

# I.

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*The absurd does not liberate; it binds.*

— ALBERT CAMUS



Chapter 1.

# Boy with a Skull



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 muddled 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.

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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 con-

ference 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 quiets 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 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.

### iii.

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I LIKE TO THINK of myself as a perceptive person (as I suppose we all do) and in setting all this down, it’s tempting to pencil a shadow gliding in overhead. But I was blind and deaf to the future; my single, crushing, worry was the meeting at school. When I’d called Tom to tell him I’d been suspended (whispering on the land line; she had taken away my cell phone) he hadn’t seemed particularly surprised to hear it. “Look,” he’d said, cutting me off, “don’t be stupid, Theo, nobody knows a thing, just keep your fucking mouth shut”; and before I could get out another word, he said, “Sorry, I’ve got to go,” and hung up.

In the cab, I tried to crack my window to get some air: no luck. It smelled like someone had been changing dirty diapers back there or maybe even taken an actual shit, and then tried to cover it up with a bunch of coconut air freshener that smelled like suntan lotion. The seats were greasy, and patched with duct tape, and the shocks were nearly gone. Whenever we struck a bump, my teeth rattled, and so did the religious claptrap dangling from the rear view mirror: medallions, a curved sword in miniature dancing on a plastic chain, and a turbaned, bearded guru who gazed into the back seat with piercing eyes, palm raised in benediction.

Along Park Avenue, ranks of red tulips stood at attention as we sped by. Bollywood pop—turned down to a low, almost subliminal whine—spiraled and sparkled hypnotically, just at the threshold of my hearing. The leaves were just coming out on the trees. Delivery boys from D’Agostino’s and Gristede’s pushed carts laden with groceries; harried executive women in heels plunged down the sidewalk, dragging reluctant kindergartners behind them; a uniformed worker swept debris from the gutter into a dustpan on a stick; lawyers and stockbrokers held their palms out and knit their brows as they looked up at the sky. As we jolted up the avenue (my mother looking miserable, clutching at the armrest to brace herself) I stared out the window at the dyspeptic workaday faces

(worried-looking people in raincoats, milling in grim throngs at the crosswalks, people drinking coffee from cardboard cups and talking on cell phones and glancing furtively side to side) and tried hard not to think of all the unpleasant fates that might be about to befall me: some of them involving juvenile court, or jail.

The cab swung into a sharp sudden turn, onto Eighty-Sixth Street. My mother slid into me and grabbed my arm; and I saw she was clammy and pale as a cod.

“Are you carsick?” I said, forgetting my own troubles for the moment. She had a woeful, fixed expression that I recognized all too well: her lips were pressed tight, her forehead was glistening and her eyes were glassy and huge.

She started to say something—and then clapped her hand to her mouth as the cab lurched to a stop at the light, throwing us forward and then back hard against the seat.

“Hang on,” I said to her, and then leaned up and knocked on the greasy plexiglass, so that the driver (a turbaned Sikh) started in surprise.

“Look,” I called through the grille, “this is fine, we’ll get out here, okay?”

The Sikh—reflected in the garlanded mirror—gazed at me steadily. “You want to stop here.”

“Yes, please.”

“But this is not the address you gave.”

“I know. But this is good,” I said, glancing back at my mother—mascara-smearred, wilted-looking, scrabbling through her bag for her wallet.

“Is she all right?” said the cabdriver doubtfully.

“Yes, yes, she’s fine. We just need to get out, thanks.”

With trembling hands, my mother produced a crumple of damp-looking dollars and pushed them through the grille. As the Sikh slid his hand through and palmed them (resignedly, looking away) I climbed out, holding the door open for her.

My mother stumbled a little stepping onto the curb, and I caught her arm. “Are you okay?” I said to her timidly as the cab sped away. We were on upper Fifth Avenue, by the mansions facing the park.

She took a deep breath, then wiped her brow and squeezed my arm. “Phew,” she said, fanning her face with her palm. Her forehead was shiny

and her eyes were still a little unfocused; she had the slightly ruffled aspect of a sea-bird blown off course. “Sorry, still got the wobbles. Thank God we’re out of that cab. I’ll be fine, I just need some air.”

People streamed around us on the windy corner: schoolgirls in uniform, laughing and running and dodging around us; nannies pushing elaborate prams with babies seated in pairs and threes. A harried, lawyerly father brushed past us, towing his small son by the wrist. “No, Braden,” I heard him say to the boy, who trotted to keep up, “you shouldn’t think that way, it’s more important to have a job you *like*—”

We stepped aside to avoid the soapsuds that a janitor was dumping from a pail on the sidewalk in front of his building.

“Tell me,” said my mother—fingertips at her temple—“was it just me, or was that cab *unbelievably*—”

“Nasty? Hawaiian Tropic and baby poo?”

“Honestly—” fanning the air in front of her face—“it would have been okay if not for all the stopping and starting. I was perfectly fine and then it just hit me.”

“Why don’t you ever just ask if you can sit in the front seat?”

“You sound just like your father.”

I looked away, embarrassed—for I’d heard it too, a hint of his annoying know-it-all tone. “Let’s walk over to Madison and find some place for you to sit down,” I said. I was starving to death and there was a diner over there I liked.

But—with a shudder almost, a visible wave of nausea—she shook her head. “Air.” Dashing mascara smudges from under her eyes. “The air feels good.”

“Sure,” I said, a bit too quickly, anxious to be accommodating. “Whatever.”

I was trying hard to be agreeable but my mother—fitful and woozy—had picked up on my tone; she looked at me closely, trying to figure out what I was thinking. (This was another bad habit we’d fallen into, thanks to years of life with my father: trying to read each other’s minds.)

“What?” she said. “Is there someplace you want to go?”

“Um, no, not really,” I said, taking a step backwards and looking around in my consternation; even though I was hungry, I felt in no position to insist on anything.

“I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute.”

“Maybe—” blinking and agitated, what did she want, what would please her? —“how about we go sit in the park?”

To my relief, she nodded. “All right then,” she said, in what I thought of as her Mary Poppins voice, “but just till I catch my breath,” and we started down toward the crosswalk at Seventy-Ninth Street: past topiaries in baroque planters, ponderous doors laced with ironwork. The light had faded to an industrial gray, and the breeze was as heavy as teakettle steam. Across the street by the park, artists were setting up their stalls, unrolling their canvases, pinning up their watercolor reproductions of St. Patrick’s Cathedral and the Brooklyn Bridge.

We walked along in silence. My mind was whirring busily on my own troubles (had Tom’s parents got a call? Why hadn’t I thought to ask him?) as well as what I was going to order for breakfast as soon as I could get her to the diner (Western omelet with home fries, side of bacon; she would have what she always had, rye toast with poached eggs and a cup of black coffee) and I was hardly paying attention where we were going when I realized she had just said something. She wasn’t looking at me but out over the park; and her expression made me think of a famous French movie I didn’t know the name of, where distracted people walked down windblown streets and talked a lot but didn’t actually seem to be talking to each other.

“What did you say?” I asked, after a few confused beats, walking faster to catch up with her. “Try more—?”

She looked startled, as if she’d forgotten I was there. The white coat—flapping in the wind—added to her long-legged ibis quality, as if she were about to unfurl her wings and sail away over the park.

“Try more what?”

“Oh.” Her face went blank and then she shook her head and laughed quickly in the sharp, childlike way she had. “No. I said *time warp*.”

Even though it was a strange thing to say I knew what she meant, or thought I did—that shiver of disconnection, the missing seconds on the sidewalk like a hiccup of lost time, or a few frames snipped out of a film.

“No, no, puppy, just the neighborhood.” Tousling my hair, making me smile in a lopsided, half-embarrassed way: *puppy* was my baby name, I didn’t like it any more nor the hair-tousling either, but sheepish though I

felt, I was glad to see her in a better mood. “Always happens up here. Whenever I’m up here it’s like I’m eighteen again and right off the bus.”

“Here?” I said doubtfully, permitting her to hold my hand, not normally something I would have done. “That’s weird.” I knew all about my mother’s early days in Manhattan, a good long way from Fifth Avenue — on Avenue B, in a studio above a bar, where bums slept in the doorway and bar fights spilled out on the street and a crazy old lady named Mo kept ten or twelve illegal cats in a blocked-off stairwell on the top floor.

She shrugged. “Yeah, but up here it’s still the same as the first day I ever saw it. Time tunnel. On the Lower East Side — well, you know what it’s like down there, always something new, but for me it’s more this Rip van Winkle feeling, always further and further away. Some days I’d wake up and it was like they came in and rearranged the storefronts in the night. Old restaurants out of business, some trendy new bar where the dry cleaner’s used to be. . . .”

I maintained a respectful silence. The passage of time had been much on her mind lately, maybe because her birthday was coming up. *I’m too old for this routine*, she’d said a few days before as we’d scrambled together over the apartment, rummaging under the sofa cushions and searching in the pockets of coats and jackets for enough change to pay the delivery boy from the deli.

She dug her hands in her coat pockets. “Up here, it’s more stable,” she said. Though her voice was light I could see the fog in her eyes; clearly she hadn’t slept well, thanks to me. “Upper Park is one of the few places where you can still see what the city looked like in the 1890s. Gramercy Park too, and the Village, some of it. When I first came to New York I thought this neighborhood was Edith Wharton and *Franny and Zooey* and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* all rolled into one.”

“*Franny and Zooey* was the West Side.”

“Yeah, but I was too dumb to know that. All I can say, is, it was pretty different from the Lower East, homeless guys starting fires in trash cans. Up here on the weekends it was magical — wandering the museum — lolling around Central Park on my own —”

“Lolling?” So much of her talk was exotic to my ear, and *lollop* sounded like some horse term from her childhood: a lazy gallop maybe, some equine gait between a canter and a trot.

“Oh, you know, just loping and sloping along like I do. No money, holes in my socks, living off oatmeal. Believe it or not I used to *walk* up here, some weekends. Saving my train fare for the ride home. That was when they still had tokens instead of cards. And even though you’re supposed to pay to get in the museum? The ‘suggested donation’? Well, I guess I must have had a lot more nerve back then, or maybe they just felt sorry for me because — Oh no,” she said, in a changed tone, stopping cold, so that I walked a few steps by her without noticing.

“What?” Turning back. “What is it?”

“Felt something.” She held out her palm and looked at the sky. “Did you?”

And just as she said it, the light seemed to fail. The sky darkened rapidly, darker every second; the wind rustled the trees in the park and the new leaves on the trees stood out tender and yellow against black clouds.

“Jeez, wouldn’t you know it,” said my mother. “It’s about to pour.” Leaning over the street, looking north: no cabs.

I caught her hand again. “Come on,” I said, “we’ll have better luck on the other side.”

Impatiently we waited for the last few blinks on the Don’t Walk sign. Bits of paper were whirling in the air and tumbling down the street. “Hey, there’s a cab,” I said, looking up Fifth; and just as I said it a businessman ran to the curb with his hand up, and the light popped off.

Across the street, artists ran to cover their paintings with plastic. The coffee vendor was pulling down the shutters on his cart. We hurried across and just as we made it to the other side, a fat drop of rain splashed on my cheek. Sporadic brown circles — widely spaced, big as dimes — began to pop up on the pavement.

“Oh, *drat!*” cried my mother. She fumbled in her bag for her umbrella — which was scarcely big enough for one person, let alone two.

And then it came down, cold sweeps of rain blowing in sideways, broad gusts tumbling in the treetops and flapping in the awnings across the street. My mother was struggling to get the cranky little umbrella up, without much success. People on the street and in the park were holding newspapers and briefcases over their heads, scurrying up the stairs to the portico of the museum, which was the only place on the street to get out of the rain. And there was something festive and happy about the two of us, hurrying up the steps beneath the flimsy candy-striped umbrella, quick

quick quick, for all the world as if we were escaping something terrible instead of running right into it.

iv.

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THREE IMPORTANT THINGS HAD happened to my mother after she arrived in New York on the bus from Kansas, friendless and practically penniless. The first was when a booking agent named Davy Jo Pickering had spotted her waiting tables in a coffee shop in the Village: an underfed teenager in Doc Martens and thrift-shop clothes, with a braid down her back so long she could sit on it. When she'd brought him his coffee, he'd offered her seven hundred and then a thousand dollars to fill in for a girl who hadn't shown up for work at the catalogue shoot across the street. He'd pointed out the location van, the equipment being set up in Sheridan Square park; he'd counted out the bills, laid them on the counter. "Give me ten minutes," she'd said; she'd brought out the rest of her breakfast orders, then hung up her apron and walked out.

"I was only a mail-order model," she always took pains to explain to people — by which she meant she'd never done fashion magazines or couture, only circulars for chain stores, inexpensive casuals for junior misses in Missouri and Montana. Sometimes it was fun, she said, but mostly it wasn't: swimsuits in January, shivering from flu; tweeds and woolens in summer heat, sweltering for hours amid fake autumn leaves while a studio fan blew hot air and a guy from makeup darted in between takes to powder the sweat off her face.

But during those years of standing around and pretending to be in college — posing in mock campus settings in stiff pairs and threes, books clutched to her chest — she'd managed to sock away enough money to send herself to college for real: art history at NYU. She'd never seen a great painting in person until she was eighteen and moved to New York, and she was eager to make up for lost time — "pure bliss, perfect heaven," she'd said, up to the neck in art books and poring over the same old slides (Manet, Vuillard) until her vision started to blur. ("It's crazy," she'd said, "but I'd be perfectly happy if I could sit looking at the same half dozen paintings for the rest of my life. I can't think of a better way to go insane.")

