

“Hits the ground running and never slackens its pace. Spectacular!”
-Janice Lull, *The Poem in Time*

Aster Lynn

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ASTER LYNN

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Part 1. Winter

1.

Thursday evening arrived. Aster dressed to kill. She wore a low-cut black dress, blood-red earrings, a cadmium red watch, and black stiletto heels. She let her brunette hair flow free and her brown eyes sparkle. She entered Gallery Lulu like a dynamo on stilts. The Giamentis on display were good but Aster Lynn was sensational.

Her stomach turned over as she entered. She felt no fear but a mountain of anxiety. She had done many audacious things in her young life, many dangerous and stupid things, but this was different. Her whole painting career hinged on this gambit. She found the bar and downed a first glass of champagne in several gulps. When she raised the refill to her lips, she found her hand shaking.

The gallery was packed. Twelve new Giamentis hung on twelve pristine white walls. Aster eavesdropped on conversations and overheard that the artist, his wife, and his mistress were due at midnight, that the paintings were selling like hotcakes, and that Giamenti was a genius. Aster grabbed a third glass of champagne from the waiter and tried to make sense of the crowd.

There appeared to be four groups in attendance. You could tell the working artists because they looked uncomfortable. Some were close to threadbare and spent a ravenous time at the cracker-and-cheese table. Others were dressed to the nines but in clothes you knew they couldn't wait to shed. Many looked exactly like the students she had studied with in college, the burly painter, the Harley painter, the heroin-thin painter, the I-paint-happy-flowers painter.

A second group was made up of young professionals in their thirties, many of them couples, maybe one in law and the other in advertising, who looked eager to buy but not quite able to afford these prices. She overheard one couple, a corporate lawyer and a prosecutor, arguing about whether the last wall space in their apartment should be turned over to a Giamenti, which the doubting prosecutor called "crazy, angry art." Her partner kept returning to his main theme: "It is bound to appreciate."

Then there was the celebrity contingent, fleshy actors, quick-eyed film directors, maestro and diva types. These self-important stars huddled, laughed slyly, shared secrets, and worked tirelessly, with every glance and comment, to fill their bed, their coffers, of their resume. If you left here without a deal or a date for sex, what was your

problem? Aster nodded to herself, making note of the sort of person she didn't want to become.

Last was the real money, the deca-millionaires, not the wealthiest people in the world but wealthy enough that they owned three or four residences. And each residence required art. These people knew the auction prices of the artists that they fancied and knew that art had appreciated better than anything else in their diversified portfolios. They were not inclined to pay millions for a painting but they were happy to pay hundreds of thousands. In this precise context, Giamenti had real value. He was a showman, which was great, he was a household name, which was great, and, best of all, his paintings invariably increased in price. What more could you ask of an artist?

Aster Lynn nursed her third glass of champagne and watched the action. She identified the owner of Gallery Lulu, a slim, gay young man who wore a suit that was probably all the rage but that looked two sizes too large for him. She began to get a sense of which people in the crowd were the real buyers. They would stand in front of a Giamenti with a special sort of attentiveness, bring their wife or husband over to have a look, turn repeatedly from one painting to another or cross the crowded gallery a half-dozen times to mentally compare paintings.

Aster considered her plan for the hundredth time. The couples were out. She knew that she couldn't land herself a patron with his wife in attendance. Most of the single men looked wrong. Either they seemed too businesslike, too humorless, or too weird. She needed someone conventional enough to have made a small fortune but unconventional enough to take an unusual risk, not a risk like the stock market but a risk like love. She needed someone to fall in love with her future and she needed that someone to fall in love in the blink of an eye. She could feel her hand shake a little.

Fifteen minutes later she spotted someone. He had a way of smiling that caught her eye. She made up her mind, chose him, and began following him. He looked to be about forty-five and sported a narrow-brimmed felt hat, an elegant black wool topcoat, and other studied clothes that combined into what she guessed was a Jewish Gatsby look. She fancied that he owned a bank or the modern equivalent. What did you call such people today? Investment bankers? She began calling him "my investment banker." When she lost sight of him she would mutter, "Where did my investment banker go?" and push through the crowd to find him.

Finally he settled himself at a corner of the gallery. He looked to be making up his mind between two Giamenti that happened to be hanging next to one another. The one on the left had black sexual doodles on a red field and read like a cross between Dali and a Chinese poster on testosterone. The one on the right was a green-on-green

story painting that told the tale of what Aster took to be a severed hand on vacation. The black-and-red painting was vintage Giamenti and went for \$320,000. The green-on-green painting was a departure, more interesting than the red but also the riskier buy, and therefore priced at \$280,000. Her investment banker was mulling over his decision.

Aster saw him make up his mind. He had gone the conservative route. He made a small nod at the black-and-red painting, quickly looked around, and began scanning the crowd for the gallery owner. Aster knew that she had no time to lose. She strode up to her investment banker and plunged in close.

“Don’t buy that,” she said, more breathlessly than she had intended.

“Why not?” The man eyed Aster speculatively, looking her square in the eye. Finally he smiled. He had brown eyes the color of old wood, a shadow of heavy beard, thick eyelashes, and a tan that went with money.

“It’ll set you back \$320,000. I’ve got a better deal for you.”

“What’s that?”

Aster sensed that he was willing to listen. She had practiced this pitch a hundred times, practiced sincerity, as it were, or rather practiced sounding as sincere as she actually felt. She had no idea how her pitch was going to come out. She shook her head a little, smiled, and took the plunge.

“I’m a great painter,” she said. She met his gaze, doing her best to communicate what she knew to be true. “I’m not known, but I will be. You pay me \$5,000 a month and at the end of the year you get my best painting. It’ll be worth every penny of this Giamenti.”

Aster stopped. She knew that saying even a single additional word would diminish the impact of what she had just said. Part of her wanted to plunge on and say more, but she restrained herself. Part of her wanted to apologize—but she didn’t go there. She stood her silence and waited.

The man didn’t smile, but his look was more pensive than harsh. He studied the young woman in front of him, whom he speculated couldn’t be much older than twenty-two or twenty-three. She was beautiful, but what impressed him was her

seriousness. Harry Goldstein divided the world into two groups of people. He didn't have a name for the larger group, except that they weren't serious. Then there was the handful of serious ones. They did most of the world's real work.

They held the integrity of organizations, insofar as organizations could have integrity. They wrote the beautiful novels. They cherished the right principles. Harry wished that he himself were a little more serious, had done a little more real work and a little less celebrity law, and could number himself in the second group. He couldn't quite, which made him sad. But he prized that second group and prized his ability to judge which group you inhabited. This young woman was one of the serious ones.

"You know, that's ridiculous on the face of it," he said after a moment. "Nobody's first paintings are worth several hundred thousand dollars."

"That young girl who appears on all the talk shows--"

Harry made a face. "God! Not her. A scam like that should make me feel sanguine about you? That's a terrible argument."

Aster felt her heart sink. It was the wrong argument! But she bit her tongue and plunged on. She knew she was on the verge of losing him.

"Not what she paints! That it happens. It does happen. Every year somebody proves the exception."

"I'm not that impressed," Harry said, tilting his head to one side. "I'm not buying it."

Aster took a deep breath. "I am going to crash through in one year. And it will cost you the price of an SUV—and not even a luxury one—to be able to say that you supported me and discovered me. And to reap the dividends! I am ... I am one of the special ones!" She believed what she was saying but she suspected that she sounded desperate and ridiculous. Her heart sank and she felt close to tears.

"How do I know that you can even paint?"

Aster shook her head. "You don't. But ... " She glanced around. "If there were a blank canvas here I'd prove it to you!"

Her investment banker laughed. “Or maybe I could sleep with you occasionally?”

Aster understood what answer he wanted. “No.” She grew very serious. “I don’t sleep with my patrons.”

“That was the only right answer.” He stared at her for a long moment. “Who are you? Give me the headlines. And be quick about it. I might still want to buy this Giamenti.”

“I’m a kid from the Mission District of San Francisco,” Aster replied. “I went to City College, got a painting scholarship to Kenyon College, graduated, and came to New York as fast as I could. Now I stand before you.” She smiled nervously. “I am going to do a beautiful job, a brilliant job. I really am.”

“Nine times out of ten, that isn’t enough. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred.” He stared at her and made up his mind. “Should I write you a check?”

Aster smiled winningly. “If you would. For fifteen thousand. Five thousand to get situated and five thousand for each of the first two months.”

“Five thousand a month?”

“For twelve months. Then you get my very best painting.”

Goldstein laughed a merry laugh and pulled out his checkbook. Aster lowered her eyes. She deserved this, she wanted this, and she knew what she was doing. But still it made her nervous. Who knew what vibration she was setting into motion. Her mother believed in vibrations, in everything from the power of tuning forks to Plato’s music of the spheres. Her mother wouldn’t ride a motorcycle if she didn’t like the sound of the engine and wouldn’t stay in a room if the air seemed to sway. Aster had no doubt that the things we did set waves in motion—what was she precipitating here? Goldstein held out the check and Aster hesitated.

“Because you really do want to sleep with me?” he said.

“Maybe.” She smiled and took the check. “I do like your hat.”

“My ex-wife hated it.”

“Because she knew you were wearing it to pick up chicks.”

“She knew that?”

“Of course.”

He shook his head. “Damn!”

“She knew all about you,” Aster laughed. “Except maybe what she was losing.”

Harry Goldstein felt something he hadn't felt in a long time. “That's a sweet thing to say! Are you sure you only want fifteen thousand?”

“For now.”

Aster smiled. Her smile grew in brilliance. She had devised this insane plan—and it was working! She knew that she could have found a day job like every other aspiring artist and slaved away at that while trying to carve out a few hours each day to paint. She could have done that—but she wanted something exceptional, something that would free her, something that would launch her career in singular fashion. She wanted something like landing on a reality show called “America's next great painter” and winning it. Out of those feelings had come this plan—and it was working!

Finally they introduced themselves. Harry told her that he was a criminal defense lawyer, that he collected art, and that he was recently divorced. Aster liked him enormously. He had that wry thing going and that kind thing going, and he was also a man. Goldstein turned to the black-on-red Giamenti.

“I might buy this anyway.”

“It's a classic.”

“Do you like it?”

“I despise it,” Aster said, not deigning to hide her contempt.

Goldstein made a face. “That's pretty strong.”

“All those happy little penises. Such deserving little penises! I hear that Giamenti has a wife and a mistress and they all live together and that everybody finds that so charming, so bohemian. I’d bop him with a four iron.”

“We collectors call his style ‘playful’ —”

“The thing is,” Aster said seriously, “can’t you see how cruel he must be? Can’t you read that there?”

Goldstein stared at the painting. “I can.” He made a small sound. “But I don’t want to know that. I can’t hold the artists that I collect to the standard that they also need to be good people. I’d have to empty my walls. It would be like needing my clients to be innocent.”

Aster held her tongue. She wanted to say more but she had a horror of blowing the deal. Finally she murmured, “I suppose you could still own it.”

“Well, I’m not so sure now.” He made a half-turn. “What about the green one?”

Aster turned to the green-on-green severed-hand-on-vacation painting.

“The black-on-red one is his ‘I am a man’ painting,” Aster said. “This one is his ‘I am a tortured artist’ painting. Underneath is a nasty, greedy, sarcastic man. Laughing all the way to the bank.”

“With my money.”

“Well, you haven’t bought it yet.”

“I own two of his already.”

Aster smiled. “Oh.”

“And they appreciate very nicely.”

“Good for you, then.”

“But maybe I’ll skip these.”

“Don’t look to me to police the art world!” Aster Lynn laughed. “I’ve got some painting to do!” She took Harry’s hand. “Thank you. I’ll do you proud.”

They both smiled. Aster Lynn turned on her heels. She had fifteen thousand dollars in her purse and all eyes on her body. She strode out of Gallery Lulu. She wasn’t sure if she had just managed a great victory or suffered a terrible defeat but she knew for certain that she’d be having more than one drink back at the Hudson Hotel where she was staying.

2.

Maybe her plan had been outrageous. But she knew the history of art. She knew about patrons, advocates, stunts, fashion, about everything that was not-art that nevertheless made all the difference in an artist's life. What really made the difference between your painting selling at auction for five million rather than fifty thousand? Not its truth, beauty or goodness. It was your place in the world of art buyers, how you were perceived, your mythology, and your celebrity status. You could rail against that fact or you could make peace with it.

Aster hadn't made peace with that reality but she knew to look it right in the face. She refused to act like a romantic fool, which she reckoned was often just a kind of cowardice. Sitting in her tiny hotel room, preparing to spend Harry's money on her first live-work space, she sat on the edge of the narrow bed with her feet planted squarely on the carpet. A glass wall separated the miniature room from the bathroom's shower, allowing her to watch her lover showering—if she had a lover. But her mind was on the future, on her ambition for herself, and how she would have to deliver. She had deposited Harry's check—now she would have to deliver.

The following Monday morning, with a cold winter rain drenching Manhattan, Aster ran by cab from appointment to appointment to see spaces. She knew enough about Bohemian history to want a place in the old West Village but her main criteria were good light and good vibrations. If possible she also wanted working artists around her who were plugged into the New York scene. She didn't care if they were madmen, drunkards, three-piece suiters, or what, just so long as they had a finger in the socket of Manhattan art electricity.

She also wanted a place with oversized doors, both to the building and to her studio. She fancied that she might bring in some large animals, maybe a horse, a bull, even a giraffe. She would bring them in not as painting models but to create buzz. If she was going to become famous in a year she had as her second job, alongside painting, creating an enormous stir. She had prepared a long list of stunts on the plane ride from San Francisco and many of the stunts on her list had a circus feel to them. She laughed at the list, she knew that her heart wasn't in it, but at the same time she knew that painting well wasn't going to be enough.

Indeed, she had pulled off her first stunt already! When, one day, they wrote about

Aster Lynn ...

Dripping wet, she met super after super and landlord after landlord. Each live-work space had its pluses and minuses. Most were too damned expensive. Some had bad vibes, a feeling that you couldn't name that made you want to leave immediately. Maybe the place's sweatshop history got to you or maybe a frustrated painter had hanged himself there. Most often it was just about the light. Even on this black day she could perfectly gauge the light possibilities of a place.

She knew light. It was like having perfect pitch. Her painting life depended on window size, window orientation, and the way the sun traveled through the day and from season to season. How could she know such a thing without almanacs or actually living in a place was one of life's mysteries. She just could. The real painters could just feel the light acoustics of a place. She entered this Chelsea loft or that East Village studio and instantly intuited whether it would provide her with enough light and the right light. So far none had.

She took a cab to the meatpacking district, her sixth stop of the day. It was further west than she wanted to be, outside the boundaries of the old Village, but, as she watched the old factories pass, she began to get a good feeling. The windows were so large! She stared at the passing lofts and knew that she wanted one.

A Chinese woman met her at the door—a nicely oversized door capable of accommodating a rhino or an elephant—of an old brick industrial building on a nondescript street. The Chinese woman introduced herself as Mrs. Lee and hurried Aster in out of the rain.

“Great building!” Mrs. Lee enthused. “Great people! All artists. Supposed to be a condo building but something happened with permits or who knows what. So these great spaces all for rent. Garbage included, water included, you just pay utilities. Great building!”

Past the lobby was a spacious room with a small garden beyond. The garden sported a few café tables and chairs and some haphazard sculpture. The room had an updated '30s feel to it, a nice clubby feel. Aster detoured there.

“What's this?” she asked.

“Community room. This was a factory, they made boxes to put clothing in, part of

the garment trade, then for maybe twenty years it was some kind of hotel for bums. A shelter. Then they redid every space and made it for artists. This was part of the lobby, the reception area, when it was a hotel for bums. Great space!”

Aster nodded.

“You on the second floor. Good light. I know you artists need good light. Great light. Windows on two sides. Floor-to-ceiling. Great space. Can’t beat it.”

They climbed a set of narrow stairs. Aster didn’t feel sanguine. The place felt dark and cramped. Mrs. Lee unlocked the door to the studio and they entered a small, dark foyer. Aster’s heart sank. They passed a narrow galley kitchen and turned a corner. Aster blinked. An enormous open space greeted her. The ceilings were high, fourteen feet at least. The square footage had to be eight hundred feet at a minimum. And the light! The space was lit now by upscale track lighting but when the sun shone ... Aster, entranced, walked the whole perimeter.

It was a gorgeous space, far beyond anything she had expected to find. It was a thousand dollars a month more than she intended to pay but she wanted it. The art world was so insane that you could spend your whole life doing beautiful work without making a cent; or, on the completely other hand, you could toss off some ironic doodles at a commercial break while watching reruns of Friends and become the beloved of collectors. Given that absurdity, what was a thousand dollars more a month? Here she could paint.

“When can I move in?”

“The first—”

“No! I’m staying at a hotel. I can’t afford to stay there! I really need to move in tomorrow.”

“I can’t—”

“Please! Mrs. Lee! This place is vacant. The hotel is bankrupting me. Please!”

“I think they were going to clean—”

Aster touched her wrist. “I’m dying to paint! Please let me move right in. They can clean around me, they can do whatever they want. I just need to get started!”

Mrs. Lee clucked and shook her head. “All right!” she agreed. After a moment she muttered, good-naturedly enough, “Artists!”

It took a hefty chunk of Harry’s \$15,000 to move in. She had to pay first, last, a security deposit, and some expenses she had never heard of. Then the whirlwind began in earnest. She quickly furnished the place, found the best buys on canvas, brushes, and the brand of paint she loved, and picked out a computer. It was a wild, frustrating ten days of shopping and deliveries, of cable guys, phone guys and bookcases appearing. Aster bought two bottles of Scotch and was halfway through the second bottle by the end of day ten. By then she had her new computer hooked up and Internet access, enough art books to make her studio feel homey, and next to nothing left in her bank account. Was it to be rice and beans? On the Sunday afternoon of that second week she called Harry.

“Harry! This is Aster Lynn. Take me to dinner.”

“You’ve settled in?”

“I have.”

“And you’re broke?”

“Close.”

“This would be an excellent time to try to sleep with you.”

“I can promise you a kiss.”

“Where?”

“You’re very salty for an art patron!”

She hung up and smiled. She liked Harry. She’d even gotten a little aroused, which turned her smile rueful. She would need sex soon and she knew it. She had a theory

about that, that she was destined to be with a certain man, someone as large as herself, someone who, as she had, had known from the time he was five or six that he had a shot at greatness. Other men, as nice as they might be, as manly as they might be, as perfectly fine as they might be, had to be treated with the greatest caution, since they weren't in the long-range cards. That didn't mean you couldn't sleep with them, however ...

She took a cab uptown and met Harry for French food at a downstairs cave on the East Side. The wine was very good and the duck sweeter than the dessert. They finished with liqueurs and coffee.

"Painting yet?" Harry asked.

"No."

"That scares me."

Aster laughed. "Nuclear weapons should scare you. Viruses from chickens should scare you. Me painting or not painting shouldn't bother you a bit."

"My money, Aster."

"You probably don't even know how much money you have. You have two children, right?"

"Both at college."

"Are they set for life? Financially?"

"Pretty much."

"What's your art worth? Just your art."

"Millions."

"There. So don't let my not painting scare you. By the way, I could use a check."

“I thought to bring my checkbook.”

He wrote a check for another five thousand. She took the check and then took his hand. In fact, he was a sweetheart. She wouldn't have minded sleeping with him. But she knew better. She squeezed his hand, leaned over, and kissed him on the lips.

“That was very nice,” Harry said.

“I'd invite you to see where your money's gone but that would end up being a tease. I'll take a cab home.”

“Aster—”

“Think art, Harry, not sex.”

“Right.”

“Goodnight, love.”

She got home and didn't feel a bit like sleeping. For the first time in what felt like years, though it had only been about six weeks, she had a place in which to paint. She could feel her blood begin to boil. New paintings were coming.

3.

She was twenty-two. Was that too young for what she had in mind?

The singer Dana Haughton had already become world-famous when she died at twenty-two. Daphne de Maurier was published by twenty-two. Aster remembered that a gorgeous poem, “The Dying of Children,” was published by the poet Bremser when he was twenty-two. She couldn’t remember his first name but she remembered his age. Ahaziah became king and reigned in Jerusalem at the age of twenty-two. The painter Ondrej Coufal had fifteen exhibitions by the time he was twenty-two, most of them one-man shows. Twenty-two was not too young for what she had in mind!

She lived and breathed her dream. Growing up in San Francisco in derelict, dangerous neighborhoods made magical by her mother’s spirit, by the way her mother found art everywhere and turned bookstores into churches and laundromats into story hours, Aster frequented lesbian hangouts and Latino dives and thought about her future glory. She discovered Diego Rivera through his mural in the City College theater, took literature, art, and self-defense classes, drank in everything about Greenwich Village and the Left Bank, and collapsed for six months when her mother died in a motorcycle accident.

Her mother and her mother’s boyfriend had been heading down the coast from San Francisco to Half Moon Bay to spend the night. At Devil’s Slide, they had skidded off the highway and over a cliff. Aster saw them flying through space as if it were an image in a bad movie. Something happened inside her that day, something that was impossible to put into words. You could name some of the behaviors that went with the change: she drank a little harder and a little more often, she found herself less and less able to hold her tongue, she painted more often and more fiercely. In a way her mother’s death had liberated her, as there was no one left in the world she had to worry about embarrassing or disappointing. In a way it hardened her. And in a way it made her desperate, though for what or about what she couldn’t say.

Her painting space was completely ready. The next day Aster went out with her digital camera and took hundreds of pictures all over Manhattan. She walked among the homeless, spent an hour outside the fence of a Catholic elementary school, spent another hour at a café across from a Yeshiva. She could feel paintings coming, or rather the theme for a series of paintings. She began looking for priests, nuns, rabbis.

The next day she went out and found a mosque to photograph. She spent several hours taking pictures of Muslim men and women. She got cursed at but she didn't care. Besides, she had her pistol.

Something had happened during her first year at City College. That was the way she thought about it: the thing that happened at City. It was a near-rape and it had caused her to arm herself. She carried a chrome-plated .25 in her purse and loved firing it. At City she'd joined only one club, the pistol club, which met at a range at Lake Merced. She'd qualified on every small arms weapon she could get her hands on. The heavier weapons were no problem—she could fire anything accurately. But she choose a .25 for her personal weapon because of its size and because she wouldn't be firing across a parking lot at a fleeing thief. She would only be firing at a man coming right at her.

The pistol was another of the things that her mother's death permitted. If, with her mother alive, Aster had killed a man too cavalierly and ended up in jail for it, she would have hated the pain that caused her mother. Fearing causing that pain, she probably wouldn't have armed herself. With her mother dead, she had no such qualms. She was not going to be a victim. She was not going to take a step back. She had adopted the Israeli motto: "Never again!" You knew that about her when you met her. She was one of the new generation of women, a counterpoint to the feminization of men that she saw all around her. It wasn't that she was hard—not at all. But she was adamant and she was dangerous.

After lunch, Aster returned to the West Village Yeshiva. She had a few more photos of Yeshiva Jews to take. A class ended and students poured out of the double doors of the old brownstone. She took her photos and then a thought struck her. She spent the next two hours taking photos of people pouring out of subway stations and pedestrians negotiating the covered walkways surrounding construction sites. She began to have composite images, integrated images. A suite of paintings was growing in her mind.

At the loft she prepared several canvases. She liked to tape and tack the primed canvas right onto the wall and paint over the edge of the canvas onto the wall, to prevent herself from shortening her brushstrokes and curtailing her energy. It made her smile to know that she was not going to get her security deposit back, not with the way these walls were going to look. She favored large horizontal canvases, no smaller than six feet wide and four feet high and often as large as eight by six or ten by eight. She had grown up in the monumental mural tradition but she had other reasons for painting this large, including that paintings this large matched her ambition.

She was almost ready to launch into a series she dubbed "Religious Education." She had the paintings in mind but was torn between two ways of rendering them, using a

covered walkway or a subway entrance as the setting for her hordes of young religious. This was a moment that decided everything—everything in the short term but maybe also everything in the long term—as you chose your way of rendering reality and as you put your signature on the world. Of course that made a person anxious!—she could feel the shivers of anxiety everywhere in her body. She wanted a Scotch—and more than one. Instead she paced up and down, awaiting the decision that was being made somewhere deep inside of her.

Finally the decision came. Subway entrances! Now everything was clear. She began painting like a maniac. Each of the paintings in the series would have the same set-up: a stream of religious pouring out of a subway entrance. In one painting the stream would be made up of sixth grade Catholic schools girls. In the second Yeshiva boys streamed out, young men of about eighteen or nineteen with side curls and prayer shawls. The third had Muslim women in veils, their eyes doing all the talking. The fourth ... the fourth remained unclear. She pored over the first three, moving from canvas to canvas as a mother might move among her three young children. Each canvas needed something different ...

Frightening figures began to emerge. She painted and painted. Then, suddenly, she stopped. She'd been painting for six hours. The last canvas preyed on her mind—how do you portray a horde of White Protestant men? They'd look like any other Wall Street contingent if she simply put them in suits and had them rushing out of a New York City subway station. It began to make her a little crazy and she poured herself a tall Scotch. As she took her first sip, it came to her. She would make them all Jesuses!-- each just a man in a suit but also a Jesus, mock pious, mock compassionate, mock kind. Some would carry a candle, some would carry a cross ...

Her subject matter hypnotized her. Over the course of the next several days each painting approached completion. She worked like a wild person, rarely eating and drinking a little too much, and her right arm began to ache and throb. Her eyes ached too. She tried eye drops, hot showers, cold towels. There was really nothing to be done about it. Her eyes would have to burn until she was finished, even if they burned themselves out.

One painting didn't work and she couldn't rescue it. She painted right over it. She had learned about detachment from books and classes but she knew about letting go at an even deeper level than that. She knew that if you ruined something you just had to move on to the next thing, that ruining a canvas or even ruining a year painting subject matter you regretted said nothing about your ability or your talent. Her fellow painting students at Kenyon were regularly defeated by the harsh critiques and snide comments they received and by their own mistakes and messes. Aster took none of that to heart.

She felt something she knew that only a few people felt: her own potential greatness.

On a Thursday afternoon she was done. She sat down in an armchair opposite the four paintings, which took up one wall of her studio, closed her eyes, and slept until ten in the evening. When she awoke she avoided looking at her new creations. She made herself a meal of frozen pizza pockets and Scotch, put on some violent music, and shut it off immediately. Only then did she dare to look. She stood back and surveyed her work. They startled her. They were brilliant, eerie, and horrifying, without irony and pulsing with power—they were a complete success. “Wonderful! A suite of paintings bashing religion,” she said darkly. “Nice work, Aster. Very commercial!”

She knew the rules. In the studio, you could do whatever you liked. Then the world came calling and said “Yes!” or “No!” To these fabulous paintings the world was bound to shout its disapproval. What had she been thinking? “Maybe Harry bet on the wrong horse,” she muttered, turning away from the wall of paintings. She was exhausted but also wired and angry, angry at herself and angry at the world. Not knowing what to do with her energy and her black mood, she changed clothes and hurried down to The Lost Note, a bar around the corner, where the Scotch fit her budget.

4.

She sat by herself in a dark corner of the bar. Maybe that was going to be her fatal flaw, attacking institutions like religion. She found herself shaking her head, debating with herself. Picasso never really attacked anything but the conventional realistic image and so collectors felt comfortable hanging him on their walls. He was too overrated for words. Georgia O’Keeffe, too, never attacked what must have been in her heart to attack. Those enormous flowers and cold desert scenes were not her truth. Few of the icons of modern painting had really spoken their mind. She kept shaking her head. Did that mean that a painter really had no permission from her culture to say what needed to be said?

Could you really speak your mind and still become famous? That was the question.

