i.

While I was still in Amsterdam, I dreamed about my mother for the first time in years. I'd been shut up in my hotel for more than a week, afraid to telephone anybody or go out; and my heart scrambled and floundered at even the most innocent noises: elevator bell, rattle of the minibar cart, even church clocks tolling the hour, de Westertoren, Krijtberg, a dark edge to the clangor, an inwrought fairy-tale sense of doom. By day I sat on the foot of the bed straining to puzzle out the Dutch-language news on television (which was hopeless, since I knew not a word of Dutch) and when I gave up, I sat by the window staring out at the canal with my camel's-hair coat thrown over my clothes—for I'd left New York in a hurry and the things I'd brought weren't warm enough, even indoors.

Outside, all was activity and cheer. It was Christmas, lights twinkling on the canal bridges at night; red-cheeked *dames en heren,* scarves flying in the icy wind, clattered down the cobblestones with Christmas trees lashed to the backs of their bicycles. In the afternoons, an amateur band played Christmas carols that hung tinny and fragile in the winter air.

Chaotic room-service trays; too many cigarettes; lukewarm vodka from duty free. During those restless, shut-up days, I got to know every inch of the room as a prisoner comes to know his cell. It was my first time in Amsterdam; I'd seen almost nothing of the city and yet the room itself, in its bleak, drafty, sunscrubbed beauty, gave a keen sense of Northern Europe, a model of the Netherlands in miniature: whitewash and Protestant probity, co-mingled with deep-dyed luxury brought in merchant ships from the East. I spent an unreasonable amount of time scrutinizing a tiny pair of gilt-framed

oils hanging over the bureau, one of peasants skating on an ice-pond by a church, the other a sailboat flouncing on a choppy winter sea: decorative copies, nothing special, though I studied them as if they held, encrypted, some key to the secret heart of the old Flemish masters. Outside, sleet tapped at the windowpanes and drizzled over the canal; and though the brocades were rich and the carpet was soft, still the winter light carried a chilly tone of 1943, privation and austerities, weak tea without sugar and hungry to bed.

Early every morning while it was still black out, before the extra clerks came on duty and the lobby started filling up, I walked downstairs for the newspapers. The hotel staff moved with hushed voices and quiet footsteps, eyes gliding across me coolly as if they didn't quite see me, the American man in 27 who never came down during the day; and I tried to reassure myself that the night manager (dark suit, crew cut, horn-rimmed glasses) would probably go to some lengths to avert trouble or avoid a fuss.

The *Herald Tribune* had no news of my predicament but the story was all over the Dutch papers, dense blocks of foreign print which hung, tantalizingly, just beyond the reach of my comprehension. *Onopgeloste moord. Onbekende.* I went upstairs and got back into bed (fully clad, because the room was so cold) and spread the papers out on the coverlet: photographs of police cars, crime scene tape, even the captions were impossible to decipher, and although they didn't appear to have my name, there was no way to know if they had a description of me or if they were withholding information from the public.

The room. The radiator. *Een Amerikaan met een strafblad.* Olive green water of the canal.

Because I was cold and ill, and much of the time at a loss what to do (I'd neglected to bring a book, as well as warm clothes), I stayed in bed most of the day. Night seemed to fall in the middle of the afternoon. Often—amidst the crackle of strewn newspapers—I drifted in and out of sleep, and my dreams for the most part were muddied with the same indeterminate anxiety that bled through into my waking hours: court cases, luggage burst open on the tarmac

with my clothes scattered everywhere and endless airport corridors where I ran for planes I knew I'd never make.

