had a book of hers. A book. When did she even *read*? He didn't hang up, slam the phone, curse her, tell her to die. He said it was on the table in front of him. He said he'd leave it with the doorman. He asked if that was it. She said she couldn't think of anything else to say. Couldn't think of anything. He said he could think of a lot of things. She said what were they. He froze. She said she had somewhere to be. He had nowhere to be. She said bye. He did too. He sat there, slumped into the kitchen chair. Ten minutes passed. Twenty. He stood up. His legs were numb, the right asleep. He hobbled to the couch, his parents' couch, a nice one, fine leather. He tried to turn on the TV. The remote wasn't working. He threw it out the window. He hoped it hit someone in the head. He wondered if he'd be charged for murder. He cursed, he tried to cry, he couldn't.

Behind him, up the hill, turning the corner, she didn't look back. He missed her already, missed her more than he had ever missed Marjorie, their thirty minutes passed forever. What about her, Rachael *Wasserman*? She had graduated

with him in college. She was in some sorority, or maybe Hillel. It would be a step down. But that stuff didn't matter anymore. He could get away with it. Her phone number was in his phone. It didn't get any easier. It would never work. He couldn't wait for next Saturday.

2

The girl was thinking something, her scooted back in the chair on wheels and leaning forward with forearms on the table, the phone in her palm, hot pink nails very obviously meant for something and whispering into the receiver meaning something, what she'd done when she saw him after the look away and the look back. It was early, earlier than he would've liked, though he wasn't sleeping much. The tight brown curls of her bangs like they were wrapped around a pencil made him realize the something never would come and maybe he should leave it alone.

The phone rang and the desk guy without covering the receiver yelled to her about a unit as if confused. Maybe it was going to be like this the entire time, as simple as writing checks and not getting evicted. Maybe the whole system was on some sort of gentlemen's agreement. Maybe he was getting screwed. The loop on the flat screen above him promoting the business, the gumball machine filled with Skittles, the doormat folding over with each opening and not getting fixed.

"Been helped right," said the desk guy leaning over, asking for the third time, a smile emerging. This is what he does every Saturday morning and gets

paid for. Was he even eighteen and did he have a serious deficiency. A problem of forgetfulness? If he did you sort of feel badly.

An aggravated acknowledgement that says I've been here thirty when you said five and I'm going insane and how are you not?

Desk guy kept on smiling in response. It was demeaning. He'd done that to a kid in a business class project, a kid who acted like an equal and should have known his place. He had listened, dismissed the kid affably, with silence. Now the eighteen-year-old voice doing it to him.

Time had been passing in weird, uneven ways, chunks of it like a blob expanding and morphing and stretching and shifting but never breaking. He went to bed and woke up without attention to time, he never went to bed or woke up, he was on the couch watching basketball, he was stumbling out of bed to the bathroom (his urine was always yellow, he wasn't getting enough fluids, and water tasted spongy) and feeling he could get up and start the day if it weren't three-thirty in the morning. What day would he start? Maybe at nine he'd wake up and be impossibly alert or fall right back asleep and wake up at noon so incredibly rested and so incredibly angry that he had to fill the hours with lots of sitting and staring and waiting for something and more sitting before the game came on. Watching the local news—who watches the local news? Something was wrong. His mind spinning, just not the usual way, not from activity to activity, work, gym, a movie at Kips Bay, a restaurant with good specials, motion sickness on a plane to Cabo for spring break and Marjorie and Ben jesting him in good fun he'd thought then—that was it, had to be—and just a passing wonder that if that

moment had happened again would he still be here in a Brooklyn realty office stocked with black and Latin young adults situated at computers with mega coffees and working the phones in a job he couldn't imagine a human possessing the drive to do. And yet here he was and there they were. This was supposed to remind him of his fortune. It didn't.

Nothing did. Each day in the time blob he managed to make his way outside, because if he didn't cook when life was good he wasn't about to start now. That was one reason. And outside, disappearing into the people, the traffic, the noise, the commotion, the world, was almost pleasant. But he'd see the German couple in front of the Museum of Modern Art flipping through a tour book and laughing in the way that meant inside joke and seethed with anger. Brooklyn's different, he reminded himself.

A guy—skintight corduroys, orange hoody too small, black-framed glasses—walked in, rubbing his bearded chin. He bantered with desk guy. *All right, all right, just tell her I stopped by.* The guy cursed and left, doormat flipped up.

“453 Sixth Street,” called out phone girl into the reception area. Hard to believe she didn't know it was his, he thought. “One bedroom. One bath.” She squinted at the computer. “Dishwasher, island, new plastic tops, cabinets redone, walk-up, the windows one.”

Desk guy leaned over the reception desk. “It's you right?”

He shook his head.

The kid pointed at him; phone girl understood and said, “You can go in there, she’ll be in in a minute.”

“No, it’s not me.” This barely over the clutter of the office. “It’s not—”

“Feinbaum.”

“Yeah, but—”

“That’s you.” Almost yelling, rather voluptuous.

He didn’t want to but had to approach her, he felt the desk guy smiling; he was next to her, leaning over her, peering at the screen. It was his place. “But it’s marble,” he said aloud not to anyone, his voice frail because he hadn’t spoken much, and as he stepped back she turned and her breast grazed his hand.

Surprisingly firm, the breast, very distinct, the graze. Deep cleavage, line of sight to her stomach, he looked elsewhere. Was he flush, bulging? No. He was thinking of Marjorie, wanting to have his way with her, and not sexually.

He would’ve been more embarrassed if the phone girl or the desk guy understood what had just happened. But they didn’t exist anymore. No one did. Marjorie did. What made sense? Could he *make* sense? It was Ben who’d introduced them, Ben who’d known her through a friend at camp, he being shocked Ben hadn’t pursued her himself. Since sixth grade Ben always a little better looking, a little smarter, a little more athletic, more of a personality, things that said absolutely nothing about him, except that was how he—Michael—talked because that was how he and Ben and their friends felt at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen: girls stacked against each other, one with a little better tits, one a little less annoying, one a little more

likely to go BJ the first time, one a little less likely to care if you cheated, which in particular was Marjorie, he'd always felt. Was it irony that she *was* that? The way it violated a bond between he and Ben was beyond humor, it was greater than what had happened in the flesh—not just cheating but betrayal of the purest kind. Michael was always the one Ben looked up to because he wasn't blowing through college women: Ben complaining to Michael random hookups “desensitized” him to sex; Michael conceding he sometimes wondered if he wanted to “just feel” someone else; Ben telling Michael how lucky he was to have someone; Michael understanding but at what, the risk of missing out? “Dude, it's all the same,” was Ben's validation of Marjorie for Michael, who had said, “I guess.” Looking back, Ben wasn't just wrong. Ben was an asshole.

Betrayal of the purest kind. But part of him wanted to pick up the phone and talk to Ben as if Ben weren't guilty. Marjorie he hated. The blame goes where? It goes to the girl. Ben a scumbag but had no part in opening her legs. No signs, came from nowhere. Marjorie did it intentionally, like she knew he couldn't be without her and wanted him to suffer. She knew she could survive without him, she knew he couldn't survive without her. None of this, if even true, explained why. Sitting at the table waiting for the agent, this one-window corner room—to sort was a start. That he was even at this point was a start. Five weeks. Get a grip. You're fucking better than this.

“Michael.”

Timed well and cheery. A cute girl was across from him. A folder on the table with documents sliding out, what he'd pictured would signify the change,

wore on him that he might be trapped in the stuffy room signing papers and pretending to read fine print for an hour. At least he wasn't waiting. Her hand smooth and grip firm. She looked different. The same clothes? Hair the same, nothing about the complexion, though the Jewish thing had thrown him, possibly interfaith parents, teeth he noticed, big teeth. No, the stripes were vertical and thicker. He'd been well? Sure. Good. Yeah, it was—it was good, it is good, everything's great—a quick week. Meaning. Maybe that it didn't seem like too long ago they'd you know been in this situation. Like seen each other. Right, he said; not like seeing each other *seeing* each other, he clarified. That's funny, she said; she reached for her earring. "I guess," he said, and she took his first hint of smile as her opportunity to ramble about how weird it was they didn't know each other in college, something she just couldn't get over, sorry to bring it up, but maybe he knew this guy from Long Island or one of those places like that—

Like that?

Well there was just something about them.

Yeah.

"You're going to make me explain," Rachael said.

"Not force but."

"Don't you hate that."

They'd assured him in that night of nursing after the faint that it hadn't been going on behind his back and he'd believed them but now he realized that his walking in on them meant recklessness, meaning comfort or boredom or familiarity, which is what drives you closer and closer to risk to the point where

it's not really risk because you can't lose anything, which meant who knew how long they'd been doing it. He didn't know. He didn't know. Did he?

"The worst," he said. "You were saying."

"Oh, just that you know them—in a bar they came in and there's a presence, an angle."

"Nah."

She meant like an edge, it was kind of funny, she thought, as did he, but not laughing funny. She didn't laugh either. This was a conversation and they weren't being cheeky. That wasn't something she did; she didn't mock him. She wanted to know. And he had to admit the haircuts were all the same, she said like *come on*. He and Ben had the same haircut, he didn't say. "Always in the same way, that slicked back tough-guy—I shouldn't be saying this, it's too general. And were always getting in bar fights."

"I averaged six a night."

She gave a little laugh and twisted her hair around her index finger. She reached for the folder, blurting out names, Goldsteins, Selkovitzes, the Hirsch twins. No, no, and no—sorry, he said. She said she sounded like a *yahrzeit*. Long Island's a big place, he said; he'd lived in Manhattan for two years. She knew. Oh.

"Ariel Grossman."

"Yeah, I went to high school with her."

"Friends," said Rachael.

"Yep. Used to be. Sort of."

“What does that mean?”

“Oh what can I say here.” Hadn’t he already said it last week? he didn’t say. “Mutual friends. . . . *Wasserman*. So who is *Wasserstein*?”

“Just another girl who works here.”

“You figured you’d be like best friends.”

“She’s nice.”

“Right.”

“No just that—”

“You don’t like her.”

Rachael paused. “I mean do people do that to you? Sorry. Unprofessional. Not like— . . .” She rolled her eyes at Brooklyn’s Homes’ reception area. “But you know, you go to a public school not Michigan and they judge.”

Michael said huh.

“They’ll judge Michigan anyway. Harvard. Not like I care, but you can tell what she thinks. Like a badge or something. Listen, we’re all in it together.” Was Rachel Wasserstein prettier than Rachael Wasserman? He liked that she wasn’t preaching. “We have the same job, who cares if it’s bullshit.”

“Way to be professional.” No—smarter.

“Entitlement. Just entitlement.”

When he thought about it, the touching was the hardest part. Her skin belonging to someone else. His head would never again rest on her chest. You’re together and alone in a room and you touch her nipple and it’s warm, sweet, almost emotional, it leads somewhere, a gesture you only share with one other

person, transcending the touching in all truthfulness, what you only realize now when the same act leads to a 911 call and an arrest or, if not, some really big explaining to do on your part and a conscious thing you might never get rid of.

“I don’t mean it like that,” she said. “It’s a stupid trope, the attitude—if there even is one. What does it even mean, the hair, the dress, what it’s supposed to say about you I don’t know.”

“Because they all do.”

“Yes. Sorry, but yes. That’s what I mean. They probably don’t even think of themselves like that. But it’s not ignorance. Why should they? You’d see.”

Phone girl and desk kid, they would be staying here until dark. It was early now. Dark was far away. The stuffiness of a room with a door he was free to leave at any time but in which he chose to stay. This was his source of power.

They reviewed the lease. Her breasts were pressed between her arms and she was saying, “I’m having . . . well I’m not supposed to not really not *supposed* to—if there are actual rules—not really ever done it before like this anyway sort of a professional thing . . . this party tonight we’re having.”

“It’s very professional in here,” said Michael. He felt badly. “I mean, cool.”

“A get-together more really. Did you”—her shirt designer expensive or exchange store cheap didn’t as much make a difference as it did tell him something he couldn’t explain now—“want to come?”

Yes came out quickly, he surprised himself. But how she spoke: a rush of words and eye contact with short breaks that felt long and heavy, breaks for him to speak (which he didn't). She moved quickly through thoughts but never covered a lot of ground. She was a talker. She spoke differently than people. It wasn't that she spoke differently. It was that he heard her differently. And it wasn't that he heard her differently. It was that he thought of her differently. The week of anticipation had changed him. You don't get over her maybe ever, but you do move forward. Eventually. Time now more concrete: he would be spending the evening with this girl, and this checklist of eat a sandwich and salad and floss his teeth and buy new boxers and hit the dry cleaners and find a good liquor store encroached upon on his conscience because human contact was scary in its new beginning, and he was overcome to say things he knew he shouldn't.

“What I love about the place are the little things. The light.”

“It's an angles apartment. Like the museum at school.”

“IU?”

“The art museum. No right angles. So cool.”

“I know,” he said, suddenly regretting having never once in four years visited the art museum he passed each day to class. “So cool. But this one, just the bedroom, the corner moldings, the windows, the island.”

Gotta have an island, she said. And not just for yourself but what's better for parties, he said. Very versatile, she said. Naked she looked like what? “A lot you can do with marble,” he let slip. She stood up. “A ton.”

“You drive that thing?”

Michael stared at him. “How else did it get here.”

“You need a license to drive these things.” “Come on.” “Where’d you get the money?” “Dad.” “You’re unemployed.”

I’ve saved, Michael said. You never saved anything, said his father; spent it all on baseball cards rotting away in our closets now the moment you got allowance. So bring them to me and I’ll cash them in, said Michael. You’ve got to get some blinds, or big curtains, said his father, people can just see in here.

“To be a truck driver.” She was back in the room? Their presence was always better in theory. She bent down to examine a cardboard box’s contents. “Not a U-Haul.”

Why was she compelled to do everything for him? he said. “Because you asked.” That didn’t mean literally do everything for him; he knew how to move furniture. But he didn’t know how to arrange a room, she said. “It’s putting stuff where it goes.” Nothing’s changed since college, she said. Should’ve heard his voice when he called to say Marjorie had made things “like a lot better.”

In college Marjorie had arranged his rooms. Senior year it’d taken her a nanosecond to see that the desk in the other corner with the television atop the skinny dresser flowed better. Another five minutes to move the bed into the center rather than against the wall with his head touching the windowpane. A cream-

colored throw rug. The hamper in the closet under the button-downs. A couple of hours assembling shelves. Friends and visitors complimented him on the setup.

She walked to his bedroom holding a cylindrical canister of pens. This made him think of how what of his father he didn't really know. His father was (sitting in a desk chair and talking about professional basketball) balding with tan skin and long gray sideburns, not necessarily what made him sure of himself but maybe part of it. His father had a way of getting things—extra airline tickets, free dinners, comped hotel rooms, better seats at the theater. His father was the youngest of three but everyone was within four years; his father was the most successful of the three but not by much. His father complained about taxi rip-offs and championed public transportation and how his son didn't need a car but flagged cabs to the airport; his father at a Seder with everyone on airline price hikes being unreasonable but flying everywhere and suggesting only that he'd stop taking commuter planes to Boston. His father not once showed an interest in fashion but was more dapper than the a young person residing in New York City, his son. Not that Michael felt a shadow.

“Living alone's a hell of an act,” his father said, able to seamlessly transition from the Knicks' problems at point guard to a lifestyle he hadn't partaken in in forty years, when the truth was his father hardly watched basketball games until the playoffs and knew nothing of his son's new apartment until he stepped foot in it, ten in the morning, his son having just signed the papers and finally, officially—though now that he was here it felt like everything had happened so quickly—gotten on with that new chapter or scene or phase or act or

whatever this was. “I mean you tell me where the stop and start is. Not that everything blends together. But remember your place because it becomes a part of you you’ll be thinking about for a while.”

For Michael this rang true and felt like what he knew and wished he could have verbalized first. The tone, deep and nasally, with no trace of conceit, Michael wished had been passed down. Michael asked what he was talking about.

His father had seen *it all*—if *it* was not—“no way”—exclusivity but the world through that prism. It wasn’t his choice to be brought into what he was brought into and he knew that. Not guilt he’d felt taking his parents’ offerings but abuse. There’d been no sense of accomplishment. Absent of fulfillment. When he’d met his mother in school he’d known it was a matter of time. They moved to Long Island because that’s what they’d thought of even with the nice house and yard and the city apt available. That was what you did. Not a dream, what you did. You got out of the city and it meant nothing but that people who stuck around had this existence where they couldn’t get the city out of their system and it showed and was sad, almost tragically sad, even when it was your friends.

Michael wondered why they didn’t go back.

“Because you never go back. You take what you have and what you are and that’s what you hold on to. You let everything else rotate but you don’t change, you don’t conform, you set the price, and then it’s not really even you moving, it’s things moving and you staying put, it’s your control.”

Michael’s grandparents from Europe to Queens, his father and mother from Queens to Long Island. The stops weren’t important for where they were or

what they said about the place, Stuart was saying, they were nothing, they were stops in places. It's how you view the situation you've arrived at regardless of the place that matters. "You'll feel it," he told Michael. He glanced outside. You gotta love the light, he said. He said that if he felt it, you would feel it.

Michael wondered whether he was telling the truth, though why would this guy—your own father—lie to you. The mystique of parenting. You don't know your father the way you know the people you grew up with, so what he does or says leaves you hanging on if he's putting you on or if he's like that, if that's typical of him. His father was not his peer and probably not a guy he could relate. But his father had been through "it all."

"Help your mother," he said.

Michael's mother walked out of the room wiping dust off her sleeve not having found what she needed in the boxes. Stuart tracked her until she disappeared in the bedroom. "Fifty-seven but like the first day I saw her."

"Dad, I mean." But Michael was thinking he'd slept with Marjorie unprotected four weeks ago. Did he need to get tested? No physical ailments, but it wasn't since high school that he'd been briefed on symptoms. What was that about how when you slept with someone you also slept with everyone they've slept with? Ben's first below-the-belt experience in a nook behind the mall parking lot where the shadow kept the floodlight out on that late-November night when Michael waited with the car running for Ben's signal to drive across the lot. They'd planned it in the Feinbaum living room after school and told the girl, their friend from the synagogue, over the phone on three-way because that was what

they did in high school, when everyone knew everything about everyone and knowing was cool and knowing in a small group and withholding from the masses was cooler. And he'd even been an instigator. And it had worked.

Michael said, "When are you guys leaving?" "We got here twenty minutes ago," said his father. "I've got stuff to do." "What's the job situation like?" "It is what it is." "You should be interviewing by now." "Okay." "What do you have this week?" "A few." "Who?" "No one." "I thought you said you had a few." "Not this week." "I said this week, you said a few." "None this week." Michael wanted his father to say he just said that. Instead his father said, "You're too valuable to be out of work."

His mother reappeared. "What happened to all your stuff?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing here."

"You did everything?"

"No, but it's clear you have a lot less stuff."

His father crossed his legs. "So he doesn't have everything. He was going to schlep everything to the apartment, hang out who knew how long, then schlep here?"

"I could've borrowed a minivan for this," his mother said.

Michael walked to the kitchen and splayed his forearms on the island. "If you're going to act like this why not just go?"

"You shouldn't be driving that thing, anyway," said his father.

“He can drive a rental,” his mother said. She turned to Michael. “Didn’t you used to have plaques and pennants and basketballs?”

“I’m twenty-five.”

“I remember you used to have so many picture albums. So many of them. You asked me to buy them, you asked me to develop pictures from camp, I mean hundreds of them, and then you’d arrange them.”

“Well, I don’t know, Mom.”

“They couldn’t’ve just disappeared like that. I thought you might want something from the old room.”

“I really don’t know. They’re probably . . .” he trailed off.

His father dangled his keys. “Twenty minutes to Manhattan. Mom’ll stay here, we’ll get everything you need. It’ll be easier with two of us. No traffic, Saturdays aren’t what they used to be. No trouble at all. You and I.”

Michael’s mother said, “Then why did you get that van, Michael?”

“He got the van, he didn’t get the van—does it matter?” said his father.

“The issue, Stuart, is there’s a piece of him missing.”

“If we think that stuff makes up our boy, Marsha, then who are we?”

“Aren’t we just agreeing with each other?” said his mother.

“Yes!” His father started to rise from the chair. “We’ll see you in an hour.”

“Sit down.” Michael’s own voice stunned him. It was louder than it’d been in weeks. “I’m not . . . we’re not going over there. There’s nothing to get.”

“I don’t want you to be without all your stuff,” said his mother.

Stuff. The pictures albums were in a midtown dumpster. His plaques and pennants were in pieces in a dumpster. Smashing them felt worse than throwing them away whole. He'd forgotten that when you break something you have to clean it up, and that cleaning it up takes time you wish you didn't have.

"It's pointless. Honestly I don't have anything."

"Well I've got to get something to eat," said his father. "Anyone?"

"I'm almost done here," said Marsha. "Your room will feel like your room, I'm working on it." She rubbed her hand over his shoulder.

Michael shut his eyes, sighed, slouched into his mother's grasp, comforted. Stuart Feinbaum walked past his son, who now stood up straight, an inch shorter than his father and feeling much shorter. His father rapped the island with his knuckles. "Plastic," he smirked. He looked at Michael. "Don't expect anything here."

They wanted to know everything, these voices. Dead voices, familiar, voices. In succession it happened, it felt standardized, like it was supposed to happen that way, like for every person in a similar situation it happened that way: one beat, another, another, until the moment it ended, when everything opened up.