She nodded at Earl, an emaciated blues musician she’d chatted with a few times, a man in his seventies who still sang in the clubs and even toured a little. He told her that he was “legendary,” which meant that he had no teeth and no money. He laughed a hoarse laugh and Aster could imagine his singing voice, a raspy voice that only decades of cigarettes could produce. She loved the blues. Her mother had, too. She had been named Aster not so much for the blue flower as for the blues, the blue sky, blue lakes, for the vibrations that blue gave off. Her mother had once laid out a dozen Van Gogh paintings, cut right out of a Van Gogh book, and said to her, “Aster, this is important. Look at these blue skies--” Aster had looked and had understood.

At the moment the Last Note stage was being set up for the late show. As much as she loved the blues, she felt too agitated to sit still and listen. She finished her Scotch and made her way back to the studio, slipping once or twice on the black ice.

For the next several days she stormed about the city, restless and agitated. The New York winter blurred her vision and half the time she hardly knew where she was going. Some streets acted like wind tunnels—there the wind hurt your face so much you thought you would die. She strode intensely, diving through traffic at the corners, bent forward against the wind, walking everywhere, as far north as Columbia, as far south as the Staten Island ferry landing. She wore a hat, gloves, a scarf, but still it was insane being out for so many hours in such ferocious weather. But she had to keep moving.

One afternoon when she got home she found a call from Harry on her machine. She rang him back immediately.

“Harry?”

“Aster! I ended up buying a Giamenti after all. The red one. Do you hate me?”

“No, I don’t hate you,” she laughed. “And I’m sure it’s good business.”

“It is. It’ll appreciate nicely.”

“Terrific.”

“He wants to meet you.”

“Giamenti?” Aster felt a chill run down her spine, colder than anything she had felt outdoors. “Why?”

“Just because. I told him about you getting me to support you. I may also have told him that you were beautiful.”

Aster made no reply. After a long moment she said, “I won’t see him alone.”

Harry laughed. “As it happens, it’s a party. Saturday night. He has an apartment in Vanity Fair Tower, costs five million if it costs a cent. Decent views—like of all of Manhattan. There will be a lot of caviar.”

“Nothing you said makes me want to come.”

“Fine. But you will? You told me that you would do whatever it took to make your name--”

“Not ‘whatever’! But all right! I’ll come.”

It left a bad taste in her mouth. She’d go because it was the right place to be seen, the right place to make contacts. But it was otherwise all wrong. She knew that Giamenti would hit on her, probably in front of his wife, maybe in front of his wife and

his mistress both, just because he could. Aster understood how that thrilled a man, to seduce a woman in an open way, as if he were king of the world. The problem wasn't that she would say yes. The problem was that she might say no in such a way that she would insult him and make an enemy for life. She didn't want Giamenti as a friend but she didn't need him as an enemy either. She couldn't keep her brow from furrowing. Some worry, deeper than the situation seemed to warrant—it was just a party, after all!—kept her gloomy for days.

The night of the party she dressed in red—red dress, red pumps, red underneath. She wore a necklace that looked like a string of cinnamon candies and a red bracelet the color of carnelian. She played “vision in red” to the hilt, something like a cross between that famous Otto Dix red portrait and a Tamara de Lempicka. But in the pit of her stomach she felt that she was making a big mistake. Was the mistake looking beautiful? Was the mistake going at all? Or was the mistake the way she was holding Giamenti in her mind, as someone she meant to get even with, insult, excoriate—even though he hadn't done a thing to her yet, except invite her to a party.

Harry had said to come at eight and Aster didn't leave her studio until ten. She grabbed a cab and gave the cabbie the uptown address. They shot north, then east, then north again, up Madison or Park—Aster wasn't watching. When they arrived at Vanity Fair Tower, Aster shook her head. It was an insane building, gilded, gargantuan, and ridiculous. A brusque doorman opened the preposterous door for her and nodded toward a second hard-boiled fellow positioned behind a desk. Aster grudgingly gave him her name and was pointed in the direction of one of the banks of elevators.

She almost turned on her heels but instead crossed the expanse of marble, hit the elevator button, and rode up alone to the thirty-eighth floor. The corridor in front of her was more of that same Las Vegas marble, the kind that costs a fortune but still manages to look cheap. She clacked down the marble corridor toward a manned door, where a security type checked her name against a printed sheet and let her pass into Giamenti's apartment.

Aster entered and shook her head. In front of her was a corridor-cum-gallery that looked like a Las Vegas version of the British Museum: more marble, alabaster pillars, and Turkish knives in cases. On the walls were gorgeous Russian icons framed in silver, leaves from ancient Persian illuminated manuscripts, woven rugs: and no modern art whatsoever. The statement, Aster supposed, was that there was ancient art and then there was Giamenti, and if you wanted the Giamenti, well, you would have to beg him for it. It was all about seduction. Aster could hear the conversation, the breathless actress or dancer crying, “But where are your paintings?” and Giamenti smiling as he replied, “Oh, to see them, you have to come into my special room ...”

From the corridor you entered an enormous space with walls of windows that looked out on a dazzling Manhattan night. The room was packed. Aster caught her breath. This was the world she intended to enter—intended to conquer, if that was the right word. These were the people with the money to afford her paintings. Next to her two men talked in conspiratorial tones about currencies. It made her heart heavy just to hear them speak. It was a terrible irony that if you needed your patrons to have clean hands, to be something other than manipulators of currencies, events, and nations, you would remain completely uncollected.

She maneuvered between bodies to the bar, got a Scotch, and turned back to the room. There, directly in front of her, was Giamenti. She knew it instantly. He had been looking for her—somehow she knew that, too. She pulled herself up to her full height—in heels, she was hardly an inch shorter than him. He was maybe thirty-five, movie handsome, with curly black hair, dark brows, dark eyes, dark skin, and tons of muscles. He wore a tight-fitting pullover shirt that accentuated his arms and even tighter pants. The words “cheap” and “erratic” came to her mind. And “dangerous.” You just knew that he wore expensive cologne and you could tell that he was slightly mad—or was it his cruelty that registered?

He intended his smile to be charming but he couldn't hide the underlying sarcasm. His cold eyes were lit by fake warmth, by something that he had learned to turn on to sell his paintings and to seduce women. In reaction to her cold, appraising stare, he tried a boyish grin. It made Aster involuntarily feel for the outline of her pistol in her red leather purse.

“You must be Aster Lynn!” Paolo Giamenti cried. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you!” He touched her on the arm, a brief touch, just to let her know that he was that close to her. “Harry Goldstein had quite a story to tell about you.”

“Hello. You are?” Aster said.

His eyes instantly lost their luster. She could read volumes in the look that replaced the false warmth. She could read him already plotting his revenge, already figuring out how to put her in her place, this upstart, unknown painter who wouldn't bow in his presence. She could also read his desire—but desire for what? Not sex, exactly—a desire to inflict pain, she fancied.

“Paolo Giamenti,” he replied after a long moment. “Your host.”

“Oh. There should be name tags.”

“What a quaint idea.”

Now he was clearly angry. And maybe a little hurt—that surprised her. Could she, with a few choice words, actually hurt the feelings of a celebrated, ice-cold painter who had been making his way in the vicious, volatile art world for a decade? On the face of it, it seemed preposterous. But she knew what she saw. He was angry and hurt—and ready, she fancied, to withdraw and lick his wounds.

“Can I show you around?” he said icily.

“I’d prefer to mingle on my own.”

“Whatever.”

Paolo turned on his heels. Aster shook her head and prepared to dismiss him from her mind. But even as she mingled, chatted awkwardly, dodged advances, and got engaged in one or two heated conversations, her mind kept returning to Paolo’s eyes. She hated that she had been able to hurt him so easily. Why were men so eager to dish it out and so unequal to taking it? At one point, her thoughts returning to this theme, she stamped her foot on the carpet.

An hour later she found herself standing by herself in front of a unicorn tapestry that looked old and real. A woman appeared beside her. She wore a low-cut black dress and big diamonds and had the look of a flamenco Carmen. Aster sensed that she was on a mission. Aster steeled herself.

“Hello!” the woman exclaimed.

“Hello,” Aster replied carefully.

“I’m Camilla. So nice to have you here.”

“Aster Lynn.” Aster held out her hand and the two women shook hands firmly.

“Are you a model?” Camilla asked, not, Aster understood, to flatter her, but to put her

down.

“I’m a painter.”

“Of course! You’re not emaciated enough to be a model. I should have known.”

“And you?” Aster said, not out of politeness but to put her interrogator on the spot.

“I used to be a dancer.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m Paolo’s wife.”

“That must be quite a job.”

Camilla laughed mirthlessly. “I wonder why you thought to say that? Paolo paints a lot, which means that I am very free. It isn’t a job at all.”

“Indeed.”

She knew that Camilla had been sent to talk to her. What exactly was her mission? To size her up? To soften her up for Paolo? To invite her to a threesome or a foursome? Aster waited. She knew that she wasn’t going to like it, whatever it turned out to be.

“You know my husband’s work?” Camilla continued.

“I do.”

She was supposed to make some obligatory compliment. She didn’t. Camilla waited, demanding that compliment by her silence and her cold gaze. Aster met Camilla’s gaze with her own fierce look. Their eyes never wavered.

“So you don’t think much of his work?” Camilla said finally.

“I don’t think much about his work. I have my own work to do.”

Camilla shrugged. “Still, you could have managed to say something nice, if you liked his work. Or you might even have said something nasty, if that’s the way you felt. But to say nothing ... that’s a little insulting, don’t you think? While you’re here at his party, drinking his Scotch?”

Aster wanted to say, “You know exactly what’s going on here!” She wanted to say, “He invited me!—and you know why.” But something about her own combative energy frightened her. Why was she spoiling for a fight? She bit her tongue and made no reply.

“So you have nothing to say?” Camilla said, her smile as false as Paolo’s.

“I have plenty to say.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Camilla’s eyes clouded over. Aster noticed a small mark on Camilla’s cheek, a grey circle about the size of a pencil eraser. Apparently it only appeared when she got really angry. Aster’s eyes narrowed.

“Lovely!” Aster exclaimed. “That says it all!”

“What does? What says what?”

“That circle on your cheek. Where he put out a cigarette. Have I got that right? Like Picasso did on the cheek of his mistress? That’s real charm!”

Camilla flushed. “No, you don’t have that right at all!” She turned abruptly and strode violently off.

5.

It had been a long time since Aster felt so angry. As a teenager she used to get wild with rage, wild when a teacher said some bigoted thing, wild when the strong boys picked on some nerdy boy, wild when the brainless, privileged girls, whose expensive scents made you want to slap them across the face, made a hysterical fuss about some cute actor or some cute car. Now, thinking about Paolo, Camilla, and their games—and about the world that she was committed to entering—her face burned as it had when she was sixteen and seventeen.

At about 11:30 she spotted Paige, Paolo's mistress, wandering about like a lost spirit. Paige wore a powder blue dress with a bodice that made her look childlike—like a naughty child, Aster supposed. Paige didn't appear to have her heart in the role. Aster followed her for a bit, not knowing exactly why, until she saw Paige drop into the lap of a lean, middle-aged man who laughed as she landed. That was enough of that.

Aster continued circulating, not understanding why she didn't just leave. She had spoken to Harry—several times already. She had sized up the crowd and even pitched herself once or twice, trying on her “brilliant young painter” public persona. She could have left and she knew that she should have left. But something was keeping her. It was past midnight and still she circulated.

A filmmaker made a pass at her. Then she found herself talking to a graybeard who kept dropping Leonard Bernstein's name.

“Isn't he dead?” Aster said finally.

“For years! But he was such a genius.”

Aster moved on. She came around a corner and saw Paolo and Harry talking together. Paolo wore a smirk and leaned in confidentially. Harry looked miserable—and a little shaken. As soon as Harry had freed himself from Paolo, Aster joined him.

“What was that about?” Aster asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“About me?”

“No.”

“About what, then?”

“About Paige.”

“What about Paige?”

“He asked me if I wanted Paige.”

“No.”

“His exact words were, ‘Would you like Paige as a late night snack?’”

“Harry.”

“I buy art, Aster, not character.”

“Harry. Really.” She shook her head. After a moment she continued, “By the way, that was entirely about me.”

Harry Goldstein nodded reluctantly.

Maybe that was why she had stayed—to make certain. She needed to be sure that the world she was entering was exactly as treacherous as she supposed it to be. All through college she’d had a book called *Anecdotes of Modern Art* on her bedside stand. She would dip into it almost every night, over time memorizing portions of it. The book contained “amusing” excerpts from the biographies of well-known painters, excerpts that were more horrifying than amusing. The anecdotes chronicled this painter’s alcoholism, that painter’s madness—and the thread that ran through the history of modern art, of all art, Aster supposed—was how rotten painters treated one another. That was why she had stayed—to see with her own eyes what she’d been reading about for years.

Just as she was thinking that thought, Paolo appeared. He strode up to her, champagne glass in hand, and stopped just short of encroaching on her space. It was a signal, she supposed, that he was on his best behavior. Aster didn't buy it for a second.

"Let me show you my studio," he said, smiling a let-by-gones-be-by-gones smile.

"I think I'll skip it."

"You don't want to see what I'm working on? I don't let everyone in. It would be a coup for you."

"You don't let every pretty woman in?"

"Is that what you think?"

"I'll just skip the honor."

"You're being rude," he said, his false smile securely in place.

Aster's eyes flashed. "Why is it rude to not want to visit your studio? Why isn't that just my right?"

Paolo tried to make a little joke. "What should we do then? Without the 'showing you my studio' thing I'm at a loss."

"There's nothing for us to do."

"At least pose for me."

"You must be joking."

"You don't believe in models?"

"I'm a painter, not a model."

“But surely you would model for me?”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Paolo laughed. “I’d memorialize you.”

“No thanks.”

“What are you so angry about?”

It was a question that caused her to tremble. She could hear the ice in her glass tinkle as her hand began shaking. She was angry that her mother hadn’t had it easier. She was angry that she’d never known her father. She was angry that men evolved with just enough more muscle mass that she needed a pistol to protect herself. She was angry that Giamenti could clown around on canvas and make millions. She was angry that meaninglessness had a way of creeping into her psyche, causing her attention to turn to Scotch. She was angry that she was one Harry Goldstein check away from absolute poverty. She was angry ...

“What do you think?” she said furiously.

“Me? I think you’re angry that I’m in museums all over the world and that you’re a nobody.”

Aster burst out laughing. “Nice one!” A glint came into her eye. She knew this feeling. She had done stupid things when feeling this way. She once dove off a cliff, to experience soaring—she might have died that day. She drove her first car so fast she burned the engine out. She knew this feeling. It was a feeling she really ought to have disputed ...

“This room, here. Is it free?” Aster said, smiling winningly and pointing to the door of what was certainly a bedroom.

“Unless someone’s using it.”

She could tell that Paolo didn’t know what to make of her. He looked—what was the look exactly?—unconfident. It was funny to see and it enflamed her.

“Let’s see,” she said, opening the door. The room was empty. “Come on in!” She waved him in. It was an ornate guest bedroom with a bed so high off the ground that you almost needed a ladder to mount it. Aster knew that she was making a mistake. But she threw back her hair and strode further into the room. Then she turned on Paolo.

“Why don’t you pose nude for me?” she said, laughing brightly.

Paolo looked at her warily.

“Pose for what?” he said.

“Just for posing sake!”

“I don’t follow.”

“You have a wife?”

“You met her.”

“Right. And a live-in mistress?”

“She’s—”

“Never mind. And children?”

This question caused Paolo to frown darkly. She watched him get his children in mind, as if they had to be summoned from a great distance. In a flash, right before her eyes, she saw how narcissism trumped love. She knew what he going to say before he said it.

“Two of them. They mock my existence. The boy’s a pig and the girl’s a cow. And we both have such good genes, Camilla and me! Every day we ask ourselves, ‘How did we produce these cattle?’”

She could hardly contain her fury. She glared at Paolo—without letting her smile waver. His attitude was like a curse on her future. If she ended up with someone as large as herself—and she wanted nothing less than that—was he bound to be someone

like this, an indecently self-absorbed man who hated his own children? Was there anyone out there who was both a great artist and a good man? Her smile faded. In the history of art, that combination looked to be horrifyingly scarce.

Her mind wandered. When she was very young she and her mother had gone to the zoo and eaten hamburgers next to a family that appalled her. The children were mean—even at seven Aster could tell that—and the father was meaner. He was cruel in the way he belittled them and ran them down about everything. Aster asked her mother why the father was like that. Her mother replied, “He’s ruined love, darling. Not every parent is loving, I’m afraid.”

Aster stared at Paolo, who was thinking his own thoughts.

“You are one charming devil,” Aster said finally, meaning to sound flirtatious but sounding only sarcastic.

“Children are ridiculous,” Paolo said distantly.

“Why don’t you take your clothes off?”

He stopped thinking about his children and stared at her. She watched him try to fathom the situation. She could read in his expression that he knew that he shouldn’t undress. He knew that she didn’t want him and that she wasn’t excited. But maybe there was still some perverse pleasure to be gained here—she watched his eyes calculate, trying to figure out what the reward might be if he got naked. She saw him shake his head slightly—no, he hadn’t been able to gauge any reward—but still he proceeded to unbutton his silk shirt. He removed it slowly. Maybe he just couldn’t help showing off his good muscles, his deep tan, his charming tufts of curly hair. He stood there, uncertain about what to do next.

Aster clapped facetiously.

“Bravo! More!”

Paolo wouldn’t—or couldn’t. Aster stared at him, now openly mocking him. If he pulled down his pants, she would laugh. That was her promise to herself. If he didn’t pull down his pants, she would also laugh. It was a lose-lose situation for Paolo and Paolo began to understand that. Slowly he slipped his shirt back on. Aster broke into derisive laughter. Suddenly she stopped laughing—Paolo’s look terrified her.

With the reflexes of a youthful athlete she rushed by him. The party swirled around her. She knew that she had to leave immediately but something made her stay for another several minutes. She sat by herself in a corner, holding her head, until a familiar voice roused her.

“Are you all right?” Harry Goldstein said solicitously.

Aster got up and forced herself to smile. “I’m fine. But I’m going now.”

“I’ll take you home.”

“No!” She hadn’t meant to sound abrupt. She shook her head slightly. “Thank you, Harry. I’ll catch a cab.”

“Aster--”

“I’m fine, Harry. I’ll call you soon.”

Suddenly Paolo appeared. He made a slow round of farewells, signaling that the party was over. But even as he chatted with this one or shook hands with that one, he darted glances at Aster. She found herself huddling closer to Harry. Then Camilla appeared and joined her husband in their round of farewells. As they got closer, Aster felt herself begin to freeze. She could see his eyes now—he looked ready to kill. She presumed that he wouldn’t raise his hand to her in the middle of a party—and yet she couldn’t be positive.

“I’m off!” she said to Harry. “I’ll call you!”

In the lobby, she noticed the doorman replacing the receiver of the building phone. When he spotted her, he made a face and hurried to the front door. He opened the door for her—awkwardly, Aster thought, and more slowly than seemed necessary.

“Cab, miss?”

“I’ll get one.”

“No problem, miss! My pleasure.”

“All right.”

The doorman let several cabs slip by without hailing one. Aster got antsy and prepared to wave one down herself. She took a step off the curb; only then did he flag a cab. It swerved to a stop inches from their feet.

“There,” he said. “Goodnight, miss.”

She said nothing and got in. It took the doorman so long to close the door behind her that the Jamaican cabby finally called out, “What you doing there, man?” Still the doorman held the cab door open. “Hey, man!” the cabby exclaimed. Only then did the door shut behind her—violently, Aster thought. A second later the cab shot out into the late night traffic.

6.

When Aster got home she went straight to bed. Almost as soon as she fell asleep, one of the windows on the north wall of the studio exploded. She bolted upright in bed and pulled the covers tight around her. An icy wind began to strike her face. She turned on the bedside lamp and stared at the gaping window frame across the room. After a moment she got out of bed. She took several steps and cried out, “Christ!”

She bent down, removed a sliver of glass from the heel of her foot, and watched a drop of blood rise to the surface. She doubled back toward the bed, walking on the ball of her injured foot so as not to get blood on the rug, and made it to the bathroom where she applied moist tissue to the puncture. The puncture had quickly stopped bleeding—but it hurt. She put on shoes and made her way gingerly to the window.

There was jagged glass everywhere—and in the middle of the glass, one pristine brick.

The phone rang. Aster jumped. She crossed the room and answered the phone on the fourth ring.

“There!” a voice hissed.

“Paolo—”

The phone went dead.

Aster stood there. After a long moment she went to the cupboard and poured herself a Scotch. She glanced at the clock. It was three-thirty in the morning. She sat down on the sofa. The brick hardly surprised her. The ice tinkled against the side of the glass: her hand was shaking. She took a long drink. Her nerves settled as she fleshed out a thought: she had insulted Paolo and he had thrown a brick. All right. Fine. She could live with that. She could live with that just so long as it ended there!

That was the thing. If Paolo wanted to throw a brick because Aster had hurt his feelings, so be it. But it had to end there. It had to, because otherwise she would have

started something too absurd to be believed. She'd taken some dangerous turns in high school and college and, though she hadn't gotten pregnant, though she hadn't gotten AIDS, though she hadn't acquired a drug habit, she might have. Some of it was blind luck. Some of it was an inner voice that said, "Don't lose yourself. You have too much to do in life!" But how much luck could you count on? It was time not to do stupid things!

Her first semester at City College she'd had an affair with an alcoholic painting professor. That hadn't been pretty. This could be worse—unless it ended right now. This could be worse because Giamenti might actually matter in the world she was determined to conquer. Why make enemies? That was the thought that she couldn't quiet. Why make enemies? She knew the answer to her own question: because she wouldn't roll over! But was that really such a great answer ... ?

The wind rushing through the gaping opening began to soothe her. She got up and crossed to the pile of broken glass. The shards were beautiful—their jaggedness, their glint. To paint glass!—that was a technical problem worthy of her talents. Bloody glass—not that this glass was bloody. But the red of the rug showing through the glass suggested that effect.

She hardly noticed what she was doing. She got out the carmine, the crimson—she found herself preparing her palette. Fortunately she had four primed canvases up, waiting. In her mind's eye she saw one super-realist painting after another, paintings where the artist had tackled glass: perfume bottles, car windows, store windows. They could make glass sparkle and they could make glass sing. She would make glass scream.

She worked all night, only stopping to make cup after cup of tea. By morning she'd finished her first Shattered Glass painting. By the afternoon she'd completed a second. She painted for three days running, sleeping only three hours a night, not really sleeping at all, just dozing off and coming wide awake after ten or fifteen minutes. The passion or pressure to create never abated during those frenzied days.

Her neighbor Shelley, a hefty black woman who painted oversized flowers, came in on the third day and watched her paint. Aster had become friendly with two of her neighbors, Shelley, who came from the south, and an Italian named Jimmy, who came from Brooklyn—which, he liked to say, was just as far away. Shelley sat on the sofa, a goblet of wine in her hand, and made oh-ing and ah-ing noises.

"You are the devil's own court painter!" Shelley suddenly exclaimed. "What makes

you paint like that, girl?”

“I have no idea.”

“You paint like a bloody executioner!”

At the end of four days Aster had four paintings finished. Her two “painting walls” were now filled: the four Religious Education paintings took up one wall and the four Shattered Glass paintings took up the other. Even if you knew nothing about art, you knew that you were in the presence of something wild and great. Aster felt neither elation or relief—or pride, for that matter. She only felt empty and spent.

For the following few days she did normal things in a complete daze, accompanied by a near-constant headache. She kept herself moving from task to task, shopping for groceries, doing her laundry—and drinking too much at The Lost Note. She didn’t have a thought in her head or a feeling in her body. On the fourth afternoon she had a slight accident with a paring knife that, for a split second, brought her back to a life. But the very next moment that spent, empty-headed feeling returned.

She hadn’t bothered to fix the window. The studio was freezing. She wasn’t ready for warmth. She hadn’t removed the glass shards from the rug and she didn’t want comfort. A sleety snow began to fall but she didn’t raise a finger to call a glazier. She watched the snow swirl in, glistening on the wood floor and dampening the red tribal rug that ran to within a few feet of the wall.

Then she slept. She slept from six in the afternoon until almost noon the next day. She alternated between nightmares that were almost pleasant and sex dreams that were virtual nightmares. When she awoke she looked at her new paintings. Finally she saw them. An immense feeling coursed through her and she recognized the feeling: she felt proud. She called Harry Goldstein.

“Harry! Come over tonight. Can you bring that fellow who owns Gallery Lulu?”

“Willie Parsley? Why?”

“Just bring him! I’ll see you then.”

“I’ll see--”

“You have to bring him!”

Harry called in the afternoon to say they’d be coming. Aster dressed. It took her a long time to decide what to wear—or rather, how to look. In life, she put on anything—a top, jeans, any old shoes. This was different. Her art should speak for itself and would speak for itself, but her persona was not irrelevant, not in a celebrity-driven, youth-driven, beauty-driven culture where everything seemed to depend on your weight and your stunts. How should she look? Beautiful, she decided.

She began pacing at seven. Goldstein and Parsley arrived at eight. She ushered them in and waved dismissively at the paintings on the left-hand wall. “Those four are called ‘Religious Education.’ Forget about them. I know they can’t be sold! These are the ones ... They’re called Shattered Glass ... ” She found she had nothing to say. She turned her back on them, moved to the kitchen counter, and took a sip of Scotch.

The two men were silent for a long time. Aster couldn’t look at them. She took another sip—a swig, really.

“Christ,” Parsley finally muttered.

Aster turned around.

Both men stood staring. “They’re magnificent,” Harry whispered. Then he came to himself. “What happened, Aster?” He gestured at the glass shards and the gaping window frame. “What happened?”

“Nothing, nothing, it’s not important!” She turned to Parsley. “Do you want them?” she said.

Willie Parsley was about her own height, five-six or five-seven, and probably twenty years older than he looked. He looked like a boy of fourteen but had to be in his mid-thirties. He had on a black leather jacket, an expensive button-down shirt with subtle purple stripes, tight pants, cowboy boots in that same subtle shade of purple, and one bucking bronco earring. As agitated as she felt, Aster nevertheless understood two things clearly: Parsley was impressed and, no doubt from force of habit, was about to play hardball.

“Let me think,” he murmured.

“I’ll be famous within a year!” Aster cried, surprising herself by her intensity. “Do you doubt that?”

“I don’t doubt that,” Parsley agreed, laughing. “But since you’re new—”

“Don’t say ‘new’!” Aster felt a little frantic. “Look at these. New, old—they’re great, aren’t they?”

“Do I get one of these?” Harry asked softly.

Aster crossed to Harry and touched him on the shoulder.

“Of course! Whichever one you want. Thank you so much, Harry. Of course! Take two ...”

Goldstein turned to Parsley. “I’m taking that one.” He nodded at the first canvas from the left. “You can say that it’s already sold for fifty thousand.”

“Fifty thousand!” Parsley exclaimed. “That’s insane, Harry! I was thinking eight or maybe twelve tops. She’s completely unknown. I can’t set a floor at fifty! People will buy these paintings—but not at that price.”

“Willie,” Harry said. “Just look at them.”

The two of them stared at the paintings. Aster hadn’t the slightest idea what to do with herself. She returned to the counter and retrieved her Scotch.

“They are stunning,” Willie Parsley admitted. “If she were a mid-career artist—”

“Think star, Willie. What would you ask then?”

“You wouldn’t be able to get these for under five hundred thousand each. A million at auction.”

Those numbers registered. Five hundred thousand. A million. They registered but they didn’t excite her and they didn’t floor her—they sounded natural and reasonable.

Suddenly she understood that she was built for numbers like that. Wealth was not going to derail her. She caught herself smiling for what had to be the first time in weeks.

“Are we agreed, then?” Harry said.

Parsley smiled wryly. “I have never, never, never heard of such a price out the gate. Fifty thousand? Tell me again why we’re starting that high?”