College was the second important thing that had happened to her in

New York—for her, probably the most important. And if not for the third thing (meeting and marrying my father—not so lucky as the first two) she would almost certainly have finished her master’s and gone on for her PhD. Whenever she had a few hours to herself she always headed straight to the Frick, or MoMA, or the Met—which is why, as we stood under the dripping portico of the museum, gazing out across hazy Fifth Avenue and the raindrops jumping white in the street, I was not surprised when she shook her umbrella out and said: “Maybe we should go in and poke around for a bit till it stops.”

“Um—” What I wanted was breakfast. “Sure.”

She glanced at her watch. “Might as well. We’re not going to get a cab in all this.”

She was right. Still, I was starving. *When are we going to eat?* I thought grumpily, following her up the stairs. For all I knew, she was going to be so mad after the meeting she wouldn’t take me out to lunch at all, I would have to go home and eat a bowl of cereal or something.

Yet the museum always felt like a holiday; and once we were inside with the glad roar of tourists all around us, I felt strangely insulated from whatever else the day might hold in store. The Great Hall was loud, and rank with the smell of wet overcoats. A drenched crowd of Asian senior citizens surged past, after a crisp stewardess guide; bedraggled Girl Scouts huddled whispering near the coat check; beside the information desk stood a line of military-school cadets in gray dress uniforms, hats off, clasped hands behind their backs.

For me—a city kid, always confined by apartment walls—the museum was interesting mainly because of its immense size, a palace where the rooms went on forever and grew more and more deserted the farther in you went. Some of the neglected bedchambers and roped-off drawing rooms in the depths of European Decorating felt bound-up in deep enchantment, as if no one had set foot in them for hundreds of years. Ever since I’d started riding the train by myself I’d loved to go there alone and roam around until I got lost, wandering deeper and deeper in the maze of galleries until sometimes I found myself in forgotten halls of armor and porcelain that I’d never seen before (and, occasionally, was unable to find again).

As I hung behind my mother in the admissions line, I put my head back and stared fixedly into the cavernous ceiling dome two stories above:

if I stared hard enough, sometimes I could make myself feel like I was floating around up there like a feather, a trick from early childhood that was fading as I got older.

Meanwhile my mother — red-nosed and breathless from our dash through the rain — was grappling for her wallet. “Maybe when we’re done I’ll duck in the gift shop,” she was saying. “I’m sure the last thing Mathilde wants is an art book but it’ll be hard for her to complain much about it without sounding stupid.”

“Yikes,” I said. “The present’s for Mathilde?” Mathilde was the art director of the advertising firm where my mother worked; she was the daughter of a French fabric-importing magnate, younger than my mother and notoriously fussy, apt to throw tantrums if the car service or the catering wasn’t up to par.

“Yep.” Wordlessly, she offered me a stick of gum, which I accepted, and then threw the pack back in her purse. “I mean, that’s Mathilde’s whole thing, the well-chosen gift shouldn’t cost a lot of money, it’s all about the perfect inexpensive paperweight from the flea market. Which would be fantastic, I guess, if any of us had time to go downtown and scour the flea market. Last year when it was Pru’s turn —? She panicked and ran into Saks on her lunch hour and ended up spending fifty bucks of her own money on top of what they gave her, for sunglasses, Tom Ford I think, and Mathilde still had to get her crack in about Americans and consumer culture. Pru isn’t even American, she’s Australian.”

“Have you discussed it with Sergio?” I said. Sergio — seldom in the office, though often in the society pages with people like Donatella Versace — was the multimillionaire owner of my mother’s firm; “discussing things with Sergio” was akin to asking: “What would Jesus do?”

“Sergio’s idea of an art book is Helmut Newton or maybe that coffee-table book that Madonna did a while back.”

I started to ask who Helmut Newton was, but then had a better idea. “Why don’t you get her a MetroCard?”

My mother rolled her eyes. “Believe me, I ought to.” There had recently been a flap at work when Mathilde’s car was held up in traffic, leaving her stranded in Williamsburg at a jeweler’s studio.

“Like — anonymously. Leave one on her desk, an old one without any money on it. Just to see what she’d do.”

“I can tell you what she’d do,” said my mother, sliding her membership card through the ticket window. “Fire her assistant and probably half the people in Production as well.”

My mother’s advertising firm specialized in women’s accessories. All day long, under the agitated and slightly vicious eye of Mathilde, she supervised photo shoots where crystal earrings glistened on drifts of fake holiday snow, and crocodile handbags—unattended, in the back seats of deserted limousines—glowed in coronas of celestial light. She was good at what she did; she preferred working behind the camera rather than in front of it; and I knew she got a kick out of seeing her work on subway posters and on billboards in Times Square. But despite the gloss and sparkle of the job (champagne breakfasts, gift bags from Bergdorf’s) the hours were long and there was a hollowness at the heart of it that—I knew—made her sad. What she really wanted was to go back to school, though of course we both knew that there was little chance of that now my dad had left.

“Okay,” she said, turning from the window and handing me my badge, “help me keep an eye on the time, will you? It’s a massive show”—she indicated a poster, *PORTRAITURE AND NATURE MORTE: NORTHERN MASTERWORKS OF THE GOLDEN AGE*—“we can’t see it all on this visit, but there are a few things...”

Her voice drifted away as I trailed behind her up the Great Staircase—torn between the prudent need to stick close and the urge to slink a few paces back and try to pretend I wasn’t with her.

“I hate to race through like this,” she was saying as I caught up with her at the top of the stairs, “but then again it’s the kind of show where you need to come two or three times. There’s *The Anatomy Lesson*, and we do have to see that, but what I really want to see is one tiny, rare piece by a painter who was Vermeer’s teacher. Greatest Old Master you’ve never heard of. The Frans Hals paintings are a big deal, too. You know Hals, don’t you? *The Jolly Toper*? And the almshouse governors?”

“Right,” I said tentatively. Of the paintings she’d mentioned, *The Anatomy Lesson* was the only one I knew. A detail from it was featured on the poster for the exhibition: livid flesh, multiple shades of black, alcoholic-looking surgeons with bloodshot eyes and red noses.

“Art One-oh-one stuff,” said my mother. “Here, take a left.”

Upstairs it was freezing cold, with my hair still wet from the rain.

“No, no, this way,” said my mother, catching my sleeve. The show was complicated to find, and as we wandered the busy galleries (weaving in and out of crowds, turning right, turning left, backtracking through labyrinths of confusing signage and layout) large gloomy reproductions of *The Anatomy Lesson* appeared erratically and at unexpected junctures, baleful signposts, the same old corpse with the flayed arm, red arrows beneath: *operating theater, this way*.

I was not very excited at the prospect of a lot of pictures of Dutch people standing around in dark clothes, and when we pushed through the glass doors—from echoing halls into carpeted hush—I thought at first we’d gone into the wrong hall. The walls glowed with a warm, dull haze of opulence, a generic mellowness of antiquity; but then it all broke apart into clarity and color and pure Northern light, portraits, interiors, still lifes, some tiny, others majestic: ladies with husbands, ladies with lapdogs, lonely beauties in embroidered gowns and splendid, solitary merchants in jewels and furs. Ruined banquet tables littered with peeled apples and walnut shells; draped tapestries and silver; trompe l’oeils with crawling insects and striped flowers. And the deeper we wandered, the stranger and more beautiful the pictures became. Peeled lemons, with the rind slightly hardened at the knife’s edge, the greenish shadow of a patch of mold. Light striking the rim of a half-empty wine glass.

“I like this one too,” whispered my mother, coming up alongside me at a smallish and particularly haunting still life: a white butterfly against a dark ground, floating over some red fruit. The background—a rich chocolate black—had a complicated warmth suggesting crowded store-rooms and history, the passage of time.

“They really knew how to work this edge, the Dutch painters—ripeness sliding into rot. The fruit’s perfect but it won’t last, it’s about to go. And see here especially,” she said, reaching over my shoulder to trace in the air with her finger, “this passage—the butterfly.” The underwing was so powdery and delicate it looked as if the color would smear if she touched it. “How beautifully he plays it. Stillness with a tremble of movement.”

“How long did it take him to paint that?”

My mother, who’d been standing a bit too close, stepped back to regard the painting—oblivious to the gum-chewing security guard whose attention she’d attracted, who was staring fixedly at her back.

“Well, the Dutch invented the microscope,” she said. “They were

jewelers, grinders of lenses. They want it all as detailed as possible because even the tiniest things mean something. Whenever you see flies or insects in a still life—a wilted petal, a black spot on the apple—the painter is giving you a secret message. He’s telling you that living things don’t last—it’s all temporary. Death in life. That’s why they’re called *natures mortes*. Maybe you don’t see it at first with all the beauty and bloom, the little speck of rot. But if you look closer—there it is.”

I leaned down to read the note, printed in discreet letters on the wall, which informed me that the painter—Adriaen Coorte, dates of birth and death uncertain—had been unknown in his own lifetime and his work unrecognized until the 1950s. “Hey,” I said, “Mom, did you see this?”

But she’d already moved on. The rooms were chilly and hushed, with lowered ceilings, and none of the palatial roar and echo of the Great Hall. Though the exhibition was moderately crowded, still it had the sedate, meandering feel of a backwater, a certain vacuum-sealed calm: long sighs and extravagant exhalations like a room full of students taking a test. I trailed behind my mother as she zigzagged from portrait to portrait, much faster than she usually went through an exhibition, from flowers to card tables to fruit, ignoring a great many of the paintings (our fourth silver tankard or dead pheasant) and veering to others without hesitation (“Now, Hals. He’s so corny sometimes with all these tipplers and wenches but when he’s on, he’s *on*. None of this fussiness and precision, he’s working wet-on-wet, slash, slash, it’s all so *fast*. The faces and hands—rendered really finely, he knows that’s what the eye is drawn to but look at the clothes—so loose—almost sketched. Look how open and modern the brushwork is!”). We spent some time in front of a Hals portrait of a boy holding a skull (“Don’t be mad, Theo, but who do you think he looks like? Somebody”—tugging the back of my hair—“who could use a haircut?”)—and, also, two big Hals portraits of banqueting officers, which she told me were very, very famous and a gigantic influence on Rembrandt. (“Van Gogh loved Hals too. Somewhere, he’s writing about Hals and he says: *Frans Hals has no less than twenty-nine shades of black!* Or was it twenty-seven?”) I followed after her with a sort of dazed sense of lost time, delighted by her preoccupation, how oblivious she seemed of the minutes flying. It seemed that our half hour must be almost up; but still I wanted to dawdle and distract her, in the infantile hope that time would slip away and we would miss the meeting altogether.

“Now, Rembrandt,” my mother said. “Everybody always says this painting is about reason and enlightenment, the dawn of scientific inquiry, all that, but to me it’s creepy how polite and formal they are, milling around the slab like a buffet at a cocktail party. Although—” she pointed—“see those two puzzled guys in the back there? They’re not looking at the body—they’re looking at *us*. You and me. Like they see us standing here in front of them—two people from the future. Startled. ‘What are *you* doing here?’ Very naturalistic. But then”—she traced the corpse, midair, with her finger—“the body isn’t painted in any very natural way at all, if you look at it. Weird glow coming off it, do you see? Alien autopsy, almost. See how it lights up the faces of the men looking down at it? Like it’s shining with its own light source? He’s painting it with that radioactive quality because he wants to draw our eye to it—make it jump out at us. And here”—she pointed to the flayed hand—“see how he calls attention to it by painting it so big, all out of proportion to the rest of the body? He’s even turned it around so the thumb is on the wrong side, do you see? Well, he didn’t do that by mistake. The skin is off the hand—we see it immediately, something very wrong—but by reversing the thumb he makes it look even *more* wrong, it registers subliminally even if we can’t put our finger on it, something really out of order, not right. Very clever trick.” We were standing behind a crowd of Asian tourists, so many heads that I could see the picture scarcely at all, but then again I didn’t care that much because I’d seen this girl.

She’d seen me, too. We’d been eyeing each other as we were going through the galleries. I wasn’t quite even sure what was so interesting about her, since she was younger than me and a little strange-looking—nothing at all like the girls I usually got crushes on, cool serious beauties who cast disdainful looks around the hallway and went out with big guys. This girl had bright red hair; her movements were swift, her face sharp and mischievous and strange, and her eyes were an odd color, a golden honeybee brown. And though she was too thin, all elbows, and in a way almost plain, yet there was something about her too that made my stomach go watery. She was swinging and knocking a battered-looking flute case around with her—a city kid? On her way to a music lesson? Maybe not, I thought, circling behind her as I followed my mother into the next gallery; her clothes were a little too bland and suburban; she was probably a tourist. But she moved with more assurance than most of the girls I

knew; and the sly, composed glance that she slid over me as she brushed past drove me crazy.

I was trailing along behind my mother, only half paying attention to what she was saying, when she stopped in front of a painting so suddenly that I almost ran into her.

“Oh, sorry —!” she said, without looking at me, stepping back to make room. Her face was like someone had turned a light into it.

“*This* is the one I was talking about,” she said. “Isn’t it amazing?”