He'd picked up, said hello. Marjorie and I are done, he said. She picked up, said hello. I said Marjorie and I are done, he repeated. They wanted to know everything. How did this happen? He said it just did. Did he want to talk about it? He opened his mouth but nothing. He choked on his words but nothing. They were silent. No one said anything. The line was dead, you heard empty cave echo,

the land line echo, until a woman's voice, the woman who he came from, who raised him, supported him, stood behind his life, loved him in the unconditional way only one woman ever could, this woman said, in a completely normal tone, *Are you still there?* He needed them to raise their voices so he could get something out, but they wouldn't. They waited and waited and he didn't know where to go. Nothing would come out. He had nothing to say on the matter. But that wasn't true. It wasn't a fact. Because the fact was that he couldn't speak because of what hurt him the most, and what hurt him most, what pained, what made him feel the blankness of nothing but the understanding that it is over and it is never coming back, was what she said next: *I'm sorry.*

His parents' throwaway apartment was a lineage gift. Michael stated he was going there and they didn't comment. "There should be clean sheets in the closet, and you know where the light switches." "Fuck, Mom, I know how to turn on the lights." Once there, his mind took over. It raced and he did what he could to corral and sift through it. He'd never thought so much about nothing. Thoughts welled up and passed, a million per second, complete incoherence, just no way to make sense of them. Marjorie should be shot, something like that but not quite, Ben should be maimed, something similar but not even close, and he always arrived at how he didn't pick up on the whole thing sooner, though what he would have done with that information was what he was trying to avoid thinking about because that meant pouring over all the missed signs to find a beginning. But what if there was no beginning, what if it just happened, one day, out of nowhere? It was impossible that it would not have eventually come out. But seeing the

infidelity not through the prism of a monitor or the censor of a live voice or the barrier of a written note but through his own eyes was not just a reminder that he'd been duped and humiliated but was an instant affirmation that to the person he cared for most he was not good enough. Who the fuck was this girl was of course the first thing he considered. But as the days accumulated and the thoughts piled on top of each other, the thing shifted to something far more troubling than who the fuck was she. Who the fuck was he?

Texts, calls, emails, these instant communicative linchpins: gone, disintegrated into cyberspace, but the remains: his phone, his computer, what he still had to look, to hold and think of a way to explain to himself what it meant to be holding a device that linked him with a person on the other end whom he once talked to all the time and no longer could. He and Marjorie spoke when they woke up, a short call, no longer than a minute, and now that was a world away, and the world away was why *I'm sorry* stuck with him and crippled his speech.

Michael can look in the mirror with a thick forest green towel wrapped around his waist and he can replay all this over and over again and he'll always want to scream at himself and say shut the fuck up you motherfucker get a fucking grip and hold yourself together, but he's not yet comfortable enough in the new apartment; it's not that he doesn't know who lives above him or below him or on either side of him but that he's a little scared of a piece of property in a strange land, so he mouths the diatribe as if he were screaming but doesn't allow sound to come out. And this is when there is an overwhelming part of him saying (when somehow it's crept to eight-thirty in the evening): you've been doing this

for so long and now you're just sick and tired and actually you're quite bored of the questioning and the wondering and the judging and the thinking and dear god—the *thinking*. He can't know if it's the pastrami sandwich he ate three-fourths of or the long steaming shower he took or the anticipation of what may or may not occur this evening, but finally, finally Michael is thinking he can get back to normalcy. Panting, he rushes out of the bathroom, leaving the towel in a heap on the floor, gets on the computer, and touches himself, already hard. There is a fingertip of shaving cream on his right earlobe and a few whiskers needing to be removed, neither of which he knows about when he closes his eyes and comes into the tissue. There's still time so he remains in his chair, washed, clean, pure, drops of whatever dripping down the center of his back, and it's a pleasant feeling, because for the first time in weeks, all he's doing is sitting.

4

Rachael Wasserman showed up at the bottom of steps of his brownstone and said it was strange that she'd probably spent more time in it than he had. Michael said it was all his stuff in there now, and Rachael Wasserman had her own situation to recall.

“When I moved to the city my parents literally showed up at my doorstep. Not that I'm still in high school where I'm embarrassed, but they're completely out of touch. I mean in college they were always the last ones to show up for events like parents weekend and I'd just stand there while all my friends would be

with their family. So I blew up at them once, felt really badly about it, because it's not like they're trying to hurt anyone, you know, so when I come to New York they're giving me the it's-so-dangerous talk, how they're going to be there from the crack of dawn, and when it comes time, guess what, they're at the front door before my alarm goes off at like six a.m. I'd been in Boston for a few weeks then came down and stayed with a friend in Murray Hill and was waitressing and literally moving one block away, and not an avenue block but a city block, a short block, so I didn't need the help. It's late summer and the humidity's just crazy, and all these people are on the corner walking in circles, sweating into the sidewalk, and leaning up against a fire hydrant are my parents in their parents clothes and my dad's got a huge cell phone in a carrier case attached to his belt and he's in socks and sandals and a baseball cap with the what do you call it brim thing completely flat and straight and long to keep out the sun, and my mom's clutching her purse under her arms folded across her chest so tightly you'd think she was going to squeeze the air out of herself, and when I come out of the front door holding a stack of sliding drawer crates with the same back pack I've used since high school already making my back so sweaty, and okay, I admit, I was a bit hung over, my mom stands up and goes, *Hi sweetie!*"

Michael was thinking Rachael Wasserman spoke like a Biblical storyteller he remembered from a radio program during the Sunday morning carpool to synagogue.

"So we get to the new corner and I'm standing outside this new apartment by myself—the worst part is it was a sublet and I knew I'd be moving in six

months—we're on the corner of Thirty-fourth and Third, and I look up at the Empire State Building, you know, but the glare from the sun is so strong I can't even look at it, and I'm feeling a little light-headed cause we'd been up all night and I see these two girls doing the exact same thing as me, they're moving, except they've got the black SUV parked in the No Loading Zone and aren't getting a ticket, and the movers are unloading dressers and beds off the ramp and straight into the door, which the doorman is holding open. They're going to the doorman high rise. I'm going to the fifth floor walk-up next door. I'm up this early and gross. My parents are transplanted from another decade. The two girls have makeup on. They're wearing black leggings and tank tops, designer, I could tell. And the sunglasses, they're wearing those, too. They're trying to lug huge camping bags from the car to the door, each one on one end, and they're really struggling. Five steps from their building they stop. One of the girls starts whining, It's too *heavy*. The mom, dressed exactly the same as the girls, runs over and says, Put that *down*, you're going to hurt your back. Then the mom says, Go upstairs, we have help. And the girl whines, It's hot. And the mom says, You have *air* conditioning. And just as they're about to go into their building, they glance over at me and stare with their mouths hanging open. Then my dad rolls up his sleeves and says, 'Better get started, the fifth floor's a long way up!' He walks past me, and I look over at the girls. Their postures don't change, their facial expressions don't change, and they just turn around and walk into their building."

Michael wasn't sure what she was talking about. He said, "What'd you do?"

“Moved to Brooklyn.”

Michael said, Right. He thought about her bellybutton, and washers and dryers in his parents’ apartment he’d never used.

“I’m talking too much, I know it.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“You were saying you’d never been to Brooklyn. Well . . . here it is.”

Leafless trees that would be quite beautiful in a few months transparent so you see the structures as the foundation, and even though they’re just buildings they’re *not* just buildings when they’re here as opposed to there, i.e. the binary BK-Manhattan. And not beautiful the way his backyard and pool were in Great Neck but beautiful in the way the city can be. They walked along a quiet avenue, the occasional laundromat or bodega on the ground floor of a corner building. Mainly brownstones, some red brick, garbage and recycling bins taking up the concrete garden space. The tallest building was a church steeple some blocks down. They sidestepped children drawing hopscotch grids with thick pieces of chalk. Cyclists were not deliverymen, they wore denim and no helmets, nor were racers in tights. A charcoal sky, a crisp air. A different air, a simpler air.

“The thing I love about Park Slope,” she said, “is that it reminds me of Bloomington. Indiana. Obviously. The streets behind campus, Second, First, Maxwell, of homes with yards and woods but not suburbany. Not the same thing, but the same feeling. It’s the calm and quiet, and there’s lots of light, like you were saying. The park’s right there. No tourists. But tons of bars, restaurants. That feel. It’s a young people’s land but it’s also a place for families. You don’t get it

back there, in the Midwest, not the diversity. And you don't get the relaxation in Manhattan. But you still have that New York flavor. The perfect mix."

Michael realized he was breathing hard. Did everyone in Brooklyn walk this fast? He glanced at Rachael Wasserman. She walked with a purpose, looked at the ground a step in front of her. No pausing for cars but there were people out, plenty of them, couples and families and every ethnicity you'd care for. Lots of people walking dogs, stopping to let dogs sniff each other, to pick up their curbside droppings. Her bra strap slipped from underneath a black sleeveless shirt and she pushed it back up. She shaved, he had a feeling, not waxed. A plane flew above them in the same direction.

"And I've got a good group here. House parties are back in. Not that they went anywhere, but you'll see. A few more blocks, they're on Butler. You'll learn the names quickly, doesn't take long. Like Lexington, Park, Madison, Fifth is Bergen, Carroll, Garfield, President, Union. I'm really into this street naming stuff, if you can't tell. But we've passed that—Union Street—there's a train stop down there too if it's ever night and the F's running wacky, the R; but I'm talking about bars, too. I feel like the bar thing was college, you know. You get a fake and it's illicit so you're there and it's exciting you know because we forget now how freshman year is the first time you've lived not under the roof of your parents. There's so much energy—boundless energy. But I'm honestly so happy life doesn't revolve the bars anymore. I'm all for drinking, but it's so loud there and wouldn't you rather be at home with your friends because you have couches and control the volume, and it's not as pathetic as, I'm gonna sit at a bar and take

shots with a bunch of girls—that’s how they say it: *girls*. Not that everyone’s like that but you know what I mean?”

“I do know,” he said languidly.

“I *do* know people who talk like that, and I’m not judging. I’m scaring you, hah, I know. I get in moods like this, when the weather is finally nice, even though it’s not that nice.”

In the neighborhood dense with hallways of vegetarian restaurants and coffee shops and thrift and apparel stores shutting down for the evening—they were, after making two turns, on a street called Fifth Avenue—they walked through a grocery store parking lot, the biggest grocery store he’d seen in New York City, hopped a concrete barrier, and were on a dead-end block of two-story row houses.

She wiped her hands of dirt and stepped forward, before stopping. “Did what I was saying at least make sense?” With big brown eyes not pleading. Three weeks ago he didn’t know a street like this existed. And who talked like this? She had a lot of friends, from everywhere, he understood. “I think so,” he said.

Now calm calm calm calm calm! says a guy wearing a flannel who’s raising a can of beer. “Here we have what we have here.”

“Fucking authority, can’t even speak,” jovially from across the room. The music’s not that loud so each pocket of people by the stereo, in the kitchen, on the couch (quick glance you’d say twenty people but more like thirty-five max) can

hear him, which flannel assumes all ought to do, lest they miss an idea, swirling about for centuries, finally explicated in its most organic, logical, obvious form.

“If I were drunk you’d know it because I’d be a tycoon.” Flannel turns serious. “But it was unbelievable. No commoner, not these guys. These were smart kids. These were Ivy League kids, kids who didn’t want to rot in a cubicle on the phone twenty hours a day. I’m telling you the talent was superb, but it was that the product was top dollar, I swear, and then they knew people, people who’d pony up because people actually buy this stuff now, the sugar babies with the slicked back lawyer or the fat cat he-he financier on their arm, the guy who funds it all, they want him walking around looking like him like he’s got the culture covered too—the market’s there—it was all right there for them, people wanted that shit. They did nothing wrong. Fuck they did everything right.”

Flannel’s goatee is thick and groomed, his eyebrows bushy, his nose sharp, his cheekbones angular, and yet his physical appearance is not so charming: his head, despite its length, seems scrunched, his eyes are beady, his lips frothy. Most important, though—his demeanor, his inflection saying as much—is that he knows he atones for his handicap with his personality: he truly believes what he says, and how he says it puts into people’s minds that he is equally as attractive as a man born handsome. *Anyway . . .*

“And then they fucked it up. No one thought about the press. No one checked the first shipment, the second, the third, the fourth—no one gave a shit! Let it ride hot into the store. Gimme a break. People are gonna pony up five-and-a-half-plus for a misprint? Misprinted baseball cards have value, that’s a

collector's item. The Declaration would be worth billions if Hancock had forgotten the H-A-N. That's just how it works. But don't you think if you're gonna plaster your name all over your jeans, if you're gonna embroider it in cursive on the belt buckle, you should at least spell it right? Fads like that, the market's open then it's closed. Get your Levi's for sixty, if you want to be practical. But if you're going to get into a niche you better not screw around. And they did."

Laughter and head shaking because was he (now sweating) riled up or was he joshing everyone? In Michael's ear Rachael whispered, "He works for a homeless shelter."

"Heard that." He jumped up, partiers turned away. He pointed at Rachael, pecked her nose. "You better have come. Who's your boyfriend?"

Rachael slapped his chest with the back of her hand. "Friends. Michael—"

"You're Michael too?" said Michael.

"Chester." He eyed Michael, stuck out his hand, they shook; Chester's hands were gloves.

"Rachael, what's good."

"I sold Michael his apartment."

"You've got bills" (throwing back a beer, wincing).

"Through Homes dummy. It's too early to be wasted. Wasted as in you call me in the a.m. saying you can't find your cat."

"First summer day's special," and he glanced at Michael.

Michael wanted out. This did not feel right. His hands were in his pockets, no, hanging free, nothing to lean on to, just standing there, the tallest one in the room? His fingers extended and contracted, again, again. Rachael and this guy Chester—his first name was *Chester*—they had a connection, a rapport, these names they were dropping—in front of him, it wasn't too kind, where *was* he? At least Chester lived here. Did Chester live here?

Chester and Rachael carrying on an itemized, obligatory, small talk Q&A, and now Chester shoving a beer in his face. “Only the best, kid,” winked, smiled—Michael saw it now, the gap between Chester's two front teeth, and more: Chester's big gums, all Michael could concentrate on, that gap, those gums, the teeth—Chester had the teeth of the forty-five-year-old. (Friends or more than friends?) Chester called him *kid*. Michael aware of the rather weak party; the rock music; the grimy rug; the too perfect without much light and thus probably fake plants hanging above a window; the dirty, open blinds; Chester speaking.

“You want to know my theory? They got cocky. They thought they were going to be some sort of cultural revolutionaries. You know they could've fixed the labels—you know *someone* was watching, you *know* the factory workers saw it. No one wants to admit a mistake, not when you've got that money on the line.” As if truly stymied: “Weird, don't you think?”

“What's weird,” said Rachael, “is that you would think a person would care what you think.” Chester smiled; Michael felt he could also. Rachael said, “Genes bowed out because the guy giving them the cash lost the cash in a divorce after his wife found another wife in Switzerland.”

Chester took a swig of beer. “Please. I mean what do I know but please.”

“And I don’t feel badly because of those kids. But you’ve gotta have the fortitude for that and it’s demeaning when you pretend you’re something else if you ask me.”

Michael looked at Chester, who mouthed that Rachael Wasserman was clinically unfit for society. Michael’s jiggled the can, finished the drink.

“Impressive, my man,” said Chester. “Thy fridge awaits. On the house. And it’s not even my place.” He backpedaled toward the deck, which Michael saw was accessible through a bedroom. “Join me, us.”

Michael and Rachael went into the kitchen, square, compact, some notches above project housing but not many. You sense the cabinets and drawers are sticky. Dirty dishes and cartons of takeout cover counter space. Rachael turned on the faucet and elbowed a cereal box into the dish rack. “How do people live like this? See, I care, and I don’t accept mediocrity.”

Michael was standing behind her, in front of the fridge, examining the dozens of photos stuck with a magnet. He did not know these people, not a single one. They were faces of people who lived in the same city as he, and they might as well be alien beings. They were at parks and in stadiums and hugging and goofing and being serious and with children and family and friends, all totally normal things, but they were not familiar, and might he meet of all them or none of them.

He said, “I know exactly what you’re talking about.”

They stared at each other, the silence maybe the gulf between them or perhaps the key, the link: his compliance. Why for her this moment seemed so peaceful, why she seemed so content, why she was grinning and why might she cry, when for him this moment was increasingly unbearable. “Can I have a drink?” She said open the fridge. He did. It was packed with Tupperware containers and bags of vegetables and possibly every salad dressing. It’s a war zone in here, he said. He heard, *Bottom right*. He crouched and slid open a drawer marked *MEATS*: beer bottles stacked on their sides. He grabbed one, was about to rise, dropped to grab another. She said thanks, how about sitting.

They pushed through some people and flopped down on an enormous vomit yellow corduroy couch that was terribly comfortable and with its dark brown stains and shredded arm looked like it’d been pulled from a dumpster. In front of them was an empty fish tank. They faced away from everyone. Michael said, “You’re not going to get, like, fired?”

She scooted next to him and leaned in. “The music—what?” He repeated the question sort of into her ear. She snorted. “Wouldn’t be the worst thing. Except for that money thing.”

“Because I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Trouble? Don’t even think about this; it’s so wrong. Where are the kids? You’re not one of those people. Not to demean adults, but we’re the kids. Plenty of the latter when we’re the former. Did I say that right?” She looked for a light to judge her bottle. “Hmm. Well. Won’t ever know if it’s the drugs or not. My point is: there’s time.”

“No, no, no, I’m not like that,” he almost cut her off, finding a spring to his voice, “Me and my friends, all we do is . . . and I’m not about . . .” but he just as quickly felt self-conscious and fumbled over his words. He heard himself say, “If need be, I can get reckless.”

“Good because if I’m going to crash a party I need a partner in crime.”

“So we’re like a team?” and he moved his knee the smallest distance closer to hers that constituted the action of moving and not a millimeter farther. He gauged reciprocation. Impossible to tell.

“Just like in the movies. I’ll be Oliver and you be Hardy.”

“Who?”

“Doofuses.” Old Jewish greaseball comedians she wanted to talk about, Groucho, and Sid Caesar who she didn’t find funny against the grain of parents. Michael took long sips of his beer and interrupted, “Wait, so you don’t actually know anyone here?”

“Not really.”

“Then who are these . . . people?”

“Midgets, animals, and maybe some of Chester’s friends from upstate. Is this a problem?”

He wanted to know about Chester; tell me everything about Chester. Well, she said, he’s a man of regional mystery, note I didn’t say international, he can be seen wearing a black cloak, he read *Richard III* during his bar mitzvah, he helps the poor but serves himself, he has three brothers and a sister and is the oldest, he

likes cats, he eats a lot of burritos from chains, and he runs five days a week in shorts you and I know as short-shorts.

“Is any of this true?” asked Michael, unsure of being put on.

“Yes, all of it. It helps?”

“I mean . . . I don’t know.”

“Not in the slightest.” She crossed her legs toward Michael and tapped his knee with her index finger. “But what if I told you that he was once engaged to be married but broke it off the night before?”

“Interesting. You’re like a spy.”

Two men with beards and a girl in a knit reindeer sweater and were playing a drinking game that involved state capitals and very little drinking. One of the men, who was wearing steel-toed boots, kept sneaking peeks at Michael, who kept missing the man’s eyes. Rachael kept talking and Michael kept nodding to the point she called him a dissenter. He grinned in way meant to show off his profile, resulting in a stilted smile. But not his fault: he was on his fifth beer but, had lost track, could have been his eighth, and she was keeping pace and they were blabbering and slobbering on their shirts. Michael complimented her attire and received a *Why thank you!* which he correctly identified as sarcasm. See, if she were going for a look she might do a bourgeois something or other, but she was fed up with what looks forced upon her—in other words, she hated how diffident she felt in a look because the look meant: not her; in other words, with the look she couldn’t be herself because she knew other people felt the same way

about the look; in sum, and that is why she does not do fashion (this came out with pauses and a scrunched face, a burp, and an apology).

“But you’re fashionable,” he slurred.

“Et toi” (her pointing to his jeans and button-up and the outfit’s crispness, like bacon).

“And it’s . . . cute” (he was fiddling with his empty beer).

“Et toi.” He looked at her quizzically, but she was onto, “We were just talking about you.”

“The great stuff, I know,” said Chester, standing before them, smiling wildly. To Michael he said, “Glad you could make it—from the city? Bet you won’t find green over there. Yet you indulge in none of this terrible, terrible apartment.”

“Michael’s in Brooklyn now, idiot, and we’re having a good time alone, thank you very much,” and she and Chester instantly deep into an argument just to argue: the definition of party crashing (you’ve got to know someone who knows someone, i.e. me, otherwise you’re weird, he said) and its ethics (once you’re in you’re in and there is no responsibility, she said). She was ticked off but it was okay to talk to him like that, and vice-versa: they were long lost pals who never get gauche, or maybe brother and sister type, but regardless they were a pair of some sort. Michael was attuned to them and nothing else. He played heightened sensory observer to make the moment larger than it was: significant of relationships (friendships) working: he and she could end on this note and tomorrow over coffee it’s like it never happened, unless it accumulates, piling on

piece by piece, so that one day all substance has vanished. How Rachael came to be great friends with this guy he could not fathom; Michael was distinctly impressed by Chester and nothing more than that, an impression. But Rachael was sticking up for him (Michael) slash defending herself: “Sometimes we don’t want to mingle with people we’ll never see again, and don’t show off because one of your friends has outdoor space. I can go real estate on you, if you want. Do you really want that? Because I will.”