“Because no one ever painted like that out the gate.”

They were agreed. Snow swirled in through the window and melted on the floor. Absent-mindedly, Aster poured them drinks. They toasted her paintings and her price but her thoughts were elsewhere. Suddenly she made up her mind.

“Harry, you get another painting this year. In addition.”

“That wasn’t our deal,” Harry replied in a voice full of emotion.

“I can change the terms if I change them in your favor!” Aster exclaimed.

“Strictly speaking, that’s un-American.”

“But it’s the way it’s going to be!” She snapped her fingers. “I know what you can do for the extra painting. Get me the best contract you can. Will you negotiate my contract, Harry?”

Parsley groaned. “The best defense attorney in New York negotiating gallery contracts! That’s like having Beethoven play requests at your wedding reception!”

Harry smiled at Aster. “I will indeed.”

The two men got ready to leave. As he was putting on his overcoat, Harry glanced at the other suite of paintings. He let out a whistle.

“Look at those!” he said. “You don’t pull your punches!”

““Religious Education,”” Aster said.

Parsley covered his eyes. “Not religion bashing! Harry, don’t make me look at those!” He turned to Aster and winked. “Not yet, anyway.”

Goldstein laughed, then added seriously, “When will you show Shattered Glass?”

“Let me find a slot. We’ll have to do some real announcing. At those prices!”

Aster smiled wryly. She shook hands with Willie Parsley, a seriocomic handshake that wavered between business and amusement. Then she hugged Harry hard and pushed the two of them out the door.

7.

For several days her mood fluctuated wildly. She felt proud of the paintings, overjoyed to have a gallery, and thrilled about the price Willie would be asking. At the same time anxiety and despair hounded her. She found herself muttering, “Is this all there is?” and “Now what?” She’d catch herself looking at the Shattered Glass paintings and saying, “Great. I can paint. So what?” Ten minutes later she’d pick up a magazine and hear herself thinking, “Soon I’ll be able to have anything in here. How crazy is that?” She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She rode a roller coaster of emotions and avoided her brushes.

She had the glass removed and the window fixed. She visited Shelley, watched her paint, and shared some bottles of wine with her. She visited Jimmy, her neighbor on the other side, a thick-necked Italian who painted Rothko-like color fields, and flirted with him just enough to keep her juices flowing. She bought art books and read novels. On a Monday near the end of the month she invited in a photographer, a young man whom the Met used and who Harry swore by, to photograph and record her paintings. On that Thursday someone came from Gallery Lulu to take the Shattered Glass paintings away. Parsley was now in charge of them. That left a long, blank wall in the studio whose blankness and emptiness she medicated with Scotch.

February slipped into March. Harry called and asked, “What are you painting?”

“Nothing!”

“Incubating something?”

“Whatever,” Aster groaned.

“Do you want company?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

She found herself sitting in cafés and drawing, which was probably a good thing, and eyeing dangerous men, which was a bad thing. She even longed for another brick

through her window—and hated herself for wanting that. In high school, when this identical feeling had welled up inside of her, she would make some dramatic gesture, spike her hair, wear her shortest skirt, play Halloween pranks in May. She had no close girlfriends but there were always boys and men around to enlist in her dramas, gay poet types or Latino artists who drank in the bars along Mission Street.

For a period of time she flirted with girls. Her mom would notice things and say, “How are you, baby?” In fact she was always all right, just wild, edgy, revved up, needing to live life not like a kid but like an artist, someone with real work to do. But she didn’t find her real work until she met Esteban, a Mission muralist. She was nineteen then. She’d watch him prepare a wall for a mural, maybe a school wall or a church wall or the wall of some building wedged in between two crumbling Victorians, and experience something she had no name for yet.

Esteban let her paint in his studio. At first she thought she was supposed to paint realistically, to make things look recognizable. Esteban told her that she wasn’t a camera. He showed her books and took her to galleries. He said, “Communicate something. Whatever you like.” He was respectful. He would watch her paint, shake his head, and say, “You’ve got it,” meaning that she had the knack. She could draw right off the bat. She could use color. “Do apples,” Esteban would say. “It never hurts to do apples. Look at Cezanne. Then do your own apples.”

Aster shook herself out of her reveries. Winter still gripped the city. She wandered the biting cold streets, needing to move. She could have approached one of the new canvases that she’d tacked up and “just painted.” But something told her not to. She wanted to respect this blackness, this blankness, this transition from the hot frenzy of the Shattered Glass paintings through some unknown territory darker than a New York afternoon in winter.

The buzz began in mid-March. First she got a gorgeous announcement about her Gallery Lulu show, an oversized, full-color postcard that showed each of her four glass paintings and that made cryptic reference to the mysterious Aster Lynn. That the image-making apparatus had gotten its teeth into her gave her the funniest feeling. She wanted to smile—ironically, she supposed—but couldn’t. It wasn’t funny, to become unreal. From now on, she would always be partly made-up. If she got famous ... that thought sent a funny chill down her spine, part pleasure, part fear.

The day after the announcement arrived she got her first phone request for an interview. Then came a second, then a third. Parsley knew his business. When, one afternoon near the end of March, she learned that she was going to make an appearance on a Sunday morning television show to coincide with the unveiling of her paintings,

she got weird and frisky. Television. Appearing on television. She said the phrase a few times, to make sense of it, to gauge her own reaction. All she could tell was that her fingers were tingling.

She couldn't stay still that whole afternoon. She was still wired at ten in the evening. At ten-thirty she dressed in her warmest jacket and thickest scarf and went out walking in the direction of Washington Square Park. The night was less bitter than recent nights and she felt almost comfortable, her scarf wound around her neck, her knit hat protecting her ears. The Village was alive and buzzing, the restaurants full, the streets clogged with traffic. At the entrance to Washington Square Park she felt for her pistol and wandered into the darkness.

She passed the drunks and the lovers. Soon she heard music and, at the same instant, grew aware of a trash can fire. A group had gathered around a young man with a guitar. Some newspapers had been set on fire for warmth. Faces were illuminated in the firelight. Aster stopped and listened. The young man looked to be about twenty-five or twenty-six and had the most beautiful voice she had ever heard. He was singing Irish ballads, with the occasional early Dylan thrown in.

Aster's only thought was, "He is so beautiful." It was his voice, his carriage, and the heart that showed through. There was also something else that she couldn't identify. As people drifted away she moved closer. After about fifteen minutes she was standing right next to him. He stopped to take a sip from a coffee container. Aster smiled. The young musician smiled back.

"You sing beautifully," she said.

"Thank you."

He looked right at her, meeting her gaze. She could read both irony and sweetness in his look. Her instant impression was that he was worldly—but kind.

"Are you Irish?" she ventured.

"Irish mother. Jewish father."

Aster nodded. "Sounds perfect."

“Musicians on my mother’s side,” the young man continued. “Rabbis on my father’s side.”

“And what are you?”

“A musical atheist.”

She laughed.

“Will you play some more Dylan?”

He nodded and played. His playing made her feel better, better about her path, better about being a painter, better about her future. He wasn’t a brain surgeon and neither was she, but nevertheless what he did mattered. His music mattered—and by extension her painting mattered. She felt some deep pleasure, some new self-acceptance, and a calm that she couldn’t remember experiencing before. At the same time, she felt like crying.

A half-hour passed. Shadowy figures drifted by. Aster shook her head.

“Thank you,” she said. “That was beautiful.”

“You’re welcome. What do you do?”

She smiled shyly. “I paint.”

The young man nodded. “I have a band,” he said.

“Do you?”

“As a matter of fact, we’re playing tomorrow night. Will you come?”

“I might,” she replied coyly.

“Here.” He found a piece of paper in his guitar case and wrote down a few words. “This is where we’ll be. There’ll be a ticket for you at the window. This note will get you backstage afterwards. If you want to visit.”

“I might.”

“I need your name. For the ticket.”

“Aster Lynn.”

“Aster Lynn,” the young musician repeated, writing it down.

“And yours?”

A fight broke out in the shadows and she didn't hear his response. It was time for her to leave. The night had grown mysteriously warmer, even though the paper fire had died out. A few dying embers glowed in the pitch darkness. She smiled at the young man and met his eyes. He looked directly at her with a look that she had a hard time identifying. What was it? The only word that came to mind was “serious.” She had the sense that she was looking back at him in exactly the same way.

She moved through the streets of the Village in a dream. When she got home she read the young musician's note. For a second she couldn't quite make out the words. Then they came clear to her. “Shea Stadium,” the note read. “8 p.m. Please let Aster Lynn backstage. Tol.”

Aster received the news in her heart and in her groin. So that had been Tol! She shook her head ironically. The young musician in Washington Square Park was only the heir apparent to Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, a troubadour whose band was one of the most famous in the world. It seemed exactly right that she would meet him and exactly right that they would exchange glances whose meaning she could feel but not name.

8.

It was past midnight. The street outside had grown quiet. Only an occasional siren broke the silence. Aster felt wired. She didn't want a drink, but she dearly wanted something. She knew exactly what that something was. She wanted to paint. And she knew what she wanted to paint.

She flew at the canvas. As she painted she heard herself muttering, "It can't work." At first she thought she was commenting on the painting, a Washington Square painting memorializing her encounter with Tol. But no—the real meaning of her words came clear to her. She was thinking about the possibility of their life together—and dismissing its possibility. It just couldn't work, two ambitious artists trying to make a go of it together. There would be too much ... a strange word came to her mind ... too much enormity in the relationship for it to work.

He'd be gone two hundred days a year. She didn't want to be with a man who wasn't there. But it wasn't that. She could amuse herself very well and who knew if she needed anyone for more than a third of each year. Rather, it was that women would throw themselves at him every hour of every day. He might have the best intentions, he might fend off ninety-nine percent of their advances, but he would have to act on that other one percent. He wouldn't be human if he didn't. So that would mean affairs. She didn't want that. She hesitated in mid-brushstroke. Even that wasn't quite it. Even if he were loyal, kind, faithful and excellent in fifty different ways, he would still be arrogant, temperamental, demanding—he would be like her, like any real artist. How could two outsized creatures survive in the same space, even if it were the size of a palace? How could they survive in the same universe, even if it were infinite?

She conjured up an image from a low-budget Japanese science fiction movie, an image of King Kong battling Godzilla. She laughed but the laugh died away instantly. "It can't work," she muttered as she applied pigment. "It just can't. There are no fairy tale romances ..."

What was the typical story when two artists tried to mate? Some survived by maintaining an awesome distance, like Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Steiglitz, the one in New Mexico virtually year-round, the other in New York. Was that a way to live? Some relationships were pure street theater, like that between Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, a symphony of posturing and affairs and operatic gestures. How ugly was that? Then you had relationships defined by the one who got to be the genius and the bully,

the one who got to brawl, drink and have lovely depressions, while his compliant mate did her mild art and all the cleaning up. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner came to mind. Ridiculous. Evolution had played another one of its dirty little tricks, along with conjuring up rats and mosquitoes. It had made it impossible for two ambitious artists to live well together.

“Could we be different?” she heard herself wonder. To that ray of hope she instantly shook her head.

She painted. A luminous night, more luminous than the real night out her window, appeared on the canvas. She got lost in the painting and looked up to find that it was four in the morning. She yawned violently and found herself too tired to go on. She cared for her good sable brushes and brushed her teeth and then sleep overwhelmed her.

The next morning she resumed painting in her signature way, a way that was fast and wild—and also serene and deliberate. To the world it must have had an uncontrolled look. But inside she was as sure of her gestures and her intentions as a race car driver or a downhill skier. Like them, she might crash—there was always that possibility—but at least she wouldn’t break her leg or her neck!—she laughed as another almost invisible midnight tree came into being.

In the afternoon she dressed warmly for the concert. She had never been to a large outdoor rock-and-roll concert. She had no patience for fireworks and thunderous effects and, as one example of her phobia, had always avoided the Fourth of July festivities at Chrissy Field in San Francisco. She loved jazz clubs and intimate music. She loved the individual and what the individual could accomplish. Fifty thousand screaming people in one place made her think of Sartre’s great line, “Hell is other people.” Such crowds made her think of conformity, blood sports, inquisitions, and other horrors. She just didn’t trust people massed together.

A deep night had already fallen by the time she got to Shea Stadium. She was led to what she understood had to be one of the best seats, on the baseball infield up close to the bandstand. At least twenty beefy bouncers in too-tight uniforms fronted the stage. They spent the long pre-concert minutes keeping young love kittens from Queens from getting too close to the stage. The electricity grew, complete darkness descended, and then the lit stage flamed into being. The band members were magically in place, as still as statues, with Tol in the center. He nodded and the band launched into its first number, one of its big hits, an anthem that was all rock-and-rock but with a ballad refrain—Tol’s signature style.

Aster felt her whole body pulse and respond. Tol stood amazingly still and radiated quiet, even as the band flew at the music. The band knocked out a sound that gripped you like a vise and made your blood boil. In the middle of it all Tol, like some Zen master, sang quietly, calmly, and gorgeously. When he stopped singing, you felt like crying—you felt the loss instantly. When a song ended, you felt like weeping. Their artistry made heat out of nothing—the second a song ended, you felt the night wind again.

They played a long set in a cold that you only felt between songs. Tol offered up one generous encore after another and put almost three hours of music on the ecstatic audience. How could he do it? He had to be pouring out buckets of adrenaline every concert night, despite all that stillness. Aster tried to fathom what sort of person could do that. She felt a shiver run down her spine. He was beautiful to look at, sang beautifully, and seemed beautiful inside—and all of that filled her with nothing but doubt.

When the concert ended she made her way to the front of the stage and presented her note to the head bouncer. He took her by the shoulder, moved her through the crowd that surged up front, led her past several security checkpoints, and escorted her down a narrow underground tunnel that twisted and turned through the bowels of the stadium. Their footsteps echoed and contributed to the pounding in her head, a pounding that was like some aftermath reverberation of the concert.

They passed through a guarded door. Aster found herself in an enormous room filled with people, noise, and food. A magnificent post-concert spread had been laid out, so deluxe a spread that it came with serving people at every station. Techies and roadies were bellying up to the feast. Aster stopped inside the door, unwilling to proceed. When her escort gestured her forward, she shook her head and stood her ground. He gestured again but she wouldn't budge. Shrugging, he left her to own devices.

She spotted Tol. He was standing in the middle of a group of people, two or three of them bodyguards, more than a few of them attractive young women. Aster's heart sank. It wasn't shyness and it wasn't jealousy that prevented her from joining him. Rather, it was some complicated appraisal process that concluded with a resounding "No!" Tol caught sight of her and, beaming, beckoned her over with a friendly wave. Aster turned on her heels and retraced her steps through the bowels of Shea Stadium.

She got home in a hurricane of a mood. She slammed the door behind her, rattling dishes in the sink. She threw herself on the sofa, jumped up, poured herself a Scotch, set it down, and threw off her clothes. Without knowing what she was doing, she found herself dressing to paint. Ten minutes later she was painting like a fiend. The

Washington Square painting exploded to life. When all that was left to do were some details, some blue-black leaves and pale yellow highlights, she flung herself into bed. She had done the right thing in avoiding Tol—she believed that!—but that didn't stop her from crying bitter tears.

9.

The phone rang the next afternoon at about two. She had just finished her first Washington Square painting and was sitting on the sofa staring at it. It was a gorgeous, moody painting in blues and blacks, with the garbage can fire casting an eerie glow on figures in the underbrush. It reminded her of certain Paris-in-the-rain paintings and some of Van Gogh's night paintings, especially the second, lesser-known "Starry Night." When she answered the phone she was lost in thought.

"Hello?" she said.

"Aster?"

She recognized Tol's voice. Her heart stopped.

"Yes?"

"This is Tol."

"Did I give you my number?" She tried to sound amused but she suspected that she sounded a little paranoid.

"You're listed in the book."

"Oh." She gave a small laugh. "I am."

"Is it all right that I'm calling you?"

"Yes. Yes. It's all right. Of course! About last night--"

"Why didn't you come over?"

"It was a little too much. I don't know—I'm sorry."

“No, it’s okay!” After an awkward silence he said, “Can I visit?”

“Visit me?”

“And see your paintings?”

The shock wasn’t that he wanted to come over. The shock was that she was a painter with a studio who could have people over to see her paintings. She remembered when Esteban would receive such visitors. He had developed a way of being that allowed a visitor to peacefully take in the paintings—paintings that were smaller versions of his murals, canvas-sized but still monumental in feel—and not be distracted by painter chitchat or painter nerves. Esteban would make tea, ostensibly in his role as polite host, but really to give the visitor a chance to look at the paintings without the painter in the room. He would return from the kitchen with the tea tray and never ask, “What did you think?” or “Which did you like?” He would only ask, “How do you take your tea?” and wait patiently for his guest to bring up the subject of his paintings.

“Well—all right,” Aster said after a long moment. “I mean, of course! Of course.”

“In an hour?”

“In an hour?” She hesitated. “Yes, all right. In an hour! That’s fine--”

She felt completely flustered. After she’d given him the address and hung up she went and changed her clothes three times, finally opting for a blue blouse and jeans. Then she did her face and brushed her hair. She felt as nervous as a schoolgirl. At the same time she recognized that this rendezvous had to mean nothing. She was determined not to get involved with someone as large as herself who had the second drawback of wandering the world touring. Even if she was infatuated with him and even if she wanted him, she had to be smart.

She had to be smart!

He rang the bell downstairs and she buzzed him in. In a minute he appeared. He smiled awkwardly and she knew that she was wearing the identical awkward smile. She let him pass by her into the studio. He was taller than her by several inches, lean and muscled, boyish and clean-cut. Only his eyes and his intensity made you suspect that he was unusual. She trailed behind him.

“Great space,” he said.

“It is. I feel very lucky.”

He had on an oatmeal-colored Irish sweater and jeans. He caught sight of the Washington Square painting.

“That was the other night,” he said.

“Yes.”

“It’s wonderful.” He moved closer. “It’s really something.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s tremendous.”

“Thank you.”

They remained completely awkward. He toured the Religious Education paintings—of course he didn’t know what to say. Who did? There was nothing odder than imagining that paintings could be discussed. She didn’t hold it against him that he couldn’t find the right words. Saying nothing was infinitely better than mouthing inanities or offering up idle praise.

Aster poured them coffee and they discovered that they couldn’t sit down. Too much was going on between them—there was too much pent-up energy, too many nerves. They stood, holding their coffee cups.

“I’m off to Paris on Friday,” Tol said. “We have three weeks in Europe.”

Aster nodded.

“Not that I love touring,” he said pointedly.

“No,” Aster replied after a moment. “But that’s your life.”

“Yes.” He looked away. “It’s hard on relationships.”

Suddenly Aster sat down. Tol followed suit, taking the chair opposite rather than joining her on the sofa.

“Maybe even impossible!” Aster said. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. The partner could always come along ... she would always be welcome ...”

“She couldn’t come along if she had important work of her own to do.”

“No,” Tol agreed. “That’s true. Not then.”

Aster laughed. “Well, whatever are we talking about!”

Tol glanced down at his coffee cup before speaking. “Are your paintings for sale?”

Aster hesitated. “I don’t think so. Not at this split second.”

“No?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What would they cost if they were?”

“Well, I guess they are, when you come down to it!” Just thinking about “her price” made her jump out of her seat. Tol rose with her. “Gallery Lulu is representing me and ... as I understand it ... they’ll be asking fifty thousand ... for each one ...” She laughed and turned to face him. “This is so new to me, being represented, having a gallery ... I’ll be easier with this in a year or two!”

Tol smiled and nodded. “I understand. It’s beyond weird to me the amount of money we’re making.” He grew serious. “Some of the guys in the band aren’t handling their wealth or their celebrity.” He shook the thought away. “So ... fifty thousand dollars.

That's pretty amazing."

"I hear that's my floor," Aster laughed.

"What's your ceiling?"

"Good one!"

Neither knew what to do or say next. Suddenly Tol took her hand.

"You could come with me to Paris."

"I can't."

"Have you been to Paris?"

"Don't say that! You don't have to sell me on Paris! But I can't."

"Can you tell me why?"

She shook her head. "I can't. But it has something to do with ... not getting swallowed up."

Tol stared at her. "You could think about it. We don't leave until tomorrow night."

"No. I really don't think so."

"Well," Tol said. He let go of her hand. "Can I see you when I get back?"

"We'd better not."

That surprised him. "No? Really? Aster, please ..."

"I just think that I need to date quieter men."

He shook his head. “You don’t really mean that.”

“No, I don’t really mean that.”

She was getting close to tears. She turned her face away.

“What is it, then?”

“I don’t know how to say it.”

“The rock star thing? The women thing?”

“Tol--”

“That’s why you couldn’t come over last night?”

He reached across and took her hand again. She felt on fire.

“Can I at least call you? You have to let me call you.”

“Since my number is in the book—”

He put one finger under her chin and raised her face so that they were staring at each other. “Say that I can call you.”

“You can call me.”

Tol sighed and let her hand go. Then he laughed. “About your number being listed. That won’t last much longer.”

For a second she didn’t understand. Then it came to her. “Because of celebrity?”

“Exactly.” He pointed to the Washington Square painting. “I suppose you won’t let me buy that?”

“No,” she whispered. “I don’t think so.” Now she was fighting to hold back her

tears. “Have a great time in Paris,” she said hoarsely.

He jotted down his phone number. “Or you can call me. Any time!”

That evening she went out and bought all of Tol’s albums. She listened to them through the night. Of course she loved him. Of course she wanted him. But a quote haunted her, something that Leo Tolstoi’s wife had said. “It is sad that my emotional dependence on the man I love should have killed so much of my energy and ability. There was certainly once a great deal of energy and ability in me.” Aster didn’t believe that anything could ever quench her fire—but she had enough darkness in her, enough doubts and down moments, that she couldn’t be sure. To protect herself ... just like that, she burst out sobbing. A little later she put herself to bed.

10.

She had several bad days. Then one morning she awoke feeling happy. It struck her how outrageously lucky she had been to choose Harry Goldstein as her target and to have him agree to her plan. What were the odds? She knew that there was luck in boldness and that she had helped make her own luck. But after that initial boldness, the gods of whimsy had gotten involved and smiled down on her. In a postmodern landscape denuded of fate and gods, hard work still counted, connections still counted, ambition still counted, talent still counted, but nothing counted more than the absurd luck of the draw.

Now Tol wanted her. How absurd was that? And she wanted him. And they could have each other. Did it verge on self-sabotage not to let their romance blossom? Of course she should let it happen! Her knowledge of the history of failed artist relationships was a ridiculous obstacle. She should get right on the phone and call his cell. She should—

She didn't. A picture came into her head—a movie clip, really. She saw her mother with one artistic man after another, this well-known novelist so depressed that he seemed enveloped in a palpable black cloud, that rocker bouncing off walls and suddenly selling his drums for heroin, this painter burning his canvases and almost burning down the building. She wasn't her mother and Tol wasn't any of his mother's lovers—but the film clip cycled and recycled in her head. When she picked up the phone, she called Harry Goldstein.

“Let me make you dinner,” Aster said.

“You cook?” Harry laughed.

“I can cook pasta and I can make sandwiches. I can also order take-out Chinese--”

“I'll bring a picnic. You paint.”

“Like your time isn't valuable!”

“We’re both minting money.”

As she hung up she thought about Picasso. First no one would buy him, then, after he had become famous, every napkin scrawl became money in the bank. He loved to torture his buyers, even going so far as to say that some painting wasn’t really his, even though it was, thus destroying its provenance and its value. It wasn’t that he didn’t love money. He loved it dearly! But he also saw the absurdity of the whole thing. How could an hour’s worth of gesturing with a brush be worth more than the annual hard labor of ten men? Nobody with even a quarter of a conscience—and Aster reckoned that Picasso had about a quarter of a conscience—could find such absurdity tolerable.

She found herself dressing up for Harry’s visit. She knew what that meant. Harry arrived at seven lugging two shopping bags full of food. In the bags were salads, cold cuts, mustards, bread, wine, fruit, a peach tart. Aster laughed.

“Are you staying for a week?”

“May I?”

He looked at her without seeming to look. She knew what he was thinking. She could feel her own pulse begin to race.

Suddenly he caught sight of the Washington Square painting. “Aster.” He crossed the living room to get a better look. “I’m going to have to buy that.”

“I’m not sure it’s for sale.”

“Not even to me?”

“I’m not sure, Harry. Let me think about it.”

“You’re doing a series of these?”

“Three more, I think.”

“Let me buy one of the series. Sight unseen. Your choice.”

“You know that you get another painting for free.”

“This one I want to buy. Seventy-five thousand.”

Aster shook her head. “My price appears to be going up.”

Harry gazed at the painting. Finally he shook himself free of its spell. “Technically, Willie should get 60% of that seventy-five thousand.”

“No!” Aster exclaimed.

Harry nodded. “That’s how his standard contract reads. If someone buys something shown at Gallery Lulu—which in a manner of speaking is what I did with the glass painting, since that’s what we’re saying I did—and that collector approaches the artist and buys something else, Willie gets 60% of that.”

“Incredible!”

“That’s the standard contract,” Harry laughed. “Not yours. Yours reads that he gets 40% of just the work that actually gets hung in his gallery. He gets nothing on leads, commissions, or anything else.”

Aster understood. She shook her head. “Thank you, Harry. I can’t tell you how--” She smiled at him and he blushed. “But, really! Would I have had to sign his standard contract without you in the middle?”

“Yes. Or gone somewhere else. To an equally bad contract.”

“I need a lawyer more than I need a muse!”

They laid out dinner on the dining room table. Harry’s provisions filled the table to overflowing. They ate, talked, and drank. Harry brought two bottles of Chateau Prieuré-Lichine Margaux and they polished off the first bottle and began the second.

“Is there a reason why I can’t buy that painting?”

“I’m not sure I want to say.”

“You’re starting a personal collection?”

“No! It’s—” She made up her mind. “I fell a little bit in love the other night. I was walking in Washington Square Park and there was this young man singing. I stopped to listen. It was Tol.”

“Tol? In Washington Square Park?”

“Exactly. I went to his concert at Shea. He came over and invited me to Paris. I said no.”

Harry took that all in. “Why didn’t you go?” he finally said.

“I’m not exactly sure.”

“And this painting is for him?”

“For him?” She fell silent. “No—I don’t know. I just don’t want to sell it right now.”

“Tol,” Harry repeated. “So you liked him?”

“I--” She shook her head. “Don’t ask me what this means. Probably I love him.”

“Isn’t that a little outlandish?” Harry replied, clearly annoyed.

“I don’t know! If something like love exists ... then I love him. If it doesn’t exist ... then I’ll have to settle for your good French wine.”

She put on a Grover Washington CD and pressed repeat. It became nine, nine-thirty, ten. They talked and flirted. Aster made sure to exorcise Tol’s presence.

“May I ask you a question?” Harry said. It was a little after eleven.

“Yes.”

“Am I leaving or staying?”

“You’re staying. If you want to ...”

“I hoped so.” He made a face. “Why?”

“Why?” She touched his hand. “Because you are gorgeous and you knock my socks off!”

Harry frowned. “If this is charity or repayment—”

“This is an aspect of love, Harry. Be quiet!”

She leaned forward and kissed him. He pressed her to him with such force that Aster gasped.

“Sorry!” Harry whispered. “I think I’ve been thinking about this for a long time.”

Aster laughed. “Good! I don’t mind being wanted.”

She led him to the bedroom and lowered—but did not extinguish—the light.

Part 2. Spring

1.

The sunlight began to soften and brighten as the days began to lengthen. Aster experienced the lengthening of the days viscerally. The prospect of the long days of summer, still months off but tangible on certain serene spring days, made her giddy with anticipation. At the same time, her basic mood remained dark. She figured that was her nature; her existential nature, compounded by the loss of her mother and the absence of her father. Her nature caused her to lose whole days brooding about—she couldn't say what. Some days it was the value of painting. Other days it was the value of her painting. Often it was the question of whether the species was worth a fig. She brooded, restlessly roamed New York, and sketched some. After completing the four paintings of the Washington Square series, she avoided painting.