I inclined my head in my mother’s direction, in an attitude of attentive listening, while my eyes wandered back to the girl. She was accompanied by a funny old white-haired character who I guessed from his sharpness of face was related to her, her grandfather maybe: houndstooth coat, long narrow lace-up shoes as shiny as glass. His eyes were close-set, and his nose beaky and birdlike; he walked with a limp — in fact, his whole body listed to one side, one shoulder higher than the other; and if his slump had been any more pronounced, you might have said he was a hunchback. But all the same there was something elegant about him. And clearly he adored the girl from the amused and companionable way he hobbled at her side, very careful where he put his feet, his head inclined in her direction.

“This is just about the first painting I ever really loved,” my mother was saying. “You’ll never believe it, but it was in a book I used to take out of the library when I was a kid. I used to sit on the floor by my bed and stare at it for hours, completely fascinated — that little guy! And, I mean, actually it’s incredible how much you can learn about a painting by spending a lot of time with a reproduction, even not a very good reproduction. I started off loving the bird, the way you’d love a pet or something, and ended up loving the way he was painted.” She laughed. “*The Anatomy Lesson* was in the same book actually, but it scared the pants off me. I used to slam the book shut when I opened it to that page by mistake.”

The girl and the old man had come up next to us. Self-consciously, I leaned forward and looked at the painting. It was a small picture, the smallest in the exhibition, and the simplest: a yellow finch, against a plain, pale ground, chained to a perch by its twig of an ankle.

“He was Rembrandt’s pupil, Vermeer’s teacher,” my mother said. “And this one little painting is really the missing link between the two of them — that clear pure daylight, you can see where Vermeer got his qual-

ity of light from. Of course, I didn't know or care about any of that when I was a kid, the historical significance. But it's there."

I stepped back, to get a better look. It was a direct and matter-of-fact little creature, with nothing sentimental about it; and something about the neat, compact way it tucked down inside itself—its brightness, its alert watchful expression—made me think of pictures I'd seen of my mother when she was small: a dark-capped finch with steady eyes.

"It was a famous tragedy in Dutch history," my mother was saying. "A huge part of the town was destroyed."

"What?"

"The disaster at Delft. That killed Fabritius. Did you hear the teacher back there telling the children about it?"

I had. There had been a trio of ghastly landscapes, by a painter named Egbert van der Poel, different views of the same smouldering wasteland: burnt ruined houses, a windmill with tattered sails, crows wheeling in smoky skies. An official looking lady had been explaining loudly to a group of middle-school kids that a gunpowder factory exploded at Delft in the 1600s, that the painter had been so haunted and obsessed by the destruction of his city that he painted it over and over.

"Well, Egbert was Fabritius's neighbor, he sort of lost his mind after the powder explosion, at least that's how it looks to me, but Fabritius was killed and his studio was destroyed. Along with almost all his paintings, except this one." She seemed to be waiting for me to say something, but when I didn't, she continued: "He was one of the greatest painters of his day, in one of the greatest ages of painting. Very very famous in his time. It's sad though, because maybe only five or six paintings survived, of all his work. All the rest of it is lost—everything he ever did."

The girl and her grandfather were loitering quietly to the side, listening to my mother talk, which was a bit embarrassing. I glanced away and then—unable to resist—glanced back. They were standing very close, so close I could have reached out and touched them. She was batting and plucking at the old man's sleeve, tugging his arm to whisper something in his ear.

"Anyway, if you ask me," my mother was saying, "this is the most extraordinary picture in the whole show. Fabritius is making clear something that he discovered all on his own, that no painter in the world knew before him—not even Rembrandt."

Very softly — so softly I could barely hear her — I heard the girl whisper: “It had to live its whole life like that?”

I’d been wondering the same thing; the shackled foot, the chain was terrible; her grandfather murmured some reply but my mother (who seemed totally unaware of them, even though they were right next to us) stepped back and said: “Such a mysterious picture, so simple. Really tender — invites you to stand close, you know? All those dead pheasants back there and then this little living creature.”

I allowed myself another stealthy glimpse in the girl’s direction. She was standing on one leg, with her hip swung out to the side. Then — quite suddenly — she turned and looked me in the eye; and in a heart-skip of confusion, I looked away.

What was her name? Why wasn’t she in school? I’d been trying to make out the scribbled name on the flute case but even when I leaned in as far as I dared without being obvious, still I couldn’t read the bold spiky marker strokes, more drawn than written, like something spray-painted on a subway car. The last name was short, only four or five letters; the first looked like R, or was it P?

“People die, sure,” my mother was saying. “But it’s so heartbreaking and unnecessary how we lose *things*. From pure carelessness. Fires, wars. The Parthenon, used as a munitions storehouse. I guess that anything we manage to save from history is a miracle.”

The grandfather had drifted away, a few paintings over; but she was loitering a few steps behind, the girl, and kept casting glances back at my mother and me. Beautiful skin: milky white, arms like carved marble. Definitely she looked athletic, though too pale to be a tennis player; maybe she was a ballerina or a gymnast or even a high diver, practicing late in shadowy indoor pools, echoes and refractions, dark tile. Plunging with arched chest and pointed toes to the bottom of the pool, a silent *pow*, shiny black swimsuit, bubbles foaming and streaming off her small, tense frame.

Why did I obsess over people like this? Was it normal to fixate on strangers in this particular vivid, fevered way? I didn’t think so. It was impossible to imagine some random passer-by on the street forming quite such an interest in *me*. And yet it was the main reason I’d gone in those houses with Tom: I was fascinated by strangers, wanted to know what food they ate and what dishes they ate it from, what movies they watched and what music they listened to, wanted to look under their beds and in

their secret drawers and night tables and inside the pockets of their coats. Often I saw interesting-looking people on the street and thought about them restlessly for days, imagining their lives, making up stories about them on the subway or the crosstown bus. Years had passed, and I still hadn't stopped thinking about the dark-haired children in Catholic school uniforms—brother and sister—I'd seen in Grand Central, literally trying to pull their father out the door of a seedy bar by the sleeves of his suit jacket. Nor had I forgotten the frail, gypsyish girl in a wheelchair out in front of the Carlyle Hotel, talking breathlessly in Italian to the fluffy dog in her lap, while a sharp character in sunglasses (father? bodyguard?) stood behind her chair, apparently conducting some sort of business deal on his phone. For years, I'd turned those strangers over in my mind, wondering who they were and what their lives were like, and I knew I would go home and wonder about this girl and her grandfather the same way. The old man had money; you could tell from how he was dressed. Why was it just the two of them? Where were they from? Maybe they were part of some big old complicated New York family—music people, academics, one of those large, artsy West Side families that you saw up around Columbia or at Lincoln Center matinees. Or, maybe—homely, civilized old creature that he was—maybe he wasn't her grandfather at all. Maybe he was a music teacher, and she was the flute prodigy he had discovered in some small town and brought to play at Carnegie Hall—

“Theo?” my mother said suddenly. “Did you hear me?”

Her voice brought me back to myself. We were in the last room of the show. Beyond lay the exhibition shop—postcards, cash register, glossy stacks of art books—and my mother, unfortunately, had not lost track of the time.

“We should see if it's still raining,” she was saying. “We've still got a little while”—(looking at her watch, glancing past me at the Exit sign)—“but I think I'd better go downstairs if I'm going to try to get something for Mathilde.”

I noticed the girl observing my mother as she spoke—eyes gliding curiously over my mother's sleek black ponytail, her white satin trenchcoat cinched at the waist—and it thrilled me to see her for a moment as the girl saw her, as a stranger. Did she see how my mother's nose had the tiniest bump at the top, where she'd broken it falling out of a tree as a child? or how the black rings around the light blue irises of my mother's eyes

gave her a slightly wild quality, as of some steady-eyed hunting creature alone on a plain?

“You know —” my mother looked over her shoulder — “if you don’t mind, I just might run back and take another quick look at *The Anatomy Lesson* before we leave. I didn’t get to see it up close and I’m afraid I might not make it back before it comes down.” She started away, shoes clacking busily — and then glanced at me as if to say: *are you coming?*

This was so unexpected that for a split second I didn’t know what to say. “Um,” I said, recovering, “I’ll meet you in the shop.”

“Okay,” she said. “Buy me a couple of cards, will you? I’ll be back in a sec.”

And off she hurried, before I had a chance to say a word. Heart pounding, unable to believe my luck, I watched her walking rapidly away from me in the white satin trenchcoat. This was it, my chance to talk to the girl; *but what can I say to her*, I thought furiously, *what can I say?* I dug my hands in my pockets, took a breath or two to compose myself, and — excitement fizzing bright in my stomach — turned to face her.

But, to my consternation, she was gone. That is to say, she wasn’t gone; there was her red head, moving reluctantly (or so it seemed) across the room. Her grandpa had slipped his arm through hers and — whispering to her, with great enthusiasm — was towing her away to look at some picture on the opposite wall.

I could have killed him. Nervously, I glanced at the empty doorway. Then I dug my hands deeper in my pockets and — face burning — walked conspicuously across the length of the gallery. The clock was ticking; my mother would be back any second; and though I knew I didn’t have the nerve to barge up and actually say something, I could at the very least get a last good look at her. Not long before, I had stayed up late with my mother and watched *Citizen Kane*, and I was very taken with the idea that a person might notice in passing some bewitching stranger and remember her for the rest of his life. Someday I too might be like the old man in the movie, leaning back in my chair with a far-off look in my eyes, and saying: “You know, that was sixty years ago, and I never saw that girl with the red hair again, but you know what? Not a month has gone by in all that time when I haven’t thought of her.”

I was more than halfway across the gallery when something strange

happened. A museum guard ran across the open doorway of the exhibition shop beyond. He was carrying something in his arms.

The girl saw it, too. Her golden-brown eyes met mine: a startled, quiz-zical look.

Suddenly another guard flew out of the museum shop. His arms were up and he was screaming.

Heads went up. Someone behind me said, in an odd flat voice: oh! The next instant, a tremendous, earsplitting blast shook the room.

The old man — with a blank look on his face — stumbled sideways. His outstretched arm — knotty fingers spread — is the last thing I remember seeing. At almost exactly the same moment there was a black flash, with debris sweeping and twisting around me, and a roar of hot wind slammed into me and threw me across the room. And that was the last thing I knew for a while.

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V.

I DON'T KNOW HOW long I was out. When I came to, it seemed as if I was flat on my stomach in a sandbox, on some dark playground — someplace I didn't know, a deserted neighborhood. A gang of tough, runty boys was bunched around me, kicking me in the ribs and the back of the head. My neck was twisted to the side and the wind was knocked out of me, but that wasn't the worst of it; I had sand in my mouth, I was breathing sand.

The boys muttered, audibly. *Get up, asshole.*

*Look at him, look at him.*

*He don't know dick.*

I rolled over and threw my arms over my head and then — with an airy, surreal jolt — saw that nobody was there.

For a moment I lay too stunned to move. Alarm bells clanged in a muffled distance. As strange as it seemed, I was under the impression that I was lying in the walled-in courtyard of some godforsaken housing project.

Somebody had beaten me up pretty good: I ached all over, my ribs were sore and my head felt like someone had hit me with a lead pipe. I was working my jaw back and forth and reaching for my pockets to see if I

had train fare home when it came over me abruptly that I had no clue where I was. Stiffly I lay there, in the growing consciousness that something was badly out of joint. The light was all wrong, and so was the air: acrid and sharp, a chemical fog that burned my throat. The gum in my mouth was gritty, and when—head pounding—I rolled over to spit it out, I found myself blinking through layers of smoke at something so foreign I stared for some moments.

I was in a ragged white cave. Swags and tatters dangled from the ceiling. The ground was tumbled and bucked-up with heaps of a gray substance like moon rock, and blown about with broken glass and gravel and a hurricane of random trash, bricks and slag and papery stuff frosted with a thin ash like first frost. High overhead, a pair of lamps beamed through the dust like off-kilter car lights in fog, cock-eyed, one angled upward and the other rolled to the side and casting skewed shadows.

My ears rang, and so did my body, an intensely disturbing sensation: bones, brain, heart all thrumming like a struck bell. Faintly, from somewhere far away, the mechanical shriek of alarms rang steady and impersonal. I could hardly tell if the noise was coming from inside me or outside me. There was a strong sense of being alone, in wintry deadness. Nothing made sense in any direction.

In a cascade of grit, my hand on some not-quite-vertical surface, I stood, wincing at the pain in my head. The tilt of the space where I was had a deep, innate wrongness. On one side, smoke and dust hung in a still, blanketed layer. On the other, a mass of shredded materials slanted down in a tangle where the roof, or the ceiling, should have been.

My jaw hurt; my face and knees were cut; my mouth was like sandpaper. Blinking around at the chaos I saw a tennis shoe; drifts of crumbly matter, stained dark; a twisted aluminum walking stick. I was swaying there, choked and dizzy, not knowing where to turn or what to do, when all of a sudden I thought I heard a phone going off.

For a moment I wasn't sure; I listened, hard; and then it spieled off again: faint and draggy, a little weird. Clumsily I grappled around in the wreckage—upending dusty kiddie purses and day packs, snatching my hands back at hot things and shards of broken glass, more and more troubled by the way the rubble gave under my feet in spots, and by the soft, inert lumps at the edge of my vision.

Even after I became convinced I'd never heard a phone, that the ring-

ing in my ears had played a trick on me, still I kept looking, locked into the mechanical gestures of searching with an unthinking, robot intensity. Among pens, handbags, wallets, broken eyeglasses, hotel key cards, compacts and perfume spray and prescription medications (Roitman, Andrea, alprazolam .25 mg ) I unearthed a keychain flashlight and a non working phone (half charged, no bars), which I threw in a collapsible nylon shopping bag I'd found in some lady's purse.