“You’re just jealous I’m not worried about what happens next.”

“And that’s why I’m leaving: goodbye!” Rachael sprung off the couch and out the door.

Michael (she said *I?*) looked at Chester helplessly. “She can be like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“But she’s cool. Great friend. *Great* friend. Love the girl.”

Michael said it was nice to meet him and thanked him for everything. No, really, it was his pleasure—and hopefully they’d see each other soon. What was it he did again, just, you know, to remember for whatever reason? Homeless shelter—organization. Cool, man, that’s real cool. (Michael looked around the room.) “So I should probably go after her.”

“Yeah, man, take care of her, go.”

Chester with a pat on the shoulder—he knew what Michael didn’t?

Rachael’d said something?

The moment he flew through the front door and hop-stepped the three stairs, the wind hit him, harsher than before. He was worried he'd have to chase her and all that comes with that. The dreadful feeling that she anchored him into the world and the boat was pulling away. The very real possibility she vanished. Dreams have a way of never coming true. Brooklyn without her—unthinkable. She was Brooklyn. He couldn't go over *there*, what were they doing over *there*, over the river? But if she wasn't here was he hailing a cab on this avenue to the left—Fourth she'd said?—and high-tailing over the bridge, the Brooklyn or the Manhattan? He realized he knew exactly where *they* were; could pinpoint the location, could smell the hallway pizza grease, could touch the warm brass door handle, could walk in and say hi and be in his room; could be there. Absolutely possible. No chance whatsoever. That was gone, that was never coming back. Rachael Wasserman was instrumental. All he wanted to do was lay next to her. At a point in life where they could just lay. She'd seized him. She *was* him. She was here *for* him. Rachael Wasserman was born to be with Michael Feinbaum. Rachael Wasserman was the girl you meet when you're done for and you wonder why it had to happen this way, and if it could have happened any other. Rachael Wasserman was gorgeous. Rachael Wasserman was standing on the sidewalk, hands in jean pockets, arm straight on body, shivering.

He asked if she was okay. She said she was cold. She added that this was a blustery city, more than Chicago, you know it's not called that because of the wind. Here and there, he nodded toward Manhattan. She said, "I meant what I said. In there."

“Me, too. What I said. And what you said. You know what I mean.”

“You don’t think I’m being weird, do you?”

“Why, did you just get out of a bad relationship?” he said like a comeback.

“It’s that I’m just me. And me is eternally uncertain. Not to make more out of it than there is, but you’re drinking, you’re thinking, this guy comes out of nowhere . . .”

They just kind of knew to walk beside each other, to retrace their steps. Garbage cans tipped by wind, trash swirling on a corner, no one out but likewise partiers. They brushed arms but nothing more. Michael didn’t know how it would end because he couldn’t imagine it ending. The mind swirls when altered and throw this on top.

In twenty minutes they were at his corner. They faced each other. He was going to tell her everything. Back in her spunky voice, no trace of apprehension, she said, “Tell me” (her nose approached his clavicle) “what would you do if you were about to die?”

He was startled and uncertain but drunk and thrilled. “Be with the people who mattered,” he said clumsily.

“I’ll tell you what I’d do. I’d just do something. And then I’d smoke pot for two hours. Tell me” (her step forward reciprocated) “have you ever wondered about civilizations that may or may not be there?”

“What was your major?”

“Breaking away. Just kidding. Sociology. A deep-sea adventure somewhere that isn’t on the map. Explore the underworld, see the fish, strangle

some tentacles, body move on octopi. To learn about alternate universes not here and not there with their own languages and numeric codes and . . . through a kaleidoscope? I'm feeling—”

Her tumble into his arms was planned or maybe not but the dankness of breath and a clammy tongue like in ninth grade alone in a tent cleared out by your best friends because it's been arranged for your first, something you never forget despite the thousands afterward. That's what she tasted like: his first. His arms were at his sides and not going anywhere. He jilted his hips backwards, bent his neck; his jaw cranked but quickly loosened and lubricated because she wasn't attacking, which he had thought she might—yes, he thought about it, her experience, or lack thereof. He had closed his eyes the moment of contact. She, not quite.

5

When very bored you think about for some reason the friend who was the unluckiest guy in world. The friend was the one who got a drinking ticket walking home from the bars when others scattered into the woods. The one who got caught with three grams of marijuana in the dorms when the ones on the other side were the suppliers. Who got caught urinating in the bushes on the dead-end street because an off-duty officer was coming home from family movie night. The friend was the one who got into a bar fight because some kid was talking smack to his face. A week later, lounging around the house, watching college football, he

pointed to his cheekbone, where a vertical cut had healed halfway, and said how he was an innocent bystander, how he wanted nothing to do with the kid, to which someone said it sounded fishy to pick a fight for absolutely no reason with a kid you don't even know, and he got defensive, swore he was not the instigator, had no reason to be involved, and the faces in the room thinking: *right*. Michael Feinbaum was in that room, sunk into a lazy chair. Michael said, "Why don't you just not get in fights?" The friend shook his head: he was always in the wrong place at the wrong time, how did this happen, it wasn't his fault, why did this always happen to him . . .

Michael, taking a late-morning shower, didn't particularly care for the kid. The kid was your best friend one day and moving on the next, everyone felt this way. The kid would step in the ring as a boxer and afterward say, I don't know why he kept hitting me in the head.

Michael toweled off and stood in front of his bedroom window. Could anyone see him? The oak tree blowing in the heavy wind. Cloudy. He had things to do? Even a half-day of waiting was annoying. Very bored. He should read a book. A way to pass time. All he possessed were a few novels he'd read in high school. In youth his parents urged him to read but weren't enforcers. He needed a bookstore. Did Brooklyn do chains or locals? Bookstores were underground, a narrow paved staircase from the sidewalk, literally below ground. They smelled like carpet in wall-to-walled three-story houses. Some had two stories but the second story was pin-drop quiet and accessible behind hidden shelves. Brooklyn: land of secret staircases. He could walk and find one. It seemed a hassle. Not a

big television guy, though he had a large, beautiful flat screen for live sporting events. Well he'd maybe have it on during breakfast since he didn't receive a newspaper like his father, but that had been Marjorie's routine, reruns of sitcoms before work.

What of the kid who got in fights? What the kid was up to. The kid was a certain type of person. He was not a loving kid. Maybe he could love. The kid was a jerk, but Michael also knew he wasn't; he'd seen the kid volunteer at the rec center coordinating basketball and volleyball for the wheelchair bound, seen the kid burrow away in the library on a Thursday night. The kid was a certain type of person.

Out of the window: a robin and blue jay on a barkless branch. Michael had been forced to a nature camp as a boy, and even though he had no interest in species he understood that what was before him was not normal. The birds were fascinating, their beaks frenzying into the branch. Michael felt he realized that maybe the most off-putting thing about situations and incidents and other such forms of deviance was perhaps that the charge of the moment peaks in the moment and plummets immediately, only the residual feelings create the sensation that what happened will linger forever, is what he's think-feeling.

Take professional American football. A Miami team went perfect in '72 playing only fourteen games. Plenty of one-loss seasons since then, but perfect's a whole new level. One loss probably means the team got luckier than a team with three losses. This used to not matter: treat a loss as whatever. You have a bad day on your opponent's good day. So be it. But now writers and commentators were

talking perfect, and so the losses matter more. Now a loss revealed weakness, a loss crippled the season, a loss resonated. Everyone caught up in perfect and the foundation wilts away: imperfections make or break you. Imperfections carried weight. They didn't, not any more so than they did years ago, but that's what people thought now. Consumed by perfect convinces you the bad moments matter more. What if the bad moments were just bad moments and not suggestive of tragic flaws, of personal failures, of an inability to live happily? Wouldn't recovery from them be easier?

The birds flew away. He grabbed his phone from the nightstand and called his dad. Stuart Feinbaum answered after seven rings, wanted to know what was up.

Nothing, really.

Okay—how are you feeling?

Michael was feeling good. In fact.

Good to hear—anything on your mind? In fact what? “I’m sorry but I have a client in five. Let’s talk tonight.”

“I was just thinking.”

“Okay. You were thinking.”

“Thinking that I sort of, like . . . understand.”

“Understanding is rarely bad.”

“About . . .” (he craned his neck as if the ceiling fan would help) “. . . it made sense . . . like when I was thinking it . . . but I’m not . . . how to, like—”

“Michael.”

“What?”

“I’m interested but—”

“Put mom on the phone.”

“I’m at work.”

“She’ll understand.”

“She’s at work too.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I need to go.”

“I have an interview.”

“Good.”

“I . . .” (how was he to explain the circumstances, at the root of which lay the gap-toothed hairball whose sixth sense was empathy and who consoled without posturing, and this *girl*) “I’ll just tell you later.”

“Michael.”

“Yep.”

“Just remember the number-one rule.”

“I had the same job for two years.”

“Be real.”

This area of town was where New York went weird. They’d called it *down there*. Streets cut up each every which way: a wrong turn could cost you hours. A caged basketball court with no roof: the sky’s the only way out. It’s tough in there. Controlled by refs but screaming and trash talking. Spectators you had to nestle

between to get a view into the cage. Zoo games going on while everyone stood—so much standing. Hookers or are they cross-dressers? hustlers or bums? teenagers playing stereos or teenagers hawking stereos? Dirty shops and hot dog stands. Corner-standing men in jumpsuits, and they were juggling, like carnival freaks. Bands of junior high cutters rocking box-top fades and neon purple sashes (boys and girls). Sidewalk book bazaars—had the sellers read the books? A hardcover about Watergate next to a stack of Swedish porn videotapes. A fleet of baton majors. The Salvation Army bell-ringing guy.

Back then he would have cabbied it, but Chester had said that if he was coming from that part of Brooklyn the F was on the money. Chester had said be in the back car and head down Sixth, as in against traffic, take a left on Carmine, at the corner, MacDougal. Michael was squinting into the sun at quarter to four and overheating despite no coat. He went left on Carmine and the honks faded, the engine roar softened. Oddly he was nervous. The freaks at West Fourth put a scare in him. Don't hang around there too much. *Down there*. In a way this was below him. If he failed, they could find out. Ben, Marjorie. *They*.

This all would've been unnecessary without that boredom. All week he'd done nothing. Sunday morning in bed with a parched throat and a first thought that it was a dream, followed by a fleeting rush of excitement that it wasn't. Having never slept here before, the walls confused him. He checked his phone for hard evidence. Her name, each letter a titillating symbol—did he know anyone with that name? Surprisingly no. Shockingly, even—the notion that six of ten Jewesses have her name. Her name was a good first-time name. He tingled,

stirred, he felt sixteen. She was calling him, his phone was vibrating in his hand, and if he answered her voice would be on the other line and the girl didn't call the guy unless she had the audacity to say let's do it again and to know he'd say yes. Of course this didn't happen. Waking up in jeans conveyed as much. The possibly fake phone number of a girl who kissed you because she was drunk. Back to being alone in your great apartment in your great neighborhood. So much had changed—there'd been weeks of change—and, really, what had changed?

He knew you waited. How often had Ben been counseled to give it three days? Ben didn't take advice. Ben was confident, Ben succeeded, Ben had the game down. Ben's not relevant; she's relevant; make her relevant. He stretched out with a yelp-yawn, pushing beige sheets his mom had tucked tightly, preparation to call, knowing he would get a voicemail. *Rachael's not here . . . but her answering machine is!* The shape of her he missed, and he wasn't thinking about her body. A personality he didn't realize until it was gone. Really, what had changed?

“Hey . . . it's Michael. Just wanted to say I had a fun time and sorry for calling this early. In the morning and, you know, after the night. Wait, it's actually . . . holy shit it's two. Um . . . I guess I hope to hear from you soon. See ya. I had fun, a lot. You have my number. Right. Okay. Bye.”

She called back in eight minutes. He hadn't moved or shut his eyes or opened his mouth. He sat up, flinging his legs over the side, looking out the window.

“Rachael—hey.”

“Hey, can’t talk for long—cute message—but me, too. Is that going our phrase—me, too? Listen, when I said I can’t talk for long, I really meant it. I’ve got a showing” (volunteer the streets and I’ll just so happen to be in the vicinity and if we play it cool, who will notice—trouble, trouble, ah, you thought I forgot) “that I’m late for but I had a moment and was in the bathroom. So there.”

Michael made it seem like he was laughing. “It’s cool, that’s cool.”

“So listen I seriously have to go right this second, like literally, but I’m super busy this week, but Friday, are you . . . around?”

“Lemme think. Yep.”

“And before I go like right now, Chester told me to tell you to call him.”

“Chester.”

“He said something about work. Okay. I gotta go this second. Lemme give you his number,” and she gave him the number.

Michael wasted no time. He dialed the number. A guy’s voice said hello. Michael had no clue what to say. “Hey . . . Chester? it’s Michael, Rachael’s . . . friend. From the other night.”

“Michael—what’s good. Listen, I’ve got to be brief—”

“Okay—”

“Because of this project we’ve got going on right this very second, and I just got back from a jog—you ever do that, the lunch break run?—interrupts the whole day—splices it right up—a real schism—and it works. I’m a bit behind, but bottom line is Rachael told me you’re out a job and might need an in.” Michael confirmed this to be, on some level, true. “So what do you say?”

“About what?”

“My bad—I’m busy here, really busy. About an interview. In short, we help out those in need, the homeless. The job’s nothing. To be honest” (he lowered his voice) “the interview’s a joke, standard operating procedure type of thing. And hey, if you’re not down, no worries.”

Michael asked if he had this straight: he was to come in for a job interview.

“Hey, are you straight or are you straight? Not sexually, sorry.”

Michael laughed that he was straight not sexually—well, that he was straight, sexually, but was straight with the interview. Chester, apparently succumbed to hysterics—Michael you’re a funny guy—laid out time and directions and was looking forward to it.

So was Michael, gazing out the window, his legs dangling off the bed, dropping the phone. This was all part of the revenge plan, it was becoming real, it fell into his lap, though give him some credit, he was establishing himself; and just wait until he shoved it back in their faces, look at him now, reinvented, you thought I couldn’t do it, you had no faith in me, you took me for nothing, now look at me, look at me, look at me, look at me, I’m better than you, you’re nothing, it’s easy for you to do what you’re doing but I’m not the same person, admit it, come forth with honesty, bear your soul, you’re jealous, that’s all I want: the truth: how and why did you do this?

Chester was the interviewer?

The interview. The date. Friday.

Five days of nothing.

He was about to be very bored.

Really, what had changed?

“Michael, how are you. We’re a good group here, a good group, lemme tell ya. Take that chair,” and the man motioned to a chair like the ones they’d sat in elementary school assemblies. Room was a white box with bare walls. Filing cabinets and shelves stacked to ceiling with folders and papers on the desk. The man, Jerry, relaxed in a chair you leaned with, staring at the brick wall outside the sole window, motioning to the mess, apologizing for it, but this business they ran tried to keep track of a lot of things and was unsuccessful in a very successful way, if you knew what he meant, because they reached out, see, it was about getting your name out to people who are looking for you and you’re looking for them, and sure critics brought up the exploitation factor, that there’s something morally backward about making money off those without money, blah-blah-blah, he’d heard it all before, and, hey, what about bankruptcy lawyers and housing projects developers, he could list them forever but it’d get them nowhere, and that’s why they were a non-profit, what people failed to realize was that they were literally non-profitting, they didn’t make money, and he had to be honest, there’s not much in the pot to go around, but you could make a fine living off doing your job and enough for (he glanced at the clipboard) twenty-five and living in, lemme see, is that Park Slope, okay, see it’s a good gig if you’ve got the spirit—really, that’s what it boiled down to, the spirit.

Michael shifted in his seat, which was very uncomfortable. What exactly had Jerry explained? He said, “No, I get it. . . . I’m just kind of curious what exactly you do.”

Jerry’s tone was light and playful but his bony, rectangular face, positioned naturally at an angle, made him seem serious.

“So let’s get down to business. You see what Chester does, right, so let’s say it’s a sort of similar but a little different.”

Seen what Chester did? He’d met Chester once, hadn’t even seen him this afternoon.

Jerry said, “We’re located here but we—you’ll be—operating primarily in Soho. Mainly. For funding we rely overwhelmingly on donations. Almost entirely. We need people to buy into the system. Research has consistently shown that people, even if they disagree with the theoretical, fundamental purpose of financially assisting the homeless, will, nonetheless, in a nutshell, contribute to the cause once they realize that they don’t have to interact with those whom they help. That’s our world, that’s our New York. My personal pop theory is the two-sided monster of personality—we want to help people without seeming like we do, or we don’t want to help them while knowing we should.” Jerry and his chair scooted forward. “I’m not a psychologist, I’m not a sociologist, I’m not into ologies; I’m a fundraiser, so I take what they give me and apply it to what I know. I know that commerce in Soho is predisposed to our purposes. It’s an untapped market. They’re our target audience, only they don’t know they’re our target audience. That’s where you come in. You get them to give. You’re our pitchman.

You're our voice. No costumes, no makeup, just you." Jerry let his chin drop and stroked it as if he had a goatee. "Just out of curiosity, what about your last job can you tell me."

So I'll meet you when I get off work—when I *get off work*. How many times had he met her when he *got off work*? Busboys and lawyers and garbage men and politicians and athletes and scientists and marketers and managers said it, but when they'd said it, it felt different, special, meaningful. When Marjorie said it, it felt standard.

"Well, we sort of did the same thing, we came up with way to sell products."

"Great, great—do you have any examples?"

"Lemme think. So I remember we did this thing for dental floss. It was a new technology where the floss could not unravel, but it wasn't waxed, so flossing your teeth was supposed to be easier than ever. And obviously you can't just say something's better than ever. And what the company wanted was a tag they could apply in print, on radio, and on screen, so we had to cross three mediums with a common denominator. My team of four, we knew each other, so the environment led to us spending two weeks throwing out ideas. Some were cute or catchy, but most were pretty boring or unoriginal, elaborate sayings or phrases that sounded sort of phony. And then one day I was walking home after dinner with my girlfriend, and it had snowed two days before, and she slipped on some ice, but instead of falling she slid like ten yards since we were on Thirty-fourth going east, you know that little downhill, and it just popped into my head

that our line was ‘Slide.’ A competitor had done ‘Glide’ but ‘Slide’ sounded smoother. Just saying it sounded smoother. And when we saw how they ended up using it, it worked. The thing actually worked.”

“And you wrote here that you resigned.” Michael nodded. I’ll meet you when I *get off work*. “Why?”

“I guess that after a while I didn’t really like it anymore.”

Jerry’s eyes narrowed. “This is going to be, I’ll be quite honest, radically different. Can someone with your skills, with your background, with your interests—and this is not to question you as a person—but can that person do this?”

Michael’s face went stoic. You don’t be real with guy like Jerry because Jerry doesn’t cut it as real. This was only, in terms of professionalism, the polar opposite of every interview he’d been prepared for in college. Jerry wearing a graphic T-shirt and sunglasses pushed to forehead with a necklace of a shark’s tooth.

Jerry said, “Sorry, I’m talking specifically about the atmosphere. You’re talking going from corporate to classless. Not classless, but you see our offices. What I’m saying is, it’s in your hands.”

“Can I get back to you?”

“Sure. Take your time, but don’t take all month. Hey” (he rose from the chair and stuck out a skeletal hand) “and by the way, I think you’d be great.”

Girl in the miniskirt and orange fishnets and twelve-year-old face with cleft chin smoking a cigarette and willing herself into a conversation of three boys whose every exaggerated motion and *Yeah, man* and *That's what I'm sayin'* and slapping hands in agreement and breaking out dance moves compels her to show interest and make herself available for inclusion while being utterly ignored as if she were a motionless dog: freak show or way of life?

Descending into the station thinking, I've got this, I can do this, that felt good, really spoke, really got it out there.

Standing on the pre-after-work crowded train, leaning against the door. Out of the corner of his eye, a man in running clothes stretching and wobbling with the rickety train but keeping balance and straining limbs, summoning every bit of resolve to touch that left toe but needing a longer finger. Michael thinking this is a city where you do what you want. Being a nobody gives you the power to be a somebody—let's separate, distinguish. Me from you. The person on the train next to you dressed the same, staring the same, ignoring the same—no reason this couldn't be your best friend, wife, partner. Anything you want. Start a couples club, where couples get together and talk, mingle, associate, socialize. Meet each other. Bringing people together. Expanding horizons. Find new people, find new interests, discover yourself. Don't be bland, don't be dull. Why here and not Chicago, LA, Seattle—why not out West—why not Europe, why not China, China had a lot of people, China was the West of the East, how about Hong Kong? Because New York's familiar. Your whole life no one knew about other places. Growing up, no one talks about leaving. It's not part of the discussion,

except every so often one who hates winter can't wait for California's beaches. What you're supposed to do is simple: live outside Manhattan and work in it. New York's a mass of land with a sliver of an island everyone's trying to squeeze on. New York's trapped between an ocean and the sprawling, compacted world. What does anywhere else have that New York doesn't? Real New Yorkers don't want to leave.