Easter brought a bitter wind and a brief snowstorm, followed by days of lovely weather. Her opening at Gallery Lulu was set for April 22nd. It was unusual to hold a full-fledged opening for a show of only four paintings but Willie Parsley had decided to go “over the top,” as he put it, considering “Aster’s prices.” He called every other day with “exciting news”—about how well the brochure had turned out, about which reporter just might be doing a feature on her, about which champagne he had settled on serving at her opening. She smiled a lot during those phone conversations, shook her head a lot, and noticed that she wasn't listening much.

She did notice that Parsley had stopped mentioning “her prices” with a tone of irony and wonderment. Now, when he mentioned them, it was completely straightforwardly. Aster wondered about that but said nothing. One day she learned the reason. All four of her glass paintings had sold to A-list collectors who had been invited in one-at-a-time for special previews. Now Aster's price was no longer outrageous. It was her floor. Just like that she had moved from obscurity to the edge of stardom. Aster took the news in stride—except when she thought about it. Then she felt like breaking into a jig. But sometimes a more complicated emotion arose, made up primarily of sadness.

She had significant money coming from Willie but wouldn't see it for a while. Apparently there was a gallery-friendly clause in the contract that Harry had let stand, about when the gallery needed to pay its artists. Still, the fact that all four paintings had sold before the opening made the opening tension-free. Unburdened of selling anxiety and with her name already made, Aster made up her mind how she wanted to be. She wanted to be humble, accessible, and natural. The idea of acting the arrogant

star made her teeth ache. She would humbly enjoy her sudden star status, smile winningly, and drink a little extra champagne.

She would take herself seriously but not take being a star seriously. That was the pledge she made to herself as she dressed in her new blue dress, bought for the opening, and put on a pair of silver earrings given to her by her mother. Her mother loved jewelry but in a completely ambivalent way. She explained to Aster that to be able to possess diamonds was a function of privilege and that in every one of a diamond's facets you could see reflected some poor person's story of woe. She nevertheless loved beautiful jewelry, just as Aster loved beautiful paintings. It wasn't a paradox, really, just the complexity of an individual nature built both for beauty and for understanding.

She took a deep breath and left for the opening, catching a cab on the main avenue a block from the studio. The cab raced quickly uptown, weaving in and out of traffic so precipitously that she had to hang on to the overhead bar. In hardly five minutes she was standing in front of Gallery Lulu, needing to go in. People milled about outside, smoking and chatting, and the inside looked completely packed. Her stomach turned over and with a nod to herself she pushed open the gallery door.

Parsley spotted her instantly. For the next half hour he whisked her about, introducing her to collectors, media people, power brokers, and folks in the arts. The names, faces and designations blurred. She noted with a kind of sad wonderment that an awful lot of beautiful women and handsome men were in attendance—it made her think for the briefest instant of Tol and temptation, of how celebrity meant temptation. How were you supposed to stay loyal to one person with so much sexual energy and sexual availability swirling around you?—not just swirling around you but aimed right at you? She shook her head mournfully.

Many painters had come—Aster wondered what they were thinking. She presumed that on balance they respected her work, because it was objectively excellent. She supposed that they also envied her and probably despised her instant success. It didn't help that she was young and beautiful. There was nothing she could do about her good fortune and the pain she was causing her poor relation painters except to treat them respectfully. She kept respectfulness as her focus and heard herself repeatedly reminding herself, “No high hat, girl. No high hat!”

The collectors with whom she chatted decried the fact that they had missed “buying into her debut.” Aster overheard them announce that she was bound to appreciate, that she would be a catch at auction, and that she would hang in museums. Because she'd never doubted that she'd have success of this magnitude, none of this turned her head.

She only wished that Tol had come. According to his band page, which she'd taken to consulting, he'd been touring nonstop since Paris. It was wrong of her to think of him, considering the cold shoulder she had given him, but in her heart she wished that he would magically appear.

Whenever she wasn't sure what to do or say next, she searched out Harry Goldstein, with whom she had not slept again. She'd take Harry's arm, lean against his shoulder, and smile a genuinely happy smile of good cheer. Harry was something of a star himself now, by virtue of possessing one of Aster's Shattered Glass paintings. She couldn't help but notice that he was preening and puffing out his chest. She smiled at that and felt genuinely pleased.

At about eleven Willie Parsley cornered her.

"Can I have some paintings?" he asked. "Any new things for me? People are clamoring!"

She had the four Washington Square paintings that she'd resisted telling him about. It struck her that his request was odd—he seemed to be begging. Why was that? He'd certainly done a fine job selling the Shattered Glass paintings. What was he afraid of? Then it struck her. Collectors could just come to her! She didn't need Willie. All evening collectors had been asking if they could see her new work. It hadn't registered what they meant. Now, suddenly, it did. No wonder they'd seemed so secretive and coy! They didn't want Parsley to know that they were stealing food from his mouth.

"How much would you ask?" Aster wondered.

"That depends on the size and the subject matter," Parsley said carefully. "Naturally collectors will want more Glass paintings. For new things—"

"I have some new things." She described the Washington Square paintings. "What about those?"

"I'm thinking seventy-five thousand," Willie replied after a moment. "I can't see going to six figures yet. Trust me—"

"I could just sell them out of my studio."

“Aster!” Parsley exclaimed. He paused and nodded. “Yes, you could.”

Aster made up her mind. “I’ll give you two and I’ll keep two. I owe you two—but not all four!”

Willie put a hand on her arm. “After that, Aster, let me have at least one out of every four new paintings. I swear it’ll serve you. We’ll move you into six figures, get great collectors on board, monitor your auction price—”

“We’ll see, Willie.” She had a sudden thought. “What about ‘Religious Education.’ Do you want one of those?”

Parsley made a face. “That’s not smart, Aster. You—”

Aster shrugged. “Never mind.”

Willie watched her for a moment and then exclaimed, “All right, then! Keep shining!”

He left her lost in thought. She shut her eyes for a moment and saw Tol as he had been in the park, singing in the shadows, barely illuminated by a trash can fire. He was singing a Dylan song ... just like that the song ended, and with it the vision.

2.

When she opened her eyes she was startled to see Paolo Giamenti staring at her. He wore a smile that struck her as genuine—which made it all the more horrifying. It had to be a particularly nasty trick of the gods that unsavory people could fool you, mislead you, and seduce you with genuine emotions. Aster blinked several times and stopped herself from taking a step backward.

“Lovely opening,” Paolo said.

“Thank you.”

“About that brick!” he laughed. “No damage done. Looks like some nice paintings came out of it.”

He was wearing an embroidered jacket that made her think of the Beatles, maharajas, and James Bond. It was fanciful, exotic, and regal and might have made her smile. But she didn’t smile. She watched Paolo warily.

“I tried to buy one of your paintings but they were already sold!” he exclaimed. “I even told Willie that I’d double the price. The prick wouldn’t budge!”

Aster made a face. “You thought he’d sell you something that was already sold? That’s hilarious.”

Paolo shrugged. “You know faggots and their morals.”

Aster smiled. “Ah, of course. It was certainly worth a shot.”

She was mesmerized by the way the light in his eyes came and went. Now it drained out of them.

“You know, I could make Willie choose between us,” Paolo said. “Who do you think he would keep on?”

It amazed her how little his threat moved her. It was like a blank and not a live bullet. She was certain that Willie would choose her. But it wasn't even that. If Willie chose Paolo, she would just move on to another gallery. She felt exactly that confident of her talent and her position. Paolo could read in her smile that he'd failed to frighten her. He laughed conspiratorially and exclaimed, "We are two of a kind!"

She wanted to say, "No, I'm much better than you!" but held her tongue. Somehow Paolo read her mind. The light that had returned to his eyes flickered out again. "So," he said. "You think that you are the better—what? Painter? Person? Warrior?"

Aster said nothing. Just as on that first night, she was shocked to see what a dramatic effect she could have on this famous, presumably self-confident man. She made a mental note about how thin-skinned even the most famous, powerful people must be—maybe more thin-skinned than anybody else. It dawned on her that people at the top were babies, impulsive, self-indulgent, quick to take offense, and primed to hold a grudge. Boardrooms, movie lots, legislatures, and the like were probably just so many nursery schools ... some painting imagery began to percolate, which she quickly dismissed as too literal and trite.

She'd forgotten about Paolo.

"So you won't say in what way you consider yourself my superior?" he said suddenly. "You won't give me even that much satisfaction?"

Aster shrugged. She noticed Camilla and Paige a few feet away, studying one of her paintings. Camilla was again dressed in black, in a gorgeous dress that she could have worn anywhere in European society, in Paris, Rome, or Madrid. Paige had replaced her baby doll outfit with a more grown-up one, a wheat-colored ankle-length dress that made a good match for her light complexion and her blue eyes. They represented all the allure you could want, the dark and the light together, a fantasy package that ought to have satisfied any man.

"Aren't those two women enough for you?" Aster said quietly, tilting her head in their direction.

Paolo turned slightly, glanced at Camilla and Page, and shook his head. "What I want from you isn't sex," he said in a hoarse whisper. "It's acknowledgement and respect!"

It was a strange, embarrassing admission and Aster felt something soften in her. She

was about to respond when a woman barged into their space.

“These glass paintings,” the woman drawled, waving broadly. “They wouldn’t go in our house in Dallas but I could really use one for our place in Bermuda. It has to be in purple, though. Can I get one of these in purple?”

Aster blinked several times. Paolo smiled broadly. He wore a look that read, “Welcome to your new life!” There was also something else in the look—he wanted to see what she would do with this test.

“I’ve done many commissions,” he said, winking. “They are very amusing, very interesting in their own way. You marry your vision with what a customer wants—that may be the highest art.”

“Patron,” the woman corrected. “I wouldn’t say customer.”

“Customer, patron.” Paolo waved the distinction away with the mildest of gestures. “The architect must please his customer. The filmmaker must please his audience. We are no different, don’t you think?” he confided mockingly. “No different at all. Just show business performers.”

Aster understood. Paolo wanted to watch her step into the commercial gutter right beside him and admit that commission money was too good to pass up. He looked unnaturally excited, his eyes glittery.

“Goya,” Aster said after a moment. “Kathe Kollwitz.”

Paolo laughed. “Rembrandt,” he countered with an easy smile. “Every Renaissance portrait painter.”

“Well,” the woman said irritably. “Yes, or no? Can I have one in purple?”

Aster was about to say something snide. Then a light bulb went on. If one answer to privilege was the redistribution of wealth—well, she could redistribute wealth. She thought for a long moment. If she went down that road, then she would actually have to paint this woman a purple one; and paint her next customer a Washington Square painting, only in sunlight; and so on. Would that be tolerable? She knew that Paolo was watching her and she also knew that his gaze was inclining her to adopt a moral

position that she might not otherwise have taken.

“You can have one in purple,” Aster said, turning to the woman. “My commission price is a hundred thousand dollars. And you have to donate another fifty thousand dollars to the charity of my choice.”

The woman stamped her foot. “That’s too much!” she exclaimed. “You can’t just triple your price!” She waited another moment and then stormed off.

Aster stood there. Paolo inclined closer and whispered in her ear.

“You asked me if I thought Willie would sell me a painting that was already sold, meaning that I was lying about my intention. Well, you just made the same lying gesture! Did you think she would pay triple? Of course not! You were just manifesting your pride. You see—we are exactly the same!”

Rage welled up in her. She turned on him and stared him fully in the face. “Enough!” she hissed. “I’ve had it!”

Her reaction brought a smile to his face. She watched him push back his jacket to reveal a scabbard on his belt. He withdrew a delicate knife with a three-inch blade, the blade sharpened to a razor’s edge and with a gleaming point, and began whittling at the waist-high chair railing that ran along the wall beside them. He whittled, shaved, and gouged, incising what looked like a Persian design into a portion of the molding. Aster stood transfixed.

“Now this molding is art,” Paolo murmured. “Willie will be pleased.” He continued whittling. “I find it charming to be the muse for your glass paintings,” he said absently. “In a way, those paintings are just as much mine as yours. Maybe I should put them in my catalogue raisonné? Or maybe in an appendix: ‘Works inspired by Paolo Giamenti.’ What do you think?”

What she thought was, “He’s mad.” Her second thought was, “If there’s a sense in which we are the same, this is the sense: that I don’t completely trust my own sanity. That’s my real fear, that the crazy thing in Paolo is in me too!” She turned suddenly on her heels, retreated through the thinning gallery crowd, and made her way out into the Manhattan night.

3.

That night she dreamed about Esteban. He had been the love of her life—if that was the way to put it. She admired him, loved sleeping with him, and felt in him an immensity that had to do with how deep he could go, how he could vanish into his art and paint like a channel. She had learned how to paint by experiencing his way. But many painters could concentrate like that, indeed needed to be able to concentrate in order to paint at all. So it wasn't his trance-like concentration that affected her so greatly. It was something ineffable, something about his serious approach to life, an approach that had less to do with discipline and more to do with soul.

However his “working class” subject matter didn't interest her and even disappointed her. In truth, she held it against him, held it as a weakness or even a moral shortfall. He was far too influenced by Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists for her taste. She could side with peasants and their plight, with peasants, immigrants, and everyday workers, but she couldn't elevate them to sainthood. She knew for certain that a peasant with power would prove just as corrupt as any king. The tradition of sentimentalizing the poor didn't work for her.

Nevertheless she could watch him for hours as he painted. He was slow and deliberate: he was Cezanne to her wild Van Gogh. It was true, however, that as she grew into her own style and began to make paintings that pleased her, his way of working began to interest her less. That slow, deliberate, painstaking style began to feel too static to her. It was the right way to build a skyscraper or to weave a tapestry but it didn't allow the winds of life to flow through a canvas. Over the course of the several months they lived together she found herself watching Esteban less and painting more.

She was in her second year at San Francisco City College then. She would leave Esteban's crumbling flat in an old Victorian on Folsom Street, walk to Mission Street, hop the Mission Street bus, change for the trolley, and end up at the junior college for an afternoon of Zen brush painting and monotyping. One semester she took an Eastern religion class, a Russian literature in translation class, and three art classes. Another semester she took a cultural anthropology class, a German literature in translation class, and three more art classes. She had many small run-ins with her art instructors but that was to be expected, since she was wild, adamant, and absolutely sure how she wanted her work to look.

She did love Esteban. But he really wasn't that well, mentally. It was hard to say what the problem was. It was something like depression or something like premature aging. It was almost as if, to fend off some never-named pain, he would leave this earth for hours and even days on end. He would sit on the sofa, doing absolutely nothing. It wasn't a good nothing—he wasn't meditating or enjoying silent music. It was a creepy nothing—like rooming with a cadaver. In the beginning she would try to bring him out of his mood by suggesting outings, by telling him stories, by acting the cheerful companion. At some point she stopped and just let him sit.

He was probably the oldest forty-year-old in the world. He seemed more like a hundred. This wasn't true in bed; nor was it true when, occasionally, he went out to the cafés or the bars. But those episodes of liveliness seemed to lead inexorably to moody bouts so dark that Aster understood his reluctance to socialize or even to make love. It was as if every taste of worldliness left a terrible taste in his mouth. So they went out less and less, made love less and less, and sometimes wouldn't speak for days on end.

Eventually she couldn't tolerate living with his gargantuan pain. She left one night while he sat on the sofa. He must have noticed that she was gathering her things but he gave no sign of noticing. He didn't follow her with his eyes, he didn't sigh, he didn't twitch a muscle. She kissed him on the lips, lips that felt softer than human lips ought to feel, and returned to her mother's flat in Bernal Heights, just over the hill from Folsom Street. It was a neighborhood of narrow streets, where lesbian couples bought old Edwardians and where gangs from the Bayshore roamed. She trudged home with her belongings in her battered suitcase.

She came in late. Her mother, who had been reading by the kitchen window, got up and began making them tea.

“You're home to stay?” she said as she poured water into the kettle.

Aster nodded.

“Hungry?”

She nodded again, then sat down and cried. Her mother quickly shut off the water and hurried to hold her daughter. She hugged Aster awkwardly and stroked her hair.

“I'm sorry,” her mother said. “I'm so sorry.”

“No.” Aster brushed away her tears and smiled. “It’s not that. I’m not sad for me. Esteban is so--” She couldn’t find the word. “So disabled,” she said finally.

They sat and talked. Did Aster know how few talks she had left with her mother? In her dream, she knew. In her dream, she felt herself cherishing that hour. She wanted to do something for her mother but didn’t know what. She noticed a bowl of lemons on the kitchen counter—the lemons had come from the lemon tree in the back yard. That gave her an idea.

“Do you want some lemonade?” Aster asked. She wanted desperately to do something nice for her mother.

“No, I don’t think so. But I’ll make you some.”

“No, no, that’s okay! I don’t want any.”

What did they talk about next? Aster couldn’t tell. She couldn’t hear the dream voices speaking. She saw the two of them sitting at the kitchen table but she couldn’t hear the conversation. She noticed objects: the yellow lemons in the blue bowl, the mystery, set in Amsterdam, that her mother was reading, the framed Nicolas de Stael poster in bright greens and yellows, the Navajo-looking ceramic tiles that her mother used as coasters. She could even recognize the fragrance of lavender from the lit candle. But she had no idea what they were saying.

She and her mother sat together. After awhile, Aster got up and went to bed. That was so wrong! She should have stayed up all night with her mother. They should have clasped hands. They should have gone out dancing. They should have taken a sudden trip or cooked something delicious. They should have done something!--considering how little time was left. She knew that in another second she would start sobbing or screaming. Something went out in her mind and the dream ended.

4.

Several days later she found herself visiting with her neighbor Jimmy Vitale. It was eleven in the morning of a beautiful spring day full of soft sunlight and the scent of jasmine. Jimmy kept pots of jasmine everywhere in his studio and the vines crawled along the floor, up the walls, even into the kitchen. Jimmy's jasmine extravaganza made Aster smile and shake her head. She curled up on Jimmy's sofa, her wine goblet within easy reach, and watched him work.

For days now she hadn't painted or wanted to paint. She got through each day in an itchy, irritable way, as if insects were crawling on her skin. She had the feeling that this strange interlude was ending--the feeling or the hope—and the warmth of the sun helped enormously. But her new fame, her loneliness, her encounter with Paolo, and some blankness or emptiness conspired to keep her agitated and unmotivated. She drank before noon—she knew that was a problem—wandered Manhattan aimlessly, and paid Jimmy and Shelley too many visits.

Jimmy stood six-two or six-three and had the body of a linebacker, with a thick neck that had to come from lifting weights. He was past thirty and looked older. Strands of gray hair infiltrated his black mop. He sported a scar just above the jaw line that Aster planned to ask about one day. Aster liked Jimmy's physicality, his bluntness, and his heart.

“What have you been here, four or five months now?” Jimmy said. He was tacking a tall, narrow canvas onto the wall, readying it for one of his vertical color field paintings. He painted pale, luminous three-color paintings in Italian ice colors like watermelon, tangerine, and peach. Seven or eight finished paintings hung on the walls. Aster was aware that Jimmy sold decently, getting a dozen or more paintings out the door annually.

“December,” Aster said. “I finished college last June, stayed with friends for a few months, and worked just long enough to round up money to get here.”

“A cold time to hit New York, December.”

“I couldn't wait.”

“You kind of exploded on the scene.”

Aster shrugged. “I had this one crazy idea, to find a patron. I guess there’s nothing like an audacious plan.”

“And some talent.” Jimmy paused. “Do you know Estelle on the first floor? The painter with the big granny glasses?”

Aster shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“She hates you.”

Aster made a face. “Hates me? Why?”

“She’s been painting for twenty years and sells nothing. God knows how she pays the rent. I think she works in a high rise at night—she might be a cleaning lady. Always dragging her ass, looking ready to drop. But she has a brain, there’s no doubt about that. She’s witty, very sharp. I almost like her paintings. Almost, but not quite. Nor, apparently, does anyone else. That’s why she hates you.”

Aster thought about that. “What does she paint?” she asked.

“Color circles filled with sarcastic figures, like she’s saying, ‘Take my middle finger, art world!’”

Aster nodded. “I know exactly how she feels. My ‘Religious Education’ paintings come from exactly that place. Fortunately or unfortunately, I have other things in me besides ‘take that!’ work!”

Jimmy nodded. “Estelle has a daughter in Brooklyn. She left her when she was a baby.”

“No.” Aster got up. “She abandoned her daughter?”

“To paint. To be an artist.”

“God, Jimmy, that breaks my heart!”

Jimmy put down his brush and picked up his coffee cup. “She’d break your knees, she hates your success so much.”

Aster shook her head. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the carafe on the table and set it beside her wine goblet.

“What’s your story?” she said suddenly.

“My story?” Jimmy stretched out on the sofa. “Born right here. An Italian boy from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. You go into any of those dark old cafés in Bensonhurst, you still only hear Italian. You ask for coffee, you get espresso, a single shot, like lead, with grounds in the bottom.”

“And?”

“And?”

“The real story!” Aster laughed.

Jimmy grew pensive. “The real story? I broke legs for loan sharks.”

“No!”

“I did. Out of pure arrogance. I’d look at some schmuck who’d just thrown away ten thousand dollars he couldn’t afford on some horse he’d picked because the horse was the same color as his Buick. I’d think, ‘You deserve to have your legs broken, you asshole.’ I felt that I was infinitely better than those jerks. I didn’t get that I was precisely as flawed and precisely as stupid as they were. Then, one day, I figured it out. I said to myself, you have to stop this.”

“Tell me the story of that day.”

“Another time.” He picked up his coffee cup and his body heaved involuntarily. “I can tell you this, though. I made some decisions that day. I decided to be better than the average person. So I serve meals at St. Jude’s. I visit an old lady who repeats

herself like to make you insane and I sit with her for an hour and smile and chat. She's a bitch but she still deserves an hour of conversation. I send emails to the teenagers in my family and try to point out a higher way. Some days these gestures feel stupid and pointless—but they're the right things to do."

"Jimmy."

"I've come to believe in prayer, even though I don't believe in God. These paintings are the way I pray."

"They're gorgeous."

"I know Rothko did them better. But I'm praying, not competing."

Aster wanted to throw herself on him. But if ever there was a neighbor you wanted as a friend and not an ex-lover, it was Jimmy Vitale.

"They let you just walk away?" she said.

"You mean, like in the movies?" Jimmy laughed. "I doubt there's a contract on my head. Maybe I made some guys unhappy, but that's about it. Still, if you ever see some thugs lurking around the corridor here, by all means give my cell phone a jingle!" His smile faded. He gave Aster a long look. "Along those lines, do you know who's been lurking around?"

"Who?"

"Paolo Giamenti."

"Christ!"

Jimmy studied her reaction. "I buzzed him in two times this week. Shelley, too, the week before. I asked him what he wanted and he said, 'Just checking out the building. I might decide to buy it.'" He put down his cup. "Is that about you?"

"It is."

Jimmy nodded. "What happened?"

“That’s a story I don’t want to tell.”

“Fair enough.”

Jimmy got up and resumed painting. Aster watched him paint. He used pale washes on unprimed canvas. The paint seemed to vanish the instant he put it on. The canvas drank in the color and left nothing, or next to nothing. Finally, after many minutes and many washes, a little color began to appear, the palest yellow, so pale that it made you shiver.

Jimmy put his brush down. “Do you have a dead bolt?” he asked.

“No.”

“Get one!”

Aster shivered again.

“You think I don’t know Paolo?” Jimmy said. “He’s a coward and he’s vicious. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right.”

“Get a deadbolt, Aster. And a gun.”

She almost said, “I’ve got one.” But she bit her tongue and turned to her wine.

5.

She couldn't stop Estelle from hating her and whether or not Estelle hated her was Estelle's business. But how she dealt with Estelle hating her was her business. The second she got back to her studio she made her way to the kitchen cupboard that served as her liquor cabinet, pulled out a bottle of champagne, and popped it into the freezer. An hour later she pulled the icy bottle out of the freezer and headed down to Estelle's.

She knocked on the door of Estelle's studio and waited. The woman who opened the door looked to be about forty-five or fifty. She was lean in the arms and legs and had a little rounded belly that accentuated her leanness. She wore granny glasses and a paint-spattered thrift shop dress. She recognized Aster and stared at her ironically. Aster returned Estelle's ironic gaze with a look at once serious and friendly.

"Yes?" Estelle said.

"Sorry to bother you," Aster replied. She held up the bottle of champagne. "Jimmy Vitale, on the second floor, said that I should see your work. I'm new to the building—I'm on the second floor. So I thought I would make your acquaintance."

"Is that right?"

Aster had nothing else to say. Estelle could invite her in or not. Aster waited, endeavoring by her look and her attitude to suggest a friendliness that she wasn't quite feeling. Estelle's mocking irony was fine—up to a point. Soon, Aster knew, she would no longer be interested in tolerating it.

"Sure, come in," Estelle said.

Estelle's studio was a mirror image of Aster's own, except that, since it was a floor lower, it had poorer light. Aster put down the champagne bottle and toured Estelle's work. Estelle was an easel painter and had a canvas up on her oversized easel. Finished paintings were stacked everywhere and a dozen or so adorned the walls. Just as Jimmy had described them, Estelle's paintings were made up of color circles filled with Magritte-like images and Miro-esque doodles. The images could only be read as ironic

and full of rage. Estelle's work registered at the unfriendly end of surrealism.

"I love your work," Aster said.

Aster watched Estelle's face register a single second of joy. Then the ironic gaze returned.

"You know how many times I've sent my slides to Gallery Lulu?" Estelle said. "Oh, by the way, I know exactly who you are."

Aster shook her head. "Many times, I'd guess."

"I've stopped counting. You know what I get in return? I get nothing but announcements of their shows. Including, about a month ago, an announcement for your show. That one had a very flattering photo of you, like you were a Left Bank painter from the Twenties. Very fetching."

"Can we have some of that champagne?" Aster said.

That stopped Estelle. She stared at Aster. "Are we celebrating something?"

"Twelve dollar champagne?"

Estelle laughed. "I guess I can drink to that."

Aster knew what she wanted, to prove to Estelle that a rising young star could also be a human being. She wanted to reach out and take Estelle's hand and say, "I can be your friend, if you'll let me. I can help you." In fact, she respected Estelle's art. She didn't love surrealism and its self-satisfied irony and unfunny jokes. But Estelle's efforts in the genre struck her as honest and powerful. She knew that she couldn't offer a lot of praise without sounding patronizing and glib, but praise was what she wanted to offer.

Estelle popped the cork, filled two glasses, and motioned Aster to the sofa. They sat without speaking for a long time, Estelle watching Aster, Aster looking away. It wasn't that Estelle's gaze made her feel uncomfortable; it was rather that she wanted Estelle to feel in command of her own space, in charge, as it were, of this moment.

“There are sadists and there are masochists,” Estelle said after a minute. Her ironic smile approached a grimace. “Do you know why Van Gogh shot himself in the stomach and not the head?”

“Let me guess,” Aster said quietly. “Something about masochism?”

“Something deep about masochism!” Estelle exclaimed. “He wanted to die painfully. He wanted a death as painful as the pain he felt in life.” She caught herself and laughed. “That’s my guess, at any rate.” She shook her head and resumed staring at Aster. “I wouldn’t kill myself that way. I’m not a masochist.”

“Just a woman in terrible pain,” Aster wanted to say. She bit her tongue. Suddenly she remembered an incident with Esteban. They had gone to see Frida. Both of them had seen the movie separately and this was the first time they had seen it together. Diego Rivera was Esteban’s hero and he admired Frida, too. The movie made Aster angry and Esteban couldn’t understand her rage. He asked her about it, puzzled, and she exclaimed that she hated it that Diego had never lifted a finger to get Frida a show. Not until she was on her deathbed did Frida experience the joy of her first show. “Isn’t that wrong?” Aster demanded. “Wouldn’t you help get me a show if you thought I deserved one?”