I was gasping, half-choked with plaster dust, and my head hurt so badly I could hardly see. I wanted to sit down, except there was no place to sit.

Then I saw a bottle of water. My eyes reverted, fast, and strayed over the havoc until I saw it again, about fifteen feet away, half buried in a pile of trash: just a hint of a label, familiar shade of cold-case blue.

With a benumbed heaviness like moving through snow, I began to slog and weave through the debris, rubbish breaking under my feet in sharp, glacial-sounding cracks. But I had not made it very far when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement on the ground, conspicuous in the stillness, a stirring of white-on-white.

I stopped. Then I waded a few steps closer. It was a man, flat on his back and whitened head to toe with dust. He was so well camouflaged in the ash-powdered wreckage that it was a moment before his form came clear: chalk on chalk, struggling to sit up like a statue knocked off his pedestal. As I drew closer, I saw that he was old and very frail, with a misshapen hunchback quality; his hair — what he had — was blown straight up from his head; the side of his face was stippled with an ugly spray of burns, and his head, above one ear, was a sticky black horror.

I had made it over to where he was when — unexpectedly fast — he shot out his dust-whitened arm and grabbed my hand. In panic I started back, but he only clutched at me tighter, coughing and coughing with a sick wetness.

Where —? he seemed to be saying. Where —? He was trying to look up at me, but his head dangled heavily on his neck and his chin lolled on his chest so that he was forced to peer from under his brow at me like a vulture. But his eyes, in the ruined face, were intelligent and despairing.

—Oh, God, I said, bending to help him, wait, wait — and then I stopped, not knowing what to do. His lower half lay twisted on the ground like a pile of dirty clothes.

He braced himself with his arms, gamely it seemed, lips moving and still struggling to raise himself. He reeked of burned hair, burned wool. But the lower half of his body seemed disconnected from the upper half, and he coughed and fell back in a heap.

I looked around, trying to get my bearings, deranged from the crack on the head, with no sense of time or even if it was day or night. The grandeur and desolation of the space baffled me—the high, rare, loft of it, layered with gradations of smoke, and billowing with a tangled, tent-like effect where the ceiling (or the sky) ought to be. But though I had no idea where I was, or why, still there was a half-remembered quality about the wreckage, a cinematic charge in the glare of the emergency lamps. On the Internet I'd seen footage of a hotel blown up in the desert, where the honeycombed rooms at the moment of collapse were frozen in just such a blast of light.

Then I remembered the water. I stepped backwards, looking all around, until with a leap of my heart I spotted the dusty flash of blue.

—Look, I said, edging away. I'm just—

The old man was watching me with a gaze at once hopeful and hopeless, like a starved dog too weak to walk.

—No—wait. I'm coming back.

Like a drunk, I staggered through the rubbish—weaving and plowing, stepping high-kneed over objects, muddling through bricks and concrete and shoes and handbags and a whole lot of charred bits I didn't want to see too closely.

The bottle was three quarters full and hot to the touch. But at the first swallow my throat took charge and I'd gulped more than half of it—plastic-tasting, dishwater warm—before I realized what I was doing and forced myself to cap it and put it in the bag to take back to him.

Kneeling beside him. Rocks digging into my knees. He was shivering, breaths rasping and uneven; his gaze didn't meet mine but strayed above it, fixed fretfully on something I didn't see.

I was fumbling for the water when he reached his hand to my face. Carefully, with his bony old flat-pad fingers, he brushed the hair from my eyes and plucked a thorn of glass from my eyebrow and then patted me on the head.

“There, there.” His voice was very faint, very scratchy, very cordial, with a ghostly pulmonary whistle. We looked at each other, for a long

strange moment that I've never forgotten, actually, like two animals meeting at twilight, during which some clear, personable spark seemed to fly up through his eyes and I saw the creature he really was—and he, I believe, saw me. For an instant we were wired together and humming, like two engines on the same circuit.

Then he lolled back again, so limply I thought he was dead. — “Here,” I said, awkwardly, slipping my hand under his shoulder. “That’s good.” I held up his head as best I could, and helped him drink from the bottle. He could only take a little and most of it ran down his chin.

Again falling back. Effort too much.

“Pippa,” he said thickly.

I looked down at his burnt, reddened face, stirred by something familiar in his eyes, which were rusty and clear. I had seen him before. And I had seen the girl too, the briefest snapshot, an autumn-leaf lucidity: rusty eyebrows, honey-brown eyes. Her face was reflected in his. Where was she?

He was trying to say something. Cracked lips working. He wanted to know where Pippa was.

Wheezing and gasping for breath. “Here,” I said, agitated, “try to lie still.”

“She should take the train, it’s so much faster. Unless they bring her in a car.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, leaning closer. I wasn’t worried. Someone would be in to get us shortly, I was sure of it. “I’ll wait till they come.”

“You’re so kind.” His hand (cold, dry as powder) tightening on mine. “I haven’t seen you since you were a little boy again. You were all grown up the last time we spoke.”

“But I’m Theo,” I said, after a slightly confused pause.

“Of course you are.” His gaze, like his handclasp, was steady and kind. “And you’ve made the very best choice, I’m sure of it. The Mozart is so much nicer than the Gluck, don’t you think?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“It’ll be easier the two of you. They’re so hard on you children in the auditions —” Coughing. Lips slick with blood, thick and red. “No second chances.”

“Listen —” It felt wrong, letting him think I was someone else.

“Oh, but you play it so beautifully, my dear, the pair of you. The

G major. It keeps running through my mind. Lightly, lightly, touch and go—”

Humming a few shapeless notes. A song. It was a song.

“...and I must have told you, how I went for piano lessons, at the old Armenian lady’s? There was a green lizard that lived in the palm tree, green like a candy drop, I loved to watch for him... flashing on the windowsill... fairy lights in the garden... *du pays saint*... twenty minutes to walk it but it seemed like miles...”

He faded for a minute; I could feel his intelligence drifting away from me, spinning out of sight like a leaf on a brook. Then it washed back and there he was again.

“And you! How old are you now?”

“Thirteen.”

“At the Lycée Français?”

“No, my school’s on the West Side.”

“And just as well, I should think. All these French classes! Too many vocabulary words for a child. *Nom et pronom*, species and phylum. It’s only a form of insect collecting.”

“Sorry?”

“They always spoke French at Groppi’s. Remember Groppi’s? With the striped umbrella and the pistachio ices?”

*Striped umbrella*. It was hard to think through my headache. My glance wandered to the long gash in his scalp, clotted and dark, like an axe wound. More and more, I was becoming aware of dreadful bodylike shapes slumped in the debris, dark hulks not clearly seen, pressing in silently all around us, dark everywhere and the ragdoll bodies and yet it was a darkness you could drift away upon, something sleepy about it, frothy wake churned and vanished on a cold black ocean

Suddenly something was very wrong. He was awake, shaking me. Hands flapping. He wanted something. He tried to press himself up on a whistling in-breath.

“What is it?” I said, shaking myself alert. He was gasping, agitated, tugging at my arm. Fearfully I sat up and looked around, expecting to see some fresh danger rolling in: loose wires, a fire, the ceiling about to collapse.

Grabbing my hand. Squeezing it tight. “Not there,” he managed to say.

“What?”

“Don’t leave it. No.” He was looking past me, trying to point at something. “Take it away from there.”

Please, lie down —

“No! They mustn’t see it.” He was frantic, gripping my arm now, trying to pull himself up. “They’ve stolen the rugs, they’ll take it to the customs shed —”

He was, I saw, pointing over at a dusty rectangle of board, virtually invisible in the broken beams and rubbish, smaller than my laptop computer at home.

“That?” I said, looking closer. It was blobbed with drips of wax, and pasted with an irregular patchwork of crumbling labels. “That’s what you want?”

“I beg of you.” Eyes squeezed tight. He was upset, coughing so hard he could barely speak.

I reached out and picked the board up by the edges. It felt surprisingly heavy, for something so small. A long splinter of broken frame clung to one corner.

Drawing my sleeve across the dusty surface. Tiny yellow bird, faint beneath a veil of white dust. *The Anatomy Lesson was in the same book actually but it scared the pants off me.*

Right, I answered drowsily. I turned, painting in hand, to show it to her, and then realized she wasn’t there.

Or — she was there and she wasn’t. Part of her was there, but it was invisible. The invisible part was the important part. This was something I had never understood before. But when I tried to say this out loud the words came out in a muddle and I realized with a cold slap that I was wrong. Both parts had to be together. You couldn’t have one part without the other.

I rubbed my arm across my forehead and tried to blink the grit from my eyes and, with a massive effort, like lifting a weight much too heavy for me, tried to shift my mind where I knew it needed to be. Where was my mother? For a moment there had been three of us and one of these — I was pretty sure — had been her. But now there were only two.

Behind me, the old man had begun to cough and shudder again with an uncontrollable urgency, trying to speak. Reaching back, I tried to hand the picture over to him. “Here,” I said, and then, to my mother — in the spot where she had seemed to be — “I’ll be back in a minute.”

But the painting wasn't what he wanted. Fretfully he pushed it back at me, babbling something. The right side of his head was such a sticky drench of blood I could hardly see his ear.

"What?" I said, mind still on my mother — where was she? "Sorry?"

"Take it."

"Look, I'll be back. I have to —" I couldn't get it out, not quite, but my mother wanted me to go home, immediately, I was supposed to meet her there, that was the one thing she had made very clear

"Take it with you!" Pressing it on me. "Go!" He was trying to sit up. His eyes were bright and wild; his agitation frightened me. "They took all the light bulbs, they've smashed up half the houses in the street —"

A drip of blood ran down his chin.

"Please," I said, hands flustering, afraid to touch him. "Please lie down —"

He shook his head, and tried to say something, but the effort broke him down hacking with a wet, miserable sound. When he wiped his mouth, I saw a bright stripe of blood on the back of his hand.

"Somebody's coming." Not sure I believed it, not knowing what else to say.

He looked straight into my face, searching for some flicker of understanding, and when he didn't find it he clawed to sit up again.

"Fire," he said, in a gargling voice. "The villa in Ma'adi. *On a tout perdu.*"

He broke off coughing again. Red-tinged froth bubbling at his nostrils. In the midst of all that unreality, cairns and broken monoliths, I had a dreamlike sense of having failed him, as if I'd botched some vital fairy-tale task through clumsiness and ignorance. Though there wasn't any visible fire anywhere in that tumble of stone, I crawled over and put the painting in the nylon shopping bag, just to get it out of his sight, it was upsetting him so.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll —"

He had calmed down. He put a hand on my wrist, eyes steady and bright, and a chill wind of unreason blew over me. I had done what I was supposed to do. Everything was going to be all right.

As I was basking in the comfort of this notion, he squeezed my hand reassuringly, as if I'd spoken the thought aloud. We'll get away from here, he said.

“I know.”

“Wrap it in newspapers and pack it at the very bottom of the trunk, my dear. With the other curiosities.”

Relieved that he'd calmed down, exhausted with my headache, all memory of my mother faded to a mothlike flicker, I settled down beside him and closed my eyes, feeling oddly comfortable and safe. Absent, dreamy. He was rambling a bit, under his breath: foreign names, sums and numbers, a few French words but mostly English. A man was coming to look at the furniture. Abdou was in trouble for throwing stones. And yet it all made sense somehow and I saw the palmy garden and the piano and the green lizard on the tree trunk as if they were pages in a photograph album.

Will you be all right getting home by yourself, my dear? I remember him asking at one point.

“Of course.” I was lying on the floor beside him, my head level with his rickety old breastbone, so that I could hear every catch and wheeze in his breath. “I take the train by myself every day.”

“And where did you say you were living now?” His hand on my head, very gently, the way you'd rest your hand on the head of a dog you liked.

“East Fifty-Seventh Street.”

“Oh, yes! Near Le Veau d'Or?”

“Well, a few blocks.” Le Veau d'Or was a restaurant where my mother had liked to go, back when we had money. I had eaten my first escargot there, and tasted my first sip of Marc de Bourgogne from her glass.

“Towards Park, you say?”

“No, closer to the river.”

“Close enough, my dear. Meringues and caviare. How I loved this city the first time I saw it! Still, it's not the same, is it? I miss it all terribly, don't you? The balcony, and the...”

“Garden.” I turned to look at him. Perfumes and melodies. In my swamp of confusion, it had come to seem that he was a close friend or family member I'd forgotten about, some long-lost relative of my mother's...

“Oh, your mother! The darling! I'll never forget the first time she came to play. She was the prettiest little girl I ever saw.”

How had he known I was thinking about her? I started to ask him but he was asleep. His eyes were closed but his breath was fast and hoarse like he was running from something.

I was fading out myself—ears ringing, inane buzz and a metallic taste in my mouth like at the dentist’s—and I might have drifted back into unconsciousness and stayed there had he not at some point shaken me, hard, so I awoke with a buck of panic. He was mumbling and tugging at his index finger. He’d taken his ring off, a heavy gold ring with a carved stone; he was trying to give it to me.

“Here, I don’t want that,” I said, shying away. “What are you doing that for?”