Thanks to my fever I had a lot of weird and extremely vivid dreams, sweats where I thrashed around hardly knowing if it was day or night, but on the last and worst of these nights I dreamed about my mother: a quick, mysterious dream that felt more like a visitation. I was in Hobie's shop—or, more accurately, some haunted dream space staged like a sketchy version of the shop—when she came up suddenly behind me so I saw her reflection in a mirror. At the sight of her I was paralyzed with happiness; it was her, down to the most minute detail, the very pattern of her freckles, she was smiling at me, more beautiful and yet not older, black hair and funny upward quirk of her mouth, not a dream but a presence that filled the whole room: a force all her own, a living otherness. And as much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't turn around, that to look at her directly was to violate the laws of her world and mine; she had come to me the only way she could, and our eyes met in the glass for a long still moment; but just as she seemed about to speak—with what seemed a combination of amusement, affection, exasperation—a vapor rolled between us and I woke up.

ii.

Things would have turned out better if she had lived. As it was, she died when I was a kid; and though everything that's happened to me since then is thoroughly my own fault, still when I lost her I lost sight of any landmark that might have led me someplace happier, to some more populated or congenial life.

Her death the dividing mark: Before and After. And though it's a bleak thing to admit all these years later, still I've never met anyone who made me feel loved the way she did. Everything came alive in her company; she cast a charmed theatrical light about her so that to see anything through her eyes was to see it in brighter colors than ordinary—I remember a few weeks before she died, eating a late

supper with her in an Italian restaurant down in the Village, and how she grasped my sleeve at the sudden, almost painful loveliness of a birthday cake with lit candles being carried in procession from the kitchen, faint circle of light wavering in across the dark ceiling and then the cake set down to blaze amidst the family, beatifying an old lady's face, smiles all round, waiters stepping away with their hands behind their backs—just an ordinary birthday dinner you might see anywhere in an inexpensive downtown restaurant, and I'm sure I wouldn't even remember it had she not died so soon after, but I thought about it again and again after her death and indeed I'll probably think about it all my life: that candlelit circle, a tableau vivant of the daily, commonplace happiness that was lost when I lost her.

She was beautiful, too. That's almost secondary; but still, she was. When she came to New York fresh from Kansas, she worked part-time as a model though she was too uneasy in front of the camera to be very good at it; whatever she had, it didn't translate to film.

And yet she was wholly herself: a rarity. I cannot recall ever seeing another person who really resembled her. She had black hair, fair skin that freckled in summer, china-blue eyes with a lot of light in them; and in the slant of her cheekbones there was such an eccentric mixture of the tribal and the Celtic Twilight that sometimes people guessed she was Icelandic. In fact, she was half Irish, half Cherokee, from a town in Kansas near the Oklahoma border; and she liked to make me laugh by calling herself an Okie even though she was as glossy and nervy and stylish as a racehorse. That exotic character unfortunately comes out a little too stark and unforgiving in photographs—her freckles covered with makeup, her hair pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of her neck like some nobleman in *The Tale of Genji*—and what doesn't come across at all is her warmth, her merry, unpredictable quality, which is what I loved about her most. It's clear, from the stillness she emanates in pictures, how much she mistrusted the camera; she gives off a watchful, tigerish air of steeling herself against attack. But in life she wasn't like that. She moved with a thrilling quickness, gestures sudden and light, always perched on the

edge of her chair like some long elegant marsh-bird about to startle and fly away. I loved the sandalwood perfume she wore, rough and unexpected, and I loved the rustle of her starched shirt when she swooped down to kiss me on the forehead. And her laugh was enough to make you want to kick over what you were doing and follow her down the street. Wherever she went, men looked at her out of the corner of their eyes, and sometimes they used to look at her in a way that bothered me a little.

Her death was my fault. Other people have always been a little too quick to assure me that it wasn't; and yes, *only a kid, who could have known, terrible accident, rotten luck, could have happened to anyone,* it's all perfectly true and I don't believe a word of it.

It happened in New York, April 10th, fourteen years ago. (Even my hand balks at the date; I had to push to write it down, just to keep the pen moving on the paper. It used to be a perfectly ordinary day but now it sticks up on the calendar like a rusty nail.)