Esteban had said nothing. They were silent the rest of the evening.

Now Aster nodded and said, “Would you like to come to Gallery Lulu with me and meet the fellow who runs it? Willie Parsley? And bring some slides? He’s probably never really looked at your slides—you know how that is. But he’ll look at them if we go in together.”

Estelle stared at her, biting her lip. “I think not,” she said after a long moment.

“I’m really happy to introduce you. Willie should get a chance to see your work—I mean it.”

“I think not.” Estelle looked on the verge of crumbling. “I should get back to painting.” She readied herself to rise. Aster reached out and touched her forearm. Estelle sat back down.

“Estelle,” Aster said. “Why not?”

She mouthed a word that Aster couldn't make out. She thought that it might have been, "Pride." She didn't want to make Estelle say it again, so she nodded and hung her head for a moment. Estelle didn't move. Aster sighed, reached for her glass of champagne, suddenly remembered that Estelle had as much as asked her to leave, and turned to Estelle with a questioning look. Estelle shook her head.

"It doesn't matter," Estelle said, her face sagging. "You can finish your drink while I paint."

Aster got to her feet instead. "Just let me know if you want that introduction," she said. "I--" She didn't know how to complete her thought. "It would make me happy to have you and Willie connect," she concluded lamely.

Estelle shrugged. "I bet it wouldn't please him," she said. "But thanks for the thought." She escorted Aster to the door. Aster waited for Estelle's last words, but none were forthcoming. Her ironic look returned but it was milder than before and tinged with sadness. Frowning and feeling sad herself, Aster left.

6.

The next day Aster headed uptown to sketch. She needed to get out of her neighborhood and out of her head. It was a cold spring day, more like winter than spring. She wore jeans, a pullover, her wool pea coat, a knit cap, and fitted walking shoes that she'd gotten at a specialty shop just off Union Square. She had few extravaganzas, except that paints, by their nature, were expensive; but she liked shoes that fit. She'd never had a manicure or a pedicure, she didn't care if she ever owned a car again, she expected that she would always rent and never own. She—

That thought stopped her in her tracks. With the prices she was apparently going to command, with the prices she already commanded, she looked destined to become not just secure but rich. At this split second she had nothing but Harry's patronage, money owed her by Willie, and some of her mother's things packed away in storage. Yet she might be rich soon. She knew what the glass paintings would net her, she knew what the Washington Square paintings would be worth, and she couldn't deny the implications of those calculations. She was on the verge of making a lot of money.

That thought shot adrenaline through her system. She couldn't tell if it was anxiety or excitement but she felt a bath of hormones flush her cheeks and make butterflies dance in her stomach. She entered Central Park and wandered along, half-aware of the new buds on the trees, the rollerbladers, the mothers and their babies, the black and Latin nannies and their wards. She stopped and sat down. After a long minute she pulled out her sketchpad and began to sketch. She sketched the tableau in front of her: the path, the railings, the trees.

A boy of about four or five came up to her and watched her as she sketched. The boy's mother sat on the bench opposite,

“What are you doing?” the boy asked Aster.

“Drawing.”

“I draw!” the boy said triumphantly.

“I bet you do.”

“I can draw a giraffe and an elephant and a lion. The giraffe has a long neck.”

“But it doesn’t make a sound. Did you know that? Isn’t that funny? To have such a long neck and not make a sound?”

The boy thought about that and ran to his mother. “The giraffe doesn’t make a sound!” he whispered loudly. “Why doesn’t he make a sound?”

“Maybe she knows,” his mother replied, pointing to Aster.

The boy ran back to Aster.

“Why doesn’t the giraffe make a sound?”

She was about to make up a fable and then remembered that she didn’t like fables. Instead she replied, “I don’t know. What do you think?”

The boy thought long and hard. “Maybe ... he has to stretch his neck to eat the tops of the trees? That hurts his throat.”

“All that stretching.”

The boy nodded vigorously.

“That could be it,” Aster said. “I think that’s a very good hypothesis.”

The boy didn’t know what “hypothesis” meant but he knew that he’d been praised. He ran back to his mother.

“I made a good hippopotamus!”

Aster and the boy’s mother burst out laughing. The second she stopped laughing she felt like crying. She remembered an incident with her mother. Aster had been in the fourth or fifth grade in a tough public school. There had been some kind of art assignment and Aster had drawn something radical and interesting. Her teacher, Mrs.

Witten, small and hard-boiled, had reacted violently and called it “ugly” and “horrible” in front of the class. Aster had been more amazed than mortified, amazed that a drawing could provoke so outsized a reaction.

That evening she told her mother what had happened. The next day her mother marched into the classroom before school, clutching Aster’s drawing and dragging with her an enormous book that Aster seemed to remember was called *The History of Modern Art*. Her mother confronted Mrs. Witten.

“You don’t call a person’s work ugly when they draw like this!” her mother exclaimed. “First of all, you shouldn’t call anyone’s art ugly! But you certainly don’t call work ugly when it looks like this.” She dropped the art book onto Mrs. Witten’s meticulously barren desk, where it landed with a loud thud, and opened it to the place she’d marked. “Here’s the work of George Grosz. Here’s the work of my daughter. This is a modern master,” she said, pointing to the Grosz, “and so is this.” She jabbed her finger at Aster’s drawing. “I don’t care what you want to call art or not art. Just keep my daughter out of it!”

She remembered that Mrs. Witten hadn’t been cowed or moved at all. She gave some explanation that was nothing like a defense and everything like an accusation. Aster thought that her mother might leap across the desk and strangle Mrs. Witten. She seemed to remember tugging on her mother’s dress and saying something like, “It doesn’t matter. Really, it doesn’t matter.” But it had mattered—not what Mrs. Witten had done or what she represented, but what her mother had done in championing Aster.

Aster looked up. The boy and his mother were a hundred yards down the path. She shook herself and resumed sketching. After awhile she got up and walked. She walked for hours, uptown and down, and ended up at an elegant midtown watering hole connected to a plush hotel. She ordered a glass of red wine, something with an Italian name, and thought about Esteban’s hands, Harry’s kind voice, and Tol’s eyes. Then Paolo appeared disguised as an Hieronymus Bosch imp. She shook that vision away.

A memory gripped her. She’d been a freshman in high school and had taken three boys to Baker Beach, where she’d danced naked for them. Why? She could remember her feelings and her reasons precisely. Her clothes seemed to be burning and constricting her and she wanted to get out of them. That was part of it. Then there was the pure sexual part, the way she wanted the boys to get an eyeful of her. There was something else, too, a flaunting of her power, a way that she wanted to be the boss. It was also incredibly stupid. Frowning, she drained her glass.

“Another?” the bartender asked.

She shook her head. She’d begun drinking at the age of twelve or thirteen, which she knew was a bad sign. She had an enormous tolerance for alcohol, another bad sign. She had favorites, like Talisker among the single malt Scotches, another bad sign. She thought a lot about alcohol. When she was feeling good she turned to alcohol and when she was feeling bad she turned to alcohol. She could throw stones at the Paolos of the world, that was her right and her obligation, but she had to look in the mirror first!

The bartender, waiting for her to change her mind, hovered nearby. Aster kept her hand over her glass. She knew that he’d pegged her as someone who never stopped at one glass. She could sense his surprise, even disbelief, that she wasn’t ordering a second. She almost felt that she needed to make some excuse, something along the lines of “I’m driving!” Finally she got up and left.

As she walked home she found herself lost in memory. In the dorm at Kenyon College, where she had spent the two years after San Francisco City College on a painting scholarship, she had a piece of plywood cut to fit her bunk bed, to make a solid painting surface upon which she could work day and night. Because her bunk was taken up with the plywood and because she didn’t want to disturb whatever she was currently working on, she would sleep under her bed in a sleeping bag. Her roommate thought that was crazy and reported her.

Called in to see some dean, Aster argued that if the school would keep a painting studio open around the clock, she wouldn’t need to paint in her room or sleep under her bed. Incredibly, her argument made sense to this dean, who laughed and said, “I know a good obsession when I hear one!” She had been right to live like that, sleeping under her bed; but had she also been a little crazy? On reflection, her state of mind back then scared her now. She pictured Paolo whittling away at the chair railing at Gallery Lulu. She understood him too well—much too well. Despite all of her talent and all of her career good luck, she nevertheless stood poised too close to a precipice. When she got home, she had that second drink—and then finished the bottle.

7.

That evening Shelley dropped by with news. “Did I tell you that Paolo Giamenti was around asking about you?” she said, easing her large frame onto Aster’s sofa.

“When was this?”

“Last week some time.”

Aster nodded. “Jimmy mentioned that he was prowling around.”

“What’s that all about?” Shelley asked.

Aster shook her head and told Shelley the story. She explained Paolo’s initial interest in her, her rebuff and the insult she delivered, the brick through the window, and what now looked to be a complicated obsession on Paolo’s part, an obsession fueled by anger and envy.

“He envies you?” Shelley said. “Your talent?”

“I think so.”

Was that true? In fact, she was certain that it was. She had known that from the first instant, that Paolo was a certain sort of hack whose main talent was sniffing out his betters—and then belittling them. She knew that he would insinuate against his rivals, plot against his rivals, try to crush his rivals, simply because he knew that he was an imposter. It was funny that the world couldn’t see that, just as it was funny that the world couldn’t see the charade that Picasso had pulled off, even though Picasso knew full well—and had actually admitted the charade himself! Picasso was the first to call himself an entertainer and not an artist and to announce that he had squandered his talent and failed his sacred duty. Paolo was no Picasso except in that regard, that he had sure self-knowledge of the fraud that he was perpetrating.

“That bit about having him undress, that wasn’t too brilliant of you,” Shelley

continued, putting down her wine glass. “Men don’t like that.”

“A thousand things were going through my mind!” Aster exclaimed. “I wouldn’t do it again.” She hesitated, then laughed. “At least, I don’t think I would!”

Why had she played that game with Paolo? In part it was just because she was feeling invulnerable, her pistol in her purse, her youth and beauty like gold bullion in a vault, her mind sharp and all of New York available to her. It was almost that simple. It hadn’t had anything to do with Paolo, really, nothing at all. But try to tell him that now!

She shook her head. No, it had everything to do with Paolo. She had found his behavior unacceptable and what he represented an abomination. He stood—well, it was a very dramatic way of putting it—for the dark side of art. It was in line with Picasso making fun of Rousseau by organizing a banquet in the elder’s honor, complete with a throne built up on a packing crate, and everyone fighting to keep a straight face, all just to humiliate the naïve Rousseau. It was like—well, she knew all the stories!

It was one thing for a painter to make more money than another painter or to become more famous than another painter. But to then opt for cruelty, to inflict pain because you possessed power, cachet, and a stamped ticket from the culture—that was unacceptable. She wouldn’t accept it!—she hadn’t accepted it. Yes, Paolo hadn’t been as cruel as all that, not in those brief first minutes. But she’d concluded from his paintings and her first glance of him that he was one of the bastards. That completely explained her actions.

“A thousand things going through your mind,” Shelley repeated. “That I know about.” She made a noise. “I need to tell you something.” She took a sip of wine and put her glass down. “You do something stupid, common wisdom has it that you did it for just one reason. As if there aren’t always fifty things going on!”

Aster nodded and sighed.

“Like last Christmas,” Shelley continued. Something in Shelley’s voice made Aster shift her position. “I was feeling really lonely. My family’s in Georgia but I didn’t want to visit them. They get me down. So I stayed here. It was cold and miserable. I made my flower paintings but they didn’t warm me up. Then I met this man. Met him at a club. He was so handsome, he had such a smile, you wouldn’t have believed he was a junkie.”

Aster sat up straighter.

“He looked so healthy,” Shelley said. “Radiant. Those eyes. You looked into those eyes and you thought that life could be wonderful. I was glad to be alive. It was my best Christmas in years.” She shook her head. “We had this dreamy night. He came over to the studio. I had all these candles lit. We drank some wine. I knew we were going to make love. He just kept smiling and smiling, like life was so good, like I was so beautiful. I began to wonder what was taking so long. He hadn’t touched me yet. I kept wondering. Then he got out his kit.”

“Shelley.”

Aster could picture the moment. She had watched junkies. A chill crept down her spine. She sat motionless.

“That needle mesmerized me,” Shelley said. “I watched him get the fix ready. I hate needles, Aster. But I was thinking and feeling fifty things at once. He gave himself the needle first. I wondered if that was that. Then I saw him prepare a second fix.”

“Shelley!”

“Without even thinking about cleaning the needle.”

Aster shut her eyes.

“I was thinking ‘How weird.’” Shelley continued. “And ‘Is that for me?’ And ‘He would never hurt me. Not with that smile!’ And ‘What will it feel like?’” And, yes, I was also thinking, ‘Don’t, girl. Don’t!’ Then he came at me with that smile and that needle. I don’t know what he said. Something corny like, ‘Let’s get to Heaven, Beauty.’ I kept staring at that needle. It didn’t frighten me—I kind of loved it. The way it looked. I was willing—even eager. I took that needle in.”

Aster took Shelley’s hand. Shelley was trembling.

“Then, two months later, I wasn’t feeling so good. I got tested.”

They both had tears in their eyes.

“The good news is that I feel vindicated,” Shelley said. “It turns out that I was exactly as stupid and reckless as I knew I’d been.”

They sat without speaking for the longest time.

“Do you know why I paint flowers?” Shelley said.

“Why?” Aster replied in a choked voice.

“Because there’s so much damned ugliness in the world,” Shelley moaned. “Who needs more ugliness?”

Aster held her hand. They sat together past midnight.

8.

The next morning Aster took down the four Religious Education paintings, so as to make room, and launched into a painting she called Needle Dreams. The imagery read as needles, fired at the viewer from a thousand angles, piercing firmaments of flesh. Folds and flaps of brown skin, pink skin, and yellow skin constituted the hills and valleys of a terrible dream landscape that made you wince. You winced at the flesh's vulnerability; the flying needles made you duck your head.

She finished the first Needle Dreams painting and launched right into a second. This one looked like a nightmare electrical storm. She had experienced storms like this at Kenyon College, Midwestern thunderstorms of such darkness, loudness and electrical fireworks that you felt that the world was ending. In the painting, electrified needles pierced black clouds that bled. Without using a drop of red, she had created the bloodiest thunderstorm anyone had ever seen.

She did a little work on the third and the fourth paintings in the series and then stopped. Her emotion was spent. She let Shelley's pain go; she let her own pain go; she slept. The next day was one of those after-painting days, empty and blank, a slow-motion day as meaningless as straw. She drank a lot of orange juice, listened to jazz, fell back asleep, checked Tol's band page, took an endless shower. Having done nothing, she went to bed early.

A few days later, half-recovered, she went out drawing. It was the perfect excuse to enjoy the first real warmth of May. She wandered through Chelsea, almost stopping for a drink at one of the new boutique hotels, headed uptown, and halted whenever something caught her eye. She drew wrought-iron railings, a funny sequined car parked in front of a hydrant, a girl sitting blankly on a stoop. She dove into a bakery for a cookie and bought two, one with nuts, one without. Then, her mouth dry, she craved coffee. She picked a French-feeling place across from Carnegie Hall.

She headed uptown all the way to the marina above 79th Street. Boats bobbed on the sparkling water. She found a bench and sketched the motorboats, the palisades of New Jersey, the currents of the Hudson River. June was truly in the air and she felt something softening in her, something coming alive. It had been winter in her for a long time, since her mother's death and before. She threw back her hair to let the sun warm her forehead. She took off her jacket. She leaned back and shut her eyes. She felt

something she almost never felt: relaxed.

Men jogged by and turned back to get a second look at her. She smiled to herself. For all these weeks she hadn't really thought about her success. Now she did. She was a painter who commanded hefty prices. Amazing! She would make six figures this year—hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was hardly out of the question that a museum would buy her. She could look for the angst in the situation or she could shut her eyes, drink in the sun, and allow herself to feel some pleasure. For fifteen minutes she chose sunlight and pleasure.

She wanted a man. She laughed to herself and hopped off the bench. She wanted a man and she would have one. The Hudson Hotel, where she'd stayed when she first arrived in New York, was ten minutes away. She strode off. Soon she found herself riding up the narrow escalator to the sumptuous lobby floor, where vines cascaded down walls and mod sofas and chairs fronted the doors of some of Manhattan's most popular bars. The only hotel bar open at that early hour was the Library Bar, tucked away at the back of the hotel. That's where she headed.

She ordered an eight-dollar beer, sat down, and spent a few minutes watching two Germans in leather jackets play a game of pool. They were terrible, about as bad as pool players could be. Aster smiled to herself and sipped her beer. The clubby, wood-paneled bar sported scores of art books on tables, in bookcases, and on a library rail that ran clear around it. She glanced at the book nearest her and gave a start. It was a book of Paolo Giamenti paintings. Biting her lip, she opened the book.

It fully engrossed her. She studied one after another of his images. Paolo had something—there was no denying that. It wasn't power, it wasn't authority, it wasn't beauty, it wasn't brilliance. What was it? She continued studying the images. What was it? Suddenly it came to her. She snapped her fingers so loudly that the two German men glanced at her. Paolo had mastered the art of the dirty little secret. That was the clue to his success: he sold dirty little secrets with great flair and energy. Paolo was a rabid, effective hustler.

What was erotic art and what was pornography? The distinction didn't matter. Giamenti's art was neither. His was an art that made the small, furtive, and ultimately ugly impulse accessible to a viewer. That was his genius. It was the id for purchase at a yard sale, the tricked-out fantasy made easy on the eyes. People who would have squirmed at anything frank or repellant found Giamenti comfortable. How exactly did he do it? Aster studied the images. She found herself learning something useful about art—and horrible about Paolo.

Finally she noticed that a man had seated himself next to her. He had on a ribbed sweater, good jeans, and good boots. Was he French? It seemed possible. She smiled at him and he cleared his throat.

“Another beer?” he said.

“Absolutely.”

He got them beers. It turned out that he was a Belgian composer in New York for the opening of a commissioned symphony. Aster smiled.

“You’re staying here?” he said.

“No.” She gave him nothing. He would have to ask.

“You came in for a beer?”

“No.”

“You’re a—”

She laughed. “No! I am not.”

“Can I have a clue?”

“You can have more than a clue.”

When she got home that evening she was still shining. The sun at the marina had made her day. So had the Belgian. She chose not to think on the dark side. She crawled into bed with a bowl of popcorn and a diet soda and watched comedies on t.v. She would do another Needle Dreams painting in the morning. Tonight, though, she would stretch out and luxuriate. She contemplated good chocolate—she thought “Belgian chocolate” and laughed—and a long, hot bath. It pleased her that she was smiling.

A moment later her good spirits deserted her. There had been nothing wrong about her romp with the Belgian; they had wrapped themselves around one another exactly as

a free man and a free woman should, playfully, passionately, in fine sweaty enjoyment. She had committed no sin; but she had opened the door to the knowledge of her terrible loneliness. Art required something of her: almost endless solitude. Life required something additional: intimacy and love. She sat up, dialed Tol's unlisted number, and made it all the way to the last digit before hanging up.

9.

Over the course of the next four days she finished the last two Needle Dreams paintings. On Friday, someone from Gallery Lulu came to pick up the two Washington Square paintings that she had promised Willie. On Saturday, spent and blank, she wandered Manhattan. She walked east to Washington Square, uptown to Union Square and through the bustling farmers' market, west to Chelsea, zigzagging her way uptown toward Central Park.

As she was coming out of a midtown bookstore she ran into Paige, Paolo's live-in mistress. Their eyes met and Aster noticed something that chilled her blood. She rushed after Paige, who was hurrying away. Aster caught up with her at the corner. She stepped in front of Paige and blocked her way.

"Let me look at you!" Aster exclaimed. She put her hands on Paige's shoulders. Paige made no objection.

"It's your fault!" Paige cried.

Aster shook her head. "Nothing Paolo does is my fault!"

"It's because he's hurting!"

"Christ."

Paolo had cut Paige at the throat. The scar was healing but it was a scar for life, an irregular pencil-thin scar at least three inches long. Paige had powdered it over but powder couldn't conceal it. Aster stood staring.

"Did he do it with that knife that he carries on his belt?"

Paige said nothing. She looked lifeless: long, blonde lifeless hair, lifeless blue eyes. Even her dress looked washed out. She stood without moving, as if she were a mannequin at Aster's disposal.

“No,” Aster said, speaking to herself. She studied the scar. “It’s a different blade.” She flashed on Paolo’s collection of crescent moon Turkish knives. “I get it! It was one of his little scimitars!” She reached out and traced the scar. Irregular and bumpy, it felt more like a series of small pimples than a scar. Paige didn’t blink or move.

Aster stepped back and shook her head. She didn’t care about Paige. What could you do with such women? She didn’t know if they were cowed, star-struck or masochistic. She couldn’t tell if they were stupid or ruined. Maybe it was a gender thing, a way for the species to survive, these pale, beautiful women turning up their white necks to be cut by the likes of Paolo. Whatever it was, she wanted to slap Paige across the face.

“At least you still have your pretty cheeks,” Aster said.

“You’re horrible!” Paige cried. “No wonder—” She clamped her mouth shut.

“No wonder what?” Aster’s eyes blazed. “What?”

“No wonder he hates you!”

Paige fled. Aster turned on her heels and stormed away. It was making her deranged. She pulled out her cell phone and called Harry Goldstein.

“Take me to Paris!” she cried.

“What’s the matter?”

“Take me to Paris. I’ll explain on the plane.”

It was a week before they could leave. Harry was finishing up a trial. By the third day of that intervening week Aster had calmed down a little. The toll so far, as it directly concerned her, was a brick through her window and Paolo skulking around the building. She refused to count the toll on Paige or the toll on Camilla, the slashes and the cigarette burns, as having anything to do with her. That was their business. She thought about it: a brick through the window and some skulking. Of course it was more than that, but as long as she kept murmuring “a brick through the window and some skulking,” she could keep her shaking to a minimum.

By the end of the week she found herself thinking about Paris and not Paolo. But that thought brought with it its own tendril of pain. She should be going with Tol. It was a travesty to be going with Harry—not that Harry wasn't a prince, not that Harry didn't deserve it. But Tol's invitation should have precluded her from going to Paris with anyone else, just so long as there was still the slightest chance that she and Tol might one day be together. Was there that chance? She had to admit that she didn't think so.

That made her cry. She had said no to him and it was unfair to blame him. She didn't blame him. In fact, it would have been unmanly of him to come back for another rejection and another rejection after that. He was being a man, the man she needed him to be, by not pursuing her. But still. He had to understand that they were star-crossed. He had to know that their fate was an open question and not a closed book. If he didn't know those things, or if they didn't matter to him, that was a tragedy. She couldn't call him and he couldn't call her and yet they ought to be talking! The pain that thought provoked sent her to the Scotch.

She read her Paris guides. Of course she'd seen enough movies to have Paris in her mind's eye. She knew the look of the streets, the feel of the light, the way the cobblestones appeared when they were wet and the way they appeared when they were sun-scorched and blistered. She knew the lore. She knew the Hemingway stories, the Picasso stories, the Josephine Baker stories. She wasn't a student of Paris gossip but she'd soaked that all up in the course of becoming an artist. She already knew Paris and she already loved Paris. She drank her Scotch and lost herself in the guidebooks.

She said goodbye to Jimmy, who made them going-away hot chocolates.

“Keep an eye on my place,” Aster asked.

“Will do.”

“Paolo's probably not finished.”

“You think he'll break in and go through your underwear drawer?”

“He's capable of anything.” She made a face, then hesitated. “You should know this,” she said after a moment. “Shelley's HIV+.”

“No.” Jimmy Vitale put down his cup. “Damn it all to hell.”

Aster sat with her hands in her lap. “Look after her, will you?” she said.

“All right.”

She sighed. “It was a shared needle. One single stupid time. Because this guy had sex appeal and a charming smile. Makes you want to shoot God right between the eyes.”

Jimmy shook his head. “I don’t think that praying by painting will make one damn bit of difference.”

“Don’t say that.”

They fell silent.

“Don’t tell her I told you.”

“All right.”

“I’m sorry, Jimmy.”

What had that meant? She glanced at Jimmy: she was sorry that his pale, meditative paintings didn’t please him. She was sorry that he thought of himself as a second-rate Rothko. In fact, his paintings were beautiful. But, exactly as he feared, they were derivative and old-hat. They were beautiful but not original. She found herself breathing very carefully. She liked Jimmy—admired him—even loved him a little. But he wasn’t a real painter. That was what she meant—that was what they both meant.

“Enjoy Paris,” he said, gazing down into his cup.

She nodded. “I will.”

She planned to. The revolution that had unshackled painting had Paris as its ground zero. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet, Renoir, Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse could hardly have flourished elsewhere. Each would have shot himself in the head by the age of twenty if forced to paint in some provincial town. They needed a great city. Every artist needed a great city. You didn’t have to live there—you just needed to be able to

come and go.

The existence of great cities was imperative, as necessary to an artist as air and water. If the world were just one small town after another, one pious, small-minded, bigoted place after another, art wouldn't have a chance. If the world were just little towns in Texas, little villages in Colombia, little oases in North Africa, you would have nothing but folk art and tourists.

She was ready for Paris! She was ready to be away from New York for a while. She wanted to get away from Paolo Giamenti and the antics of a class of people she despised, the sarcastic, moneyed, self-indulgent class. She just wanted a vacation! That was it. Paolo wasn't driving her from New York. She wouldn't permit that. No! He'd only precipitated a vacation that she desperately needed. She'd had nothing that you could call a vacation since before her mother died. That was all this was, a vacation, and in exactly the right place for a painter to take one.

Did she believe her own explanation? She sat with her bags packed, wondering and drinking.

10.

They had five days in Paris. That was all the time Harry could spare. They stayed in a small, elegant hotel off the Place des Vosges. Aster was stunned. The Paris of her first encounter, the Paris of the Place des Vosges and the Marais, the famous islands in the Seine upon which sat Notre Dame and through which ran narrow lanes, the amazing parks—not just the Luxembourg Gardens but the Parc Montsouris, near the city university, the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, with its hidden waterfall, the Parc Monceau, with its pyramids and pagodas—was not only more than she expected but unbelievably moving. She felt a little shaken, a little in shock.

She and Harry spent the first hour of their first day in the Place des Vosges, strolling the same paths over and over again. She knew from the guidebooks that this square was reputed to be the most beautiful in Europe. She'd taken that description as hype. Now she knew better. Its beauty was so profound that her heart opened wide. She needed to sketch it and she knew that she'd return to sketch it in the coming days. She needed to sketch it not to remember it and not to memorialize it but to own it, to have it become part of her web of being, just as it must have become part of the web of being of the illustrious artists, among them Victor Hugo, who had rented apartments overlooking this square.

During that first hour something about Paris life registered. As they retraced their steps they passed by a certain café a second time, a third time, a fourth time. She could tell that the diners sitting at the outdoor café tables had ordered—but none of them had food yet. They were sipping wine and talking and—this was the revelation—they were in no hurry. She could tell that they didn't care when their food might arrive. She tried to make sense of this pace, this leisureliness, this way of being. What did it say about a culture that its busiest, most ambitious, most artistic souls—its Parisians—could sit for an hour before even the appetizers arrived? Thinking about it, she realized that she was experiencing a culture shock as profound as if she'd been dropped into the jungle among headhunters.

They shopped for a picnic dinner and ate al fresco on the Place des Vosges grass. They had wine, bread, cheese, chicken legs, roast potatoes, green beans, and an apricot tart. Lovers on blankets kissed, light glinted off the pink facades of the encircling mansions, diners clinked glasses at the cafés half-hidden under the surrounding arcade. Aster was so full of feeling that she could hardly breathe. But she recognized

that the happiness was tinged with some other mood, not sadness precisely, but close enough. She wondered if it were sadness that this happiness could only last five days! That thought made her laugh—Harry glanced at her but she shook her head and said nothing.