Coming out of the tunnel into daylight, sun primed to set past the Statue of Liberty, the train rattling around up and the curve. Michael had been here before, when he was down and confused and angry, he was so angry, but that could not be conjured, it had passed, because how would he live without Rachael? She was a source of energy and desire. She was in bloom. He was seeing her tonight. How could he admit that she crept into his mind far too often. That her tongue had attacked his. It wasn't innocence, though he could be persuaded to believe in hers, it was cuteness, klutziness, and not the class variety. It was her way of interacting, like she knew you because she knew herself. What she wanted and what he wanted. That was the key to her: she sensed his uniqueness. He'd done nothing, and she fell for the nothingness. Silly girl. Silly Rachael. She wanted him. How good it felt.

And no one else on the train seemed to *get* it: blank stares into dreams, nose-deep in books, chatting on phones, sleeping. He whirled around, grabbing the post to brace himself as the train shook in a way that felt unsafe. Those parking lots were a hundred yards below; there was no barrier. Peering past the Kentile sign and smokestack and East River bridges to the rise of that sliver of

island: was the clue to Rachael Wasserman in the gleaming Empire State Building at this angle? In the cumuli that hovered over the skyline, the motherly protector? If you live in Brooklyn are you more of a New Yorker or less?

Running—well, jogging, at this stage, if that. Running. Just to test it out. That would be their group, his contribution to the circle, bringing people together. People were lonely, but you could bring them together if you found the focus.

They were back underground and pulling into his stop. The doors opened and he raced through and two-hopped the steps because you get the heart rate going a little bit and it's a one-track mind through the upcoming night. Approaching the steel turnstile—in Manhattan it meant decrepit but in Brooklyn authenticity—met by a woman he'd judge because judging wasn't creepy if you had someone, and he had Rachael. Moderation; she was moderate in every category. After you, he motioned. After you, she waited. No you, he said. She didn't budge. He stood. She took a step, as he did. They halted. Okay, he said—your turn. Thanks, she smiled coyly, and he didn't even track her. In Brooklyn, how kind we are. His mind was on tonight, his mind was on this moment, his mind was taking steps, it was a process, it would all work out, he was sure everything was in his control, not that he needed control, he was fine with succumbing, but it was soothing to know he had a stake in this; he could plow ahead as he saw fit—

—Thinking that if a person tried to mug me I could outrun him, push this clip so the world passes like a bullet train in the countryside, dash of *whoosh!* Looking both ways crossing Eighth Avenue, seeing a car so on his toes with quick kicks that reminded him of chasing an outlet pass for a two-step layup and circling back under the hoop and bursting up the court, a seamless process, every muscle twitching in accordance, twisting and turning, balancing for precision, the paradox of being so attuned to your body that you're free from it, free to reach your mind, to wonder, do I want to do this? He wanted to explore. A street with aristocratic homes on one side and the park on the other. He jogged in and turned onto a two-lane road with no traffic and two narrow lanes by the curb that everyone seemed to be utilizing. Most people were running toward him and no one mouthed or waved hi. The last time he'd ran was two months ago on a treadmill using the gym membership he'd since abandoned. The gym was a social thing—*I'm going to the gym*—where you threw on basketball shorts and a college shirt and got in your reps, never working up too much of a sweat, never grunting except on that last hard rep—and not the meathead type, never tacking on much weight, unless to goof off, unless with irony—because, really, you were there to talk with your friends, which of course you could do sitting in the living room, except that was lame because no one was there to see you. It was always better to be seen—maybe this was why girls like Marjorie did the cardio machines, the step-up thing and the other one where they stand and their legs move fast and flip through an *Elle* but never enough to run their mascara. Maybe this was why he'd once thought it a smart idea to start on the treadmill—Ben gave

him the *Okay* grin—to warm up the muscles (*Okay*), *Men's Health* said that that was how you were supposed to work out (*Okay*), and why not take advantage since they pay a lot to access this equipment (*Okay*)—and he'd lasted less than ten minutes and had had trouble stopping it.

But not even a half hour ago he'd rummaged through his closet for a pair of gray New Balance sneakers, grabbed a long-sleeved T-shirt and blue shorts, and now with each thud on the pavement he felt his stomach tighten, and his ankles absorbed the shock, and he glanced around at the large kidney-shaped field down the short slope to his right, at the men hustling in a small soccer game with cones to be knocked over as goals, at the kites rising above naked trees to sheet-silver clouds, at the two guys in tight jeans tossing the football, at the sweatshirted couples on blankets sipping wine, at the fathers chasing young ones with beach balls, at the nannies pushing strollers on the paved path enclosing the field. He made eye contact with runners, but they seemed so focused, it was so easy for them, so he emulated their style and coasted around the field, down the hill, winding into a more wooded area. When he got to a stoplight at the bottom (there were no cars), he realized he didn't know where he was and turned around, so now he was going up the hill, raising knees a little higher, kicking heels a little farther, pumping arms a little harder, chugging and breathing hard, passing people who couldn't handle the hill, who hadn't been an all-district guard, who hadn't been blessed with a muscular physique and a quick metabolism, except for this one guy pulling alongside him, a real show-off with his short-shorts and

compression shirt, a guy who wasn't going to pass Michael, who was drifting away but Michael was chugging and reeling him in—

Michael was going to take the job he'd interviewed for this afternoon it just occurred to him for reasons A that he didn't have to sit in the apartment anymore, B that he could use it as a conversation starter with Rachael Wasserman, C that he could use it to appease his parents, D something to do with that guy Chester, and E that word might get out to *them*, which had to do with how badly he wanted *them*, the *her* and the *him*, to know what he was doing and to know that he was doing it well. Stick them in their bubble and let them be happy rotting in redundancy; let me discover the universe, find me running in Prospect Park on Friday afternoons before spending the night with my—

Keep a steady speed and you got this, you're on his tail, he sees you in the rearview mirror, he feels your breath . . . Michael's legs spun like wheels; he moved to the side and pursed his lips to take quicker, shorter, heavier breaths; he surged ahead and alongside the guy and maintained posture as the hill crested . . . He was eyeing him but concentrating on the top, on the stoplight ten yards away . . . eight yards away . . . five yards . . . three . . . Michael was a half-step ahead when the road evened out and he let out a huge gasp and heard . . . nothing. The guy wasn't even breathing, he was looking straight ahead, he had the same cadence, he was wearing headphones, he was a dead-face, and was it possible he was now getting faster?

Michael back at the top glancing over the field and realizing his muscles were sore but he was still running, trying to keep pace with the guy, the guy who

was now some yards ahead, quickly the guy was up over the turn and out of sight beyond the bend. Michael now running in the direction with everyone, panting hard and feeling his head bob all over the place—he was deathly tired and heaving breaths—if only he could control them—they were beyond his grasp—the question was what will they think if they see me collapse on this pavement, if I stumble to the side and vomit, which was possible with his stomach both heavy and light and his temples throbbing and his eyes popping and his arms and legs quivering, yet he was still moving. The guy was long gone. Someone passed him, now another, and he was thinking this was a very bad idea, which was when he saw up ahead the stone structure that had to be a water fountain, only it might not be turned on because it wasn't quite summer . . .

He lurched up to the fountain, gasping for breath, hands on knees, pressed the button, let the water at its perfect temperature coat every crevice of his mouth, run down his esophagus—he just sucked on the spigot and inhaled with each gasp, hands on the rim of the stone basin, forehead on his arm, the imprint making him realize how sweaty he was, sipped more and more, until his stomach felt funny.

The sun never seems less pleasant than when your body is crying to be relieved of pain, so he stood there and closed his eyes, and when he opened them he said, Hey—you. She had no idea what to say and nothing really came out but a friendly look you give the homeless who try to make conversation. No, I'm not weird, he said, I know you, from the train. She looked at him with faint recognition. He said, I don't know how I do because your hair, it's in a ponytail . .

. (he gasped, still recovering) . . . sorry, I'm a little out of breath, but (he realized he had nothing to say) remember, we did the you—no you—no you—thing? Oh, right, she said. He said, How are you?

“Good?” she said.

“Sorry, I don't usually do this, but it's the coincidence, and it's such a nice day outside . . . that frame of mind . . . and how can you ignore two chance interactions with someone like this?”

She had to give it to him, but excuse me while I take a sip of water, she said, that was neat, though she still didn't know how he recognized her because she certainly wouldn't have recognized him. Well I guess it's because—(he took his first real look at her: rather narrow hips, a sports bra flat-chest, arms and legs like rods, a lean torso, baggy running shorts, loose tank top, *plump* was somehow what came to his mind, she had that soft appeal, that schoolgirl cute when she was anything but, she was probably older than him, probably took two weeks paid vacation every August, probably ate a bagel with jam over the morning paper, probably laughed a lot with her friends but came off serious otherwise, for all he knew she was an executive)—he guessed it was because she had a look.

“A *look*.”

“In a good way.”

“Care to explain.”

But he was drawn back, stumped, wondering what lay beneath. Nerves choked him, this violator, who would approve of him? Models and actors and athletes had things come to them. He was none of these people. How had Ben

gotten Marjorie? Over time, or in a moment? But this situation was the same—pressure builds, it bursts, and there’s your recipient. So that was it. They’d been behind his back, but for how long, and to what extent. It wasn’t spur of the moment. Were they enjoying themselves? Could Ben wake up and touch her—he was *touching* her—and think whole of himself? Could he think with conscience that this was okay? How could this be satisfying?

Michael said, “How about over drinks?”

She glared. “If you can beat me.”

Michael said, Excuse me?

“Beat me in a race. From here to Ninth Street. It’s not far, and I’m not even warmed up—I’ve gotten a little sidetracked.”

Michael played along with this joke. Said he’d line up, said but he didn’t really know exactly where Ninth Street was because he wasn’t familiar with the neighborhood because he’d just moved here and was still getting situated. She ignored him walking across the road to the running lanes, reminded him it wasn’t far, said on your mark—Michael said, Wait—“Get set, go.”

He caught up quickly. As he passed her, he became aware that this was highly informal; she could just go home. And it wasn’t like he wanted drinks so badly that he was into pursuit; in fact he didn’t understand why he’d agreed other than *all right* just came out. Dates are settled by footraces?

He held on for a few more strides, when it suddenly became a great strain to maintain pace. Every bone and muscle and organ felt creaky and heavy and was weighing him down; he was moving in spite of himself. And now he was

being passed by this girl he couldn't remember how he knew, and now she was as far in front of him as the guy on the hill, and now he simply could not believe this was taking place, and she stopped.

“I am out of shape,” he said, slowing.

“This isn't the best you're seeing me,” she said, breathing lightly.

He wasn't sucking air because it was his muscles that were the offender. They ached and ached. “I can't believe how fast you are. Normally I'm not this slow, but you.”

“So I won.”

“You did.” He straightened. “So where are we? Okay, I see” (he pointed to fifteen-foot monument) “that's the intersection, and I live over . . .”

“Which means I don't owe you anything.”

He was going on about his bearings; he rubbed sweat from his eyes and squinted.

“How about you explain what you meant by my look. Over drinks, to use your terminology,” she said a bit sarcastically.

Michael saw that her eyes, resting deep in sockets, were exquisite, but they didn't make her face, they were part of her face, she was fair and blond and not voluptuous and not perky, it was hard to imagine her hair styled without a ponytail, she was possibly a British fashion model, a dignified, conservative one; pretty, her face was, but she didn't look frail, and he kept thinking she looked plump. He asked was she available tomorrow evening. She said she was, and,

straight-faced, said remember my number, gave it to him, and ran off without a word, shorts and shirt fluffing in a light breeze that had picked up.

That's poetry, Rachael said, while he was trying to remember if it had happened. He decided it had, but he had to think hard. No more than two hours ago and it felt like two years ago. She was more than a figment but not by much; he could recall how he felt regarding her and why she made him feel this way, but the reasons didn't comprise the parts of her as he remembered. He'd appraised her for nothing. He couldn't pick her out on a street corner. So why was she more interesting than listening to this?

“Here's my top ten of things to do in New York before you die. And don't think I was so incoherent I forgot about what I said. The first is panhandle on the subway in guise of choice. Personally, I'd choose cowboy outfit because a woman wearing one freaks people out and then you can just look at them. Number two is to spend twenty-four straight hours on a subway. Three, eat a Nathan's hot dog and ride the Cyclone. Four, kayak the Hudson. Five, Statue of Liberty. Six, ice skate in Central Park when a celebrity's there. Seven is spend an hour atop the Empire State, eight is discover the real best Chinatown restaurant, nine I can't remember, and ten is to spend an indeterminate amount of time in a part of every borough you would never have reason to visit.” She let this sink in. “By the way, I'm listing off the top of my head, though I've given this sufficient thought beforehand, I just haven't written it down, and I didn't think I'd be presenting it to you, or anyone, but, well . . .” She laughed as if she'd made a stupid joke. “I just

realized something totally embarrassing. I'm not from here, but I've lived here long enough to be deemed a citizen of New York City—and these are all tourist addictions. And I hate tourists. I'm going to come up with better options.”

The bar they were in, with its heavy rugs and low couches and detailed afghan quilts, had an Arabian motif and a woman in a top hat playing folk piano on a black upright sounding like Johnny Cash, singing throaty gibberish that Rachael'd just called poetry. Michael had no speaking opinion. In some moments he hated it, in others, loved it, judgments on a bar or melody. He wasn't listening, to the music (the singer on set break), to Rachael, to anything.

Rachael said, “Is something on your mind? You're quiet, which is saying a lot. It's saying you literally aren't speaking. But I know you're listening. I don't know if you're hearing but I know you're listening, and despite our small sample size of interaction, I can point to the facts that you were here before me, that you put your arm around me, that you kissed me on the cheek, and that you were really awkward in doing all this as proof that you care somewhat.” She looked in his eyes as if to deconstruct every reason for his existence in terms that made complete and utter sense (he thought). “Okay just checking.”

“What?” he said.

“I can tell something's on your mind but overall you're fine.”

“Eh, I don't think so.”

She let it be and time passed.

Because the way she'd taken control. With quick, snappy wit she was forceful—far more forceful than her in front of him now. Rachael's talk was a

charade, there was something behind her blabbering and he didn't particularly care for it; Rachael got away it because he let her. The moment in the park never would have happened with Rachael like it did with the other girl. The park girl was a different species.

“Will you at least indulge me on my quest for ten great things? As a native you're supposed to assist the foreigner, right?” She slid down the couch and nestled into his loose arm.

“In Great Neck I could.”

“Michael, where are your parents from?” she inquired sort of matter-of-factly.

He told her Queens.

“How often did you visit your grandparents?”

“We went on the holidays and usually once a month, usually on Sundays. There was a Seder every year. Then they died.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Did you ever go into Manhattan?”

“Yeah, I mean, my dad took us to Knicks games and my mom likes musicals, and my dad does too, for some reason.”

“Who's this us—brothers and sisters?”

“Friends. I'm an only child.”

She asked, “Are you better friends with your friends from home or your friends from college?”

He said they were the same. She said he didn't answer the question. He said, Well.

“So you spent your childhood on Long Island, you visited Queens at least once a month, you went into Manhattan with your friends and family somewhat frequently, and then you lived in Murray Hill for two years with who knows who—I’m guessing friends—and yet you appear to have zero confidence as a New Yorker.”

Letting out his accent, he said, “If you’re from here, you’re from here.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. What I’m trying to figure out is what you did your entire life.”

“I guess I’m not a very interesting person,” he said almost with derision.

She took his hand in hers and laid it on her thigh stretched out over a coffee table. “No, you’re not.”

The second set was up-tempo and about love. This time they both hated it. “She’s increasingly reminding me of a dolphin,” whispered Rachael; “but I can’t say why.” “It’s just boring,” whispered Michael. They pulled each other out of the bar, stepping around people and furniture.

The moment they stepped outside she gasped as if she’d been underwater. “I felt like I was in an alternate universe.”

“Why did we go there again?” Across the street was an enormous brick armory taking up the entire block.

“I don’t know. Their musicians aren’t good and their comedy isn’t funny. It always felt like a place you should be able to relax.”

He asked what she wanted to do. Neither had had more than a beer.

“It’s too cold to go for a walk but too hot to be trapped inside. I wish it would just be summer already.” She glanced at her small sports watch. “And somehow it’s past midnight. Today just flew by. This week flew by. Weird that we met so recently.”

It felt like she was treating him as a boyfriend. He liked this. “What changed from an hour ago?” he said. “You seem, like, subdued.”

She said was in one of those moods. He asked what kind.

“I don’t know—where everything is just blah and it’s like, what am I doing?”

“You think I don’t like you?” (Why did he say this?)

“I don’t know what it is. I’m not making sense.”

There was a long pause. Rachael said, “I guess I’m going to go home.”

“I ran today,” he said. “First time in forever.”

She grinned. “That’s great.”

“Wait, when am I going to see you again?”

“Let’s get together soon. You can tell me everything about the new job. See ya,” and she blew him a kiss.

So she and Chester talked and she hadn’t mentioned this. Part of him wanted to penetrate their circle, separate them, come between them, keep each of them for himself. Another part scoffed at them. What could they possibly offer him that he did could not obtain himself? Was she going to his apartment?

He turned onto his block, when his cell phone vibrated in his jeans pocket. It was a text message. These were becoming increasingly popular. In college no one had sent text messages. They were more expensive than phone calls. They were simple, easy, effortless, concise, and daring. Text message ambiguity and intrigue was replacing phone call awkwardness. People sent them all the time. No one called anymore; they texted.

Park Girl. That's how he'd saved her contact in his phone, somehow remembering her number, because if she'd mentioned her name he'd forgotten, when after the run he'd texted to confirm for tomorrow night. He pressed the receive button. He was suddenly very nervous, though there was no rational reason to be so. The worst she could write, he supposed, was that she was coming to kill him. The odds of this were zero, and even the odds were a hundred, there was no way she could locate him. And the best thing she could write was that she loved him. Nerves were waiting to find out if you received the A on your senior project that the peers you regarded weakly had. Nerves were not reading a text message from a girl whom you'd interacted with in a random, silly way.

She was sorry but she was violently ill and wouldn't be able to make it tomorrow night.

Was he being played for a fool? Possibly; but who was he to think meeting her the way he had was an appropriate means for beginning a relationship? He realized that everything he'd thought of about her, the night he'd played out in his mind, the one where they had drinks timidly before finding a common interest and remarking how the fact that their mothers took them sledding to the same park

each winter and could you believe they'd actually met then and not now so this actually made them close (it was Ben's story from an Israel trip, a "trip of coincidence"), and they slept together and maybe more came of it or maybe it ended, preserved as memory . . . all for nothing. The fantasy was everything he hadn't done with Rachael.

But Rachael was right. Sometimes everything is like blah and you don't know what you're doing. Climbing the steps to his apartment, Michael found this annoying.

7

Monday morning Michael navigated the freaks on West Fourth in casual dress, slacks and a tucked-in collared shirt, unsure what was appropriate but figuring he could smooth-talk his way out of any predicament, streets or office, in said garb. The look of a man in control of himself was what he wanted to project.

The downstairs door, a single apartment door, was locked, and there was no buzzer, so he waited outside until a tall, slender woman in a suit approached from behind and let him in with a doubtful look. He started to tell her who he was and what business he had here—"Just that I work here, but don't have a key, or know the code, it's nothing"—lagging behind, she ignoring him, he hoping she'd keep walking up the stairs, past the office, not his coworker. When she stopped on his floor and swung open the door, he sprinted to catch it and save the ignominy of knocking only to have her answer it. And he was in.

“Hey Jess,” said Jerry, stepping to avoid her swinging briefcase. She hardly smiled and rushed down a hallway. “She’s a sweet lady, does great work here, glad you got to meet her already.” Jerry stuck out his left hand; the other held a coffee mug. “Just passing through but let’s get you set up,” and he wheeled around and led Michael down the opposite hallway of the interview room, though this one was identical, narrow, decaying cream walls, exposed ceiling pipes, a factory feel if not for the frayed black wall-to-wall carpet, more like a paper-thin fabric. Michael peeked in an office to see the woman already at a desk behind a computer. They made eye contact; her stare was emotionless.

“So let’s see here,” said Jerry, shuffling through paper in a manila folder on the desk. They were in another small office—it had just sort of happened, exposed hinges, no door, a passageway—that was no different than the interview room, Jerry’s office, except it was less furnished, if that were possible. “Check out what’s here, quickly, but it’ll take a moment or two, that’s about it.” Jerry scurrying away.

Michael thinking each morning he’d been greeted by a security guard who was, be he white, black, American, foreign, a plump old male with a chauffeur’s hat and far too many upper layers of clothing who saw Michael through a metal detector with a head nod, which Michael reciprocated, adding a genuine, How you been? Michael took an express elevator, whose odor of cologne and aftershave and hair gel from the businessmen silently crowding the box was the oddest combination of fresh and stale; he figured they must have real jobs that matter and are important; he wondered if his destiny was to become one of them,

if this track he was on led to being in the same elevator but with a receding hairline; he'd no reason to assume otherwise and never considered alternatives; the men seemed noble and he almost looked forward to the day he could apply the aftershave without self-consciousness. He was deposited on the forty-seventh floor into a sunny lobby, where sectioned behind a sleek, curved counter sat a bushy-haired secretary who was either on the phone or showing in a visitor, it was never not one of the two. Michael clocked in when he swiped his card and entered a vast space of background noise and cubicles, his somewhere in the middle. He divvied time between this cove and the meeting rooms, where he and his team, two lumpy middle-aged men and a thirty-five-year-old divorcee, collaborated. Each meeting room was glass enclosed and eavesdropping on Midtown Manhattan on the other; you could glimpse Times Square, but that was taboo. *It's situated so that we're perfectly aware of our real-world ramifications but only able to see them by straining*, mused the lumpier of his male coworkers; *it's essentially a motivational ploy that I don't think works; I think better incentives are cash, but I've got eighteen-year-olds and a retirement fund, so why would I complain? and I'm happy.*

The break room stashed boutique tea and coffee, and someone always brought brownies or cupcakes. Far too much time was spent there conversing about nothing, but no one minded because the economics of the business were such that it only took one epiphany to make a client millions, and anyway break room chatter tended to drift toward work-related matters, which fostered ideas. How had Michael gotten this job? His dad knew someone who knew someone.