But he pressed it into my palm. His breath was bubbled and ugly. “Hobart and Blackwell,” he said, in a voice like he was drowning from the inside out. “Ring the green bell.”

“Green bell,” I repeated, uncertainly.

He lolled his head back and forth, punch-drunk, lips quivering. His eyes were unfocused. When they slid over me without seeing me they gave me a shiver.

“Tell Hobie to get out of the store,” he said thickly.

In disbelief, I watched the blood trickling bright from the corner of his mouth. He’d loosened his tie by yanking at it; “here,” I said, reaching over to help, but he batted my hands away.

“He’s got to close the register and get out!” he rasped. “His father’s sending some guys to beat him up—”

His eyes rolled up; his eyelids fluttered. Then he sank down into himself, flat and collapsed-looking like all the air was out of him, thirty seconds, forty, like a heap of old clothes but then — so harshly I flinched — his chest swelled on a bellows-like rasp, and he coughed a percussive gout of blood that spewed all over me. As best he could, he hitched himself up on his elbows—and for thirty seconds or so he panted like a dog, chest pumping frantically, up and down, up and down, his eyes fixed on something I couldn’t see and all the time gripping my hand like maybe if he held on tight enough he’d be okay.

“Are you all right?” I said — frantic, close to tears. “Can you hear me?”

As he grappled and thrashed — a fish out of water — I held his head up, or tried to, not knowing how, afraid of hurting him, as all the time he clutched my hand like he was dangling off a building and about to fall. Each breath was an isolated, gargling heave, a heavy stone lifted with terrible effort and dropped again and again to the ground. At one point he

looked at me directly, blood welling in his mouth, and seemed to say something, but the words were only a burble down his chin.

Then — to my intense relief — he grew calmer, quieter, his grasp on my hand loosening, melting, a sense of sinking and spinning almost like he was floating on his back away from me, on water. — Better? I asked, and then —

Carefully, I dripped a bit of water on his mouth — his lips worked, I saw them moving; and then, on my knees, like a servant boy in a story, I wiped some of the blood off his face with the paisley square from his pocket. As he drifted — cruelly, by degrees and latitudes — into stillness, I rocked back on my heels and looked hard into his wrecked face.

Hello? I said.

One papery eyelid, half shut, twitched, a blue-veined tic.

“If you can hear me, squeeze my hand.”

But his hand in mine was limp. I sat there and looked at him, not knowing what to do. It was time to go, well past time — my mother had made that perfectly clear — and yet I could see no path out of the space where I was and in fact in some ways it was hard to imagine being anywhere else in the world — that there was another world, outside that one. It was like I’d never had another life at all.

“Can you hear me?” I asked him, one last time, bending close and putting my ear to his bloodied mouth. But there was nothing.

## vi.

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NOT WANTING TO DISTURB him, in case he was only resting, I was as quiet as I could be, standing up. I hurt all over. For some moments I stood looking down at him, wiping my hands on my school jacket — his blood was all over me, my hands were slick with it — and then I looked at the moonscape of rubble trying to orient myself and figure the best way to go.

When — with difficulty — I made my way into the center of the space, or what seemed like the center of the space, I saw that one door was obscured by rags of hanging debris, and I turned and began to work in the other direction. There, the lintel had fallen, dumping a pile of brick almost as tall as I was and leaving a smoky space at the top big enough to

drive a car through. Laboriously I began to climb and scramble for it—over and around the chunks of concrete—but I had not got very far when I realized that I was going to have to go the other way. Faint traces of fire licked down the far walls of what had been the exhibition shop, spitting and sparkling in the dim, some of it well below the level where the floor should have been.

I didn't like the looks of the other door (foam tiles stained red; the toe of a man's shoe protruding from a pile of gravel) but at least most of the material blocking the door wasn't very solid. Blundering back through, ducking some wires that sparked from the ceiling, I hoisted the bag over my shoulder and took a deep breath and plunged into the wreckage headlong.

Immediately I was choked by dust and a sharp chemical smell. Coughing, praying there were no more live wires hanging loose, I patted and groped in the dark as all sorts of loose debris began to patter and shower down in my eyes: gravel, crumbs of plaster, shreds and chunks of god-knows-what.

Some of the building material was light, and some of it was not. The further I worked in, the darker it got, and the hotter. Every so often my way dwindled or closed up unexpectedly and in my ears a roaring crowd noise, I wasn't sure where it came from. I had to squeeze around things; sometimes I walked, sometimes I crawled, bodies in the wreckage more sensed than seen, a disturbing soft pressure that gave under my weight but worse than this, the smell: burnt cloth, burnt hair and flesh and the tang of fresh blood, copper and tin and salt.

My hands were cut and so were my knees. I ducked under things and went around things, feeling my way as I went, edging with my hip along the side of some sort of long lathe, or beam, until I found myself blocked in by a solid mass that felt like a wall. With difficulty—the spot was narrow—I worked around so I could reach into the bag for a light.

I wanted the keychain light—at the bottom, under the picture—but my fingers closed on the phone. I switched it on—and almost immediately dropped it, because in the glow I'd caught sight of a man's hand protruding between two chunks of concrete. Even in my terror, I remember feeling grateful that it was only a hand, although the fingers had a meaty, dark, swollen look I've never been able to forget; every now and then I still start back in fear when some beggar on the street thrusts out to me such a hand, bloated and grimed with black around the nails.

There was still the flashlight—but I wanted the phone. It cast a weak glimmer up into the cavity where I was, but just as I recovered myself enough to stoop for it, the screen went dark. An acid-green afterburn floated before me in the blackness. I got down on my knees and crawled around in the dark, grabbing with both hands in rocks and glass, determined to find it.

I thought I knew where it was, or about where it was, and I kept looking for it probably longer than I should have; and it was when I'd given up hope and tried to get up again that I realized I'd crawled into a low spot where it was impossible to stand, with some solid surface about three inches above my head. Turning around didn't work; going backwards didn't work; so I decided to crawl forward, hoping that things would open up, and soon found myself inching along painfully with a smashed, desperate feeling and my head turned sharply to one side.

When I was about four, I'd gotten partially stuck inside a Murphy bed in our old apartment on Seventh Avenue, which sounds like a humorous predicament but wasn't really; I think I would have suffocated if Alameda, our housekeeper back then, hadn't heard my muffled cries and pulled me out. Trying to maneuver in that airless space was somewhat the same, only worse: with glass, hot metal, the stink of burned clothes, and an occasional soft something pressing in on me that I didn't want to think about. Debris was pattering down on me heavily from above; my throat was filling with dust and I was coughing hard and starting to panic when I realized I could see, just barely, the rough texture of the broken bricks that surrounded me. Light—the faintest gleam imaginable—crept in subtly from the left, about six inches from floor level.

I ducked lower, and found myself looking over into the dim terrazzo floor of the gallery beyond. A disorderly pile of what looked like rescue equipment (ropes, axes, crowbars, an oxygen tank that said FDNY) lay harum-scarum on the floor.

"Hello?" I called—not waiting for an answer, dropping to wriggle through the hole as fast as I could.

The space was narrow; if I'd been a few years older or a few pounds heavier I might not have got through. Partway, my bag caught on something, and for a moment I thought I might have to slip free of it, painting or no painting, like a lizard shedding its tail, but when I gave it one last pull it finally broke free with a shower of crumbled plaster. Above me was

a beam of some sort, which looked like it was holding up a lot of heavy building material, and as I twisted and squirmed beneath it, I was light-headed with fear that it would slip and cut me in two until I saw that somebody had stabilized it with a jack.

Once clear, I climbed to my feet, watery and stunned with relief. “Hello?” I called again, wondering why there was so much equipment around and not a fireman in sight. The gallery was dim but mostly undamaged, with gauzy layers of smoke that thickened the higher they rose, but you could tell that a tremendous force of some sort had blown through the room just from the lights and the security cameras, which were knocked askew and facing the ceiling. I was so happy to be out in open space again that it was a moment or so before I realized the strangeness of being the only person standing up in a room full of people. Everybody else was lying down except me.

There were at least a dozen people on the floor—not all of them intact. They had the appearance of having been dropped from a great height. Three or four of the bodies were partially covered with firemen’s coats, feet sticking out. Others sprawled glaringly in the open, amidst explosive stains. The splashes and bursts carried a violence, like big blood sneezes, an hysterical sense of movement in the stillness. I remember particularly a middle aged lady in a bloodspattered blouse that had a pattern of Fabergé eggs on it, like a blouse she might have bought in the museum gift shop, actually. Her eyes—lined with black makeup—stared blankly at the ceiling; and her tan was obviously sprayed on since her skin had a healthy apricot glow even though the top of her head was missing.

Dim oils, dulled gilt. Taking tiny steps, I walked out into the middle of the room, swaying, slightly off balance. I could hear my own breath rasping in and out and there was a strange shallowness in the sound, a nightmare lightness. I didn’t want to look and yet I had to. A small Asian man, pathetic in his tan windbreaker, curled in a bellying pool of blood. A guard (his uniform the most recognizable thing about him, his face was burned so badly) with an arm twisted behind his back and a vicious spray where his leg should have been.

But the main thing, the important thing: none of the lying-down people was her. I made myself look at them all, each separately, one by one—even when I couldn’t force myself to look at their faces, I knew my mother’s feet, her clothes, her two-tone black and white shoes—and long after I

was sure of it I made myself stand in their midst, folded deep inside myself like a sick pigeon with its eyes closed.

In the gallery beyond: more dead. Three dead. Fat Argyll-vest man; cankered old lady; a milky duckling of a little girl, red abrasion at her temple but otherwise hardly a mark on her. But then, there were no more. I walked through several galleries littered with equipment but despite the bloodstains on the floor, there were no dead at all. And when I walked into the far-seeming gallery where she'd been, where she'd gone, the gallery with *The Anatomy Lesson* — eyes closed tight, wishing hard — there were only the same stretchers and equipment and there, as I walked through, in the oddly screaming silence, the only two observers were the same two puzzled Dutchmen who had stared at my mother and me from the wall: what are *you* doing here?

Then something snapped. I don't even remember how it happened; I was just in a different place and running, running through rooms that were empty except for a haze of smoke that made the grandeur seem insubstantial and unreal. Earlier, the galleries had seemed fairly straightforward, a meandering but logical sequence where all tributaries flowed into the gift shop. But coming back through them fast, and in the opposite direction, I realized that the path wasn't straight at all; and over and over I turned into blank walls and veered into dead-end rooms. Doors and entrances weren't where I expected them to be; freestanding plinths loomed out of nowhere. Swinging around a corner a little too sharply I almost ran headlong into a gang of Frans Hals guardsmen: big, rough, ruddy-cheeked guys, bleary from too much beer, like New York City cops at a costume party. Coldly they stared me down, with hard, humorous eyes, as I recovered, backed off, and began to run again.

Even on a good day, I sometimes got turned around in the museum (wandering aimlessly in galleries of Oceanic Art, totems and dugout canoes) and sometimes I had to go up and ask a guard to point the way out. The painting galleries were especially confusing since they were rearranged so often; and as I ran around in the empty halls, in the ghostly half-light, I was growing more and more frightened. I thought I knew my way to the main staircase, but soon after I was out of the Special Exhibitions galleries things started looking unfamiliar and after a minute or two running light-headed through turns I was no longer quite sure of, I realized I was thoroughly lost. Somehow I'd gone right through the Italian

masterworks (crucified Christs and astonished saints, serpents and embattled angels) ending up in England, eighteenth century, a part of the museum I had seldom been in before and did not know at all. Long elegant lines of sight stretched out before me, mazelike halls which had the feel of a haunted mansion: periwigged lords, cool Gainsborough beauties, gazing superciliously down at my distress. The baronial perspectives were infuriating, since they didn't seem to lead to the staircase or any of the main corridors but only to other stately baronial galleries exactly like them; and I was close to tears when suddenly I saw an inconspicuous door in the side of the gallery wall.

You had to look twice to see it, this door; it was painted the same color as the gallery walls, the kind of door which, in normal circumstances, looked like it would be kept locked. It had only caught my attention because it wasn't completely closed—the left side wasn't flush with the wall, whether because it hadn't caught properly or because the lock wasn't working with the electricity out, I didn't know. Still, it was not easy to get open—it was heavy, steel, and I had to pull with all my strength. Suddenly—with a pneumatic gasp—it gave so capriciously I stumbled.

Squeezing through, I found myself in a dark office hallway under a much lower ceiling. The emergency lights were much weaker than in the main gallery, and it took my eyes a moment to adjust.

The hallway seemed to stretch for miles. Fearfully I crept along, peering into the offices where the doors happened to stand ajar. *Cameron Geisler, Registrar. Miyako Fujita, Assistant Registrar.* Drawers were open and chairs were pushed away from desks. In the doorway of one office a woman's high-heeled shoe lay on its side.

The air of abandonment was unspeakably eerie. It seemed that far in the distance I could hear police sirens, maybe even walkie-talkies and dogs, but my ears were ringing so hard from the explosion that I thought I might well be hearing things. It was starting to unnerve me more and more that I had seen no firemen, no cops, no security guards—in fact not a single living soul.

It wasn't dark enough for the keychain flashlight in the Staff Only area, but neither was there nearly enough light for me to see well. I was in some sort of records or storage area. The offices were lined with filing cabinets floor to ceiling, metal shelves with plastic mailroom crates and cardboard boxes. The narrow corridor made me feel edgy, closed in, and

my footsteps echoed so crazily that once or twice I stopped and turned around to see if somebody was coming down the hall after me.