That evening they went to a club in Montmartre that opened early, a world music club featuring, that evening, an Italian singer in a mini-dress. Afterwards they sat at a café on the rue des abbesses, a lively street in the shadow of the basilica of Sacré-Coeur. They spoke little; Aster people-watched. She was shocked to discover how many handsome men and beautiful women—just ordinary young Frenchmen and women—passed by them as they sat there. At one point she found herself shaking her head.

“Beautiful women are a dime a dozen here!” she exclaimed. “I’m truly amazed.”

Harry smiled. “But of course, you’re the most beautiful.”

She hadn’t been fishing for a compliment and didn’t return Harry’s smile. She was thinking. Her obsession returned: her obsession with the idea that life presented too many obstacles to the marriage of two real artists. All this beauty and all of these beautiful people had to be numbered among those obstacles. It had to make you jaded, just as it had made Paolo jaded, so jaded that a Camilla on one arm and a Paige on the other arm wasn’t nearly enough. She watched another gorgeous French woman pass, long in the waist, alluring in her black dress, and shook her head again.

After a while Harry said, “I have something to show you.”

He led her from the rue des abbesses up the short, steep rue ravignan to a small square shaded by towering chestnut trees. To the left was a hotel and next to it sat an old building sporting a glass-fronted display window.

“The Bateau Lavoir,” Harry said.

Aster nodded. Here, in front of her, was most famous atelier in the world. Virtually every early-twentieth century artist had kept a studio in this building. It was here that Picasso had painted *Les Femmes d’Alger*, invariably referred to in art history books as “the most important painting of the twentieth century.”

“Let’s go,” she said abruptly.

Harry, surprised, shrugged but said nothing.

Back at the hotel they unpacked, watched a few minutes of French television, and prepared for bed. For some reason—was it jet lag or was it something else?—they didn't make love. She sensed that Harry was expecting it but that he was too sweet, too timid, or too self-protective to make an advance. She turned away from him in bed; then, at the last minute, she turned back.

“Would you mind if I wandered on my own tomorrow?” she asked.

“No, of course not.” He looked hurt but tried to hide his feelings.

“It's just that I want to do the D'Orsay at my own pace,” she explained. “I might spend an hour in front of one painting. That's all.”

“Oh.” His expression cleared. “Of course. We'll meet for drinks.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Just pick the time.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “Thank you.” Then she turned away and quickly fell into a deep, troubled sleep.

In the morning she had her first real croissant. Harry lingered over breakfast with a third cup of coffee and a copy of the Herald Tribune. Aster got going. She had her map, her good walking shoes, and so much pent-up energy that she felt high. At eight-thirty she kissed Harry goodbye and by nine-fifteen she was entering the D'Orsay, that great train station-turned-museum beside the Seine.

There were not only no crowds at this early hour but the museum was virtually empty. She climbed to the top floor where the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings hung and entered a room full of Van Goghs. Aster stopped in her tracks. As many museums as she had visited, she had never seen an array like this. The paintings were gorgeous—and very different from their reproductions. Van Gogh's “Room in Arles” was ever so much brighter and more vivid than she expected it to be. Suddenly she understood what Van Gogh had meant when he said that he painted garishly on purpose. He had feared that his cheap pigments would fade over time. Now, more than

a hundred years later, they were still incredibly luminous and bright.

She stood in front of “Room in Arles” for twenty minutes. Something about its perspective riveted her. She felt her chest heave as she stood there, thinking in a wordless way about the representation of objects and what a canvas could accomplish. How could a small canvas do what this one did? His canvases were really remarkably small. She had always painted big and had always wanted to paint big. But, staring at this particular Van Gogh and surrounded by canvases of an equal majesty, she couldn’t deny that a small canvas could pack a tremendous punch.

The room began to fill up around her. Finally she shook herself out of her trance and wandered on to a room full of browns—a room of Gauguins as moving as the Van Goghs. After a good twenty minutes she wandered downstairs to the ground level of the museum. In a side room a painting caught her eye. It was an early Monet, painted when he was just twenty-eight, and as captivating as anything she had ever seen. It was a snow scene called “La Pie”—the Magpie—painted the winter of 1868. In the foreground was a snowy field. On a snow-covered fence sat a single magpie. The magpie was one small black spot and balanced all that snow. It amazed her that a bit of black could do so much work.

At eleven-thirty she left the D’Orsay. It had gotten too crowded to enjoy. The museum-goers were now bunched together shoulder-to-shoulder. It was a kind of idiocy or carelessness to come to this great museum so late in the day—it meant that you didn’t care one way or the other what you got to see. Aster shook her head and, reemerging into the spring sunshine, turned right toward Harry and drinks.

11.

For the next two days she and Harry did the sights. They meandered through more churches and museums than had any right to exist. They did a half-day trip to Monet's home at Giverny, which impressed her primarily for the crowds and the way you were herded through, and a good two hours at the Pompidou Center, where she bought a surrealist calendar and a book called Paris Calm. What interested her the most about the Pompidou were the Mongolian musicians playing in front of the museum who, dressed in bright traditional garb, made astounding, implausible humming sounds with their voices.

They floated down the Seine, visited Shakespeare & Company, shopped at small stores in back alleys. They peeked into galleries and looked at art. Aster kept her eyes peeled for just the right souvenir dress. She was thinking yellow but red was all the rage. Harry, who had been to Paris many times, pointed out the hidden synagogues of the Marais and detailed the history of privilege that the Place Vendome represented. Aster listened intently to Harry's commentary.

Early on the afternoon of the third day they found themselves strolling through the Parc Monceau, a beautiful park full of architectural follies. They passed a miniature Roman pillar, a small Egyptian pyramid, a pile of stones resembling Stonehenge, a ten-foot-high pagoda. At one point they stopped to read a placard affixed to a bench. It read "Jacques Garnerin, premier parachutiste, 1769 - 1823."

"An 18th Century parachutist?" Aster wondered, shaking her head.

"The strangest thing is that he lived to be fifty-four!" Harry exclaimed.

They held hands and strolled quietly.

"These mansions," Harry said, nodding at the buildings that lined the other side of the park fence. "Some of the richest Jews in the world owned them. They were deported and executed during World War II. They believed they could prosper, build mansions, own the most gorgeous furniture. None of that saved them."

Aster nodded. She thought of Tol and his paternal line of rabbis. When he played his Irish music, did they turn over in their graves? She shook her head: that wasn't the real question. The real question was, who was he? Was he who appeared to be, almost perfect? No, that wasn't the question either. She knew who he was—or else she didn't know anything. He was good, kind, and deep. He was exactly as he appeared. He was the exception, exceptional as an artist, exceptional as a person. She knew that better than she knew her own name. No, the real question was ... the only question was ... had she been right or wrong in rebuffing him?

Harry failed to notice the tears welling up in her eyes.

Why hadn't she and Harry made love on this trip? She knew the answer. She was saving herself for Tol. It was ludicrous, preposterous—but the truth. She heard herself think, "If Tol really is exceptional, then my argument doesn't hold water!" In the next instant she saw, parading in her mind's eye, one after another of the gorgeous French women she'd been seeing everywhere. Each of them would have thrown themselves on Tol in an instant. Could anyone be that exceptional? He was exceptional, yes, but superhuman?

She got a sudden shock. Could she be that exceptional? This was the thought that had been eluding her—the thought that she'd been avoiding confronting. She found herself trembling and asked Harry if they could sit down.

"Are you tired?" he asked solicitously, leading her to a bench.

"No, no, just thinking."

A soft breeze came up. She shut her eyes. If she and Tol became a couple, would she remain faithful? She had a past of recklessness. She had an out-sized appetite. She had slept with men carelessly. She had—she had played with Paolo. Yes!—she didn't have clean hands there. Paolo disgusted her but he also intrigued her. He would never be able to seduce her but that didn't mean that she might not fall, because of something wild and unstable in her. She was the problem! And she didn't want to fail Tol, to hurt him ...

Later that day they were wandering behind Notre Dame. Suddenly Harry said, "Down there." He pointed to a steep, narrow flight of steps leading down to the Seine. They descended and in a moment were at the water's edge.

They found themselves at the entrance to a tiny cave: the Deportation Memorial, dedicated to the quarter million French citizens deported from Paris to the Nazi death camps. Aster reluctantly stepped in. The place was so cold and spare it sent a chill right through you. The names of the death camps were incised into the walls. There were remembrance candles and bouquets of flowers.

“This doesn’t feel right,” Aster whispered.

“It’s a throwaway,” Harry replied. “The French are pro-German, World War II notwithstanding. German is the language that gets you ahead in school. If you take German, you get the best teachers, the best classes, the best schedule. If you take English or Spanish you become a second-class citizen in the French educational system. This is so widely known that the Minister of Education had to go on television to deny it. Everything about World War II is underdone, hidden away, furtive.”

She took Harry’s hand. “I need the sun.”

They retraced their steps. Soon they were meandering through the side streets near their hotel. In a moment they would be back in the cool of the hotel lobby where, because rooms cost so much, they offered you free sherry. She and Harry would have a sherry ... she stopped and turned to her good friend.

“I love you,” Aster said.

Harry stared at her. He seemed to make up his mind. A goofy smile appeared on his lips.

“Is this a good moment to pop the question?” he said, simulating getting down on one knee by bending forward a little.

Aster’s eyes clouded over. She took both of his hands in hers. “Harry,” she whispered.

His face fell. “As a smart Jew with a lot of life experience, I take that to be a no?”

“Harry!” she whispered hoarsely. “This has been such a gift--”

He grimaced. “I shouldn’t have asked. Forget about it! Let’s have a good dinner.”

They were silent the rest of the way home. At the hotel they sat together stiffly on a plush sofa in the dark lobby, drinking their complimentary sherry, unable or unwilling to speak.

“I’m sorry,” Aster finally whispered, squeezing Harry’s hand.

“Don’t be! Really. Don’t be.”

They had a slow-moving dinner and retired to their room, where they remained awkward and out of sorts. They watched BBC programs on French television, one show after another, until Harry fell asleep. Aster felt like crying. When she awoke in the morning Harry was already gone. His note read, “Gone shopping. See you back here at noon. Or if you want to do something on your own, just leave me a note.” It wasn’t exactly frigid, but it was close. Aster pulled the covers over her head and forlornly tried to sleep.

12.

At about nine a.m. she arrived at the Place des Vosges, sketchbook in hand. The square was cool, still, and almost empty. The first mothers and their small children began arriving at about ten. They headed for the sand box on the western side of the park, where Aster was sitting, which, because of the orientation of the sun, was ten degrees warmer than the identical sand box on the eastern side. After awhile the first busload of tourists arrived, looking self-conscious. Their guides filled the Place des Vosges with information in three languages.

By eleven the park began to fill. Musicians appeared under the arcades. Workmen renovating nearby buildings came to eat their luncheon sandwiches, ham or tuna on long baguettes. Men and women on the move stopped for a moment to punch numbers into cell phones. The first lovers arrived, a young couple with a bottle of wine, books to read, a picnic lunch, and a blanket. Two young travelers loaded down by enormous backpacks stopped to nap, using their backpacks as rough pillows. Here and there a young woman on her lunch break coaxed a bit of a tan from the spring sun.

Aster made sure to be back in the lobby right at noon. Harry entered a minute or two later. He strode up to her, put down his packages—a pair of boutique bags sporting good addresses--and hugged her hard. Aster laughed.

“Listen to me,” he said, holding her shoulders. “You have nothing to feel guilty about. I can’t imagine not being with you, but that’s my problem. If you act like I’ve made you feel bad I’ll throw myself off Notre Dame like ... like what’s-his-name.”

“That hunchback.”

“That hunchback.”

They were good again. They had steak-and-fries and a bottle of wine at a café a few steps from the hotel. They lingered over coffee and dessert.

“Do you go right back to court?” Aster asked.

“Not for a month.”

“How long does it take you to prepare?”

“I’m quick. Some painters take seven years to paint a painting and still it’s no good. Van Gogh took an hour. What do you take? When you’re on your game?”

“Sometimes just a few hours.”

Harry nodded. “I’m from the Mozart school,” he said. “Beethoven labored and did great work. Mozart breezed and did great work. As great as they can be, somehow I don’t trust the laborers.”

She stared out at the Place des Vosges. She could go anywhere, see anything—she could go to London, Tokyo, Barcelona ... she noticed that Harry had pulled out his checkbook and was writing a check. She wondered about that, since he couldn’t be paying the bill with it. It looked to be a very large amount ...

When he finished, he looked up. Their eyes met.

“I wanted to finish paying up for the rest of year,” Harry said. “It’s probably time for you to have a nice chunk of money.”

He held out the check. After a moment she took it. It was made out for forty thousand dollars.

“That’s too much,” Aster said. “Isn’t it? I’m sure it’s too much.”

“It’s exactly right,” Harry replied. “Shattered Glass more than covers what I’ve given you. You were the best investment I’ve ever made.”

She looked down at the table. “And the Washington Square painting,” she said. “You get one of those, too. I have one picked out for you.” He began to object but she stopped him. “No, really!” she exclaimed, looking him in the eye. “If you don’t take it, we’re through!”

Harry laughed. “Well, given that--”

Aster had a sudden thought. “That contract with Willie that you negotiated? You left in the part where he didn’t have to pay me for six months. You couldn’t have missed that clause--”

She watched him flush. A wry smile began to play at her lips. Finally Harry nodded.

“I didn’t want you to have a big chunk of money in your hands. I thought you might leave.”

“Harry,” she said softly.

“Sorry about that. It was irrational ... and overbearing. But I just didn’t want you to possess the wherewithal to leave ... ”

She shook her head. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling and decided to hold her tongue.

“I’ll have Willie change that,” Harry said, looking down. “And get you paid.”

After a moment Aster said, “Yes, do that.”

They went for a walk in the direction of the Picasso museum. They were walking along a street filled with boutiques when Aster saw him. She felt the most terrible pang of anguish and gripped Harry’s hand hard. She wanted to turn and run or duck into a shop but Tol had already spotted her.

The two couples approached one another. Aster dropped Harry’s hand but Tol and his date, an exquisite blond who had to be a Scandinavian or German model, continued swinging their arms in unison.

“Aster,” Tol said merrily.

“Tol.” She introduced Harry Goldstein. He and Tol shook hands.

“This is Hilga,” Tol said. “You may have seen her on the cover of German Vogue?”

“He just likes saying that,” Hilga said in perfect, lightly accented English. “Every

Jew—even every half-Jew—needs to have his German woman.”

Harry laughed. “That is a mouthful. We should probably have drinks and analyze ourselves.” He glanced at Aster. “Or maybe not.”

Aster and Tol stared at one another. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was for coming to Paris with someone else. For his part, he looked amused. She tried to gauge whether she liked his reaction. Was he amused because he was basically indifferent? That wasn't it. His attitude confused her—but it also pleased her. She found herself almost able to smile.

“Harry Goldstein?” Hilga said. “So, who was the German woman in your life?”

“My second wife.”

“There,” Hilga said, turning to Tol. “I told you.”

They said their good-byes. They didn't even feign making a date to get together. Tol and Hilga strolled off.

“So that's Tol,” Harry said.

Aster said nothing.

In the evening they packed. She couldn't read Harry's mood any better than she could read her own. At about eleven she said, “Want to take a last stroll?”

They skirted a locked and deserted Place des Vosges and made their way through narrow streets still teeming with life. At the cafés, diners were just finishing dinner. Couples strolled through a dark but bustling Marais. Aster walked close to Harry and touched his arm. She wanted him to know just how grateful she was. She didn't want him to feel like he'd been playing second fiddle. That night, in bed, she did everything she could to drive that point home.

13.

What terrible luck! Tol should have been in Seoul, Oslo, Florence--anywhere but in Paris! But maybe he was there for exactly the same reason that Aster had come. Maybe he'd brought Hilga to Paris because he wanted to be there with Aster, just as Aster had brought Harry to Paris because she wanted to experience it with Tol. She thought about nothing else on the six-hour flight back to New York.

She spent the first night back sitting at The Lost Note, jet-lagged and drinking too much. The next day she went out walking. She strode a dozen blocks past the Metropolitan Museum and all the way back home. Tendrils of summer air infiltrated the spring chill; she hardly knew from one minute to the next whether to shed her jacket or bundle up tighter. That mirrored her mood. Part of her was close to something like ecstatic and part of her was moody and desperate.

The next day she felt compelled to paint. She took down the last two Washington Square paintings, the one reserved for Harry and the one ... she knew exactly what she'd been about to say. The one reserved for Harry and the one reserved for Tol. She shook the thought away. "The one for Harry and the one I get to sell!" she exclaimed.

She tacked up four new primed canvases. She wanted to do Paris—but not any traditional Paris painting. She wanted to honor her experience, she wanted to express what Paris had meant to her, but at the same time ... she paced the studio like an animal in its cage. At one point she got out the postcards she'd brought back from Paris and spread them out on her dining room table. Then, each time she paced the studio, she would stop for a few seconds in front of the postcards. There was something there ...

On the hundredth trip past the dining room table something clicked. She picked up one of the postcards. It was a typical scene of a steep, tree-lined set of stairs leading down from Sacré-Coeur. She studied it and thought about what Van Gogh had done in "Room in Arles." She stared at the postcard and pictured in her mind's eye those great paintings of the California School, where plunging San Francisco streets gave you the experience of vertigo.

She began to see something. It had to do with falls from great heights, with the rooftops of Paris as seen from the escalator at the Pompidou, with waterspout gargoyles

on Gothic cathedrals, with that French parachutist who had lived to be fifty-four. She would do Paris in plunging perspective, as if you were diving or falling from a tremendous height. Was it diving or was it falling? She wouldn't know until her brush hit the canvas.

She worked all day and through the night. Her first Plunging Paris painting began to appear. It looked like nothing she had ever seen and yet it spoke of a million Paris paintings, the bad and the good alike. It made you feel like you'd fallen out of a helicopter and were spinning down toward the rooftops of Paris and the white radiance of Sacré-Coeur. It gave you vertigo and brought a lump to your throat—and also confused you, because it wasn't Paris at all, it was someplace no one had ever seen before.

She awoke in the afternoon in a daze. She made coffee and took her coffee cup to the window. Staring out, she saw five large men approach the building. She thought of Jimmy. Italian gangsters from Brooklyn! They couldn't be anything else. Had they come to remind Jimmy that leg-breakers never got to leave the business? She hurried to her cell phone and rang Jimmy but only got his voice mail. She located her purse, extracted the .25, hurried to the door, and opened it a crack.

Someone had buzzed the five men in. They strode right by her and up to Jimmy's door. The one in front pounded hard. "We've come for you, Jimmy!" he shouted. "Open up!" The beefy men completely filled the narrow hallway. Aster pushed the door open several inches and watched as Jimmy's door opened and the five men piled in. She didn't hesitate. She rushed down the hall and plowed in after them.

"All right!" she cried. "All right!" She aimed the pistol at the group. "Jimmy!"

"Aster?" Jimmy came out from around the massive men. "What are you doing?"

She could feel her absolute lack of fear. She held the pistol at arm's length, as she'd been taught and as she'd practiced, and knew that at this distance she could put a bullet precisely where she wanted, anywhere she wanted. The men stared at her. Jimmy got between her and them.

"Are they here to hurt you?" Aster said, refusing to lower the gun.

"They're here to take me out for my birthday!" Jimmy replied. Everybody laughed except Aster. Jimmy half-turned and pointed. "This is my brother Vinny. He's a cop.

This is Sal. He's a firefighter. This is Tony. He's the biggest, toughest queer in the Village. This is Mike. He's a painting contractor. This is Lenny, who actually is a thug but who is also a dear friend."

Aster reluctantly lowered the pistol. "Christ," she murmured.

"Do you have a permit for that, miss?" Vinny said, his eyes twinkling.

They all laughed.

"They're taking me out for pizza. Want to come?"

"No, no." She was still in a daze. "Christ, Jimmy! Don't tell me any more hoodlum stories!"

"Aster is a great painter," Jimmy said suddenly, addressing his guests. "She's just amazing."

"Can we see what you do?" Tony said. "I have clients who buy art."

"Tony's an interior decorator," Jimmy said.

"I'm a corporate art buyer!" Tony exclaimed, offended.

"Like that isn't an interior decorator!"

They all laughed, except for Tony.

"Let me show them what you do," Jimmy pleaded. "Please!"

"All right."

She led the six enormous men back to her studio.

"Be careful," she said. "Things are on the floor."

She had the four Religious Education paintings and the two remaining Washington Square paintings spread out on the rug. The four Needle Dreams paintings hung on one of her painting walls and the first Plunging Paris painting and three blank canvasses hung on the other. As the massive men moved gingerly around the studio she got out the Scotch bottle and poured them whiskies without asking.

“What’s with the Catholic school girls?” someone said. Aster ignored the question.

“The Washington Square paintings,” Tony asked. “What’s the price?”

“Seventy-five thousand,” Aster replied. Somebody whistled. “But they’re not for sale. Two others in the series are available at Gallery Lulu.”

“Seventy-five thousand!” Tony said, not so much in surprise as by way of congratulations. “Willie Parsley represents you?”

“He does.”

“Seventy-five thousand is a very nice number.”

“Go figure,” Aster said.

Tony turned back to the Washington Square paintings. “I want the one with the red accents,” he said. “I have a client with a new building just off Washington Square. The painting’s perfect. It may not be for sale, but if it is I’ll meet your price.” He glanced at Aster. “It’s a big tobacco distributorship. Some kind of middle-man thing.”

“Cigarettes,” Aster said.

“Cigarettes,” Tony nodded. “Cancer. And so forth. Seventy-five thousand.”

Aster walked to the window. She hadn’t thought about this before. She saw herself in shows, in galleries, in museums, collected by sympathetic souls who threw candlelit dinner parties. You didn’t paint so as to be hung in hospital corridors or the lobbies of tobacco companies. Aster stared out.

Tony waited. The others were gathered around the “Religious Education” paintings.

Jimmy was explaining their merits. “She’s a god-damned atheist!” she heard one of the men interject. Aster couldn’t tell if it was a friendly oath or a real complaint. She shook her head and turned to Tony.

“Let me think about it,” she said.

“I can always buy it at Lulu. Less money for you.”

“Let me think about it. Leave me your number.”

Soon the last drops of Scotch were gone. Aster ushered the men to the door. “Great neighbor!” the firefighter said to Jimmy. “Armed and beautiful!”

Aster smiled and shook her head.

The cop got serious. “Be careful with that,” Vinny Vitale said. “You think it’s a toy, you should throw it in the river.”

“Did I handle it like it was a toy?” Aster replied.

The cop laughed and gave Aster a grudging nod.

14.

There was a Thursday evening opening at Gallery Lulu for the paintings of an Icelandic painter named Bodvardson. His specialty was grotesque portraits. Aster thought about going but at the last minute changed her mind and went to bed early instead. At two in the morning her phone rang. It was Willie Parsley.

“Aster!” Willie cried breathlessly.

She shook herself awake. “Willie? What is it?”

She heard him hesitate. “Your two Washington Square paintings! Somebody slashed them! They’re ruined!”

“What?” She tucked her knees up. “Slashed them?”

“They were in the back room. I’d just gotten them framed. It must have been somebody at the opening tonight. They were fine earlier this evening! An inside door was jimmied.”

Aster bit her lip. “Have you called the police?”

“Of course! I have insurance. I’ll be filing a claim. The police came already. I just finished dealing with them. Then I called you.”

“So it’s a police matter,” she muttered.

“Absolutely.” Willie paused. “I’m really sorry, Aster,” he said with feeling. “They were great paintings. “

The paintings meant nothing to her. She could do a hundred Washington Square paintings. She could probably do them with more intensity and brilliance after this. It was the escalation of Paolo’s revenge that made her crazy.

“Do you suspect anyone?” she ventured.

“I do! There was a woman here from your building, Estelle Buster. She was making bitter noises all evening about Bodvardson’s work, about everything she saw hanging in the gallery, but especially about your prices. She got drunk and loud. I told the police about her.”

“Willie!” That made a huge difference. “It wasn’t Estelle! Was Paolo Giamenti there?”

“He was.”

“He did it,” Aster said. “That’s between you and me. For God’s sake get them off Estelle! It was Paolo.”

“Paolo?” Willie sounded stunned. “You know that for a fact?”

“I don’t know it for a fact. But I know it for a dead certainty! I insulted him last winter and he’s been taking his revenge ever since.”

A long silence passed between them. Finally Willie said, “I’ll have to tell the police, Aster. And my insurance carrier.”

“Willie!”

She heard him hesitate and rethink the situation. “I don’t know,” he said after a long moment. “You don’t know it for a fact. Nothing good can come of me accusing him. Not a damn thing! I’m going to say that I have no idea.”

“Tell them that you feel certain that it wasn’t Estelle!”

“How would I know that?”

“I don’t know! But you have to get them off that scent.”

“I can’t,” he replied. “I can’t take that back without raising suspicion. We’ll just have to let it play itself out.”

They fell silent.

“We’ll get insurance money, Aster,” Willie said. “At least there’s that.”

Aster made no reply.

“For the full amount. I have written offers at seventy-five thousand for those paintings. In fact there was going to be a bidding war. I have it all in writing. There’s no doubt we’ll get a settlement for the full amount.” He thought about that. “Of course, we’ll lose the money we would have made from the auction. But the publicity from this—that isn’t half bad.”

Aster wasn’t listening. “Have you ever seen Estelle’s work?” she said.

“I can’t remember,” Willie replied. “I see millions of slides. Have you?”

“I have.” She sat up a little straighter. “Willie, since the paintings were in your care, I could probably sue you.”

“Aster!” Willie exclaimed. “That’s crazy. You’ll get the money from the settlement. Why would you want to sue me?”

“I wouldn’t. But I could.” She waited.

“All right. What do you want?”

“Hang one of Estelle’s paintings.”

Willie made a noise. “You mean, sight unseen? Just like that?”

“No! Absolutely not! Go through the process. Give her a call. Say that you’ve heard about her work. Ask to see slides. Pick the best one. If you hate them, pick one anyway. If you love them, give her a show. All right?”

“And if her work totally sucks? What about my reputation?”

Aster laughed. “Tons of work that sucks gets hung! I’ve seen bad work in San Francisco. I’ve seen bad work in New York. I’ve seen bad work in Paris. I’ve seen bad work hanging at Gallery Lulu, for that matter! And often with fantastic price tags attached. One damned painting, Willie.”

Parsley made a noise. “Wonderful! This has been a great evening. Plus nobody gave a rat’s ass about the Bodvardsons.”

Aster hung up, got out of bed, grabbed a diet soda from the refrigerator, and paced the studio. Then she called Tol.

They hadn’t spoken since their encounter on the street in Paris. She dialed his cell phone number and got a wide-awake voice with plenty of noise in the background.

“Yes?”

“Tol? It’s Aster.”

“Aster.”

She took a breath. “I know that only crazy people call at the three in the morning. Maybe I’m a little crazy.”

“What’s the matter?”

She could hear genuine concern in his voice and knew that she had his undivided attention.

“I--” She didn’t know where to begin.

“Aster.”

“Paolo Giamenti slashed two of my paintings. In a back room at Gallery Lulu. They don’t know it was him but I do.”

“Aster!”

She made a noise. “That’s not why I called. I’m so sorry about Paris, Tol.”

Her voice cracked. “I’m so sorry. I should have waited. I should have waited to go with you.”

Tol’s response came instantly. “And I shouldn’t have been there with Hilga?” he said gently. “We shouldn’t be making love while we wait? Aster, I don’t hold Paris against you. Do you hear me? I don’t hold Paris against you.”