But he excelled, no better than the eighty of his coworkers but no worse, and he was rewarded with two weeks paid vacation and ten yearly sick days and a holiday bonus and a salary of \$42,500 that was scheduled to climb as he kept producing.

He never thought of himself as an advertising person because he never cared to consider that people could be categorized by occupation, though he did recall a particular moment. Thirty-five-year-old divorcee got chummy with him one afternoon when middle-aged lumps were breaking and the two were alone and gazing at the cloud formations over the city. The assignment was a quasi-motorized adult scooter and divorcee, pushing for a nostalgia-themed campaign, couldn't handle it. *Michael, she said, you don't realize how lucky you are. What I would give to be your age and everything that comes with it.* This he could handle, but she went on. *Every winter day I go downstairs to buy soup, and the little man shivering in his cart couldn't be more friendly. This makes me think about how privileged I am because of my well-paying white-collar job, and I feel so terrible for that little foreign man in his baker's hat. But then—and this always happens—on the way back up here I realize that he doesn't care about my job or me, he only cares about the money I give him for the soup. And then I realize that I don't care about him, I only care about how good his soup tastes. And then when I'm eating the soup, I forget about all of this and start thinking about work, until a time later in the day when I suddenly can't stop thinking about the guy with his soup and nothing else. And that's when it hits me that a million people*

want my job, and even though I hate my job, I would never give it up to anyone for anything.

Michael looked at the crinkly sheets of paper before him, on which was printed, in a ghoulish 12-point font, the following:

SSSSOHO ALLIANCE

(FOR INTERNAL EYES ONLY)

SIMULATED INTERACTION BETWEEN AGENT X AND
(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y. DIALOGUE MUST BE STRICTLY
ADHERED TO BUT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED A JUMPING
OFF POINT FOR CASUAL CONVERSATION HINTING
TOWARD SALEABLE MATERIAL.

REMEMBER TO BE YOURSELF: SMART, STRONG,
SUPERIOR, SUPPORTIVE – THERE IS NOTHING WE
CANNOT DO FOR YOU (!)

AGENT X (enters place of business): Hi (*hello* and *how are you*
can be substituted), my name is NAME OF AGENT X and I'm
with the SSSSoho Alliance.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: Um—

AGENT X: Is there a manager I could speak with?

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: Sure, but he/she is on the phone. Why don't I take your name and he/she will give you a call back.

AGENT X (smiles broadly, but coolly): Hey, I've got no problem waiting.

(APPX. 4-11 MIN. PASS)

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: You can follow me.

(AGENT X IS LED TO DISAPPOINTING/DISTASTEFUL WINDOWLESS ROOM, WHERE MANAGER IS FINISHING MEMO OR PHONE CALL)

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y (leans back as if distracted): So, what can I do for you?

AGENT X (approaches affably, sits): (Re-introduction; pulls out brochure.) What we do is help the homeless gain a foothold into the mainstream community through a series of monthly coordinated events. We do food drives, social networking, social outreaching, clothing exchanges, and other such stuff. Too much to list here!

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: Well that's . . . it's certainly not a bad thing.

AGENT X: Mr./Ms. LAST NAME OF (POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y, did you know that each year, in the borough of Manhattan alone, over 18,000 homeless men and women are denied access to a shelter because of failed bureaucratic and administrative

systems? Why, just this past SUMMER/WINTER over 7,500 homeless in the borough of the Bronx were left to suffer in the HOT/COLD without adequate garments simply because they were unaware of a clothing drive held within an 8-12 block radius of their purported whereabouts? Mr./Ms. LAST NAME OF (POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y, we work to eliminate these problems with the ultimate goal of ensuring that all men and women residing in the city of New York are given an equal opportunity in the pursuit of life.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y (diffidently): I must say, I have noticed that a relatively inordinate number of homeless seem merely to be lacking sufficient knowledge of city- and state-funded tools that could be construed as advantageous to their overall well-being.

AGENT X: Exactly, Mr./Ms. LAST NAME OF (POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y, we're educators as much as we are a human interest group. And the governing body to which you alluded is a wonderful system in our democratic process. Now, we exist because it is on occasion that individuals must pick up the slack left dangling by the universal, by which I mean all that society does not do to help society. It's a shame, but someone must do the work.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: A terrible shame, it really is.

AGENT X: And what's worse is when we see the government wasting its valuable dollar on such luxuries as honorary dinners and helicopters.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: Those fat cats should be put down quietly!

AGENT X: We waste not a single penny. We are funded entirely by businesses like yours, and we see to it that 100% of our donations benefit the needy.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y (eyes AGENT X): So who's paying you?

AGENT X: We're a nonprofit, SIR/M'AM.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y (relaxes): Ah, yes, a nonprofit.

AGENT X: Our team has crunched the numbers and found that a mere \$30 per month, or one-time \$360 yearly donation, from every business in the Soho neighborhood can dramatically increase the chance that we will be able to fulfill all our goals of radically altering the landscape of our wonderful city of New York.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y: How many businesses do you have now?

AGENT X: 98% of those pursued.

(POTENTIAL) CLIENT Y (stands nobly, offers hand): So this counts as a write-off, correct?

(END SIMULATION)

NOTE: SOME OF THIS IS FACTUALLY SPOT-ON, BUT MOSTLY IT IS COMPLETE BULLSHIT. IF YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF IN A CONVERSATION OF THIS NATURE, LEAVE IMMEDIATELY. THIS WAS A COMPLETE JOKE! YOU SHOULD NEVER APPROACH A CLIENT IN THIS MANNER! HOWEVER, YOU NOW HAVE A REASONABLY BASIC FEEL FOR WHAT IT MAY BE LIKE TO TRY TO CONVINCING A STRANGER TO GIVE YOU MONEY IN THE NAME OF THE HOMELESS. BUT ALL SITUATIONS ARE RELEVANT TO THEMSELVES. IN OTHER WORDS, ONCE YOU FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH OUR MATERIALS, ACT WITH POTENTIAL CLIENTS IN A MANNER YOU FEEL IS APPROPRIATE, I.E. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS. AND BY THE WAY, OUR NAME IS SOHO ALLIANCE, NOT FUCKING SSSSOHO ALLIANCE.

Michael was scratching his right temple with the bottom of a pen. He lifted his neck to see if he was being watched. The hallway was quiet like an empty castle. He could hear faint commotion in an unseen room. He envisioned walking into the mean lady's office and stripping her to fishnets; she was muscular, possibly going to Athens for water polo. He flipped through the remaining sheets, the real (apparently) instructions on paperwork, rules,

regulations. He remembered that he hated when people approached him in Union Square asking if he could spare a moment for children, or whales. He found it hard to concentrate on anything other than what his parents were going to get at when they dropped by this weekend. He wanted them to stay for hours, but what they would do he couldn't imagine; he would be okay if they made dinner, rented a war drama, and left around eleven p.m. Reading through the material twice and was like staring at a thick horizontal line on a blank sheet of paper: you keep waiting for it to jump out, for your brain to click, for the answer to be revealed, and it never does, because there is no answer. He still had no clue what he was supposed to do. He went out and figured he'd quit later.

Clipboards turn charming, affable men into lab technicians and exam proctors. Sunglasses pushed on the crown or fastened vertically to a shirt neck relax serious businessmen. Few rules here but you gotta follow them, informal or not. Messenger bags, unless situated at the precise dimension, and good luck with that, are great clichés; stood a chance years ago before fading; plus separate yourself from bicycle delivery service. Sandals are uncomfortable. Don't look like a sixteen-year-old on the links, don't look like a frat boy. (What had Rachael told?) But if you find that balance . . .

Blazing through the office, wheeling on inquiry, Chester's words of wisdom. Was Michael supposed to be in on the joke or taking the words to heart? Not until he'd left the office and headed downtown on the subway, nervous, clueless, certain and scared of imminent failure, did he consider doing whatever

he pleased. Chester's offerings had reduced the job to a farce. Confidence pulled his body into Spring Street daylight. He had territory to capture.

"I'm Michael" (disarmingly to the tall brunette) "and I'm with the Soho Alliance. Is there a manager I can speak with?"

"You said" (typing into the register, inattentive) "can I tell him who's calling. I mean who's here. And what it's about."

"Certainly. The homeless conundrum."

Looks up unsurely: "Sure."

Michael with hands at sides and a neutral bordering on pleasant expression catching her lavender scent as her wood-soled black shoes tapped down the floor, past clothes, elite, vintage, hung like gowns from wheeled racks, mass space separating racks, limited merchandise, a bare room save a dozen racks, an industrial room with AC crawl space and a long tube exposed overhead and something important happening on ground level. The girl had an upside-down triangle face but was striking. So was everyone in here, there weren't too many people, never were in a place like this, though this was where these types of people shopped. These types of people were bred so stores like this could exist. Forget fame and wealth and prestige, you shopped here because you lived the lifestyle. You ate organic food, even sheathed ones, like bananas, and in your eighth floor studio loft a bongo drum sat in the corner unused, and your clothes, cut from thick, luscious denim and cotton, were streaked with pastels and

charcoals, and you rarely made physical contact with anything, and you went through your day wondering what it was you did all day. Just an intuition.

She returned and asked him to follow. Down a corridor, U-turned to descend a spiral staircase, through a door, where a thin bald man with heavy bags under his eyes sat reviewing a thick stack of papers. An incense stick ashed onto a brass plate, and only a low-watt crane desk light shone. The office had art prints of lighthouses and dragons, but also a huge framed poster of a rapper from the '80s Michael couldn't place. The office had character, but no motif. Michael couldn't decide if he was comfortable or afraid.

The man put down the papers and leaned back, his head settling on his trunk. Michael waited for him to speak, until he remembered that this man had nothing to say to him.

“I can't imagine there's anything you want less than to talk to me right now. But let me explain how I can help you. If you support me, your store will be recognized throughout the city as a contributor to, a funder, a backbone of the noblest cause in modern day city life. I've been thinking about this a lot, lately. The type of people who shop here are philanthropists. They spend all day in coffee shops ruminating on the good of helping others, probably shedding a tear for the pains of witnessing their fellow man suffer. Yet do we ever see them volunteer? No. We see them shop . . . for clothes. What they are is vanity. What they are is an image.”

Michael spoke freely, channeling Chester, feeling composed, like he was practicing, which he'd done on the train, and though his speech now felt even less

authentic, this was what he wanted, given the realness of the moment: this was his job.

“Does this make them bad people? Of course not. They still have the heart, the desire. We all have that. But these are people whose lives are not complete unless they are involved in everything. They believe that their sheer presence in this city, the fact that they leave their apartments and breathe city air, makes them important. Again, what is the catch? That they talk a big game, that they want to do good but they’re too lazy to ever act on it. What am I doing? I’m describing a philanthropist. A person caught up in letting people see their contribution. The only way these people operate is by giving money and having others know that they give money. And who cares how it’s done. We all win. And I’m saying this is what your store represents. It’s full of these people. I’m talking about what your store becomes when it gets exactly what it needs.”

He stopped awkwardly. He’d run out of things to say, ways to say those things, and ideas of what those things were, or might be.

The man did something with his mouth resembling a pucker. “Please leave and never come back.”

Michael was too invested for jokes. “This is exactly the hard-edged, no-b.s. attitude a company—organization—like ours seeks. This is why you’re perfect.” Michael noticed a large shaving cut on the man’s jawbone. The man’s face seemed far away yet very close. There was a buzzing sound. The office was small and felt smaller. Michael sensed hostility, deep and urgent, unspoken.

“So you’re not interested. So you’re sure you’re not interesting. Because, remember, it’s not what I need from you, it’s what you could use from me.”

Michael instantly regretted saying that. The man wasn’t speaking, just looking Michael in the eyes so Michael had no choice but to look elsewhere, and he realized his armpits were perspiring, he was short on breath, his impulse was incorrect. Had he come across weak, stupid, desperate? The man’s mere presence now a terrible grievance, except Michael was in a stranger’s office, in this man’s chair, this man’s property, this man who probably owned the store, had conceived of the store, had brought the store up from nothing, the store didn’t exist without this man, and now this man was engaged by a used car salesman’s pitch, the thing this man had spent a lifetime avoiding. Michael rising from the chair, eyes on the floor, muttering thanks for your time. The staircase dizzied him and he tried to walk proudly down the corridor into the space of the floor but his whole body lurched and he felt the types of people glaring at him like an alien in their world, and on the way out the triangle face girl’s question got chopped in half by the shutting door, and he felt, in the emerging warmth of ten-forty a.m., like he was in fifth grade and had been yelled at by his least favorite teacher.

He bought a pretzel and bottled water from a cart and walked down Spring Street in the bike lane, hearing Eastern European dialects from large families wearing book-bags and from thirty-year-old glamour couples and realized that if he explained to them what had just happened, they would be utterly confused, and so he began to laugh, and he choked up salt, spewing it onto a parked motorcycle. He went to wipe it off the seat but thought better, and he continued down the bike

lane thinking about the tremendously pathetic life of the guy he'd just come face-to-face with out of the most improbable scenario imaginable: trying to con him into giving up money disguised as a we're-here-to-help-you ploy. They were both a joke, and Michael was glad to be in on it.

He could break and walk and eat and that was the good of the situation. He was on the streets with no time limit but time. He was not confined by walls. The buildings were one continuous seven-story brick structure marked by fire escapes, down here in Soho, where the streets seemed to continually curve so that you had to step forward to see beyond there, only to see that you couldn't see beyond there, and there, and there.

Michael walked into small jewelry gallery with low ceilings and asked the man tinkering with a watch at a workstation behind the counter if could speak with someone in charge. The man yelled over his shoulder in Hungarian or Romanian, groaned, and nodded toward the back. Michael's arm brushed the sides of the narrow hallway, until he ducked his head into a room with an even lower ceiling.

"Yes, yes, what can I do for you," chirped a heavysset woman with the same (but thinner) accent. Michael stared at her in amazement. "What is it, we don't have all day, you see."

Michael took in the watches, the necklaces . . . the belts and bracelets . . . the baby rattles . . . the clocks, lamps, lockboxes . . . the teapots, silverware, serving dishes . . . piles upon piles . . . stacked so high and densely you couldn't see where the stacks started.

“What kind of store is this?”

She removed her glasses and let them fall on her enormous breasts. She wore a black sweater covered in lint and hair. “Does the sign outside read or does it not?”

“You just have so much . . . stuff. Are we even in New York?”

“No, we are in Chechnya. Of course we are in the New York City! I have orders to fill, so get out,” she shooed him.

A clanging rang out, as he stumbled backward. The lady gasped—“You are ruining the treasures!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he shuffled his feet, turning to leave, “but don’t you want to know why I am here?”

“If I wanted to see you, I would have invited you.”

He pointed to the corner. “Hey, a piano.”

“Utilized by the great Moscow Symphony Orchestra,” said the lady proudly.

“Huh?”

“I said, get out at once!” she yelled, her breasts jiggling.

“Okay, okay, have a good one,” and he ducked into the corridor, until he was back in the main room. “What a nut,” he said to the guy, who, now wearing jeweler’s spectacles, cursed to himself. This is kind of a nice store, thought Michael, maybe a Star of David for Marjorie, and he had the desire to tell Ben about that lady.

He walked directly into the next store, and asked the young lady working the register if he could speak to the manager. She said sure and turned away, but, smiling mischievously, asked what was so funny.

Michael, caught between a laugh and smile, shook his head like no one could understand. “I was just over there . . . this lady with her . . . she had just so much stuff, stacked to the ceiling, like the cave in that movie . . .” (he was composing himself) “I guess it wasn’t that funny . . . *Aladdin* . . . I saw it when I was a kid . . . a long time ago . . . never mind.”

“I see,” she said. “And what did you say you did?”

“Excuse me,” he said in a professional tone, “I’m with the Soho Alliance. We coordinate events for New York’s homeless population. Just tryin’ to do our part, you know.”

“Very interesting,” drawing out the *very*, and as the girl left Michael realized he had no idea where he was. But the snarling, the growling, the smell, that awful stench, not of rotten food, not of rubbish, but of the feral, of bestiality— . . . he was in a pet store, not quite a store, not a place of commercial business, but a boutique, a stylish abode for wild, rabid animals to pretend they were hip. Yikes! he said, his right leg buckling.

Sorry, sorry, she implored, yanking a googly-eyed pug. “He’s friendly but rambunctious.”

Michael clutched his bag to his chest; the pug settled. The lady, wearing a fanny pack, slackened the leash, and the pug went straight for Michael, paws grating his jeans near his crotch.

“Chester!” she snapped, and the pug settled, its eyes rolling around.

“Your dog’s name is Chester?”

“Charles.”

“Oh.”

“He’s a real dope. Practically cross-eyed. My husband named him Charles because he looks like a piece of cheese.”

“He kind of looks like a barrel.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. You don’t have crackers in your pocket, do you? He loves salty foods, for some reason.”

“I was eating a pretzel. Jeez I’m thirsty.”

“Yep, that’s Charles.”

The girl returned. “Um . . .”

“Michael,” he said.

“You can follow me, Michael.”

“Say bye, Charles,” said the lady, but the dog had moved elsewhere, bored.

In another minute Michael was in cozy room with a small orange couch, lime green baby chairs, stained wood filing cabinets, building blocks and waiting room toys shoved in the corner next to big ferns surviving in front of the shuttered window that caught a ray of sun through the courtyard, and the walls were covered with small framed photos and poster boards of pictures, children and animals and gaiety the overriding themes. The lady sitting across the desk

couldn't be younger than forty and had the face of a sunflower. He immediately wanted to be friends with her. She said, "How can I help you?"

Michael was so thrown off by such human courtesy that he almost said thank you. He pitched her with honest locution. She listened attentively and asked questions about ownership, partnership, clientele, funding. He answered forthrightly, and when he didn't know, he said it was his first day. Their discussion branched into kids and pets. He'd never had one but always wanted a dog and could only imagine the requited love to balance the two species; was that it? Oh, absolutely (she crossed her legs), because you have to understand the relationship from the time you're a kid, otherwise how would anyone have the passion, it's not an acquired trait, it's almost inbred, and the next thing you know you're channeling it into a make-or-break business (she threw up her palms to the pictured walls), "But we're doing okay."

"So do you think you might be interested in what we do?"

"Like I was saying, and I never got your name come to think of it" (he told her) "Michael, the relationship between dogs and humans is cultivated in the womb practically. And you see these shelters struggling with overpopulation. It's a trait of the angry. And we're not about being angry." She closed one eye and opened the other widely. "I see a definite correlation between rescues and the homeless, and I don't think it's far off to equate the two." Michael waited calmly while she thought to herself. "I think the thing we can do is strike up some sort of deal. What's good for us is good for you and vice-versa. Let's talk."

So they hammered out monetary details so that the Soho Alliance could form a minor partnership with Spawcity. Michael Feinbaum walked out a relieved man.

The rest of his day resulted in no more sponsorships. Just an intuition that the balance Chester'd been referring to was a mish-mash of something involving the way you see yourself channeled into the way people see you connected to the circumstance of your meeting, which was a roundabout way of explaining that in the real world of serious business no one is going to help you so you've got to do everything yourself, with the caveat that people will be more likely to do things for you if you just act like yourself. Who had said that. His dad had said that. His dad was right. His dad was coming soon. So was his mom. Today's little adventure, well that was fun.

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And yet there was that feeling of, today's activities classify as work? Am I now, what, a homeless outreach coordinator? a door-to-door-salesman? a canvasser? a guy who begged people to give away money? In a lower level business course, a five hundred-person auditorium deal, they'd watched a video on the first factories, and the impression it left was that work was repetitive, mechanical. Which meant he'd never had a job. He'd never thought like this. He didn't like this and he needed to talk about this. The problem: he knew only one person his age, and she

was . . . Could he call her? Were they like that? Call just to talk? Call when you don't have plans? They ended maybe awkwardly on Friday. But he wanted to hear her take. Fuck it. He could call her. They were adults.

He called Rachael and expressed the work-related sentiments and throw in a few Chesters to not make it seem like he was stalking her. *Stalking* her? Absurd. They were adults; they could talk.

She waited so long he thought she'd hung up or had never been there in the first place.

"You're having an identity crisis. You're just confused. Normal."

"I'm supposed to be working," he said aimlessly.

"For what? Health? Money? The government? Anyway, you are working. And the thing is I'm not sure why."

"You work because what else would you *do*."

"Why you're confused."

He demanded she answer his question.

"Well I'd have to think about it," she said. "Anyway, this idea of doing I don't like. If you had to describe me to someone else, would you say, 'She's a real estate agent'?"