If the day had gone as planned, it would have faded into the sky unmarked, swallowed without a trace along with the rest of my eighth-grade year. What would I remember of it now? Little or nothing. But of course the texture of that morning is clearer than the present, down to the drenched, wet feel of the air. It had rained in the night, a terrible storm, shops were flooded and a couple of subway stations closed; and the two of us were standing on the squelching carpet outside our apartment building while her favorite doorman, Goldie, who adored her, walked backwards down Fifty-Seventh with his arm up, whistling for a taxi. Cars whooshed by in sheets of dirty spray; rain-swollen clouds tumbled high above the skyscrapers, blowing and shifting to patches of clear blue sky, and down below, on the street, beneath the exhaust fumes, the wind felt damp and soft like spring.

"Ah, he's full, my lady," Goldie called over the roar of the street, stepping out of the way as a taxi splashed round the corner and shut its light off. He was the smallest of the doormen: a wan, thin, lively little guy, light-skinned Puerto Rican, a former featherweight boxer. Though he was pouchy in the face from drinking (sometimes he

turned up on the night shift smelling of J&B), still he was wiry and muscular and quick—always kidding around, always having a cigarette break on the corner, shifting from foot to foot and blowing on his white-gloved hands when it was cold, telling jokes in Spanish and cracking the other doormen up.

"You in a big hurry this morning?" he asked my mother. His nametag said BURT D. but everyone called him Goldie because of his gold tooth and because his last name, de Oro, meant "gold" in Spanish.

"No, plenty of time, we're fine." But she looked exhausted and her hands were shaky as she re-tied her scarf, which snapped and fluttered in the wind.

Goldie must have noticed this himself, because he glanced over at me (backed up evasively against the concrete planter in front of the building, looking anywhere but at her) with an air of slight disapproval.

"You're not taking the train?" he said to me.

"Oh, we've got some errands," said my mother, without much conviction, when she realized I didn't know what to say. Normally I didn't pay much attention to her clothes, but what she had on that morning (white trenchcoat, filmy pink scarf, black and white two-tone loafers) is so firmly burned into my memory that now it's difficult for me to remember her any other way.

I was thirteen. I hate to remember how awkward we were with each other that last morning, stiff enough for the doorman to notice; any other time we would have been talking companionably enough, but that morning we didn't have much to say to each other because I'd been suspended from school. They'd called her at her office the day before; she'd come home silent and furious; and the awful thing was that I didn't even know what I'd been suspended for, although I was about seventy-five percent sure that Mr. Beeman (en route from his office to the teachers' lounge) had looked out the window of the second-floor landing at exactly the wrong moment and seen me smoking on school property. (Or, rather, seen me standing around with Tom Cable while *he* smoked, which at my school amounted to practically the same offense.) My mother hated

smoking. Her parents—whom I loved hearing stories about, and who had unfairly died before I'd had the chance to know them—had been affable horse trainers who travelled around the west and raised Morgan horses for a living: cocktail-drinking, canasta-playing livelies who went to the Kentucky Derby every year and kept cigarettes in silver boxes around the house. Then my grandmother doubled over and started coughing blood one day when she came in from the stables; and for the rest of my mother's teenage years, there had been oxygen tanks on the front porch and bedroom shades that stayed pulled down.

But—as I feared, and not without reason—Tom's cigarette was only the tip of the iceberg. I'd been in trouble at school for a while. It had all started, or begun to snowball rather, when my father had run off and left my mother and me some months before; we'd never liked him much, and my mother and I were generally much happier without him, but other people seemed shocked and distressed at the abrupt way he'd abandoned us (without money, child support, or forwarding address), and the teachers at my school on the Upper West Side had been so sorry for me, so eager to extend their understanding and support, that they'd given me—a scholarship student—all sorts of special allowances and delayed deadlines and second and third chances: feeding out the rope, over a matter of months, until I'd managed to lower myself into a very deep hole.

So the two of us—my mother and I—had been called in for a conference at school. The meeting wasn't until eleven-thirty but since my mother had been forced to take the morning off, we were heading to the West Side early—for breakfast (and, I expected, a serious talk) and so she could buy a birthday present for someone she worked with. She'd been up until two-thirty the night before, her face tense in the glow of the computer, writing emails and trying to clear the decks for her morning out of the office.