She sat down hard. “This is so crazy! Why aren’t we together?” She tried to control her voice. “Thank you for what you just said.”

“We will be together. You think we won’t?”

“Can we be together tonight?”

Tol laughed. “I’m in Miami, Aster. At a party for my new CD.” He paused. “I have publicity things lined up for weeks.”

“Then another tour?”

“Then another tour.” He hesitated. “I could drop in—but that’s exactly what we’re not doing.”

“Name a city that we should see together. I swear that I won’t go there with anyone else!”

“Don’t give it another thought, love.”

“Name a city!” Aster persisted.

“Where haven’t you been? London? Rome? Dublin? Amsterdam?”

“I haven’t been to any of them!”

“Dublin, then. Dublin will be a good city for us.”

She began sobbing. “Dublin it is,” she said through her tears. “Goodnight, Tol.” She hung up and spent the rest of the night with her eyes wide open, thinking.

Part 3. Summer

1.

The idea came to her in the middle of the night. First thing the next morning she called Parsley.

“Look,” she said breathlessly. “Let’s hang two blank canvases at the gallery and I’ll paint them live. You invite an audience to watch me. I’ll paint them and you sell them then-and-there.”

Aster waited.

“I don’t know,” Parsley finally replied. “What if—”

Aster jumped to her feet. “Trust me, Willie! They’ll be brilliant! I’ll do one from noon to three and the other from four to six and they’ll be absolutely brilliant.”

“Are you serious, Aster?”

Esteban worked incredibly slowly when he painted his murals. If you commissioned one from him, that was the first thing he told you. “There can’t be a deadline,” he would say. “I work patiently.” One day he suggested that she help him with a project, a mural for a Mission church. In fact, for this commission there was an informal deadline and Esteban was far behind schedule. That was part of the reason for his offer. But Aster knew that the main reason was to give her an opportunity. She loved him for that and knew exactly how exceptional his gesture was, given how rarely one artist gave another artist an opportunity, even if they happened to be sharing the same bed.

Her section of the mural was five feet wide and twelve feet high. She had to depict field workers in a dream landscape of giant lettuces and artichokes, with purple hills in the background and a blue sky lit by a burning sun above. Like a madwoman, she whipped through her section in an afternoon. It came out perfectly. It only now occurred to her that Esteban had never asked for her help again and hadn’t really thanked her or praised her. Had her speed and success further demoralized him?

“I’m completely serious,” Aster replied. “I need to do this!”

“Let me think about it.”

“Think about the publicity, Willie!”

After a long moment Willie replied, “I need to think about whether I believe you can pull it off.”

Aster bit her lip. “What about an audition?”

Parsley grunted. “All right! Come paint something here at the gallery.”

“I will!”

She was there first thing in the morning. She got a primed canvas masked and tacked to the wall and turned to Parsley.

“What do you want?”

“Do the gallery as seen from the street.”

Aster nodded and hurried outside to look. Stepping back to get the right perspective, she found herself in the gutter. A taxi barreling down the narrow street honked at her. She dove back onto the sidewalk. After five minutes of dodging traffic and studying the gallery’s façade, she rushed back inside.

“Fine,” she told Willie. “Gallery Lulu in the rain.”

“In the rain?”

“That’s what I feel like.”

She began painting. She loved the technique of slanted lines for rain, taken from the Japanese, that Van Gogh had used so brilliantly. The façade of Gallery Lulu began to appear as if in a mist: the French green of the gallery awning, purples and oranges that became reflections on glass, all as if seen through a blue-gray haze. She mixed paints

and flew at the canvas. Parsley stood transfixed. When it seemed that some customers were disturbing her—though in fact Aster took no notice of them—Parsley shooed them away. In two hours she was done.

Aster stepped back.

“Christ,” Willie said. He stood in front of the glistening canvas, shaking his head.

“Well?”

“I’ll buy it myself.”

“Fine.”

“Unless it’s a gift.”

“No, I don’t think so.” She stared at the canvas. “But you can have it for a rock bottom price. Twenty thousand.”

“Done. I’ll write you a check.” He walked directly to his desk. “It’s the bargain of the year,” he said, writing out the check. He returned a moment later. “You want to do the Washington Square paintings live?” he asked, pressing the check into her hand.

“I do.”

“You’re on!”

It was the perfect stunt and Parsley milked it exquisitely. The buzz started the instant he announced that the beautiful Aster Lynn, whose great Washington Square paintings had been tragically and scandalously vandalized, would recreate them live, as bravely as any high wire walker, lion tamer, or other daredevil artist. The story had everything—a gorgeous young woman, scandal, intrigue, risk—and suddenly faces that had never appeared on television before, the faces of art critics, curators, and collectors, were popping up to debate whether Aster Lynn could or couldn’t pull such a feat off. It became one of those instant phenomena, like poker or spelling bees, and Aster found herself a complete celebrity.

Everyone wanted to interview her. Everyone wanted to photograph her. Willie, acting as her self-appointed personal assistant, arrived six times a day, shepherding in this print reporter or that camera crew. The photographer from People Magazine wanted her to pose “like a wild animal.” Aster spit out her refusal. Some days she found herself with a dozen phone interviews, half with print journalists and half, live or taped, with radio hosts all over the country.

At first she tried to answer every question thoughtfully and honestly. By the twentieth interview she found herself replaying her best, most convincing answers. She realized that she had stopped thinking—there was no time for it and no point to it. There were no new questions forthcoming. She fielded the same ten questions again and again and provided her now-standard answers. She didn’t know who had slashed her paintings. No, she wasn’t scared of painting live. No, she hadn’t slashed them herself. Yes, it was possible that she was the first painter to ever try such a thing as live painting—she really didn’t know, one way or the other.

By the third week of this nonstop attention she began to feel deranged. Just as Tol had predicted, she’d had to change to unlisted phone numbers, for her landline and cell phone both. Hundreds of emails poured in, from breathless high school students who were rooting for her, from sarcastic mid-career artists, from people who mistook her for their friend or art expert—could she recommend a good art book, which did she think was the best New York museum to visit if you only had the time to visit one, which paints did she use, did she like to paint with her windows open or shut?

She stopped drinking during the day—then drank too much at night. She understood why this attention was called “buzz.” It was like the buzzing of a swarm of gnats. She couldn’t hear herself think. Collectors bombarded her with requests to see what she was doing. She turned them all down. That only inflamed them. She started getting gifts from them—boxes of the finest French, Swiss, Belgian and domestic chocolate, cognacs and sherries, top champagnes. Jimmy would deliver them to her—she had stopped responding to the buzzer or answering knocks at her door, unless they were coded, and had put up a note that all deliveries for Aster Lynn were to go to 2C—to Jimmy.

The oddest thoughts began to disturb her, none of them having to do with painting live. It disturbed her that the storage space she had rented back in San Francisco might be damp and that she would return to find her mother’s possessions ruined. It disturbed her that something that looked suspiciously like mold had started to sprout on the west wall of the studio. It disturbed her that her color sense had shifted—her pigments appeared to have darkened. Cadmium red didn’t look like cadmium red any more!—that frightened her.

Willie kept adding elements to the stunt. Too many people wanted to attend the event; it would stream live over the Internet; it came to him to set up monitors around town. You could watch at Ginger Island over drinks. You could watch at a theater in the East Village. You could watch in Rockefeller Center outdoors beside the rink. Wildest of all, you could stand on Broadway and look up—Aster would be on the big screen above Times Square! And you could bid on the paintings as they emerged!—that was a masterstroke. Willie hired a score of unemployed actresses to take bids from around the world as Aster painted. You could log on to your computer wherever you were in the world and watch her paint live ...

One afternoon Shelley came over to visit. She looked tired but put on a good face.

“Did I hear you on the radio this morning?” Shelley asked.

“You did.”

Shelley whistled. “You still have to go and make those paintings.”

Aster threw up her hands. “That’s the easy part!”

Shelley shook her head. “Nice to hear. I wouldn’t find it that easy.”

“Have some chocolate! I have tons of it.” She joined Shelley on the sofa. “How are you doing?” she asked.

“Declining,” Shelley replied. “But at least I’m still able to paint.”

They spent two hours visiting. Some idea began to percolate in Aster’s brain, something to do with Shelley, but she couldn’t nail the idea down. She made them pasta, tossed it with bottled spaghetti sauce, broiled up some garlic toast, and opened a bottle of expensive champagne. They finished the bottle of champagne and Aster turned to Shelley.

“Now what?” she asked. “Port? Sherry? Brandy? Cognac? I’ve got everything.”

“What makes AIDS go away?”

They shared a good sherry, held hands, and chatted quietly.

2.

The day of her performance approached. Aster found herself growing grave. She wasn't worried about producing bad paintings. Indeed, who would even know? That wasn't cynicism, just the fact of the matter. That this doodle or that scribble could be worth several hundred thousand dollars took you beyond cynicism to a place of absurdity. Not that she was going to do anything like bad work—she was positive that she would succeed brilliantly. But if she happened to make a mess, she'd deal with that. None of that worried her.

She only wondered about Paolo. How could he pass up such a splendid opportunity to pull a stunt? And how would she react if he appeared and interfered with her? He had already slashed two of her paintings: that gesture horrified her but it also fascinated her. It was an extraordinary bit of violence—an extraordinary violation—more vicious than harming her physically. It was like harming her child. Had she really affected him so deeply that he wanted to hurt her children?

July arrived. Aster finished the last of the Plunging Paris paintings. Sweltering tourists filled the parched, sooty city. Her performance was slated for the second Saturday of the month. She avoided Washington Square Park because she wanted to paint from memory, from that first feeling, from remembering Tol and that night. Nor was it hard to avoid the park; she'd stopped going out much. Her fame curtailed her wandering. Too often she'd come down to find a photographer or a fan waiting. She stopped going to the Lost Note, she stopped sketching in the parks; she only ventured out to shop and to take care of essentials.

A few days before the event she got a call from Tol.

“Good luck,” he said.

“You perform live all the time!” she laughed, putting down her drink. “I've seen you.”

“But I don't compose in front of my audience!” he replied.

“I bet you could ... and I bet you would!”

“In fact I did that once,” he laughed. “Half an album came out of it.”

“Bingo.”

They talked for half an hour.

“Don’t come and watch me!” Aster exclaimed at the last moment. “You’d prove a monumental distraction!”

“I’ll be thinking of you.”

The day arrived. Aster awoke at four a.m., wired and wide-awake. She watched the sun rise as she finished her third cup of coffee. She turned on the television and got the weather. Hot and humid. Times Square would be jammed. The gallery would be packed. Everyone would be watching. She dressed slowly, not sure of her persona. Should she be comfortable and bohemian? Should she be beautiful? She tried on a jeans outfit, a dress with heels, a skirt and a blouse, a t-shirt and pants. Something about Paris came back to her—the way Frenchwomen wore their black dresses even in the morning, looking simultaneously sexy, elegant, and casual. She chose a black cocktail dress. She would be beautiful.

Her cab stalled because limos and town cars, dropping off collectors and celebrities, made the street outside Gallery Lulu impassable. Aster had to walk the last block. It was eight-thirty in the morning. The air already had that dead, super-heated, stultifying mid-July feel to it. Finally her nerves attacked her. Her stomach churned and her heart pounded. Pushing her way through the excited crowd trying to get into the gallery, she felt close to fainting. Her mind didn’t seem like her own. It was filled with thoughts she never had, about coming up short, about failing. She held on to the door for a second, to support herself.

Parsley had her painting area cordoned off with velvet ropes. Outside of the ropes, spectators filled three rows of chairs and scores more stood crowded around the area. At the back wall, looking like a volunteer contingent at a public television pledge event, twenty young women sat at a bank of phones. Half of them were on the phone already. A pair of cameramen flanked the painting area. Aster caught sight of two wall-mounted cameras. Suddenly she doubted she could do this. Parsley had his arm around her shoulder and was whispering intensely into her ear as he led her forward.

“Step back every so often!” he whispered. “Let people see how it’s going. Maybe turn around once in a while so that people can see you. God, you look beautiful! Don’t worry about the cameras ... do you need anything? There’s a bottle of water next to your palette ... if you need me, I’ll be dashing around, but George will be right there the whole time ... if he moves an inch I’ll strangle him ...”

She pictured Tol playing to that crowd of fifty thousand in Shea stadium. He’d performed flawlessly and without making any fuss about it. Suddenly her nerves settled and her vision cleared. She laughed out loud: the colors around her looked normal again. Her Chinese red bracelet was Chinese red again! She shook her hand and made her bracelet jingle.

“Great!” she exclaimed. “Let’s do it!”

She entered the painting area, stood before the two blank canvases, turned once to the crowd, and shrugged. The well-dressed crowd laughed. She had thought that she would work on one canvas at a time. But as she stood there, the buzz of the crowd at her back, she changed her mind. A moment later, she began. She tackled the canvas on the left first, working in her wild, deliberate way for twenty minutes. Without pausing to take a breath, she turned to the canvas on the right. This one felt colder, as blue-black as the other but more yellow. She worked on it for fifteen minutes, then, like an ambidextrous pitcher, shifted back to the first.

She heard the crowd’s excited whispers. She knew that a million things were going on behind her. Sirens erupted in the distance—she heard them but didn’t take any notice. People were still trying to get in ... at some point waiters began passing out drinks, then hors d’oeuvres. She glanced in the direction of the phone bank ... all the women were talking. Something happened by the front door that she couldn’t see ... maybe they had stopped a homeless man from entering? She kept painting.

An hour passed. A second hour passed. Both paintings were emerging simultaneously. At one point she had the idle thought, “I wonder which painting is winning?” She smiled at that and took a sip of water. She could sense the crowd hush as she paused. It was as if they were painting with her, holding their breath to see which canvas she would choose and what imagery would appear next. She waited a beat longer, to build suspense. Then she attacked the canvas on the right, lifting lampposts out of thin air, gesturing them into being.

She worked more slowly after three o’clock, not because she was tired but because

the paintings required more consideration. She's been painting for six hours straight. She hadn't gone to the bathroom, she hadn't stopped at all except to mix paints, appraise the paintings, and sip water. She wondered how many in the crowd had hung in there with her. She glanced around ... she recognized with a thrill that most of the faces hadn't changed. They had come at nine and were still with her six hours later. It struck her that they would never forget this ...

Both of the paintings were blue-black, but the one on the left was redder and the one on the right more yellow. She thought of the left one as "blood" and the right one as "neon." In each painting the central tableau of singer, small audience, and trash can fire could be clearly discerned, but beyond that they represented different worlds. She nodded to herself—she had given the world at her back a clear choice. Greek shipping magnates would choose "blood." Danish industrialists would choose "neon." She smiled at her distinction and wondered what her audience made of her smiling.

The paintings were virtually done. She sat down in front of them to see what they still needed. She sat that way, staring and thinking, for five or ten minutes. She felt sympathy for her audience—how boring, to literally watch paint dry!—and wondered if a mass exodus would begin. But no one was stirring. She got up, made a first stroke, a second stroke, then sat down again. She glanced around—George materialized instantly.

"Wine," Aster said. "Red."

"We have a Chilean Shiraz—"

"George!"

He hurried off and returned with a goblet obscenely full of a red wine as dark and thick as bull's blood.

Fatigue hit her. For the first time since she began early that morning she grew worried, not about the paintings as they were but about ruining them if she continued. Were they done? She sipped her wine and contemplated them. "Blood" was done. She nodded to herself. Done! She turned her attention to "neon." Was it also done? She was trying to decide when the audience decided for her. They began to applaud. The applause grew to a crescendo. There was nothing for her to do but stand, turn, and bow. She did exactly that—and raised her glass to them. Their applause thundered in her ears.

Parsley entered the painting area and, joining Aster, faced the audience.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you! I know you’ll agree with me—no one has ever seen anything like this. It is really a watershed moment in the history of art.” He turned to Aster. “Thank you. God, you were magnificent!”

She smiled. The audience broke into applause. Aster shook her head, carefully put down her wine goblet, and waltzed out of Gallery Lulu.

3.

That night she thought about her mother. They had been a complete family, the two of them. She hadn't needed anyone else. It wasn't a "single-parent family"—it was a family. She didn't need her father, whom she had never known. Three or four times her mother had tried to broach the subject of her father and each time Aster had cut her short. "It's okay!" Aster would reply. "It's not important!"

One time her mother had insisted.

"You need to know about him."

"No."

"You don't want to know that he was a good man?"

Aster bit her lip. "I don't mind knowing that."

"That he was very smart? That he looked like a cavalry officer?"

"Fine. All right."

"Can I tell you two stories?"

She didn't want to hear them. But she nodded. Her mother took her hand. They were sitting on the living room sofa in a tiny room that had barely enough space for the sofa, a couple of bookcases, and a lamp. But the windows were large and afforded a view of a steep Bernal Heights street full of Edwardians. It was late afternoon. What had provoked this conversation? Aster had no recollection. But she remembered the stories.

One had been about the time her mother and her father had traveled to Mexico and attended a bullfight. What was the point of the story? It had something to do with shared experience. The brutality hadn't outraged them. Nor had it attracted them. The

story wasn't about bullfighting at all. It was more that they had sat in the blistering sun, a young man and a young woman enveloped in a cheering crowd, and thereafter possessed that shared memory—although they would only live together for another year.

Probably she didn't really understand the point of the story. But she hadn't asked any questions. Suddenly she pictured Estelle in her granny glasses and heard that muttered word: "Pride." Some stubborn pride had caused Aster to dismiss her father, since he had dismissed her. But that wasn't quite it. He hadn't dismissed her—her mother had ordered him out. He'd been a gambler and that was that. Her mother had demanded that he leave ...

Still, he had left.

The second story was as hard to grasp as the bullfighting story. It had something to do with a visit they had made to the home of friends when Aster was a few weeks old. Her father was about to be booted out of the house—he didn't know that yet, but her mother did. They weren't speaking much. They were both terribly unhappy. Her father had just lost a large sum of their money at Bay Meadows. Maybe it was all of their money—Aster didn't remember. They'd gone to visit a couple they knew in the Haight-Ashbury. Something was troubling the couple but her parents were so tense themselves that they didn't notice the tension in the apartment. Somehow Aster knew. She wouldn't stop crying and couldn't be comforted. Finally her father had gathered her up in her pink blanket and walked with her up and down Haight Street, singing to her for almost an hour. Eventually she fell asleep.

That was the whole story.

Aster choked back tears. Of course she knew what that story meant, what her mother had intended to communicate. Her father had loved her.

Still, he had left, apparently without protest.

The phone interrupted her thoughts. She hadn't been answering it since she'd gotten home from Gallery Lulu and eighteen new messages waited for her on her machine. For some reason, she answered the phone now.

"Aster!" Willie exclaimed. "Here's the update! I ended the bidding at 8 o'clock. I could have kept it going but it felt unseemly to keep all those A-list collectors fighting.

The yellow one sold for three hundred sixty-five thousand. The red one sold at three eighty.” Willie waited. “Aster? Are you there?”

“No, I’m not all here,” Aster replied. “Thank you, Willie. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Aster--”

“Tomorrow, Willie.”

She knew nothing about her father’s whereabouts. But one Google search might locate him. She knew his name, she knew that he’d trained as an architect, she knew that his family came from the Midwest. Maybe he would decide to search her out!—now that she was famous. Maybe, as her story became known, a stream of middle-aged men would appear, each claiming to be her father, each with his story of woe and need ...

Did she know anything about his parents? She shook her head. Her mother had done a perfect job of cutting them off and Aster had done a perfect job of not caring. She doubted that she’d even heard their names. She didn’t know if he had siblings, other children ... she didn’t know if she had half-sisters and half-brothers ... she wondered if she cared even now. Yes, he had comforted her; but he had gambled; he had left without protest; and he had never reached out to her. What did she want? Would she have been pleased if he suddenly appeared? Or would she have frowned and thought twice about letting him in?

She sighed. She could only imagine what today had done for her name. If there had been buzz before the event ... she had pulled it off like a champion. She made herself some instant hot chocolate. She didn’t feel like drinking. She was certain that Tol had called, that his was among the eighteen new messages; but she didn’t feel like listening to them, not even to hear his voice. She had some French chocolate with her hot chocolate—chocolate overkill—and put herself to bed.

That night she dreamed about a tropical island in a cobalt blue sea. The island was volcanic and rough to the touch. Strange fruit grew on its trees, fruit that was sweet one minute and bitter the next. She seemed to be happy exploring the island—she felt like a girl again. She discovered a waterfall and swam in the natural pool at its foot. She was naked; then she was dressed in something made of leaves. Her garment was surprisingly substantial, surprisingly well-made. A designer sarong, her dream self laughed. It had apparently been very expensive, but she could afford it. Still, she worried about having spent so much on a sarong and wondered why she couldn’t just

wander around naked ...

The phone began ringing at eight a.m. the next morning. She turned off the ringer. At ten she got out of bed. Nothing had changed: she was still in her studio, light poured in, the temperature was rising, the dog days of August were coming, the Lost Note would already be open for its first customers, a garbage truck rattled down the street ... nothing had changed. She laughed out loud. Like nothing had changed! She could only imagine how famous she'd become overnight.

4.

At eleven o'clock she heard a knock at the door and her name being called. She recognized Estelle's voice, crossed to the door, and opened it. Her downstairs neighbor faced her shyly.

"I saw you yesterday," Estelle said, fidgeting with her glasses. "You were something!"

Aster nodded. "Thank you."

"Can I come in for a minute?"

Aster let her pass into the studio. Estelle glanced around, made her way to the sofa, and dropped down heavily. Aster joined her and waited.

"Did you know that I have a daughter?" Estelle asked after a moment.

"No," Aster lied. "I didn't."

Estelle sat up. "You know that I didn't slash your paintings?" she exclaimed. "You know that?"

"I know that."

Estelle nodded. "I need you to know that!" She paused. "The police questioned me. It was almost funny. To tell you the truth, I wanted to confess that I'd done it, just to bask a little in your reflected glory. That's how nutty I am—how defeated." She frowned and lowered her eyes. "That would have been my stunt, my way of grabbing attention. We do need to grab attention, don't we?" she said.

"We do," Aster replied. "We should come up with a really good stunt for you! Your work deserves it."

Estelle waved the compliment away. “It’s past my time. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Maybe my daughter still has a chance. Me, I’m a total failure.” She raised her hand. “You don’t have to say anything. You don’t have to make me feel better. I left my daughter. That’s pretty dreadful. I paint in a way that nobody wants. When I approach a canvas I do something completely self-sabotaging. Maybe it’s anger and bitterness—I don’t know. All I know is that I’ve made bad mistakes as a mother and bad mistakes as an artist.” She laughed forlornly. “I have no career and a daughter who’s attempted suicide as many times as I have.”

Aster shut her eyes.

“You’re angry too,” Estelle said, “but it’s different. I would love to be you. But that’s not going to happen. The question for me right now is, does my daughter have a chance? She wants to be an actress but she’s a nervous wreck. She butchers every audition. As it stands right now ... I was wondering ...” She glanced at Aster. “I was wondering if you would talk to her.”

“Talk to her?”

“Just talk to her! Maybe you could rub off on her.”

She took Estelle’s hand and squeezed it.

“I’d be happy to talk to her.”

Estelle’s head dropped.

“About Gallery Lulu--” Aster murmured.

“Funny you should mention that,” Estelle said, looking up. “Somebody from there asked to see my slides. Of course I haven’t heard anything.”

Aster squeezed her hand. “I’ll check on that.”

“And about my daughter?”

“What would you like me to do?”

“Have coffee with her! Somewhere around here—I wouldn’t expect you to travel to Brooklyn.”

“Of course!” Aster got up, found a scrap of paper, and wrote down her unlisted phone number. “Have her call me. I mean it!”

Estelle got to her feet. “Thanks.” She looked Aster in the eye. “I would never have slashed your paintings!”

Aster hugged her and ushered her out. As she opened the door she got a shock. Camilla, about to knock, was standing there.

“Camilla,” Aster said.

“May I come in?”

Aster made perfunctory introductions, said a last goodbye to Estelle, and let Camilla pass into the studio.

“Excuse me a minute,” Aster said. “I have to make a phone call.” She crossed to the far end of the studio, pulled out her cell phone, and dialed.

“Aster!” Willie exclaimed, recognizing her voice. “We have to talk--”

“Willie.” Aster paced in a small circle. “You have to get back to Estelle about her paintings! You promised me--”

“Who’s Estelle?”

“My neighbor downstairs! I told you about her. She does--”

“Aster!” Willie interrupted. “You can’t be serious. You are the hottest painter in New York—the hottest painter in America. We have a million things to discuss! You can’t get your priorities all screwed up--” He hesitated. “Aster?”

He had been right to stop. Aster was furious.

“I have eight paintings here, Willie, twelve counting Religious Education,” she said through clenched teeth. “What’s my price now?”

“I’m really not sure. Yesterday was special. I don’t think that’s your price yet. Maybe between two hundred and three hundred? Maybe two-fifty? I have to think!”

“I am asking you to help a woman who deserves a little help. That isn’t a screwed-up priority. I won’t work with you if you won’t take my requests for favors seriously.”

She waited. It took a long time for Willie to reply. “Well, then maybe we won’t be working together!” he exclaimed. The line went dead.

Aster stood there dumbfounded. An instant later her phone rang.

“Aster, love!” Willie cried. “I can’t find Estelle’s slides. Would you please have her send them to me again? As soon as I get them I will pore over them!”

“Fine--”

The line went dead again.

Interesting, Aster thought. He couldn’t possibly have looked for Estelle’s slides in that split second. So this was Willie’s passive-aggressive style, making her force Estelle to resubmit her slides just to prove to Aster who was the boss. And this in the aftermath of yesterday! She nodded to herself. She would always, always have to be careful. She could call him back and tell him to actually look for Estelle’s slides, which no doubt were there somewhere. She could ... she could burn her bridges, dub him as dangerous and untrustworthy, and stop dealing with him. Or she could smile and accept that she would be dealing with shadowy personalities every step of the way. Her mind told her to smile but her body was shaking.

“Something wrong?” Camilla said.

Aster jumped. The Spanish woman had come up behind her. She wore an intoxicating fragrance that made Aster’s head spin. She was astonishingly beautiful; Aster meant to take a step back but couldn’t.

“Just business,” Aster said.

Camilla, smiling, nodded. “You are a big business now. It’s funny for one person to be a big business.”

Aster exhaled. She stepped around Camilla and headed toward the kitchen.

“Drink?” Aster said.

Camilla was following her. “It isn’t quite noon,” she said, a twinkle in her voice.

“Drink?”

“Some white wine.”

Aster had an open bottle in the refrigerator. She pulled out two of her good glasses and filled them to the brim. She began hers even before handing Camilla her glass.

They stood there. Camilla watched her.

“You drink fast,” she said. “Like it was water.”

“I don’t drink Scotch quite this fast.”

Camilla laughed. “Well, you had better be careful.” She paused. “After all, this is just starting. Wait until the flashbulbs start popping in your face. You’ll be lucky not to become an alcoholic.”

They made their way to the sofa. Aster sat down first and Camilla sat down very close to her. Aster could feel her heart pounding.

“I suppose this is about Paolo?” she said.

“My visit? Not really. Yes, you made him completely deranged. Yesterday he went to Times Square and watched you painting on that giant screen. The whole time he rushed around grabbing tourists and crying, ‘What do you think? What do you think?’” She laughed. “God, what the tourists must have thought of him! I tried to quiet him down

but he wasn't having any of it. I've never seen him like that—and I've seen him in some states. Then last night--" She reached for her wine and took a sip. "Well, that's neither here nor there. I'm not here about him."

"His state of mind must be your business ... "

"I don't think so!" she exclaimed merrily. She touched Aster on the knee. "If he cracks, I'll put him in the best institution, the one with the prettiest nurses. They can give him scissors and glue and construction paper--" She looked at Aster. "Damn," she said, staring into Aster's eyes. "I have this nasty itch." She hiked up her skirt. "Right here. Would you like to scratch it?"