"What else would I say?"

"That I'm your friend. Anyway, this is stupid. What're you doing?"

"I just got home from . . . work." They both laughed. She asked how it was. He said it was one of the most off-putting things he's ever done (he was cradling phone between shoulder and ear and balancing on one foot slipping off

his shoes), but—and she *really* had to hear this—he kind of liked it. Could he perhaps explicate why in a way that would clarify his paradox and satisfy her soul? “I guess because it was so dumb it was fun.” “That’s unsatisfactory.” He laughed—why was he laughing? he said. So you don’t think I’m funny? she said. He guessed she could be funny, but most . . . but he had never heard her say anything downright hysterical . . . in the short time they’d known each other . . . of course. “You were going to say most girls aren’t funny.” He was not. Was too. Not. Too. (He fell onto the couch rolling his eyes.) “I can hear that,” she said. “What are *you* doing,” he said.

“I’m going bowling. Wanna come?” (He was yawning.) “Fine, then I’m not going.”

“I’ll go,” he laughed, “I’ll go.” “First admit I’m funny,” she said. “Admit what?” “That I’m funny.” “Because you said to?” “Because it’s true.” “How do I know it’s true?” “Because you believe it.” “How do you know what I believe?” “Because you told me.” “I did?” “If you didn’t, you’ll wish you did.” “How do you know that?” “Because I know you.” “You think you know me?” “Better than you know yourself?” “Fine—what’s my favorite color?” “Blue.” “Wrong. It’s red.” “No, it’s blue.” “But I’m telling you you’re wrong, it’s red.” “Which is exactly why I know you better than you know yourself.”

He smiled an overbite and looked out the wall of windows where the eastern sky went from pale gray to black.

“You there?” she said. “Meet me at the train at Fourth and Ninth in thirty.”

He promised to comply. He said, “Rachael, you’re right. It’s stupid.”

“I think that’s the first time you’ve said my name,” she said.

“RachaelRachaelRachaelRachaelRachaelRachaelRachaelRachaelRachael.

”

Does that mean we’re a couple? (You say that I’m your friend.) If she inputs my name as “Bro” and hers as “Anna K.” without consultation, does that mean we’re a couple? If she gives me a ball tutorial (sizes, weights, grips, colors) and claims ignorance when I demand to know her sources, does that mean we’re a couple? If she pumps her fist after a spare and wipes fake tears with fists after a gutter ball, does that mean we’re a couple? If we’re sitting on the bench and she’s leaning into me and educating me on the cultural diversity of the Monday night crowd at a Sunset Park bowling alley populated by age-ranging Mexicans, Latinos, Asians, blacks, and Orthodox Jews of various denominations, which I can clearly observe myself, and she elbows me after said comment, and rubs her hand all over my face, what the hell does that mean? And if she struts out and wiggles her behind for fifteen seconds before a shot, and I say I saw that, and she says, What? with a sly grin, does that mean our reasons for coexistence overlap?

“You’re the best looking lousiest bowler I’ve ever seen,” he said after she posted a second game score on par with the evening’s outside temperature.

“I want to come back here on Friday,” she said. “Can we agree that would be splendid?”

Sure, he said, not wanting to. Yes, he was having fun, but circumnavigation meant its definition. At some point you just did it, though he

relied on no personal experience that wasn't archaic. Sex. So maybe you don't just do it. Maybe this was how things worked. Remember, you went to the same college and didn't know each other or any of each other's friends. Suddenly it all made sense. Sort of. Actually not at all. But a little bit. She wasn't like *that*. *That*. What was *that*?

If she gives the seven-eighth's full pitcher of beer to the sloppily attired double dating adolescents who in the adjacent lane have revealed themselves to be planetarium enthusiasts, does that mean we can go home now?

Whew time flies when you're looking forward to something coming up that you're impossibly excited for. When you stake out a destination and performance enhances and productivity follows. Not a situation where you can't focus on anything else; one where you block it out and focus on everything else. And not blocking out the way insanity blocks out. Blocking out the way quarterbacks throw touchdowns the night their father dies. Healthy focus, renewed fervor, and that's palpable, that's what ropes in a candy store for a thirty-per-month, and don't they make fine chocolate covered pretzels here, don't you! The life insurance agency's waffling but "ultimately" they're looking to "broaden horizons" and aren't we all in it for the "good of humanity," aren't we hypocritical if we aren't trying to "insure against life," wink-wink, thank you, I'll be in contact, I'll mail you that brochure (steps outside onto Prince Street, phone rings), Rachael I can't talk now, I'm in the middle of something (not exactly true) but can I call you back or well since I'm going to see you tomorrow can we just

talk then. . . . Oh it's a time change. . . . From quarter to eight to eight. . . . How necessary was this? . . . Well aren't you cute, no sarcasm. . . . Kay but you are more. . . . I'm talking like what? . . . It's pep, I've got that pep. . . . No, I wasn't strong enough to be a high school cheerleader. . . . I didn't think you were either.

Flies through the manicured hair, i.e. a sufficient combing, the cleansed face, the perfect outfit (jeans and T-shirt, but a *bamboo cotton army green faded* fitted T-shirt), the early arrival, the missed cheek kiss opportunity, the small-talk train ride to the Thirty-sixth Street station, the sensation of maybe this has all been a gigantic mistake, the walk up the hill, the puzzling sensation because of but, um, isn't that it?

"What I said was here," she said. "Sunset Park, home of wedding cake shops, for reasons unknown, and what I'm guessing will be a surprise."

"I've been here once in my life," he said, glancing back at the bowling alley's yellow awning.

"Twice," she corrected, "and why am I a faster walker than you?"

He hustled alongside and she led him a few blocks up the Mexican restaurants and Chinese take-outs and dollar stores and, indeed, the wedding cake shops of this portion of Fifth Avenue, over mile down the road from his apartment but an entirely different place, so said the ethnic citizenry hanging out on this warm spring evening. They were at a stone wall, they were hiking the wide steps and the interior driveway of a park a few blocks long. He asked, between breaths, for an explanation, but, in her sneakers and light blue jeans and her own form-fitting top and her corduroy jacket, she kept on chugging, and when they finally

reached the lamppost at which she'd chosen to come to a halt versus all the others—he's thinking we're going to do it on the jungle gym over there?—she pivoted and looked over his shoulder with those big brown eyes that were obviously seeing something. “What?” he said, turning—and he gulped, for before him, beyond the apartment buildings and industrial buildings and the few smokestacks was New York City lit up, Staten Island blending into Jersey blending into Midtown blending into Queens, with the New York Harbor and lower Manhattan and Brooklyn in the foreground, with the Empire State Building, its top floors and antenna awash in red lights, standing tall, the axis point, the reference point, the punctuation. Shoulder to shoulder, his head a foot higher, they stared.

After some time he said, “We couldn't have picked a better night.”

“It is so clear tonight,” said Rachael. “Crystal clear. It's not too often you can see *everything*,” and she pointed out landmarks, the rolling hills beyond the Verrazano, the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges almost hidden but you saw the subway in motion, the red brake lights of bumper-to-bumper on the Prospect Expressway, tiny Liberty Island and the Statue, the outline of Red Hook, with its factories and alleged Ikea location, the nub of Battery Park sucked up the Hudson and East Rivers, the sparkling Chrysler Building, the rooftops of the Lower East Side and the East Village escalating into skyscrapers, the Citi building marking Queens, the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge and Roosevelt Island, and see the Atlantic-Pacific clock tower building up ahead?

He did, but his perspective was all out of whack, he said. How so? she said. Just that he had never seen NYC like this. She asked what he made of it, but he had no answer. Instead he said, “How did you find out about it?”

“You’re a bit in awe.”

“It’s, like, time stopping, but moving.”

“It’s like, here we stand on this hill, still, motionless, and there we see the lifeblood of a city carrying on. It’s my favorite part of being up here, watching the cars and hearing nothing but a distant hum, like when you listen to the ocean without seeing the water. But look—in two dimensions, all cars would crash into each other. Try to picture that, it’s like those Magic Eyes books. I just wish I had seen it with the towers.”

She mentioned the towers, he didn’t want to think about things like that. He said, “I like when you explain things,” and turned toward her but looked out over the view, until he felt her turn to him. He wanted to gobble her up; they kissed for a very long time, and, holding hands, stared some more.

Rachael said, “No matter how exquisite or surreal something is, there’s only so long you can look at it.”

“It’s like a virtual reality Lego set,” said Michael. “You could like disassemble it, if you could touch it. And I was hoping you’d say that.”

They held hands back to the train. On the subway he put his arm around her and she rested her head on his shoulder. When they exited the train in Park Slope, Rachael fastened her jacket buttons and shoved her hands in armpits. “Is it

me, or did it get colder in the twenty minutes we've been underground? I just want it to be warm already," she sighed.

Michael put a leg onto the first step of his brownstone's short, steep staircase.

"Are you prepared for this?" She froze with a look. He clarified, "Seeing it for the first time since you sold it to me."

"Just don't ask me if it's professional any more," she said, blowing past him.

He flipped on the light switch to dim (preset) and she said, "Whoa."

"You like it?"

"*Love* it."

"Different than before, no?"

"There's no comparison." (She meandered into the living room, glancing at the ceiling.) "I really broke the bank, brought in a fleet of decorators."

"Which is to say you've hardly changed a thing."

"I've done absolutely nothing."

"It shows."

"Thanks."

He met her halfway for the embrace and straddle and cinch backward to the marble island he'd so stupidly thought, and when he had her up against it, all he'd pictured from the exterior proved true on the inside, she was soft and curvy and a handful of warmth, except that marble island ruined it, too tall, indenting

her back, so they stumbled with squeaks and heaves and grunts into the bed cushioning the fall where darkness took over. It was a thought about fingertips on skin that kept encroaching, in some ways it felt like the first time, he had sinking a spot-up jumper on the wing on repeat, he was touching grease, she was oily, she was foul, she was sticky, she was slimy, she was scaly, she was Marjorie, she was Rachael, she was wrinkled, she was crumpled, she was crinkled, she was who, who was Rachael, Rachael was under the hoop, the ball was rolling off his fingertips, the ball was spinning in the air, the ball was rotating to the rim, the ball was grazing the hoop, the ball was plummeting through nylon, the ball was in Rachael's fingertips, Rachael had the ball, she was passing the ball, Ben was catching the ball, Ben on a fast break, Ben slicing through defense, Ben hitting a layup, Ben nodding at Marjorie, Marjorie nodding at Rachael, Rachael nodding at Michael, Michael panting, Rachael whimpering, Rachael gasping, Michael crying, Michael smiling, Michael spitting, Rachael worrying, Michael deflecting, Rachael rubbing, Michael crying, Rachael consoling, Michael sobbing, Rachael recoiling, Michael reaching, Rachael swatting, Michael grasping, Rachael removing, Michael falling, Rachael lunging, Michael falling, Rachael leaning, Michael plummeting, Rachael peering, Michael crashing, Rachael hearing, Michael crashing, Rachael screaming, Michael bursting, Michael bubbling, Michael burning, burning, burning.

Not a razor hum, computer glow, cellphone charger beam. Hiss of air through the cracked window. The tree swaying and shaking a power line he noticed propped on his right elbow. He shimmied his legs cautiously until hers, a

tad stubbly, interlocked with his at the knees, to which Marjorie would have apologized profusely or preemptively delivered a succinct, inflexible explanation just in case he would mention it to his friends, the stubble, which he wouldn't. Hence biggest difference one: self-confidence, though the brands differed: where M identified and played to her strengths, R accepts hers but conceals them. (How do I know this? I should ask her. I should get at it.) For all the obvious reasons of look where that led me, R wins. Biggest difference two: M was cool, R is not. (I think I might like this.) Biggest difference three: M is a deviant. Biggest difference four: I hate M. Biggest difference five: Fuck M. Biggest difference six: I just fucked R.

 Holding the blanket to her chin and with shut eyes (he peeked), Rachael said, "You know how they say we've entered a post- or reverse- or inverted-feminist age, how we've superseded the sexual revolution, how technology has desensitized us, how girls are menstruating younger, how sixth graders losing their virginity is normative, how, basically, we've reached a point where there's no raw, baseline, scientific sexual data to be unearthed, how from this point forward everything an industrialized culture learns about sex is reactive, how when every crevice, literal and metaphorical, has been explored, every theory about sex is rendered secondary? You awake? You know?"

 "Sure," he said softly.

 "Well I believe in all that, and I believe that that makes it doubly scintillating."

 He was stroking her hair.

“Which is to say I’m glad we waited.”

(Does that mean we’re a couple?)

9

The best part is that it’s not awkward.

Until she mentioned that.

But why does that have to be? If you talk about the awkwardness, does that make it more or less awkward? If you leave it alone it becomes awkward, and the longer you draw it out, the more likely it is to end up hurting you. But what is actually at stake is the question. I’ll tell you what’s awkward. Calling someone an asshole when you thought you hung up is awkward. Saying someone is the dumbest person in the class as he/she walks in is awkward. It’s awkward because you mistakenly reveal your true feelings to the person from whom you had consciously attempted to conceal them, and it’s entirely plausible that you had that person fooled, that that person genuinely liked for you the wrong reasons, and now they A no longer like you and B know you were being disingenuous to their face the entire time, and so you’re just kind of standing there knowing all this, knowing things will never be the same, knowing, perhaps worst of all, you will never forget the moment. She didn’t think any of this applied here today.

“Jeez . . . I mean.”

“Ugh, see, this is your problem.” She sat up, holding blankets to clavicle.

“Why are you so afraid to think.”

Afraid to *think*, he said. "I'm not afraid to think." She asked if he understood, in infant's terms, the difference between a thought produced and a thought explored. He said what.

"You think of something to say, you gather the courage to say it, and then what? If it's not talked about, it dies. Imagine that. Something you care about so much so as to devote a thought to dying before it enters the lexicon of life. How do you think anything in the world gets done? Tell me, did you do that at that old ad institution."

"What? Why are you talking about that? How do you remember of all things?"

"I'm not stupid."

"I mean, maybe I did, I don't know." He was lying on his back. "I mean, yeah, obviously. But so what?"

"My point," she said, "is that you're not an idiot but you enjoy introducing yourself as one."

"I'm not an *idiot*."

"Exactly my point."

As he shook his head incredulously and rolled on his side, she slipped off the bed and crouched by the window. "Shit."

"What?"

"My clothes aren't here. They're in the living room."

"I'm facing the other way" (he covered his eyes with his forearm).

"I don't care if you see me naked."

“I won’t look, I promise.”

“I said I don’t care.”

“I’m not going to look.”

“That’s not . . . *ugh*.”

He felt odd and powerless at the white figure moving effortlessly out of view. A naked girl is really just a shapely blob of skin, he thought; the crack of the rear is both aesthetically appetizing and unappealing.

He heard footsteps and rustling and had no intention of leaving the bed. He realized that he was naked, a foreign sensation. Linen on the groin was, though smooth, a grating intrusion. He always slept in mesh shorts. Maybe she’d leave and never come back. Maybe the next sound he’d hear would be the door slamming and a dying gust of wind. Maybe he’d laugh at that. Maybe he wanted her beside him, around him, in front of him; she was in front of him, she was busting out of the turquoise shirt that fell mid-thigh, last night it’d been tucked in, and wearing nothing else but a bad hair day. She was speaking and he was seeing his child in those thin eyebrows and pleasant-looking face. In one frame he saw gorgeous and in another cute. Hard to tell, was she cute or was she gorgeous? She—*she*—Marjorie—was gorgeous, he’d thought. Pleasant-looking not an excuse for ugly, not an excuse for mediocrity, not an excuse for vanilla, not a reason to call it quits. Just a term as close to truth. Marjorie was gorgeous, *they* had thought. They had *all* thought in consensus. What would they think of Rachel? This was what he liked best: how he felt was how he felt and could not be contended with. Cute *and* gorgeous.

“*Michael*,” she snarled, leaning against the doorframe, “I’m talking to you.”

“I’m listening,” he said as if she were joking.

“We’re going out for breakfast.” He said okay. “Because I’m starving.” He said he was too. “Because you have not one bit of food in here that isn’t a condiment, a box of ice cream sandwiches, or moldy takeout.”

“You opened the freezer? I don’t have any cereal?”

“How can a person *live* like this?” she said loudly, departing to fetch her clothes.

A corner spot hidden on Third Street by trellis. A gray sky through the curved atrium attached to the dining room. Three-fourths of the tables filled. Surprising for the best Spanish spot in the neighborhood, she said. An adjacent large party congratulating a couple with race runner’s bibs pinned to shirts; strollers parked to the side and fat babies in laps being force-fed food smeared on cheeks. An oval white China dish stuffed with an egg and cheese burrito and home fries (minimally greasy, that kind of place), and something veggie on hers she always forgot the name of. Michael was trying to determine how to attack his meal and Rachel was talking about awkwardness, saying she was going to keep talking about it solely because doing so totally removed the potential awkwardness, not that there was any, and that once the talking about it became annoying, then, and only then, would they have an indicator of where they stood.

“How about now?” he said, tapping the bottom of a glass ketchup bottle. None was coming out.

“Hit the 57.” He ignored her. She repeated herself. He ignored her. She pointed a slender finger where the neck met the trunk and a 57 was engraved. Michael hit the spot, and ketchup flowed onto his plate.

“How’d you know that?”

“Because I’m from Pittsburgh.” A forkful of spinach dangled in front of her chest. “Aren’t you the slightest bit curious what Pittsburgh’s like?”

“Anything interesting about Pittsburgh?” He was eyeing the mountain of ketchup.

“Nothing I would ever share with you.”

“Will you stop being mean to me?”

She nearly choked on a piece of spinach. “Being mean? Are you eight? Am I your stepmother?”

They brunched. Every moment a busboy filled up a water glass that was already full or reached for a plate unattended for a mere ten seconds, but when Michael requested an additional napkin, he received a look from a man terribly inconvenienced. He thought of what his parents were doing at this exact moment and guessed probably the same thing he was doing, provided his mom still hated lox and his dad loved extra lean corned beef. He thought about the two short runs he’d done in the past week and how his feet were blistering on the arch. Jogging had seemed such a promising activity that first day and was now kind of annoying. It wasn’t getting easier, he didn’t feel faster, he dreaded the idea of

going running. He was doing it because it was something to do and because he enjoyed being in the park. Sometimes it hit him, usually after work, while he was walking from the train station to his apartment, that there was so little in the world for him to do at this moment, and that what had, over the last couple of months, seemed such a strong idea was probably just a capricious, an emotionally charged decision, logical but uneducated. He didn't really think about his old life because that wasn't a viable option and so it had sort of seeped out of the picture as something worth thinking about. Right. It didn't really work like that. He did think about his old life knowing he couldn't go back, knowing he'd committed to this life. And why did it have to be *a* life; couldn't it just be a *part of* a life? Like what if that had been Part A and this was Part B? Will there be a Part C, D, E, or is this it? And this here before him, this girl sitting Indian-style chowing down on some vegan concoction—this was it? Would he care if he never saw her again? But that problem. There was nothing else to do. And now she was talking the way she talked.

“I'm increasingly becoming a proponent of the sober night out.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Absolutely. Take last night, for instance. We remember everything, we aren't hungover, and . . . well that's it, but those are two big pluses. What do you think? In college I just wore down so quickly. I went to a house or frat party every weekend freshman and sophomore year, then to the bars every weekend junior year, and by senior year I just didn't have it in me, but I was still doing it because all my friends were. And that was my stupid social life. Here I am, twenty-five,

talking like my parents. And then it's like, my grades were fine, but I never really engaged with my classes." She gazed at a young mother strapping the baby in the stroller. "Sometimes I wish I'd gone to a small liberal arts school in New England. You know what I mean? By the way, happy first of the month. I mean, you went to Indiana too, so you know, the way all those Midwest kids seemed so content to just sit at Nick's three nights a week and play all those drinking games, listening to the same songs, seeing the same people, making the same small talk . . . and now I'm just here . . . in Brooklyn . . ." she trailed off. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," he said between bites of egg and tortilla.

"You have to have some opinion."

He shrugged. "I never really thought about it."

"I know you can relate, given you lived a pretty similar life to me for four years."

He looked at her like: Don't kid yourself.

She shook the table, rattling the silverware, spilling some water. "Fuck, Michael, speak to me."

"Relax," came out rather seriously.

"What is wrong with you. You can't *do* this." He said do what. "Act like you don't care about anything. Like nothing bothers you. Like you have no opinion on anything. Like you feel absolutely nothing." She lowered her head and ran both hands over her scalp. "I *knew* you would do this."

"You don't have to cry, okay."

“I’m not going to *cry*.” They locked eyes in a grimace and looked away. The group was breaking up, he noticed, with hugs all around. One baby’s eyes were wide, the other was sleeping.

In a calculating tone, but with a tiny edge, Rachael said, “Tell me something about yourself. Because I don’t think you would voluntarily bullshit with me for two weeks, sleep with me, take me out to *breakfast*, and *then* decide to never speak to me again. We all know that happens these days. I know that as well as anyone. So give me a reason to believe that that’s not happening. What is it, and don’t give me that Long Island crap.”

You weak and pathetic little girl from some fuck city who knows where. You know why we didn’t know each other in school? Because you were the type of person I’d laugh at if you tried to hit on me at a bar. Do you know who my girlfriend is? She’s one of the girls you hated. Do you know who my friends are? They’re the guys you see and wonder what it’s like to be them. You say you want nothing to do with us because it makes you feel better to ignore what you can’t have. But these are all guesses. I don’t know any of this because to know any of this I would have had to know that people like you existed.