"I don't know about you," Goldie was saying to my mother, rather fiercely, "but I say enough with all this spring and damp already. Rain, rain—" He shivered, pulled his collar closer in pantomime and glanced at the sky.

"I think it's supposed to clear up this afternoon."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm ready for *summer*." Rubbing his hands. "People leave town, they hate it, complain about the heat, but me—I'm a tropical bird. Hotter the better. Bring it on!" Clapping, backing on his heels down the street. "And—tell you what I love the best, is how it quietens out here, come July—? building all empty and sleepy, everyone away, you know?" Snapping his fingers, cab speeding by. "That's *my* vacation."

"But don't you burn up out here?" My standoffish dad had hated this about her—her tendency to engage in conversation with waitresses, doormen, the wheezy old guys at the dry cleaner's. "I mean, in winter, at least you can put on an extra coat—"

"Listen, you're working the door in winter? I'm telling you it gets *cold*. I don't care how many coats and hats you put on. You're standing out here, in January, February, and the wind is blowing in off the river? *Brrr*."

Agitated, gnawing at my thumbnail, I stared at the cabs flying past Goldie's upraised arm. I knew that it was going to be an excruciating wait until the conference at eleven-thirty; and it was all I could do to stand still and not blurt out incriminating questions. I had no idea what they might spring on my mother and me once they had us in the office; the very word "conference" suggested a convocation of authorities, accusations and face-downs, a possible expulsion. If I lost my scholarship it would be catastrophic; we were broke since my dad had left; we barely had money for rent. Above all else: I was worried sick that Mr. Beeman had found out, somehow, that Tom Cable and I had been breaking into empty vacation houses when I went to stay with him out in the Hamptons. I say "breaking" though we hadn't forced a lock or done any damage (Tom's mother was a real estate agent; we let ourselves in with spare keys lifted from the rack in her office). Mainly we'd snooped through closets and poked around in dresser drawers, but we'd also taken some things: beer from the fridge, some Xbox games and a DVD (Jet Li, *Unleashed*) and money, about ninety-two dollars total: crumpled fives and tens from a kitchen jar, piles of pocket change in the laundry rooms.

Whenever I thought about this, I felt nauseated. It was months since I'd been out to Tom's but though I tried to tell myself that Mr. Beeman couldn't possibly know about us going into those houses—how could he know?—my imagination was flying and darting around in panicked zig-zags. I was determined not to tell on Tom (even though I wasn't so sure he hadn't told on me) but that left me in a tight spot. How could I have been so stupid? Breaking and entering was a crime; people went to jail for it. For hours the night before I'd lain awake tortured, flopping back and forth and watching the rain slap in ragged gusts against my windowpane and wondering what to say if confronted. But how could I defend myself, when I didn't even know what they knew?

Goldie heaved a big sigh, put his hand down and walked backward on his heels to where my mother stood.

"Incredible," he said to her, with one jaded eye on the street. "We got the flooding down in SoHo, you heard about that, right, and Carlos was saying they got some streets blocked off over by the UN."

Gloomily, I watched the crowd of workers streaming off the crosstown bus, as joyless as a swarm of hornets. We might have had better luck if we'd walked west a block or two, but my mother and I had enough experience of Goldie to know that he would be offended if we struck out on our own. But just then—so suddenly that we all jumped—a cab with its light on skidded across the lane to us, throwing up a fan of sewer-smelling water.

"Watch it!" said Goldie, leaping aside as the taxi plowed to a stop—and then observing that my mother had no umbrella. "Wait," he said, starting into the lobby, to the collection of lost and forgotten umbrellas that he saved in a brass can by the fireplace and re-distributed on rainy days.

"No," my mother called, fishing in her bag for her tiny candy-striped collapsible, "don't bother, Goldie, I'm all set—"

Goldie sprang back to the curb and shut the taxi door after her. Then he leaned down and knocked on the window.

"You have a blessed day," he said.