“Hello?” I said, tentatively, glancing into some of the rooms as I passed. Some of the offices were modern and spare; others were crowded and dirty-looking, with untidy stacks of paper and books.

*Florens Klauner, Department of Musical Instruments. Maurice Orabi-Roussel, Islamic Art. Vittoria Gabetti, Textiles.* I passed a cavernous dark room with a long workshop table where mismatched scraps of cloth were laid out like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In the back of the room was a jumble of rolling garment racks with lots of plastic garment bags hanging off them, like racks by the service elevators at Bendel’s or Bergdorf’s.

At the T-junction I looked this way and that, not knowing where to turn. I smelled floor wax, turpentine and chemicals, a tang of smoke. Offices and workshops stretched out to infinity in all directions: a contained geometrical network, fixed and featureless.

To my left, light flickered from a ceiling fixture. It hummed and caught, in a staticky fit, and in the trembling glow, I saw a drinking fountain down the hall.

I ran for it—so fast my feet almost slid out from underneath me—and gulped with my mouth pressed against the spigot, so much cold water, so fast, that a spike of pain slid into my temple. Hiccupping, I rinsed the blood from my hands and splashed water in my sore eyes. Tiny splinters of glass—almost invisible—tinkled to the steel tray of the fountain like needles of ice.

I leaned against the wall. The overhead fluorescents—vibrating, spitting on and off—made me feel queasy. With effort, I pulled myself up again; on I walked, wobbling a bit in the unstable flicker. Things were looking decidedly more industrial in this direction: wooden pallets, a flat-bed pushcart, a sense of crated objects being moved and stored. I passed another junction, where a slick shadowy passageway receded into darkness, and I was just about to walk past it and keep going when I saw a red glow at the end that said EXIT.

I tripped; I fell over my feet; I got up again, still hiccupping, and ran down the endless hall. Down at the end of the corridor was a door with a metal bar, like the security doors at my school.

It pushed open with a bark. Down a dark stairwell I ran, twelve steps, a turn at the landing, then twelve steps to the bottom, my fingertips

skimming on the metal rail, shoes clattering and echoing so crazily that it sounded like half a dozen people were running with me. At the foot of the steps was a gray institutional corridor with another barred door. I threw myself against it, pushed it open with both hands—and was slapped hard in the face by rain and the deafening wail of sirens.

I think I might have screamed out loud, I was so happy to be outside, though nobody could have heard me in all that noise: I might as well have been trying to scream over jet engines on the tarmac at LaGuardia during a thunderstorm. It sounded like every fire truck, every cop car, every ambulance and emergency vehicle in five boroughs plus Jersey was howling and caterwauling out on Fifth Avenue, a deliriously happy noise: like New Year's and Christmas and Fourth of July fireworks rolled into one.

The exit had spat me out in Central Park, through a deserted side door between the loading docks and the parking garage. Footpaths stood empty in the gray-green distance; treetops plunged white, tossing and foaming in the wind. Beyond, on the rainswept street, Fifth Avenue was blocked off. Through the downpour, from where I stood, I could just see the great bright bombardment of activity: cranes and heavy equipment, cops pushing the crowds back, red lights, yellow and blue lights, flares that beat and whirled and flashed in quicksilver confusion.

I put my elbow up to keep the rain out of my face and took off running through the empty park. Rain drove in my eyes and dripped down my forehead, melting the lights on the avenue to a blur that pulsed in the distance.

NYPD, FDNY, parked city vans with the windshield wipers going: K-9, Rescue Operations Battalion, NYC Hazmat. Black rain slickers flapped and billowed in the wind. A band of yellow crime scene tape was stretched across the exit of the park, at the Miners' Gate. Without hesitation, I lifted it up and ducked underneath it and ran out into the midst of the crowd.

In all the welter, nobody noticed me. For a moment or two, I ran uselessly back and forth in the street, rain peppering in my face. Everywhere I looked, images of my own panic dashed past. People coursed and surged around me blindly: cops, firemen, guys in hard hats, an elderly man cradling a broken elbow and a woman with a bloody nose being shoed toward Seventy-Ninth Street by a distracted policeman.

Never had I seen so many fire trucks in one place: Squad 18, Fighting 44, New York Ladder 7, Rescue One, 4 Truck: Pride of Midtown. Pushing through the sea of parked vehicles and official black raincoats, I spotted a Hatzolah ambulance: Hebrew letters on the back, a little lighted hospital room visible through the open doors. Attendants were bending over a woman, trying to press her down as she struggled to sit up. A wrinkled hand with red fingernails clawed at the air.

I beat on the door with my fist. “You need to go back inside,” I yelled. “People are still in there —”

“There’s another bomb,” yelled the attendant without looking at me. “We had to evacuate.”

Before I had time to register this, a gigantic cop swooped down on me like a thunderclap: a thickheaded, bulldoggish guy, with pumped-up arms like a weightlifter’s. He grabbed me roughly by the upper arm and began to hustle and shove me to the other side of the street.

“What the fuck are you doing over here?” he bellowed, drowning out my protests, as I tried to wrench free.

“Sir —” A bloody-faced woman coming up, trying to get his attention — “Sir, I think my hand is broken —”

“Get back from the building!” he screamed at her, throwing her arm off and then, at me — “Go!”

“But —”

With both hands, he shoved me so hard I staggered and nearly fell. “GET BACK FROM THE BUILDING!” he screamed, throwing up his arms with a flap of his rain slicker. “NOW!” He wasn’t even looking at me; his small, bearish eyes were riveted on something going on over my head, up the street, and the expression on his face terrified me.

In haste, I dodged through the crowd of emergency workers to the opposite sidewalk, just above Seventy-Ninth Street — keeping an eye out for my mother, though I didn’t see her. Ambulances and medical vehicles galore: Beth Israel Emergency, Lenox Hill, NY Presbyterian, Cabrini EMS Paramedic. A bloody man in a business suit lay flat on his back behind an ornamental yew hedge, in the tiny, fenced yard of a Fifth Avenue mansion. A yellow security tape was strung up, snapping and popping in the wind — but the rain-drenched cops and firemen and guys in hard hats were lifting it up and ducking back and forth under it as if it weren’t even there.

All eyes were turned uptown, and only later would I learn why; on Eighty-Fourth Street (too far away for me to see) the Hazmat cops were in the process of “disrupting” an undetonated bomb by shooting it with a water cannon. Intent on talking to someone, trying to find out what had happened, I tried to push my way towards a fire truck but cops were charging through the crowds, waving their arms, clapping their hands, beating people back.

I caught hold of a fireman’s coat—a young, gum-chewing, friendly-looking guy. “Somebody’s still in there!” I screamed.

“Yeah, yeah, we know,” shouted the fireman without looking at me. “They ordered us out. They’re telling us five minutes, they’re letting us back in.”

A swift push in the back. “Move, move!” I heard somebody scream.

A rough voice, heavily accented: “Get your hands off me!”

“NOW! Everybody get moving!”

Somebody else pushed me in the back. Firemen leaned off the ladder trucks, looking up towards the Temple of Dendur; cops stood tensely shoulder to shoulder, impassive in the rain. Stumbling past them, swept along by the current, I saw glazed eyes, heads nodding, feet unconsciously tapping out the countdown.

By the time I heard the crack of the disrupted bomb, and the hoarse football-stadium cheer rising from Fifth Avenue, I had already been swept well along towards Madison. Cops—traffic cops—were windmilling their arms, pushing the stream of stunned people back. “Come on people, move it, move it.” They plowed through the crowd, clapping their hands. “Everybody east. Everybody east.” One cop—a big guy with a goatee and an earring, like a professional wrestler—reached out and shoved a delivery guy in a hoodie who was trying to take a picture on his cell phone, so that he stumbled into me and nearly knocked me over.

“Watch it!” screamed the delivery man, in a high, ugly voice; and the cop shoved him again, this time so hard he fell on his back in the gutter.

“Are you deaf or what, buddy?” he yelled. “Get going!”

“Don’t touch me!”

“How ’bout I bust your head open?”

Between Fifth and Madison, it was a madhouse. Whap of helicopter rotors overhead; indistinct talking on a bullhorn. Though Seventy-Ninth Street was closed to traffic, it was packed with cop cars, fire trucks, cement

barricades, and throngs of screaming, panicky, dripping-wet people. Some of them were running from Fifth Avenue; some were trying to muscle and press their way back toward the museum; many people held cell phones aloft, attempting to snap pictures; others stood motionless with their jaws dropped as the crowds surged around them, staring up at the black smoke in the rainy skies over Fifth Avenue as if the Martians were coming down.

Sirens; white smoke billowing from the subway vents. A homeless man wrapped in a dirty blanket wandered back and forth, looking eager and confused. I looked around hopefully for my mother in the crowd, fully expecting to see her; for a short time I tried to swim upstream against the cop-driven current (standing on my toes, craning to see) until I realized it was hopeless to push back up and try to look for her in that torrential rain, that mob. *I'll just see her at home*, I thought. Home was where we were supposed to meet; home was the emergency arrangement; she must have realized how useless it would be, trying to find me in all that crush. But still I felt a petty, irrational pang of disappointment—and, as I walked home (skull-cracking headache, practically seeing double) I kept looking for her, scanning the anonymous, preoccupied faces around me. She'd gotten out; that was the important thing. She'd been rooms away from the worst part of the explosion. None of the bodies was her. But no matter what we had agreed upon beforehand, no matter how much sense it made, somehow I still couldn't quite believe she had walked away from the museum without me.



Chapter 2.

# The Anatomy Lesson



WHEN I WAS LITTLE, four or five, my greatest fear was that some day my mother might not come home from work. Addition and subtraction were useful mainly insofar as they helped me track her movements (how many minutes till she left the office? how many minutes to walk from office to subway?) and even before I'd learned to count I'd been obsessed with learning to read a clock face: desperately studying the occult circle crayoned on the paper plate that, once mastered, would unlock the pattern of her comings and goings. Usually she was home just when she said she'd be, so if she was ten minutes late I began to fret; any later, and I sat on the floor by the front door of the apartment like a puppy left alone too long, straining to hear the rumble of the elevator coming up to our floor.

Almost every day in elementary school I heard things on the Channel 7 news that worried me. What if some bum in a dirty fatigue jacket pushed my mother onto the tracks while she was waiting for the 6 train? Or muscled her into a dark doorway and stabbed her for her pocketbook? What if she dropped her hair dryer in the bathtub, or got knocked in front of a car by a bicycle, or was given the wrong medicine at the dentist's and died, as had happened to the mother of a classmate of mine?

To think of something happening to my mother was especially frightening because my dad was so unreliable. *Unreliable* I guess is the diplomatic way of putting it. Even when he was in a good mood he did things like lose his paycheck and fall asleep with the front door to the apartment open, because he drank. And when he was in a bad mood—which was much of the time—he was red-eyed and clammy-looking, his suit so rumpled it looked like he'd been rolling on the floor in it and an air of

unnatural stillness emanating from him as from some pressurized article about to explode.

Though I didn't understand why he was so unhappy, it was clear to me that his unhappiness was our fault. My mother and I got on his nerves. It was because of us he had a job he couldn't stand. Everything we did was irritating. He particularly didn't enjoy being around me, not that he often was: in the mornings, as I got ready for school, he sat puffy-eyed and silent over his coffee with the *Wall Street Journal* in front of him, his bathrobe open and his hair standing up in cowlicks, and sometimes he was so shaky that the cup sloshed as he brought it to his mouth. Warily he eyed me when I came in, nostrils flaring if I made too much noise with the silverware or the cereal bowl.

Apart from this daily awkwardness, I didn't see him much. He didn't eat dinner with us or attend school functions; he didn't play with me or talk to me a lot when he was at home; in fact, he was seldom home at all until after my bedtime, and some days — payday, especially, every other Friday — he didn't come clattering in until three or four in the morning: banging the door, dropping his briefcase, crashing and bumping around so erratically that sometimes I bolted awake in terror, staring at the glow-in-the-dark planetarium stars on the ceiling and wondering if a killer had broken into the apartment. Luckily, when he was drunk, his footsteps slowed to a jarring and unmistakable cadence — Frankenstein steps, as I thought of them, deliberate and clumping, with absurdly long pauses between each footfall — and as soon as I realized it was only him thudding around out there in the dark and not some serial murderer or psychopath, I would drift back into a fretful doze. The following day, Saturday, my mother and I would contrive to be out of the apartment before he woke from his sweaty, tangled sleep on the sofa. Otherwise we would spend the whole day creeping around, afraid of shutting the door too loudly or of disturbing him in any way, while he sat stony-faced in front of the television with a Chinese beer from the takeout place and a glassy look in his eye, watching news or sports with the sound off.