“I was in a relationship all through college.”

“Okay, relationship. And.”

“And it actually started before college, went through college, went long enough for us to live together out of college. And then one day I came home and saw her and my best friend together. Like that. You know what I mean.”

“Okay.” The corners of her lips curled the slightest bit upward. “*Okay*.”

So he told her the story. The words, which he had always imagined would be bottled up inside him forever and would take forceps to extract, materialized with a calm candor, and for some reason hearing himself speak the details aloud made the story seem kind of goofy. And look at Rachael, absorbing it like duty. Not eating, not waving off busboys. She had put her feet on the floor, but her shoulders hadn't moved. She didn't give away any reaction, she didn't interrupt, and he didn't editorialize, except for at the end, when he said, "And it was awful. But, you know, and then we met . . . and . . ."

"I'm astonished," she said, looking at her empty plate, "that you're alive."

He bit a piece of jammed toast and hiccupped a chuckle.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

"Hey, that's cool."

"No, like, I don't know what to say," and as she kept saying that, it became clear she wasn't saying that because she couldn't muster an appropriate response. She looked at his plate, where chunks of potato skirted in a small pool of ketchup, and said, "I don't want to ask you if you like me."

"No, it's not that," he said quickly. "It's—"

"It's what?"

He arched his eyebrows. "You're quick to cut me off."

"Well," she said, "you see how I might feel duped."

"And that's *my* fault?"

She asked him what he was going to say.

"I wasn't going to say anything. I was going to say, 'I don't know'."

“Were you really?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t I believe that.”

He put down his fork and breathed deeply.

She said, “So you got what you want.”

“Huh? You think I’m using you?”

She was staring beyond him intensely; he turned to busboys clearing and setting tables. The restaurant was empty.

Rachael pulled her hand out of her hand purse and flung a twenty-dollar bill on the table. “Thanks for the meal. See you soon. Probably not.”

The half-empty bottle of Heinz 57 on her side of the table. Hmm, he thought.

How that had happened was not on his mind. What was on his mind was that he didn’t have to think about her. No doubt she was at fault. He had let out his secret and she had betrayed him. She had begged for his secret, only to flick away his impossibly honest moment, and so she was not worth his time.

A man ran down the street wearing shorts. Michael realized that he was warm, that his jeans were sticking to his legs in sweat spots and his bellybutton was dampening and his armpits were perspiring. Why were his armpits always sweaty? A wind that picked up was a warm wind, a summer wind. He took out his phone and in a few quick clicks was at a screen with her name at the top and the blinking cursor in a blank box. So how do you actually compose such a message?

What do you say? Overthinking these things was a mistake. Be simple. Be intriguing. What would you want to hear?

“Hey, this is Michael from the other week. Wanted to see what you’re up to.”

He walked up the street. The neighborhood (so said the map in the train station) was a huge grid that sloped off the west edge of Prospect Park to Fourth Avenue (which the R subway line ran under to Bay Ridge and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge). The streets were perpendicular to the park and were, as far as he could tell, brownstone blocks; the avenues, Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, which ran parallel to park, were commercialized with bars, banks, bodegas, boutiques, just endless blocks of business, while Sixth and Eighth (one-way traffic) were busy streets but residential. Yes. He hadn’t seen a synagogue—the Jews were hiding! The amount of churches and day care centers surprised him. Families liked it here. So did Young People. Yes. That was the neighborhood, there was maybe more to it, and he had a space inside of it.

“didn’t think I’d hear from you. no plans.”

Tonight, or ever? Certainly she had plans in the future, so why wouldn’t she mean tonight? Maybe she meant today, or right now, as in no plans right now, or maybe she was engaged in plans and was free later, or maybe nothing at all and she was a lame person who was manipulating him for her own good, which was why she reverted to the reverse psychological tactic of saying she didn’t believe she’d hear from him because she desperately wanted to hear from him, and by

saying not that she didn't *want to* but that she didn't *think she would* meant let's get together right now please, thus affirming that she had no plans.

“Want to get together tonight?”

He reached Prospect Park West. He took a sip from the water fountain and sat on a bench outside the short stone wall. The bench was not comfortable. A woman walking an enormous, lazy dog passed. Maybe he would get a dog. While he sat in the apartment, it could sit with him. That could be interesting. Around the neighborhood people would see him and say, There goes that man with his dog. Such an adult responsibility. He was an adult because he had power to do whatever he wanted. If he wanted to go to Mexico, he'd be there in seven hours, maybe even six with how fast planes traveled, plus another three with the time change—he could be in Mexico in three hours. What he would do there, who knew—maybe eat quesadillas, or visit Machu Picchu—was that in Mexico? But that was the point: he could do whatever he wanted. And who would stop him? Had he ever thought about this, he'd have obviously reached the same conclusions as today. But he'd never thought like this before. In high school he and his friends taken a few road trips, Jersey beaches (a romp), Cape Cod (kind of boring), the Canadian border (to gamble), and in college they'd done a few spring break excursions, but those had been sanctioned and funded by his parents. Of course, he had a job. But the worst that could happen was Jerry, really the skeleton of Jerry, would become incensed and fire him. What a joke. Why not just rent a car and drive to California, or Seattle, the great west, the frontier, land of infinite space? If he got bored, he'd come home. That was all.

His phone vibrating and this evening's plans wrapped up with a night out with . . . except his mother was calling.

"What?" he said testily.

She reminded him that she and his father were seeing a Sunday matinee and were planning on stopping by earlier. He said he knew, he asked what time. She said noon. He said he didn't need people feeling sorry for him. She asked that he refrain speaking to her in that tone.

"It's just that I—"

"Are lucky enough to have people who care for you willing to spend time with you."

"Have a lot of stuff going on right now."

"I'm glad to hear that. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Can you put Dad on the phone?"

"He said he's going watching the Knicks game. I'm surprised you're not."

"Mom, the season's over. They got crushed in the first round."

"Oh. He must have meant another game. Baseball, maybe?"

"There aren't any playoff games today. Yeah, like dad can sit through a Mets game. All right, I'll see you tomorrow."

The call, which lasted fifty-seven seconds, exhausted him. Or was it the night of choppy sleep with that girl? To have a meaningless conversation with one's parents. Wonderful! He stood up and walked along the avenue. Energy wasted thinking about his parents. They were just two random people. If he had the power to travel anywhere, how valuable were two random people? But if that

were true, why did anyone matter but himself? He couldn't believe he was thinking like this. *Think about the girl who hasn't texted back.* This was the annoying thing about text messaging. It was so easy to message each other with nothing at stake, but now that he'd broken the barrier and suggested a date of sorts, he was in fits of anxiousness waiting for her response, as if whether she responded in two seconds, two minutes, or two hours made a difference in her level of interest. But it did make a difference, because if he were intrigued by a woman's call he'd answer immediately. Or would he? After all, he'd waited a week since she'd cancelled on him, solely for the purpose of guilt-tripping her and ensuring that if she had any interest in seeing him she'd agree to a make-up date without reservation. Yet here they were. And she wasn't responding. He needed a nap.

He woke up on the couch in the dark. Wearing shoes. Rolled on his back to itch his shoulder blade. Saturated with heaviness. As a nap person he knew the first ten were overwhelming. He flipped open his phone. It was nearly ten o'clock. Slept for a very long time. He remembered he was supposed to be with this girl tonight. Supposed to be, as in if she wanted to be. She didn't and that was the end of her. And Rachael out of the picture. The brunch fiasco was this morning? Another Saturday night, alone. Did people go running at night? A quick loop around the park would be nice. He could not escape that he was alone, yet he wasn't seething with anger, wasn't depressed, wasn't even upset, not even bored.

He was . . . he couldn't explain it, he couldn't make sense of it, he couldn't gather himself to even consider what it was.

He went to flip off his phone, when he noticed something. The message icon was lit up. He squinted. A new message from 1:09. Today? Yes, today. That was when he was sitting outside the park. He had received a message while he was speaking with his mother, and when he'd shut his phone there was nothing to alert him that he'd missed it. He opened the phone. It was from her.

“no good. monday?”

So he'd napped through a nonexistent event. And despite the fact that she still wanted to get together, wanting to do so on Monday made him less excited. Monday was so bland. He wrote back that Monday was fine. He wondered why they didn't just speak to each other.

10

She was making a list of all that he needed and he was not appreciating what she termed the motherly instinct to love and protect and serve her offspring in times of need. “I can do stuff myself,” he said. Of course, but she was only trying to help, what he'd understand when he had kids—and more than he could “possibly imagine,” added his father from looking out the window; “I love this light,” he said, “sit back, read the paper, got your coffee.” Stuart Feinbaum turned around and scanned the room from the foreground of living space straight to the kitchen. “But on *what?*”

Michael craned his neck. “What do you mean.”

“You’ve got furniture, but do you use it?”

“I’m sitting on the couch,” he said.

Coffee table, said his mother, jotting on a pad. She wanted to know, would he use a toaster? “I mean . . . sure.” And some sharp knives, in case he wanted to make chicken, or steak. That’s a delicacy, a dinner-out meal, he said. “We cook all the time,” she said. “Why didn’t you when I lived there.” “We did, you just don’t remember. You were always running out. I’m not criticizing. We know you haven’t had time, with the new job. Are you a little on edge? Because with everything that’s happened . . . I’ve been in stressful situations myself . . . I’m just curious, what have you been, you know, doing?”

She was so earnest and it was ten times worse when they danced around it. His father, what was he doing? Watching and listening, what he always did. They weren’t friends, his parents, but they liked to know things. Parents who were friends lost control, failed to maintain distance, authority. Give his parents a little hint and they run with it. What would they say about him to others? What do think they about him? He didn’t know. He knew they loved him and cared for him and wanted the best for him and wanted him to be happy and would do anything to ensure this, but what did think of him as a person? What did they know about him as a person?

They weren’t pushy. At their urging he tried recreational sports and summer camps and school clubs—never an instrument, not his taste—but could always back out, his decision. He knew this, loved this, hated how this

compromised his adolescent instinct to yell at them remorselessly. A line set up over time that he didn't want to cross because when he had a time or two his punishment had simply been that he now knew even less about what they were thinking (maybe an only child thing)—but he knew they were, he caught them whispering in the kitchen and in their bedroom with the light on and hushing when he came by, and it consumed him: what do they think about me? So this was how he returned the favor. No one needed to know these new . . . characters.

“Hanging out, exploring the neighborhood, Brooklyn. It's a cool place.” A big place, his father said, a bit like Queens but also entirely different, though he chalked that up to how one colloquially perceived the borough, not to how it appeared physically, not to the buildings or the streets; Brooklyn was a bit more intimate, however, he thought. Michael acknowledged the intimacy factor over Queens. The reaches of Queens felt obscure; even when you weren't close to the marshes and drifts and Jamaica Bay you always felt like you were, always felt like on the brink of a vast nothing. Here there was a certain energy, little packed cities, he felt, the park he'd run in, the shops he'd perused, the restaurants he'd been ordering from, the subway lines he'd taken. He heard himself saying, “And with not having ever been here, it's neat experiencing it for the first time.”

“It's still only a tiny chunk,” said his father. “Check out the Williamsburg shtetles, Borough Park, Midwood, if you want to see some real Jews, Coney Island too, but that was in the '40s and '50s.”

Silence. His mother said, “Michael, all I mean is that you should have basic items like pot holders and a tea kettle. You have this wonderful apartment

and it should reflect you. Like it should be suited to your tastes.” She held up the list and tapped it with the pen. “Luckily I brought you some notepads and pens last time, but I had to go digging in your room to find them. At home we keep scratch paper and writing utensils in a drawer by the phone. I know everyone’s all cellphones and email, but did you notice that this island has a drawer?” She opened and closed it. “This would be a perfect place to store everyday items. I know I run into a thousand things each day that I need to jot down, and instead of scrambling, I know where I can go. This will make your life a lot easier when you start school.”

Michael, listening patiently, knowing he’d reached the point where all he could do was heed her suggestions, agreed with her, except for one part.

“If I go back to school.”

“Well, whatever you decide to do, I think it would be advantageous.”

His was father puzzled. “If.”

“I just don’t know,” said Michael.

“Second thoughts it sounds like.”

Michael nodded hesitatingly.

“Have you even applied?” said his mother. “*Yeah*, I have,” he sort of snapped. She asked if he’d received any feedback.

“These things take a while.”

“Do you have any idea of where you stand.”

“He knows his grades, his boards, his letters, his essays,” said Stuart.

This cooled Michael, and the conversation took a rational turn. "I'm just not sure if I still want to. If it'd be good for me."

"I guess what you have to consider," said his mother, "is whether you want to move ahead now or later. Because in your field this is an important degree to hold, and the opportunities aren't always recurring."

"Well, I can defer for a year," he said.

"At all of them?"

"I think."

"At Columbia?"

He smiled that, indeed, at Columbia the M.B.A. program was deferrable for a year. But why was he smiling, was it a mask for what they were on to, why did he think they were onto something, should they be?

"Because what type of school it is I don't know, though who can argue with its reputation of course." She walked toward him. "A real opportunity."

"I know what kind of school it is."

She sat down and rubbed his head, as she was wont to do. (Probably an only child thing.) "You'll always have your brains and your desire and your work ethic."

"Can you at least not treat me like a small child?" he said as he allowed her to hug him.

Now his father spoke, "What your mother and I are trying to figure out is, you seemed very into it a while back, and we're just wondering if we can help you with a decision."

Thankful they cared to inquire. Blessed. Honestly he was. But not having it. He put elbows on knees and clasped hands together.

“I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry. It’s under control. I’m not going to screw up any ‘opportunities.’ Anyway, I’m probably going.” He knew he might regret his words, but he didn’t care.

“What are you guys seeing anyway?”

“*Phantom of the Opera*,” she said.

* * * * *

Another Monday morning, walking into the office, sipping bottled water, messenger bag strap sweat stain diagonally on his blue collared shirt, the downside of going to be a scorcher, wearing shorts, cargo khaki, would they look the part? Bumping into Chester, knocking him over, almost, Chester wasn’t carrying anything, Chester’d been in early, was he an overachiever? Hi, Chester, what’s going on, Chester? Good, man, what’s good, and for you, too, by the way, cause you’re breaking all sorts of records. What was that you said? (Chester pulling him off to the side, lowering voice)—that you’re doing a lot better than most people start off because, honestly, most people don’t cut it, but you’re looking like one of the ones, we all started like this and I did all right but you’re shattering the old marks, we keep them you know, the good ones, and performance tallies, no money, not even betting, a friendly thing, a silly motivational thing, a tactic—and plus it’s your attitude—and that bodes well,

because then probably just through the summer with this and you'll be doing what I'm doing. Which is exactly? Which is exactly, well . . . (the woman, Jess was her name, walked by; Chester waited head down until she passed the counter space with the sink and coffee machine and cupboards; Michael asked Chester who she was; Chester said just a woman who worked here) . . . we can discuss it later but—oh, hey, by the way, I was in your and Rachael's neighborhood the other day, morning actually. Neat but I thought you lived there. (Radically shaking his head)—I'm in Carroll Gardens, you gotta cross the canal, or just take the F a few stops, but anyway there was this race in the park Saturday morning, a ten-miler, three loops basically, real fun time, a community thing, a nice break out of the monotony of life to get out and be amongst your fellow Brooklynners, you wouldn't think maybe but true, very true. "Oh yeah I saw people in race bibs. Wait you ran ten miles?" asks Michael with astonishment. "Yeah, man," says Chester, leaning against the wall, downplaying nothing, "it was freakin' great." "Wow, that's, like, as long as Manhattan." "Actually" (Chester tilts his head) "that's kind of accurate." Michael asks, "Why?" "Fun, man, have you ever?" Michael conveys he hasn't. "Plus I'm training for this race in August. A marathon." "Isn't that like twenty miles?" "Twenty-six and change," says Chester. "Put your body through that now. Especially with the weather coming up. That's why I'm saying, you should do it."

Michael dubious. Not sure what he heard. Chester saying what? He laughs. *Okay*. Good luck though. Chester on hand with some common misconceptions: that only Kenyans run marathons, that you slave your life to

running, that it ruins bodies, that it ruins lives, that it's boring. In fact it's fun. He's mentioned that? Yes he has. But it's because it's true. He puts it like: Imagine a high you get where you want the feeling to continue forever and it doesn't have to stop, and on top of it, it's healthy, like you're doing your body a good deed. Chester knows Michael's an athletic guy, knows he'd adapt, knows he'd enjoy. Chester knows what Rachael tells him? How does Chester know these things? Chester saying, "I'm telling you, this is going to be the next big thing."

"Absolutely not."

Chester just throwing it out there. Michael asks why me, why not others, aren't others doing it, don't you have friends who do this sort of stuff, I'm more of a gym guy on occasion. "My friends are wimps," Chester says. "They won't even go a half-hour. But, hey, I gotta work, so we'll talk." Chester throwing his fist, Michael bumps. Chester turns to leave. Wait a second. "What's the most you've ever run?" Michael doesn't know. Four miles maybe? he's saying; is that how much you run in a basketball game? Chester doesn't know, but probably less—"Probably a lot less." Chester says that this week they're going for a jog, just an hour. Explore Brooklyn.

"An hour. Um."

"You might surprise yourself. Peace."

* * * * *

The world gazing upon the time spent in such establishments. Corner taverns like sanctuaries. Reflected in an amber bottle tilted to the hovering lamp with his ear a whisker from the counter, the self. Lake Monroe that final week. Ben and her on a pontoon boat he could not access without swimming and no one went in the water, you drank cans of beer on your boat, it pulled up alongside and you stepped aboard. Her suit was cobalt with white polka dots. Even though she wore jean shorts atop. Sixty-plus people. They were together the whole time.

“Michael?”

His expression quizzical and oblivious. Tapping fingers on the bar, cherry wood, stained dark, a rhythm blotting out the soft soul. A horrendous decision on all accounts but no sense in extricating yourself. Not too late to change. Yet that optimism of seeing it through. Some were like that, others bolted rather recklessly. Because even if this girl in front of him was the one, what a hassle. Why couldn't he just be there at the end. Or in the middle. He'd take transplanting effective now. The feeling she was the one. She's the one. Somehow, she was the one. It was stupid, so, so stupid.

She was Laura.

Oh, right. Don't mind if you do, he said; no—no, please, please do.

“Excuse me.”

She said he looked dazed. He said, “Recognize”; did she want something. She asked what was he having. He wasn't even sure. Laugh at that. “Some beer?” he was saying. “I've spent too long in these places to not know what I'm drinking.” (Why did he say that?) She inquired if he was sure “this” was good.

She was tentative, warm, receiving. Teeth that light up a room, he thought. “No, I’m fine,” he said. “I was just lost” (he twirled his hand) “in my world.”

“Your world?”

“Me and you, we’re, like, sharing a world.” He was speaking nonsense.

She slipped off the bar stool to loosen her cardigan. Simple elegance in attire, he thought. Necessary for “this”?

Vodka tonic, she wanted, not urgent. Maybe we should go to a table, he said. That sensation of discomfort, unfamiliarity. Whatever he wanted, she made clear. He said he wasn’t sure she’d show. Funny because she’d had the same thoughts. He wanted to know why. She guessed circumstance. She surveyed the dining tables: “Can we, or do we have to have dinner?” “You mean my approach?” (he sipped ale). “I’ve moved past it,” she said.

She was up and motioning to follow to a table in the corner under the perched television showing a soccer match. She settled into the straw-backed chair.

He did the same and felt the cold from exposed brick an inch from his cheek. The wall brought them closer, somehow, like their noses were touching. He said, “But it’s like how you sometimes take a chance, but not if it doesn’t feel right. Not be presumptuous. I don’t mean it like that. But I—we—pass millions of people and, trust me, I don’t do this.”

A squat, limping Mexican with a mustache brought her a drink. Thank you, she smiled glamorously and upward. The man wanted to know, in an accent,

if they were enjoying food this evening. Just drinks, Michael said quickly, knowing she was watching him. He made sure to smile at the guy.

There was this damn ringing. “I can’t stand it,” he said. It was rude, obnoxious, really. Not that this was a theater or a class or a packed place but. That’s the problem with today, he said, that we’re always so distracted by others, and there’s never any face time with the person you were with, an exaggeration but. She said okay. He felt marginally satisfied, she seemed vaguely interested. What was off? The damn ringing. He patted his pockets. Wait, he said, sorry. He stood up. He knew she was watching him. He walked to the bar. The ringing was an annoyance he’d like to squash. The phone face up on the bar counter, lit and sputtering, had caught the attention of patrons. The bartender reached for it; so did Michael. The bartender deferred—“Yours?” Michael nodded without looking up. Scooped it up, silenced it, deposited it in his jeans. He walked back with heavy legs. Sat down across from Laura, red-faced. Her lips were curling. “I’m an idiot,” he said. She was stirring her vodka tonic. “Who was it?” “Anyway,” he said, “I’m glad we did this—finally.” “You don’t want to tell me?” “No one.” She made a face.

“It was my mom. My parents” (because he knew nothing about her he’d need to tread carefully or risk what?) “they’re sort of hassling me” (and how far he could go depended on her). About what, she said. Nothing really, he said.

“Typically one being hassled by one’s parents means there’s something occurring in that person’s life that’s significant.”

“Or maybe it means that nothing’s occurring.”

Perceptive, she said. “Hmm, that *is* true.” She laughed. “I suppose your right.” She thought about this and laughed some more. “I suppose you’re absolutely, positively correct.”

“So, what do you do,” he said, noticing ruby red diamond earrings.

“I’m . . .” (she played with her straw) “wait, don’t you want to guess?”

Prim and proper or corporate came to mind, but he stumbled. Clues. He knew she rode the subway so he ruled out aristocracy, a position of pretension. Her jogging outfit was pedestrian but that of real runner person, so she was probably not snobby. A leap, but. She was adult-looking, she could be his age or eight years older, and that changes everything. She essentially agreed to a blind date. On the other hand she’d seen enough to bank on him not being a lunatic.

“An executive at an advertising agency,” he said proudly. She arched her eyebrows. “No, no,” he said. “An account manager . . . for a . . . department store?”

“I’m a tad insulted.”

A major mistake. Never willingly respond to setup questions. Appearances are deceptive. He posed a question. “So what made you willing to do this?”

“We had a bet.”

“Seriously.”

“Right—seriously.” She looked at the ceiling. “Truthfully, there’s not much to say. You seemed like a nice guy.”

“In what sort of way? I mean, how could you tell?”

She looked wary. A line he'd crossed? She went on. "I suppose you can just tell. You weren't forceful, I didn't feel in danger, and I thought, well, why not. Or maybe not. It was very capricious. For me."

The compassionate tone she spoke with made him feel like he was talking to a sister or conducting a professional interview. She seemed business-like, ladylike. A career orient. If she steered them into liquid and annuities he'd be sunk when she found out about the Alliance. One mention of résumés and done for. With her blond hair and blue eyes she had to be Scandinavian, he thought. Her accent untraceable, like any person of this country. But not a countrywoman, a city dweller. From New York? Where was the edge? What if she said Seattle. He'd maybe like her exponentially more. The hows and whys of her adulthood. There was no way she had parents was the impression she gave. But the type of person he was thinking of didn't show cleavage.

"What do you do?" she asked.

He found himself responding immediately. He told her about the nonprofit—he made sure to mention this specific terminology. (She knew what that meant. He grinned.) He explained the mission statement, the purpose, the bullet point of general objective viewpoints from his admittedly partial perspective. She absorbed this. "So what is it you actually *do*?"

"It's kind of really stupid," and he offered a play-by-play account of door-to-door salesmanship that he made as riveting as possible. He described the dramatic walk, the pitch, the contact, which was what it was really about, making this person feel like they must see you again, like their value as a human will

diminish if they do not make your acquaintance, the old, I think we each have what the other wants honesty, not in those words; and yeah some subterfuge he admitted, “But find me a successful business that’s not devious”; and he never mentioned he’d been at it for seven days exactly because not all applies.

“You’re certainly the showman,” she said.

He was feeling perky, a buzz from the beer, he’d signaled the mustache accent for another with a wink even, it was hard to think of the moment as Monday evening seven p.m. at the ivied bistro practically hidden in the red-brick corner two blocks from the apartment; it was a Park Slope statute that alcoholic-serving establishments be cut into corner buildings, he thought. But tonight, indeed it felt like an all night affair, you might say, and disregard that he had to be in the office at eight for a Jerry meeting. Will Chester be there? Because chances expire.

“I’m actually kind of a dork,” he said. “I’m applying to business schools. But that’s boring; what do you do, come on, you can’t just leave me guessing, though I could go on all day, starting with, let’s see, flight attendant, and, um, how about professional dog walker, census taker, well, you would’ve just finished the millennial, no, not really, but imagine that privilege, do you think a thousand years ago they wondered who would be the next millennial population seeker outers” (animated hands and eyes coordinated, his accent unleashed, dropping his R’s, speaking nasally, she might notice) “um I’d also go with landscape architect, professional poker player, cruise ship coordinator, litigator, forensic scientist, and I’d say the least likely is bailiff.”

She leaned forward. “I think you just like saying millennial. And isn’t that redundant? And isn’t every occupation a profession?”

“Like the traveling secretary for the Yankees is still a professional traveling secretary, even if he has seven bosses.”

“Yes. But at least that’s a real job.”

“So tell me.”

“I mean, what is a *cruise ship coordinator*?” she enunciated.

Absolutely no clue, he said.

She straightened her back and locked shoulders and ballerina he now saw clairvoyantly. They both took sips of drinks.

“I’m in school,” Laura said.

“Like college?” he said concealing . . . glee? surprise?

“For piano.”

“What do you mean?”

“What does that mean?” said Laura.

“So you’re a musician,” he said, “like in a band?”

She said it was a master’s program in piano performance. He said, Oh—like Billy Joel? He thought this was playful, maybe humorous. “Not exactly,” she said, “though he has some classical skills and an opus of knock-off Chopin.”

She was thinking how lame he was, how bored she was, and when it would be appropriate to leave. He said, “So you go to school here? In Brooklyn?”

“I’m at the Conservatory, it’s Brooklyn College’s.”

He asked if she liked it and she said a person would have to be verifiably crazy to devote this much time to something they didn't care for. What kind of hours are we talking, he said. Seven a day, she said. So like a work day. "Of sitting on a bench and doing the same thing over and over again," she said.

"To me that sounds crazy," he said. "Did you always do this? Like your whole life?"

"I've been playing since I was two."

"So if we went to a bar, are you just better than the person playing the piano? And don't be afraid to say you are."

"I am."

"That's really, really cool." What else could he say? He knew music, but classified he knew American rock bands from the 1980s. Maybe she could play for him. "Did you go to what that school is, the music one that everyone goes to?"

"Julliard," said Laura.

"Julliard," Michael repeated.

"No, I grew up in Boston."

"My uncle went to BU," he said. He waited for some sort of confirmation. She didn't say anything. "Is that where you went?"

"Harvard," she said. "You?"

She was definitely bored, you could tell, glancing off to the door every spare moment when there's no cross traffic and smiling without conviction. He'd been a force when he was being random and goofy, though grounded in studiousness, and wanted to reclaim that. Do that and you come off desperate and

bizarre. You've got to wait for the moment, but if it's never going to arrive you've got to get there somehow or it's just you and a person sitting at a table trying not to find each others' eyes in an intimate setting when you're not intimate and know you'll never be intimate, and that's awkward. Now who would say *that?*

He said he went to school in the Midwest at a big state school that was really for some reason starting to get popular for people from his area of Long Island to go to but he wasn't going back out there anytime soon even though they did have a really great M.B.A. program though their undergrad business school was actually better, at Indiana, but was applying to business school at Columbia and that's actually why his parents were nagging him, calling him all the time, because they felt the need to check up every five seconds on his status, and he'd just had it up to here with them. But (sighed) parents were parents and what could you do but love them (this showed his worldliness slash maturity slash cuteness, and he desperately wanted to know her age, though merely talking about parents made him seem young). And obviously his parents hadn't called; this he didn't say.

And progress in bantering about what he and she wanted to do with their respective lives that he'd guided them toward was certainly being made, as was a shared memory of the public school experience: bus ride hierarchy in elementary school, which is weird because the other day he passed a school on the walk home and saw all these little kids under five-foot and thought of them having no real-life sensibility solely based on the fact that they looked like miniature versions of

people. Yes, yes! she exclaimed, but with her drink's crushed ice melting and the lime green skin of her slice as a prism (pushed off to the side and she's not ordering another), was she really that into it? Was he missing something strange about being a public school person and going to, he didn't know, a place like Harvard?

"My parents were professors so it was cheap and easy to get into and I felt comfortable there," she shrugged with no trace of conceit or false modesty.

But all times must end on a note of charm or disgust, and when it falls in the middle, what? They semi-hugged and since it was getting late she had to be on her way and no promises were made and he was left standing outside the dungeon-like front door having no clue what he thought about her; literally thinking, I have no clue what I think about her. Which was okay, for he had a call to return.

11

"The objective of our not-for-profit first and foremost is to profit." Snickers. Jerry shushing with palms. "All kidding aside," he was saying. Chester four seats over around the oval table. Michael with scratch paper. The Jess woman next to him scribbling something in a notebook maybe listening to Jerry. Michael unable to stop wondering if Jerry's important. Jerry in the same clothes as the interview but wearing a black baseball cap today and five o'clock shadow saying "... that we can be proud of." Michael simultaneously struck by how few employees there

were and how few faces he knew. She was growing on him. Jess. He and her in one of those sunken iron-gated garden bar spots on Christopher; she'd rip him apart between sheets, she looked so mean you knew it was a put-on. Jerry was mentioning him. Jerry was singling him out for stellar performance, records even. Chester didn't lie; Chester nodding for approval and leading the clap; now everyone knew Chester brought him here, and they were looking at him. He wished they'd stop. It might mean something if he knew these people, though who can be complimented to zero contentment? Jerry could be a better communicator if it mattered. He'd love to know Jerry's relevance, this guy he felt badly for, it would be like discovering the identity of the man behind the curtain when, in fact, you knew all along—out goes astonishment and it's sad, dreadful. "And we're lucky to have him."

"And I'm lucky to be here." She stopped writing to look. Of course she did. Her appeal was in that she wasn't pretty the way you'd want your kids to be but was alluring in an ugly, mystifying way. "No thanks to Chester." No, maybe he shouldn't have mentioned him by name, when you're not aware of reputations. She was in a black suit revealing nothing and everyone else went casual. She could be the woman who signed his checks, he better watch his tongue and eyes. But he got some laughs, which was enough, and affected his demeanor not this way or that. Jerry looked constipated. Jerry was turning it over to Chester who was managing an upcoming event in August, the summer bashes, though you "wouldn't really call it that, considering it's our annual you all know this already thing," asserted Chester taking charge. Michael had seen Chester take charge once

before during a house party with and found him a bit of an oddball, in an endearing way. But this was familiar territory and he commanded respect. So this was what Chester did: he pitched ideas helping the homeless so he could rent an apartment and purchase nourishment and take a late-summer vacation. This was how he was earning his paycheck. (*I'll meet you after work*, he'd told her.) When someone in third grade asked him, Chester, what he wanted to be when he grew up, he said lawyer or fireman or president and ended up in a stuffy, windowless room.

Michael went running after work, jogged into the park and directly past the bench he assumed he'd be sitting on in two hours. A nanny was bouncing a kid on her lap and making faces to the child's horror. If they were still there, would he and Rachael sit on a different bench, or would that be against the rules? He wound down a paved path, past a small lagoon in which dogs were wrestling, chasing tennis balls, and looking dopey with flaccid tongues. The *weather*, he heard the owners marveling, most of who were middle-aged ladies with post-childbirth bodies in caps and sunglasses who reminded him of genuinely decent, caring human beings. Gosh that was wrong. He circled softball games: the lesbians (unless hitter and catcher kissing before at-bats was formality), the thirteen-year-olds fielding baseballs hit by the dad-coach (barking instructions) as if polished college boys, the adults in an after-work game (could be deadbeats), the Latin game involving happiness and screaming in Spanish, the Orthodox Jew game involving a lot of clutter and disorder (one adult for thirty-five children). He was

passing a hot dog vendor with a long line and trying to avoid dog leashes and stepping back on the drive going the right way away from the sun or maybe the wrong way, too many people out, and he felt ownership of the park. He was taking an exit drive, looking to the right with the Soldiers' and Sailors' Arch at Grand Army Plaza to see that no cars were coming, he was sprinting down the hill, panting up his steps, sensing the restorative powers of a warm shower, thinking, Here I come, here I come.

The sun snuck through trees, but it wouldn't be for long that leaves blotted it out completely, she said. "It's my favorite in the dead of summer, when I find a spot in the shade and watch people."

Standing before her, but at an angle, he asked what she was reading. She held up the cover. He'd never heard of it, but it looked long, he said, and what was it about. "A woman who kills herself. And other stuff." (She read from the first page.) "All happy families are alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

"That's kind of funny," and he sat a space from her.

This had to be safe. They weren't too far from the road, and every so often a parks service vehicle crept along. Streetlights were on, the one in front of them sputtered, hardly projecting onto the six-aside soccer match with book-bags as goals on its last legs. *I can't see no more!* yelled a guy whiffing on a shot. I can never tell if those guys are any good, she said. It's almost like we're in the game, he said; I can feel that guy's sweat. He asked if this happened all the time here.

“Pretty much constantly when it’s warm,” she said, adding, “They do this at home.” In Pittsburgh, he said. She nodded still watching the game. When she was a kid her dad would take her and her best friend up to the park, where he’d play tennis and they’d run around a cinder track and play hide-and-seek in the portable bleachers, and because there was a ton of open grass, there were always a hundred of these boisterous little soccer matches, always played by guys dubiously claiming to having formerly starred on the Cameroonian national team. “It’s funny,” she said hazily, “I feel like we went there every single night, but it was probably only once or twice.”

Like here, he said. *It is*, she said; a multicultural city, and though much smaller than even Brooklyn, still had flavor. “And then we’d drive a little loop on top of the hill where you overlooked the city and I felt so connected on those nights.”

“Is that why we went up to the park the other night?” he said.

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“Because I liked that a lot.”

He looked at her profile and she seemed lost. Did she get homesick? She didn’t answer. Maybe she presumed sexually and that was problematic. But she’d sounded reserved, contrite almost, when they’d spoken last night, on the phone, only for a minute, only to plan this meeting, but he could read her, intuitively, better than anyone he’d ever known, which struck him as odd given that she seemed to understand him, too, although maybe he couldn’t, maybe he just felt like he could because he wanted to believe that he could. Or maybe the story

they'd tell everyone was precisely that. No, it wasn't love at first sight; we just *got* each other.

She was sitting Indian style, like a young girl, which he saw her as, an eleven-year-old with a bow in big hair and glasses and puffy cheeks and missing teeth, she was wearing a ruffled cream dress she hated but her parents loved, to have known her all those years, how different it all could have been had he been exposed to someone with the simple, delicate lifestyle and preferences of his partner.

"Listen, I'm sorry," she said.

You could tell she worked herself into a frenzy over this, it wasn't easy, not for her types. He felt badly, terribly, horribly, awfully about everything demeaning he'd ever thought of her, and now he wanted to say this, pour this out, to be forgiven, to be honest. That was all he wanted, to be honest.

"Rachael"—her name sounded sensuous and romantic, like they were living a hundred fifty years ago—"it's okay. I've . . . I've been doing a lot of thinking, and you're right. You're right about everything." He waited for her to speak, but she didn't. "I shouldn't have said all that stuff without thinking of how it would make you feel."

"I'm glad you told me everything. I overreacted. I got caught up in the moment. I was being . . . I just . . ."

"You what."

She got out that she'd been annoyed with everything and probably wasn't thinking clearly or rationally—"Not with you," she said quickly, looking at him

for the first time, “but with work people.” He waited some time to ask what she meant.

“Remember I told you about that girl who had the same name as me, almost, how I didn’t like her?”

“Wasserstein was it?”

“Yeah. She’s been making it really annoying to do my job. Every time she’s in the office there’s something to complain about—though it’s complaining masked as commenting. The computer’s slow and it’s hampering her ability to be productive. She can’t find a file on a listing and notes how it can be so disorganized ‘around here,’ implying elsewhere, i.e. where smart people work. She’s not a mean person, but when you talk to her you feel like she’s not really invested in what you’re saying. She’ll answer you nicely, but you don’t feel like she really cares. And I’ve noticed that she’s always talking to me, and I think the reason she’s doing it to me is because A we’re the same age, B she thinks this makes us allies, but also C she thinks she’s above me and can treat me as if I’m stupid.”

“Why would anyone think that.”

“See, I don’t know. She never brags about where she went to school, but she’s made sure everyone knows it, dropping the subtlest hints by mentioning it in conversation, saying how some experience associated with it can help her do her job better. That kind of crap. It’s like, everyone knows the stigma attached to it, if there is one, and I personally don’t think there should be, but there is, and so she

knows what she's doing, and what she doesn't realize is that selling apartments isn't my dream life either."

"What is your dream life?"

"I don't want to talk about myself, and you don't want to hear. I don't know . . . I just don't know. Something involving people, and maybe myself. I don't know. But what about you, what can you tell me."

"About mine?"

"You said you were thinking. I'm wondering about what. Because when you told me the story the other day, you seemed okay. You seemed like, quote, a guy—just a guy, an apathetic guy. And I'm guessing that you weren't always okay, and that whatever your dream life was, it probably took a bit of a hit."

"I just meant that I've kind of moved past it, as crazy as that sounds."

"And you weren't, like, angry?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely, I mean, I kept having these fantasies that I was going to win her back, that kind of stuff. But that time I spent at my parents' apartment—and obviously that was the worst time of my life—I realized that if she wasn't calling me and crying, then why should I care for her? So I knew it was real, but it still didn't feel real, because, obviously, I hadn't been in that situation ever before. And I came up with this crazy idea I never would have done in a million years."

"Change everything."

"Yes. And it's really fucking weird. But I guess that in some ways it's not."

“Maybe the fact that it’s not paralyzing you is a sign that it wasn’t that strong in the first place.”

Maybe, he said.

“That wasn’t appropriate.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“This is what I do. I get so attached and turn you off by being intrusive when I shouldn’t be. No one deserves it. It’s childish.”

“I feel like we’re going about this in a very . . . adult way.”

“Yeah, but what is *this*,” said Rachael.

He was hoping she’d answer. The soccer stars gathered their bags, slinging them over shoulders, hiking down socks, no one wore shin guards, a few had European replica jerseys, these cave-man, breaking into groups of two, three, joking. A plane flew overhead loudly, a lot of planes flew over this park, Michael thought, yet this was a green world isolated from the horns and screeches and chatter you knew was over there on the other side of those trees, from structure.

Rachael was saying, “Last year I visited a friend in Crown Heights. It’s two miles away, but it took me an hour door-to-door on the subway. So I was pissed. That’s the part of New York I hate. I stepped out of the station and was surrounded by ten synagogues and thousands of Jews, those kind, the religious ones. Then I walk two blocks west, and it’s a black neighborhood, even though nothing changed, physically, like buildings and the look or feel of the area. It was like tonight, warm where you’re starting to feel it’s going to be summer, and it was the same time, dusk, a gorgeous night. I was so out of place, in both the

Jewish and the black neighborhood, even though I am Jewish and was going to visit a friend who is black. Or maybe it was because I didn't know the neighborhood. But whatever it was, because I randomly felt out of place, I should have felt scared or odd or inferior. I should have wanted to leave. That recognition should have consumed me to the point that it precluded my ability to function and act the way I act in, say, my childhood neighborhood, or around my childhood friends. But it didn't. Instead all I could think about was this wonderful world we live in. And then I thought about how there was some person in suburban Kansas, or rural Michigan, or south central LA in a totally different environment but thinking the exact same thing, and how the only connection we could make was by thinking the exact same thing, that in this massive, wonderful, infinite world, we are not weird, we are not out of place, we are not alone."

Michael said, "The other day I read this article in the paper from last year that was about how people in New York are happier in the summer. But the article also said something about how people say they're happier, even if there's no way they could know, because they don't say that the winter makes them sad, only that the winter makes them want summer more. And then it was talking about how the reason people are happier is because of something in the air that makes them want to be outside, which seemed like a way of saying that people like warm weather. And it was also saying how businesses do better and how relationships happen and all this stuff." He paused, waiting for the last of the soccer players to walk past. "When you called the other night, I happened to be sitting in this bar, talking to the bartender about, a total coincidence, some soccer match on TV. What's

more depressing than that. It wasn't like in the movies or anything; I just wanted to have a drink to cool off after work, so I went to a bar by myself. But it was actually an awesome day at work: I got two more sponsorships and met some cool people who said they might be interested. So I realized that the reason I wanted to cool down was because I was thinking so much about what I could have said that made you be angry with me. I didn't answer the phone because I was talking to the bartender but really because I didn't know what to say. Not in a bad way, but, like, I wanted what I said to sound really good, and I didn't think I could live up to that."

Rachael not responding and her chest going up and down and up and down and that pretty face worked into a bout of consternation indicated that he speaking was, in fact, the opposite of what he should have done. She spoke.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

Yes, he meant it, all of it. Of course he did, and her faint smile brought him alive. It dawned on him not for the first time that what had happened in his quote old life was a phase, maybe a test, a test of what he was willing to endure to find someone he cared for. If that had never happened at its particular time and place, he never would have met Rachael. And who was Rachael but a chance encounter just as likely to happen as not happen? But that was the thing about his entire life. How was growing up near Ben and meeting Marjorie and becoming involved with them and all those people any different than how he came to find himself on this bench thinking about the various positions he would like to utilize

to make love tonight to a girl who grew up in Pittsburgh and had her own set of friends and experiences and maybe misfortunes? What were her misfortunes? And what if he'd been born in Russia, wouldn't his very idea of what constituted friends and relationships and people be different than now? Based on the coldness, the remoteness, and more? He was here and had to make the most of his situation—he had to do whatever he pleased, whatever made him happy. What he had said he had meant, all of it. But how often is what you say and mean how you really feel?

“Michael,” she said, “I want to say something really, really stupid.”

“Please.”

“You see the moon up there, that icicle colored misshapen sphere? You see how we can see its bumps and craters and how it almost looks like we can touch it, but we can't?”

“I see,” he said, scooting to put his arm around her.

“The moon gives me hope.”