Consequently, neither my mother nor I had been overly troubled when we woke up one Saturday and found he hadn't come home at all. It was Sunday before we started getting concerned, and even then we didn't worry the way you normally would; it was the start of the college football season; it was a pretty sure thing that he had money on some of the games,

and we thought he'd gotten on the bus and gone to Atlantic City without telling us. Not until the following day, when my father's secretary Loretta called because he hadn't shown up at work, did it start to appear that something was seriously wrong. My mother, fearing he'd been robbed or killed coming out drunk from a bar, phoned the police; and we spent several tense days waiting for a phone call or a knock on the door. Then, towards the end of the week, a sketchy note from my dad arrived (post-marked Newark, New Jersey) informing us in a high-strung scrawl that he was heading off to "start a new life" in an undisclosed location. I remember pondering the phrase "new life" as if it actually might reveal some hint of where he'd gone; for after I'd badgered and clamored and pestered my mother for about a week, she'd finally consented to let me see the letter myself ("well, all right," she said resignedly, as she opened her desk drawer and fished it out, "I don't know what he expects me to tell you, you might as well hear it from him"). It was written on stationery from a Doubletree Inn near the airport. I'd believed it might contain valuable clues to his whereabouts, but instead I was struck by its extreme brevity (four or five lines) and its speedy, careless, go-to-hell sprawl, like something he'd dashed off before running out to the grocery store.

In many respects it was a relief to have my father out of the picture. Certainly I didn't miss him much, and my mother didn't seem to miss him either, though it was sad when she had to let our housekeeper, Cinzia, go because we couldn't afford to pay her (Cinzia had cried, and offered to stay and work for free; but my mother had found her a part time job in the building, working for a couple with a baby; once a week or so, she stopped in to visit my mother for a cup of coffee, still in the smock she wore over her clothes when she cleaned.) Without fanfare, the photo of a younger, suntanned dad atop a ski slope came down from the wall, and was replaced by one of my mother and me at the rink in Central Park. At night my mother sat up late with a calculator, going over bills. Even though the apartment was rent stabilized, getting by without my dad's salary was a month-by-month adventure, since whatever new life he'd fashioned for himself elsewhere did not include sending money for child support. Basically we were content enough doing our own laundry down in the basement, going to matinees instead of full-price movies, eating day-old baked goods and cheap Chinese carry-out (noodles, egg foo yung) and counting out nickels and dimes for bus fare. But as I trudged home

from the museum that day — cold, wet, with a tooth-crunching headache — it struck me that with my dad gone, no one in the world would be particularly worried about my mother or me; no one was sitting around wondering where we'd been all morning or why they hadn't heard from us. Wherever he was, off in his New Life (tropics or prairie, tiny ski town or Major American City) he would certainly be riveted to the television; and it was easy to imagine that maybe he was even getting a little frantic and wound-up, as he sometimes did over big news stories that had absolutely nothing to do with him, hurricanes and bridge collapses in distant states. But would he be worried enough to call and check on us? Probably not — no more than he would be likely to call his old office to see what was happening, though certainly he would be thinking of his ex-colleagues in midtown and wondering how all the bean counters and pencil-pushers (as he referred to his co-workers) were faring at 101 Park. Were the secretaries getting scared, gathering their pictures off their desks and putting on their walking shoes and going home? Or was it turning into a subdued party of sorts on the fourteenth floor, people ordering in sandwiches and gathering around the television in the conference room?

Though the walk home took forever, I don't remember much about it except a certain gray, cold, rain-shrouded mood on Madison Avenue — umbrellas bobbing, the crowds on the sidewalk flowing silently downtown, a sense of huddled anonymity like old black and white photos I'd seen of bank crashes and bread lines in the 1930s. My headache, and the rain, constricted the world to such a tight sick circle that I saw little more than the hunched backs of people ahead of me on the sidewalk. In fact, my head hurt so badly that I could hardly see where I was going at all; and a couple of times I was nearly hit by cars when I plowed into the crosswalk without paying attention to the light. Nobody appeared to know exactly what had happened, though I overheard "North Korea" blaring from the radio of a parked cab, and "Iran" and "al-Qaeda" muttered by a number of passersby. And a scrawny black man with dreadlocks — drenched to the bone — was pacing back and forth out in front of the Whitney museum, jabbing at the air with his fists and shouting to nobody in particular: "Buckle up, Manhattan! Osama bin Laden is *rockin* us again!"

Though I felt faint, and wanted to sit down, somehow I kept hobbling along with a hitch in my step like a partially broken toy. Cops gestured;

cops whistled and beckoned. Water dripped off the end of my nose. Over and over, blinking the rain from my eyes, the thought coursed through my mind: I had to get home to my mother as soon as I could. She would be waiting frantically for me at the apartment; she would be tearing her hair out with worry, cursing herself for having taken my phone. Everyone was having problems getting calls through and pedestrians were lined ten and twenty deep at the few pay phones on the street. *Mother*, I thought, *Mother*, trying to send her a psychic message that I was alive. I wanted her to know I was all right but at the same time I remember telling myself it was okay I was walking instead of running; I didn't want to pass out on the way home. How lucky that she had walked away only a few moments before! She had sent me directly into the heart of the explosion; she was sure to think that I was dead.

And to think of the girl who'd saved my life made my eyes smart. Pippa! An odd, dry name for a rusty, wry little redhead: it suited her. Whenever I thought of her eyes on mine, I felt dizzy at the thought that she—a perfect stranger—had saved me from walking out of the exhibition and into the black flash in the postcard shop, nada, the end of everything. Would I ever get to tell her she'd saved my life? As for the old man: the firemen and rescue people had rushed the building only minutes after I got out, and I still had hopes that someone had made it back in to rescue him—the door was jacked, they knew he was in there. Would I ever see either of them again?

When I finally made it home, I was chilled to the bone, punch-drunk and stumbling. Water streamed from my sodden clothes and wound behind me in an uneven trail across the lobby floor.

After the crowds on the street, the air of desertion was unnerving. Though the portable television was going in the package room, and I heard walkie talkies spluttering somewhere in the building, there was no sign of Goldie or Carlos or Jose or any of the regular guys.

Farther back, the lighted cabinet of the elevator stood empty and waiting, like a stage cabinet in a magic act. The gears caught and shuddered; one by one, the pearly old deco numbers blinked past as I creaked up to the seventh floor. Stepping into my own, drab hallway, I was overwhelmed with relief—mouse-brown paint, stuffy carpet-cleaner smell and all.

The key turned noisily in the lock. "Hello?" I called, stepping into the dimness of the apartment: shades down, all quiet.

In the silence, the refrigerator hummed. *God*, I thought, with a terrible jolt, *isn't she home yet?*

"Mother?" I called again. With rapidly sinking heart, I walked fast through the foyer, and then stood confused in the middle of the living room.

Her keys weren't on the peg by the door; her bag wasn't on the table. Wet shoes squelching in the stillness, I walked through to the kitchen—which wasn't much of a kitchen, only an alcove with a two-burner stove, facing an airshaft. There sat her coffee cup, green glass from the flea market, with a lipstick print on the rim.

I stood staring at the unwashed coffee cup with an inch of cold coffee at the bottom and wondered what to do. My ears were ringing and whooshing and my head hurt so badly I could scarcely think: waves of blackness on the edge of my vision. I'd been so fixed on how worried she would be, on making it home to tell her that I was okay, that it had never occurred to me that she might not be home herself.

Wincing with every step, I walked down the hallway to my parents' bedroom: essentially unchanged since my father had left but more cluttered and feminine-looking now that it was hers alone. The answering machine, on the table by the tumbled and mussed-up bed, was dark: no messages.

Standing in the doorway, half-reeling with pain, I tried to concentrate. A jarring sensation of the day's movement jolted through my body, as if I'd been riding in a car for far too long.

First things first: find my phone, check my messages. Only I didn't know where my phone was. She had taken it away after I was suspended; the night before, when she was in the shower, I'd tried to find it by calling the number but apparently she'd turned it off.

I remember plunging my hands in the top drawer of her bureau and clawing through a bewilderment of scarves: silks and velvets, Indian embroideries.

Then, with immense effort (even though it wasn't very heavy) I dragged over the bench at the end of her bed and climbed on it so I could look on the top shelf of her closet. Afterwards, I sat on the carpet in a semi-stupor, with my cheek leaning against the bench and an ugly white roar in my ears.

Something was wrong. I remember raising my head with a sudden

blaze of conviction that gas was seeping out of the kitchen stove, that I was being poisoned from a gas leak. Except I couldn't smell any gas.

I might have gone into the little bathroom off her bedroom and looked in the medicine cabinet for an aspirin, something for my head, I don't know. All I know for sure is that at some point I was in my room, not knowing how I got there, bracing myself with one hand against the wall by the bed and feeling like I was going to be sick. And then everything was so confused I can't give a clear account of it at all until I sat up disoriented on the living room sofa at the sound of something like a door opening.

But it wasn't the front door, only somebody else down the hall. The room was dark and I could hear afternoon traffic, rush-hour traffic, out on the street. In the dimness, I was still for a heartstopping moment or two as the noises sorted themselves out and the familiar lines of table lamp, lyre-shaped chair backs grew visible against the twilight window. "Mom?" I said, and the crackle of panic was plainly audible in my voice.

I had fallen asleep in my gritty wet clothes; the sofa was damp too, with a clammy, body-shaped depression where I'd been lying down on it. A chilly breeze rattled in the venetian blinds, through the window my mother had left partly open that morning.

The clock said 6:47 p.m. With growing fear, I walked stiffly around the apartment, turning on all the lights — even the overhead lights in the living room, which we generally didn't use because they were so stark and bright.

Standing in the doorway of my mother's bedroom, I saw a red light blinking in the dark. A delicious wave of relief washed over me: I darted around the bed, fumbled for the button on the answering machine, and it was several seconds before I realized that the voice was not my mother at all but a woman my mother worked with, sounding unaccountably cheerful. "Hi, Audrey, Pru here, just checking in. Crazy day, eh? Listen, the galley proofs are in for Pareja and we need to talk but the deadline's been postponed so no worries, for now anyway. Hope you're holding up, love, give a call when you've got a chance."

I stood there for a long time, looking down at the machine after the message beeped off. Then I lifted up the edge of the blinds and peeked out at the traffic.

It was that hour: people coming home. Horns honked faintly down on

the street. I still had a splitting headache and the feeling (new to me then, but now unfortunately all too familiar) of waking up with a nasty hang-over, of important things forgotten and left undone.

I went back to her bedroom, and with trembling hands, punched in the number of her cell phone, so fast that I got it wrong and had to dial again. But she didn't answer; the service picked up. I left a message (*Mom, it's me, I'm worried, where are you?*) and sat on the side of her bed with my head in my hands.

Cooking smells had begun to drift from the lower floors. Indistinct voices floated in from neighboring apartments: abstract thumps, somebody opening and shutting cabinets. It was late: people were coming home from work, dropping their briefcases, greeting their cats and dogs and children, turning on the news, getting ready to go out for dinner. Where was she? I tried to think of all the reasons why she might have been held up and couldn't really come up with any — although, who knew, maybe a street somewhere had been closed off so she couldn't get home. But wouldn't she have called?

Maybe she dropped her phone? I thought. Maybe she broke it? Maybe she gave it to someone who needed it more?

The stillness of the apartment unnerved me. Water sang in the pipes, and the breeze clicked treacherously in the blinds. Because I was just sitting uselessly on the side of her bed, feeling like I needed to do something, I called back and left yet another message, this time unable to keep the quaver out of my voice. *Mom, forgot to say, I'm at home. Please call, the second you get a chance, okay?* Then I called and left a message on the voice mail at her office just in case.

With a deadly coldness spreading in the center of my chest, I walked back into the living room. After standing there for a few moments, I went to the bulletin board in the kitchen to see if she had left me a note, though I already knew very well she hadn't. Back in the living room, I peered out the window at the busy street. Could she have run to the drugstore or the deli, not wanting to wake me? Part of me wanted to go out on the street and look for her, but it was crazy to think I would spot her in rush-hour crowds and besides if I left the apartment, I was scared I'd miss her call.

It was past time for the doormen to change shifts. When I phoned downstairs, I was hoping for Carlos (the most senior and dignified of the doormen) or even better Jose: a big happy Dominican guy, my favorite.

But nobody answered at all, for ages, until finally a thin, halting, foreign-sounding voice said: "Hello?"

"Is Jose there?"

"No," said the voice. "No. You cah back."

It was, I realized, the frightened-looking Asian guy in safety goggles and rubber gloves who ran the floor waxer and managed the trash and did other odd jobs around the building. The doormen (who didn't appear to know his name any more than I did) called him "the new guy," and griped about management bringing in a houseman who spoke neither English nor Spanish. Everything that went wrong in the building, they blamed on him: the new guy didn't shovel the walks right, the new guy didn't put the mail where it was supposed to go or keep the courtyard clean like he should.

"You cah back later," the new guy was saying, hopefully.

"No, wait!" I said, as he was about to hang up. "I need to talk to somebody."

Confused pause.

"Please, is anybody else there?" I said. "It's an emergency."

"Okay," said the voice warily, in an open-ended tone that gave me hope. I could hear him breathing hard in the silence.

"This is Theo Decker," I said. "In 7C? I see you downstairs a lot? My mother hasn't come home and I don't know what to do."

Long, bewildered pause. "Seven," he repeated, as if it were the only part of the sentence he understood.

"My mother," I repeated. "Where's Carlos? Isn't anybody there?"

"Sorry, thank you," he said, in a panicky tone, and hung up.

I hung up the phone myself, in a state of high agitation, and after a few moments standing frozen in the middle of the living room went and switched on the television. The city was a mess; the bridges to the outer boroughs were closed, which explained why Carlos and Jose hadn't been able to get in to work, but I saw nothing at all that made me understand what might be holding my mother up. There was a number to call, I saw, if someone was missing. I copied it down on a scrap of newspaper and made a deal with myself that if she wasn't home in exactly one half hour, I would call.

Writing the number down made me feel better. For some reason I felt sure that the act of writing it down was going to magically make her walk

through the door. But after forty-five minutes passed, and then an hour, and still she hadn't turned up, I finally broke down and called it (pacing back and forth, keeping a nervous eye on the television the whole time I was waiting for somebody to pick up, the whole time I was on hold, commercials for mattresses, commercials for stereos, fast free delivery and no credit required). Finally a brisk woman came on, all business. She took my mother's name, took my phone number, said my mother wasn't "on her list" but I would get a call back if her name turned up. Not until after I hung up the phone did it occur to me to ask what sort of list she was talking about; and after an indefinite period of misgiving, walking in a tormented circuit through all four rooms, opening drawers, picking up books and putting them down, turning on my mother's computer and seeing what I could figure out from a Google search (nothing), I called back again to ask.

"She's not listed among the dead," said the second woman I spoke to, sounding oddly casual. "Or the injured."

My heart lifted. "She's okay, then?"

"I'm saying we've got no information at all. Did you leave your number earlier so we can give you a call back?"

Yes, I said, they had told me I would get a call back.

"Free delivery and set up," the television was saying. "Be sure and ask about our six months' free financing."

"Good luck then," said the woman, and hung up.

The stillness in the apartment was unnatural; even the loud talking on the television didn't drive it away. Twenty-one people were dead, with "dozens more" injured. In vain, I tried to reassure myself with this number: twenty-one people wasn't so bad, was it? Twenty-one was a thin crowd in a movie theatre or even on a bus. It was three people less than my English class. But soon fresh doubts and fears began to crowd around me and it was all I could do not to run out of the apartment yelling her name.

As much as I wanted to go out on the street and look for her, I knew I was supposed to stay put. We were supposed to meet at the apartment; that was the deal, the ironclad agreement ever since elementary school, when I'd been sent home from school with a Disaster Preparedness Activity Book, featuring cartoon ants in dust masks gathering supplies and preparing for some unnamed emergency. I'd completed the crosswords and dim questionnaires ("What is the best clothing to pack in a Disaster

Supply Kit? A. Bathing suit B. Layers C. Hula Skirt D. Aluminum foil”) and — with my mother — devised a Family Disaster Plan. Ours was simple: we would meet at home. And if one of us couldn’t get home, we would call. But as time crawled by, and the phone did not ring, and the death toll on the news rose to twenty-two and then twenty-five, I phoned the city’s emergency number again.

“Yes,” said the woman who answered, in an infuriatingly calm voice, “I see here that you’ve phoned in already, we’ve got her down on our list.”

“But — maybe she’s in the hospital or something?”

“She might be. I’m afraid I can’t confirm that, though. What did you say your name was? Would you like to speak to one of our counselors?”

“What hospital are they taking people to?”

“I’m sorry, I really can’t —”

“Beth Israel? Lenox Hill?”

“Look, it depends on the type of injury. People have got eye trauma, burns, all sorts of stuff. There are people undergoing surgery all over the city —”

“What about those people that were reported dead a few minutes ago?”

“Look, I understand, I’d like to help you, but I’m afraid there’s no Audrey Decker on my list.”

My eyes darted nervously around the living room. My mother’s book (*Jane and Prudence*, Barbara Pym) face-down on the back of the sofa; one of her thin cashmere cardigans over the arm of a chair. She had them in all colors; this one was pale blue.

“Maybe you should come down to the Armory. They’ve set up something for families there — there’s food, and lots of hot coffee, and people to talk to.”

“But what I’m asking you, are there any dead people that you don’t have names for? Or injured people?”

“Listen, I understand your concern. I really, really wish I could help you with this but I just can’t. You’ll get a call back as soon as we have some specific information.”

“I need to find my mother! Please! She’s probably in a hospital somewhere. Can’t you give me some idea where to look for her?”

“How old are you?” said the woman suspiciously.

After a shocked silence, I hung up. For a few dazed moments I stared at the telephone, feeling relieved but also guilty, as if I’d knocked something

over and broken it. When I looked down at my hands and saw them shaking, it struck me in a wholly impersonal way, like noticing the battery was drained on my iPod, that I hadn't eaten in a while. Never in my life except when I had a stomach virus had I gone so long without food. So I went to the fridge and found my carton of leftover lo mein from the night before and wolfed it at the counter, standing vulnerable and exposed in the glare from the overhead bulb. Though there was also egg foo yung, and rice, I left it for her in case she was hungry when she came in. It was nearly midnight: soon it would be too late for her to order in from the deli. After I was finished, I washed my fork and the coffee things from that morning and wiped down the counter so she wouldn't have anything to do when she got home: she would be pleased, I told myself firmly, when she saw I had cleaned the kitchen for her. She would be pleased too (at least I thought so) when she saw I'd saved her painting. She might be mad. But I could explain.

According to the television, they now knew who was responsible for the explosion: parties that the news was alternately calling "right wing extremists" or "home-grown terrorists." They had worked with a moving and storage company; with help from unknown accomplices inside the museum, they had concealed the explosives within the hollow, carpenter-built display platforms in the museum shops where the postcards and art books were stacked. Some of the perpetrators were dead; some of them were in custody, others were at large. They were going into the particulars in some detail, but it was all too much for me to take in.

I was now working with the sticky drawer in the kitchen, which had been jammed shut since long before my father left; nothing was in it but cookie cutters and some old fondue skewers and lemon zesters we never used. She'd been trying for well over a year to get someone from the building in to fix it (along with a broken doorknob and a leaky faucet and half a dozen other annoying little things). I got a butter knife, pried at the edges of the drawer, careful not to chip the paint any more than it was chipped already. The force of the explosion still rang deep in my bones, an inner echo of the ringing in my ears; but worse than this, I could still smell blood, taste the salt and tin of it in my mouth. (I would be smelling it for days, though I didn't know that then.)

While I worked and worried at the drawer, I wondered if I should call somebody, and, if so, who. My mother was an only child. And though,

technically I had a set of living grandparents — my father’s dad and stepmother, in Maryland — I didn’t know how to get in touch with them. Relations were barely civil between my dad and his stepmother, Dorothy, an immigrant from East Germany who had cleaned office buildings for a living before marrying my grandfather. (Always a clever mimic, my dad did a cruelly funny imitation of Dorothy: a sort of battery-operated hausfrau, all compressed lips and jerky movements, and an accent like Curt Jurgens in *Battle of Britain*.) But though my dad disliked Dorothy enough, his chief enmity was for Grandpa Decker: a tall, fat, frightening-looking man with ruddy cheeks and black hair (dyed, I think) who wore lots of waistcoats and loud plaids, and believed in belt beatings for children. *No picnic* was the primary phrase I associated with Grandpa Decker — as in my dad saying “Living with that bastard was no picnic” and “Believe me, dinnertime was never any picnic at our house.” I had met Grandpa Decker and Dorothy only twice in my life, tense charged occasions where my mother leaned forward on the sofa with her coat on and her purse in her lap and her valiant efforts to make conversation all stumbled and sank into quicksand. The main thing I remembered were the forced smiles, the heavy smell of cherry pipe tobacco and Grandpa Decker’s not-very-friendly warning to keep my sticky little mitts off his model train set (an Alpine village which took up an entire room of their house and according to him was worth tens of thousands of dollars).

I’d managed to bend the blade of the butter knife by stabbing it too hard into the side of the stuck drawer — one of my mother’s few good knives, a silver knife that had belonged to her mother. Gamely, I tried to bend it back, biting my lip and concentrating all my will on the task, as all the time ugly flashes of the day kept flying up and hitting me in the face. Trying to stop thinking about it was like trying to stop thinking of a purple cow. The purple cow was all you could think of.

Unexpectedly the drawer popped open. I stared down at the mess: rusty batteries, a broken cheese grater, the snowflake cookie cutters my mother hadn’t used since I was in first grade, jammed in with ragged old carry-out menus from Viand and Shun Lee Palace and Delmonico’s. I left the drawer wide open — so it would be the first thing she saw when she walked in — and wandered over to the couch and wrapped myself up in a blanket, propped up so I could keep a good eye on the front door.

My mind was churning in circles. For a long time I sat shivering and

red-eyed in the glow of the television, as the blue shadows flickered uneasily in and out. There was no news, really; the picture kept returning to night shots of the museum (looking perfectly normal now, except for the yellow police tape still strung up on the sidewalk, the armed guards out front, rags of smoke blowing up sporadically from the roof into the Klieg-lit sky).

Where was she? Why hadn't she come home yet? She would have a good explanation; she would make this into nothing, and then it would seem completely stupid how worried I'd been.

To force her from my mind I concentrated hard on an interview they were running again, from earlier in the evening. A bespectacled curator in tweed jacket and bow tie—visibly shaken—was talking about what a disgrace it was that they weren't letting specialists into the museum to care for the artwork. "Yes," he was saying, "I understand that it's a crime scene, but these paintings are very sensitive to changes in air quality and temperature. They may have been damaged by water or chemicals or smoke. They may be deteriorating as we speak. It is of vital importance that conservators and curators be allowed into the crucial areas to assess the damage as soon as possible—"

All of a sudden the telephone rang—abnormally loud, like an alarm clock waking me from the worst dream of my life. My surge of relief was indescribable. I tripped and nearly fell on my face in my headlong dive to grab it. I was certain it was my mother, but the caller ID stopped me cold: NYDoCFS.

New York Department of—what? After half a beat of confusion, I snatched up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello there," said a voice of hushed and almost creepy gentleness. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Theodore Decker," I said, taken aback. "Who is this?"

"Hello, Theodore. My name is Marjorie Beth Weinberg and I'm a social worker in the Department of Child and Family Services?"

"What is it? Are you calling about my mother?"

"You're Audrey Decker's son? Is that correct?"

"My mother! Where is she? Is she all right?"

A long pause—a terrible pause.

"What's the matter?" I cried. "Where is she?"

"Is your father there? May I speak to him?"

“He can’t come to the phone. What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s an emergency. I’m afraid it’s really very important that I speak to your father right now.”

“What about my mother?” I said, rising to my feet. “Please! Just tell me where she is! What happened?”

“You’re not by yourself, are you, Theodore? Is there an adult with you?”

“No, they’ve gone out for coffee,” I said, looking wildly around the living room. Ballet slippers, askew beneath a chair. Purple hyacinths in a foil-wrapped pot.

“Your father, too?”

“No, he’s asleep. Where’s my mother? Is she hurt? What’s happened?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to wake your dad up, Theodore.”

“No! I can’t!”

“I’m afraid it’s very important.”

“He can’t come to the phone! Why can’t you just tell me what’s wrong?”

“Well then, if your dad’s not available, maybe it’s best if I just leave my contact information with you.” The voice, while soft and sympathetic, was reminiscent to my ear of Hal the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. “Please tell him to get in touch with me as soon as possible. It’s really very important that he returns the call.”

After I got off the telephone, I sat very still for a long time. According to the clock on the stove, which I could see from where I sat, it was two-forty-five in the morning. Never had I been alone and awake at such an hour. The living room—normally so airy and open, buoyant with my mother’s presence—had shrunk to a cold, pale discomfort, like a vacation house in winter: fragile fabrics, scratchy sisal rug, paper lamp shades from Chinatown and the chairs too little and light. All the furniture seemed spindly, poised at a tiptoe nervousness. I could feel my heart beating, hear the clicks and ticks and hisses of the large elderly building slumbering around me. Everyone was asleep. Even the distant horn-honks and the occasional rattle of trucks out on Fifty-Seventh Street seemed faint and uncertain, as lonely as a noise from another planet.

Soon, I knew, the night sky would turn dark blue; the first tender, chilly gleam of April daylight would steal into the room. Garbage trucks would roar and grumble down the street; spring songbirds would start singing in the park; alarm clocks would be going off in bedrooms all over

the city. Guys hanging off the backs of trucks would toss fat whacking bundles of the *Times* and the *Daily News* to the sidewalks outside the newsstand. Mothers and dads all over the city would be shuffling around wild-haired in underwear and bathrobes, putting on the coffee, plugging in the toaster, waking their kids up for school.

And what would I do? Part of me was immobile, stunned with despair, like those rats that lose hope in laboratory experiments and lie down in the maze to starve.

I tried to pull my thoughts together. For a while, it had almost seemed that if I sat still enough, and waited, things might straighten themselves out somehow. Objects in the apartment wobbled with my fatigue: halos shimmered around the table lamp; the stripe of the wallpaper seemed to vibrate.

I picked up the phone book; I put it down. The idea of calling the police terrified me. And what could the police do anyway? I knew only too well from television that a person had to be missing twenty-four hours. I had just about convinced myself that I ought to go uptown and look for her, middle of the night or no, and the hell with our Family Disaster Plan, when a deafening buzz (the doorbell) shattered the silence and my heart leaped up for joy.

Scrambling, skidding harum-scarum to the door, I fumbled with the lock. “Mom?” I called, sliding the top bolt, throwing open the door — and then my heart plunged, a six-story drop. Standing on the doormat were two people I had never seen in my life: a chubby Korean woman with a short, spiky haircut, a Hispanic guy in shirt and tie who looked a lot like Luis on *Sesame Street*. There was nothing at all threatening about them, quite the contrary; they were reassuringly dumpy and middle-aged, dressed like a pair of substitute school teachers, but though they both had kindly expressions on their faces, I understood the instant I saw them that my life, as I knew it, was over.