The gesture made Aster gasp. She jumped to her feet and strode away from the sofa.

Camilla laughed. "Come back! Don't worry. I can keep my clothes on ..."

Aster sat down on the edge of her bed, then, as if the bed were electrified, jumped up again. She strode to the door of the studio, yanked it open, and stood there waiting. Camilla shrugged, rose, and crossed to the door. She handed Aster her wine glass.

"Most people don't have our itch," she said, inclining her head a little. "You will discover that you have to scratch it!"

Aster said nothing. She closed the door behind the Spanish woman. Once she had stopped trembling, she poured the contents of both glasses down the drain.

5.

Willie called a third time.

“Let me try two of the Religious Education,” he said. “I’ll take the Catholic school girls—Catholic school girls are always erotic, even your vacant-eyed ones. And maybe the Yeshiva boys. Who, let me add, define not-erotic, except maybe to certain rabbis.”

Neither his bantering nor the fact that he remembered the subject matter of her paintings impressed her.

“Let me think about it,” she said

“What do you need to think about?”

They both knew what was going on. He had let her down on Estelle and she was debating whether to maintain their relationship.

“Everything!” she said, so as to avoid deepening the rift. “Just give me a day or two--”

“Of course, Aster. Yesterday must have exhausted you.”

When they hung up she began pacing like a wild animal. As if yesterday had exhausted her! She was on fire, on edge, barely able to contain herself. She made a quick calculation—yesterday had netted her more than four hundred thousand dollars. It wasn’t that, although that was something! It was that everything she now did would be wanted. She could scribble her name on a napkin and make money. That meant a million things, the astounding and the terrible both. She sat down, jumped up, sat down ... she understood one thing for certain. She wanted a drink and she could never again drink cavalierly.

At least she had passed up Camilla’s thigh!

Her cell phone rang again. She thought it was Willie for the fourth time. It wasn't.

“Aster?”

“Tol!” Aster cried. “It’s so good to hear your voice!”

“My guess is, you’re starting to look at properties.”

“It isn’t that! I don’t want out of New York. But I have all this stuff swirling inside of me. I feel like a maniac!”

“It’s beginning,” Tol said quietly. “Nothing and nobody can prepare you for it.”

“Can I see you?”

“That’s why I called.” He paused. “I’m off the road. I hoped you’d visit me.”

“Where are you?”

“I keep a Manhattan apartment and a place in L.A. But I live in the Berkshires.”

“The Berkshires must be gorgeous this time of year.”

“They are.”

She laughed. “I could have a look.”

“I can have a car pick you up.”

Sunlight streamed through the tall windows.

“How long is the trip?”

“About four hours. With good traffic.”

“I wouldn’t quite make it back home tonight.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Not quite.”

“I suppose there are some excellent bed-and-breakfasts where a girl could stay?”

“There are. I also have about thirteen extra bedrooms.”

“Send me a car, Tol,” she said softly.

“It’ll be there in an hour.”

“Make it two.”

The car ride soothed her. She thought in a dreamy way about the crazy things that artists did when they got rich. Suzanne Valadon came to mind. Valadon provided her dogs with Persian lamb coats to sleep on and filet mignon to eat. Her cats got Beluga caviar on Fridays. Valadon drove around Paris in a fancy car driven by a chauffeur in white livery, which she made him change twice a day. She would grab a taxi and take it 350 miles into the countryside so that she could pick strawberries, then send the cab driver back for something she’d forgotten. She bought the most expensive clothes—and ended up wearing them and ruining them while she painted. Aster shook her head. It was sad, disgusting, and insane.

Her fall, if she fell, would be different from Valadon’s. She wouldn’t find herself painting in furs or buying filet mignon for her dogs. What was her brand of insanity? Forests flew by. She sat back against the plush leather. She might perversely dismiss Tol, arguing that to do so was to guard her individuality. She might take on the woes of the world, irrationally supposing that because she had money she could end wars and defeat hunger. She might take offense too easily—she had it in her to write people off the first time they fell short. She nodded to herself. The real tests were coming.

They arrived at a gated compound half-hidden by sycamores and plane trees. Two barking German shepherds charged the fence. A video camera on the gate turned to get a look at the driver. The driver rolled down his window and spoke into an intercom. The gates slowly swung open. They drove down a lane with the guard dogs yapping beside them and pulled up to an enormous shingled house. Tol was standing out front, smiling.

The driver opened her door. Aster sat there. She wasn't hesitating or debating; she wanted to look at Tol for another moment. She stared at him, sighed, and slid out from the back seat. She wanted to run right up to him, throw her arms around him, and kiss him; but she only smiled. He came forward shyly. Neither seemed to know quite what to do. In the meantime the chauffeur opened the trunk and extracted Aster's overnight bag. The bag gave them something to focus on.

"Let me show you around," Tol said, taking her bag.

"Please."

They went inside. It was a large, rambling, light-filled Cape Cod house. People were everywhere, mostly men hoisting bottles of Guinness. "Musicians," Tol said. "From Ireland. We're playing Irish music tonight."

"You mean a concert?"

"No. We're working on an album of traditional Irish music."

They moved from room to room. At the back of the house they entered an enormous living room with a stone fireplace at the far end. Every wall held art. Aster stopped in her tracks.

"I know," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

Above the fireplace hung one of her Shattered Glass paintings.

She had to sit down. Tol, worried by her reaction, sat down beside her.

"Are you all right?" he said.

She turned to face him. "I'm fine! I've just never seen one of my paintings in a real space. It's just strange, Tol. I have to get used to it."

"It's gorgeous, you know. Really wonderful."

"I'm glad you bought it," she said. "I mean it."

She remembered an incident with the alcoholic painting professor. His name was John. He had a pockmarked face, wore denim shirts, and fancied himself a cowboy. He painted desert scenes filled with snakes coiled up to strike the viewer. He had a vicious side and she knew it, but she stayed with him for a month—until he struck her.

She remembered that they had gone to visit some friends of his and there, on the living room wall, hung one of his paintings. She hadn't mentioned it—and on the drive home he'd suddenly screamed at her, "What, don't you have eyes?" She hadn't understood what he meant and told him so. He replied, "When you see a painter's painting and he is standing there right beside you, you have to say something!"

Tol took her hand. "Thank you for coming," he said.

"May I please have a whiskey!" she laughed,

"Coming right up."

Tol hopped to his feet. Aster stared at the Shattered Glass painting. She felt pride and wanted to feel nothing but pride—instead of all of these damned mixed emotions! When Tol returned with their drinks, Aster attacked hers as if she was dying of thirst.

6.

The musicians knew all about her.

“Tol made us watch you paint!” a burly fellow exclaimed. “For hours!”

“I didn’t make you, I invited you--”

They all laughed. A dozen of them were gathered in a beautiful garden room at the south end of the house.

Aster smiled. Tol had paid the way of these musicians from Dublin, Cork, Galway, and Northern Island. They were Ireland’s finest musicians. She was suddenly struck by the profound difference in the lives of musicians and painters. Musicians could sit around and play music, and because they could share music they could be friendly and convivial. Painters couldn’t just sit around. They had no activity to share. Painters had no equivalent of “making music with your friends.” That increased their suffering.

She made herself comfortable in a deep armchair in the corner. The musicians tuned their instruments. She knew little about traditional Irish music but enough to identify the instruments. There were three fiddlers, two accordionists, a harpist, a fellow with an array of tin whistles, a bodhran percussionist, a piper, a mandolin player, a banjo player, and Tol with his guitar. After this rehearsal session and dinner, they intended to retire to Tol’s studio and record.

The last fiddler got in pitch and they were off. Aster recognized the first song as a rebel song, an “up the English” song. Next came a ballad that somehow brought the Civil War to mind. Then came a song right out of the Renaissance. They played non-stop for half-an-hour. When they paused someone offered her a tin whistle. She laughingly refused. They invited her to sing but she shook her head. They were sweet—but they didn’t need an amateur interfering.

They resumed. Aster lost herself in the music. Tol was their leader and yet they played as if no one was leading. They moved seamlessly from song to song, sometimes the fiddlers at the center, sometimes the accordions, sometimes the drum. Aster heard

herself say, “They love this music.” You didn’t see love in action all that often. She wanted to paint them—no, film them. She wished that someone was capturing this magnificent session—she almost said obsession—on film.

She shut her eyes and drifted away. Her body relaxed. She had been holding some terrible tension in her body since she first arrived in New York--no, since long before that, since even before her mother had died. When hadn’t she been tense, intense, wired, electric, the only serious one in the room, the only one carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders? Now that weight fell away. It was more than relaxation—she felt safe. Painting was dangerous. The world was dangerous. People died; men lashed out; the thin veneer of civilization was everywhere cracking like ice in the spring. Here was the safety of family. She listened and cried a good, tearless, purifying cry, a small smile playing on her lips.

After the session came a banquet. The rough plank table in the dining room seated twenty-five and every seat was taken. There were musicians, techies, and beautiful women. The women eyed Aster speculatively. Aster sat next to Tol. Two middle-aged women in uniform served. Leg of lamb followed soup and salad. The Irish soda bread amazed her. She slathered more pieces than she cared to count with the farmhouse butter.

“Do you have brothers and sisters?” Aster asked, leaning over. Tol had to cup his ear to hear.

“I have an older brother at Yeshiva. He’s studying to be a rabbi. We don’t talk.”

Aster nodded.

“And a sister,” he continued, “in fashion. I don’t get her either.”

“Fashion!”

They devoured their lamb.

“We are good eaters!” Aster laughed.

“Is our appetite a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Good!”

One of the musicians clinked his glass to get the room quiet. He hoisted his glass. “To Tol!” he cried. “For his hospitality. For his musicianship. And for his love of the Irish!”

“Here, here!”

The table burst spontaneously into an Irish drinking song. Everyone seemed to know the words. The musicians all sang together. Then each took turns singing a chorus of his own invention. A tall man with a full red beard acted as master of ceremonies, pointing first to this one, then to that one, skipping the techies but not the beautiful women, all of whom declined. He pointed to Aster and she shook her head. Everyone laughed.

“Doesn’t your woman sing?” someone shouted.

“She paints!” Tol replied.

“Doesn’t mean she can’t sing!”

Tol sang his chorus. His voice defied description. It caused this raucous bunch to fall completely silent. When he was done the master of ceremonies pointed to a lean man who played the bagpipes. The man shook his head.

“I will not follow that,” he said.

They all laughed. But he did follow; he launched into his chorus in a sweet Irish tenor.

After dinner Tol led her outside onto the porch.

“We’ll be playing until two or three.”

“You could wake me.”

“Should I? It might be even later.”

“Wake me.”

“I will.”

They kissed. Tol touched her hair. She sighed and said nothing. They sat down on the porch swing and swung gently.

“Should I be worried about one of the women in there putting a knife in my back?” Aster asked.

“No.”

“You haven’t been ‘really’ seeing anyone?”

“No.”

She nodded. “Neither have I.”

They fell silent.

“Can I ask you something?” Tol said.

“Go ahead.”

“How do you do what you do?”

“You mean, paint?”

“I mean paint so that another person is rocked?”

She leaned over and kissed him. “That is the sweetest thing anyone is ever going to say to me.”

“Will you teach me?”

She hesitated. She thought of how Esteban had been with her, especially in the beginning. The more proficient she got, the more he withdrew. But in the beginning, in that first month or two, right up until that day she had helped with his mural, he had been the perfect teacher. In essence he had said, “You can do this; think big; go ahead.” It wasn’t teaching, really; he taught nothing. He had nothing to say about perspective, composition, color matching, or any of that. He simply invited her to succeed.

“You bet,” she said after a long moment.

“Can I afford you?”

“Just keep me in that soda bread!”

They took off walking, strolling down past the lit studio, past a pitch-dark shed, down to a burbling stream, and back to the main house again. On the porch she turned to him.

“Do you love it here?” she asked.

“I do.” He studied her expression. “You don’t?”

“I think I’m a city girl. I think it would be hard to paint here.”

He chewed on that. “What you get here is top security. You get safety.”

Aster nodded. “I know exactly what you mean!” She laughed sardonically. “But I’m not sure that I don’t need life—danger or no danger.”

She squeezed his hand and released him to the waiting musicians.

7.

She didn't know what to do with herself. She watched some television, took a shower, brushed her hair. The country night, filled with the sounds of frogs and crickets, disturbed her. She tried to sleep but couldn't. She sat up in bed watching first an infomercial, then an interview with a missionary just back from Africa, then a show on fly fishing. An owl hooted persistently. Finally it was one o'clock in the morning. She decided to stay awake. The instant she came to that decision, sleep overtook her.

Her last thought had something to do with fire. An hour later, suddenly awake, she shot up in bed, She threw on her jeans and a sweater and went out walking. It was colder than she'd expected, and darker, and more frightening. Folsom Street in the Mission felt safer than this! The fragrant, moonlit-night rattled her. She edged by the recording studio, which was brightly lit and hummed to the sound of a generator. Would Tol and his brothers play all night? It didn't matter. She loved him and everything would be all right.

She continued on, not at all sure about proceeding deeper into the night. A structure as large as a small barn loomed up. Aster approached the shed and tried the door. It creaked open. She stepped in and fumbled for the light switch. A single naked bulb came on. A spider darted away from her hand. She gasped a little and stood stock-still. The shed sported a dirt floor, pine plank walls, potting benches, shovels, hoes, and cans of paint, and an impressive sit-down lawn mower as large as a tractor. Slowly her nerves quieted.

The space reminded her of Jackson Pollock's Long Island painting shed. In that shed, which she had seen in a documentary, Pollock had stumbled on his drip painting technique. He would spread out his canvas on the floor, and, surrounded by old wheelbarrows and rusty rakes, dance his brand-new painting dance. Aster's eyes returned to the cans of paint. She almost wished she had canvas. She would have tried a Pollock—it would be fun to do that once.

You could do that once, for your own edification and amusement. But once was enough. Even if you did it brilliantly, it would still be a cliché. Pollock owned that, just as Rothko owned the tri-color and O'Keeffe the out-sized flower. Why repeat them? It was a psychological mistake. Maybe Jimmy was meditating, praying, and even adding beauty to the world, but he was still doing Rothko and he knew it. Shelley's flowers,

as much as they were her own, were still Georgia O’Keeffe’s. It was just too close to copying; and copying had to hurt the spirit.

She stood staring. The back wall, made up of vertical pine boards, called to her. She approached the gallon cans of paint. There was a barn red, a black, a blue the color of blueberries. She knew what she wanted to do. She would paint Tol and her in an embrace. He would be blue and she would be red. They would be outlined in black. It would be primitive, an homage to Matisse, to Haring, to the graffiti artists whose work she saw all over New York, in the galleries and on tenement walls. She pried open the cans, found some paint sticks, and began to stir.

She remembered helping her mother paint their Bernal Heights apartment. They had painted the living room a pale lime green, one bedroom pale yellow, one bedroom a vivid Chinese red, and the kitchen a blue very close to lavender. For some reason that she could no longer remember, her mother had decided to paint the bathroom white—a Navajo white edgy in its starkness.

She moved to the wall with a broad brush not meant for the task and boldly blocked in the figures in black. At one level she agreed with the contention that anyone could be taught to draw—but probably not like this. Matisse had envied Picasso his drawing facility, just as Picasso had envied Matisse his color sense. People did have gifts ... she gave her figure the exact curve of her own breasts and, as for Tol, she guessed.

She thought of Esteban and the trip to Mexico they had never made. He was going to show her the Mexican muralist tradition at its roots. Their first stop was to be Mexico City. When he talked about the delicious street food of that great metropolis his appetite returned and he would be happy for hours. Sometimes, in the glow of that imagined trip, he would want to make love. But after several weeks of trip-planning he fell into a deep depression. She presumed that the comment she had let drop, about wishing that the muralists had included scenes of peasant fathers beating their wives and their children, had helped sink the trip ...

The shed door squeaked opened. Aster turned quickly. Tol entered and came toward her. She put down her brush and wiped her hands on the piece of tarp she’d been using as a rag.

“You weren’t in bed,” he said.

“No. I was too restless.”

“I went looking for you.”

“Here I am.”

There was nothing left to say. There were some old carpets in a tumbled pile in the corner and they led each other in that direction. The intensity of their love-making caused the German shepherds to start barking. When she could breathe, she laughed and cried, “We roused the animals!”

“We waited a little long,” Tol panted.

“I’m just glad—”

“Me, too.”

At five a.m., in Tol’s bed, they made love again; and again, with the sun streaming in, at ten in the morning. Then they slept, until four in the afternoon.

“Breakfast?” Tol said.

“Lunch?”

“Dinner?”

It was a gorgeous afternoon full of the scent of flowers and the humming of insects.

“I’ll call the kitchen,” Tol said.

“You’ll call the kitchen.”

“I have staff.”

“You have staff.”

She was teasing him. But she understood that she would have to get used to the idea. Tol had staff. She would have stuff. She shook her head and smiled wryly.

“Well, I would like a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich on white toast with Miracle Whip, a bag of potato chips, and a pickle. Tell the staff, please.”

Tol kissed her.

“And coffee,” she said. “Large quantities of coffee.”

After lunch they walked to the stream. Every so often they stopped to kiss. There were questions—a whole life script to be written. Birds chirped aggressively in the lengthening afternoon shade. They sat by the stream and Tol tossed pebbles in one by one.

“What do we do now?” Aster asked.

“I go on tour again. We talk on the phone. We stay in love.”

She nodded. “All right.”

“You could live here.”

“I don’t know if I could. I have to think about it.”

She decided to go home that evening. They both understood. They’d had the overture; they already needed the intermission. They stood by the town car, holding one another. It wasn’t quite dark yet. She would be home by midnight. She opened her mouth to Tol and kissed him. He dug his fingers into her shoulders. She got in, he shut the door behind her, and the car started off. She had so much on her mind that she almost forgot to wave. At the last instant she remembered. Tol, smiling, waved back.

8.

She could no longer postpone dealing with the world. The number of unanswered emails and phone messages confronting her had grown to astronomical proportions and their number only kept increasing. And many of them were important!—they required her attention. She spent three full days doing business and making notes to herself. On the evening of the fourth day she called Harry.

“Help!” she cried.

Harry laughed. “A little famous?”

“Help!”

“I’ll drop by in an hour.”

Harry arrived at eight. She ushered him to the dining room table and threw up her hands at the piles of paper that lay scattered there.

“I’ve been making notes to myself--”

Harry laughed. “Did you know that you could sell those notes? They have value.”

“Christ.”

“Which means, a shredder. Shred everything.”

“Christ.”

Harry pulled over a pad and began jotting down his own list.

“You’ll need a purchase contract. You want to spell out the arrangements with collectors. How the insurance works when the painting’s in transit, the owner’s

responsibility with respect to maintaining provenance, everything. I'll get one drawn up."

Aster nodded.

"There are new wrinkles with respect to resale, about how you're notified and whether you get something on the resale--"

"Really? I can keep getting paid on the same painting?"

"That whole notion is in its infancy--"

She poured Harry port and made herself some black coffee.

"You'll need a personal assistant--" Harry continued.

"That so weird."

"And a financial planner--"

She shook her head.

"And security--"

"Harry!"

"And a tax accountant--"

It stopped being funny. She wanted to protest and say, "I paint." But she knew better. She knew that she was obliged to take care of business. She blew on her coffee. After a moment she got up and returned with chocolate.

"And services," Harry continued, scribbling away. "There are services that will monitor your auction price and keep you posted, so that you know exactly what you ought to be charging. They also keep track of the whereabouts of your paintings. That way you can maintain perfect provenance--"

Suddenly she yawned uncontrollably. “What’s first?” she said. “What’s the absolute first thing?”

“There’s never a first thing,” Harry laughed. “Everything swirls together. You interview personal assistants while you set up collector appointments while you ... and so on. If I had to say what first was, it would be to get the collectors in. They are chafing at the bit to throw money at you.”

Even that confused her. “Who do I invite in first? Their names mean nothing to me!”

“Let me see who’s emailed you,” Harry said.

She pulled over her laptop. Soon they were scrolling through her email inbox.

“Christ!” Harry said. “God!”

She knew what that meant.

“You recognize some of these names?” she said facetiously.

“There are thirty people here you should see,” Harry said. “And what do you have? Six or eight paintings to show?”

“If I give Willie six to sell, that leaves me with six. Six or seven.” She was thinking of the last Washington Square painting, the one she hadn’t made up her mind about.

“If you give Willie?”

She thought about that. Many of the messages had been from Willie but none had been about Estelle. Technically, the ball was in Aster’s court; she was supposed to get Estelle to resubmit her slides. But she had half-expected—no, fully expected—Willie to search around Gallery Lulu, find Estelle’s slides, look at them, and grant her favor without any passive-aggressive fuss. He hadn’t. In some sense he was in the right, as they had left it that the next step was Aster’s. But in the larger sense he was entirely wrong.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “I have mixed feelings.”

“He handled the event brilliantly.”

“He did.”

“If you need your dealers to be perfect--”

She nodded. “I think I’ll stay with him. Is that your advice?”

Harry threw up his hands. “I’m not advising! I’m only saying, I’ve never met a perfect dealer ... or a perfect anybody. Even if you mostly sell from your studio, you should probably have at least one gallery. It’s still the custom.”

“Then—I only have six or seven paintings to sell.”

“Inventory!” Harry cried. “You need inventory! Those six or seven will get snapped up. And then what?”

“Inventory,” she repeated.

“I’ll rank order these collectors,” Harry said, grabbing a new piece of paper. “But you shouldn’t leave any of them out in the cold. You should start a newsletter--”

“A newsletter?”

“A newsletter! To keep collectors informed. To let you know when you have a new auction price, a new show, when an article comes out on you—all the usual.”

“All the usual.”

“And we have to get you that purchase contract--”

Harry was scribbling notes to himself. Aster stood up and walked to the window. “Inventory,” she murmured. She could make believe that it didn’t matter that collectors were waiting for her work; but of course it mattered. It was a damaging, deranging pressure, something that you could treat sarcastically or seriously but that you couldn’t

ignore. She saw them lined up on her street, all down the block and around the corner, the collectors looking like something out of Magritte, wearing bowler hats with blue sky showing through their skulls ... this was exactly how a sarcastic response might begin. She stood very still, looking down on the deserted street.

“Okay,” she said, returning to the table. “Help me make sense of this. Do I sell to the first person who wants a painting, do I auction things off, do I impose some sort of criteria ...?”

For the next hour they discussed handling collectors. She began to understand how she might make it work. She finished her second cup of coffee and poured herself a third. “Won’t that keep you up all night?” Harry asked. Aster shrugged.

They tackled other matters. She noticed that Harry was beginning to eye her. Finally he said, “It’s getting very late.” She knew what he meant. She bit her lip.

“I’m seeing Tol,” she said quietly. “We got together a few days ago.” She stared away. “I think it’s something.”

“Is that right?” Harry got to his feet. “Oh, did I tell you? I’m seeing someone.”

“Good for you!” She got up also.

“A book editor--”

“Perfect!”

“We’re planning a trip. We’re thinking about London.”

“Excellent!”

She didn’t believe a word of it. She knew that he was crushed.

“Something’s past due,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“Your Washington Square painting.”

She took him by the hand and led him to the far end of the studio. Kneeling down, she carefully rolled up Harry’s gift. It was a poor second to what he wanted but it was all she could give him.

9.

It took many conversations, but finally she and Harry came up with a plan. They would create an auction for each painting. Collectors could visit, so as to see the paintings for themselves, but Aster wouldn't commit to selling on the spot. Harry thought that they should make an exception to this general rule, that preemptive offers would be accepted. A preemptive offer would be an offer one hundred thousand dollars above her last highest price. This would be the equivalent of a bird in the hand and would guarantee a rapid escalation of her prices.

He assigned a young secretary in his office named Jennifer as her temporary part-time personal assistant. Jennifer organized her collectors' appointments, emailed her documents that Harry created, among them a purchase contract and a hand-out for collectors that explained her "policies," constructed a rudimentary data base, researched newsletter options, and picked her brain about what she wanted from her website. She found herself on the phone with Jennifer four or five times a day. She told Harry that she would have to pry Jennifer away from him altogether; he laughed but didn't disagree.

Aster dreaded this next phase: collectors appearing in her space. The first one was due in two weeks, a dotcom billionaire flying in from Singapore. In the meantime she was obliged to organize her space. Harry sent over a fellow named Lance who worked as a stage designer. He had done some fancy Broadway musicals and big budget films and came over as a favor to Harry, who had represented him in an "annoying drug thing" and made it go away.

It took Lance several days to figure out how she could display her finished paintings—other than laying them out on the floor, where they currently lived—and another full week to have constructed a gorgeous rotating rack capable of holding twelve large paintings. A piece of sculpture in its own right, it could only get into the studio because she had picked a building with such large doors. She had needed those large doors not for a giraffe or an elephant but for this!

She tried to paint. She tacked up four canvases and paced in front of them, opening up to her next imagery. One morning, reluctantly and half-heartedly, she approached the canvases and began on some country scenes inspired by the look of Tol's property. She thought she would do four different points along his stream, as if you were walking

beside it encountering different light dynamics. The first was predominantly yellow, full of dappled sunlight; the second was cooler and darker, as if you'd passed into a denser part of the wood. The third focused on the stream itself ... she could see that the paintings might be beautiful but they nevertheless disgusted her.

“Pretty little stream,” she said, mimicking that painting instructor on television who was always saying “pretty little cloud” and “pretty little tree.”

The more she worked on her Berkshire Stream paintings, the more her mood darkened. One afternoon she found herself close to tears. She called Tol, who was on tour on the West Coast. As calmly as she could, she explained her fear: that she was already co-opted, that she was doing conventional, boring, dead-as-a-doornail work because she was feeling smug and comfortable. Tol listened without interrupting.

“Are you sure you hate them?” he asked.

She stared at them. “I'm eighty-five percent sure.”

“What's the fifteen percent?”

“I can't say.”

“That's probably just enough of a percentage to make completing them the right choice,” he said after a moment. “I've made myself finish songs that I hated at the eighty-five percent level, and a few of them ended up on the right side of the ledger.”

She nodded. “All right. I'll think about that.”

Tol laughed. “I love giving advice to the world's greatest painter!”

First thing the next morning Jennifer called.

“You have your first collector today!”

“I know,” Aster groaned.

“Dev Kapoor. At one p.m.”

“I have to leave at noon and I doubt that I’ll be back before--”

“Aster.”

“All right!”

At noon she made a fresh pot of coffee. Then she didn’t know what to do with herself. Half-heartedly she returned to work on the fourth Berkshire Stream painting. The four paintings were in various stages of completion, none more than half-done. She found herself stepping back more frequently than usual. Her past paintings stood alone; but these four referred to one another, since they were to be read as a stroll along the stream. Lost in the work, she jumped at the sound of the doorbell.

She buzzed the billionaire in. A few moments later he appeared. He was a short, round, pleasant-looking Indian fellow of forty-five or so, bespectacled and diffident. Aster smiled. She liked him immediately. She ushered him in and pointed to the sofa.

“Coffee?” she asked.

“With cream and sugar, please.”

“Christ!”

“Black will be perfect.”

She brought them coffee. They sat together on the sofa.

“You caused quite a stir with your live painting,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

“Apparently!”

“Very Turner-esque. Very bold.”

“Well, I could have painted naked. That would have been bolder!”

Kapoor laughed. “Like Georgia O’Keeffe and Chagall! But they painted in the privacy of their studios.” He grew serious. “I’ve always been intrigued by the difference between boldness and arrogance. I watched you very carefully as you painted. There was not a single second when your mind wandered to ego. Maybe you are arrogant in other places in your life!—but that day you were completely humble, just serving the paintings, just trying to do your best. I only wish that the whole world could have been watching—it’s so rare to see an honest thing.”

Aster stared down.

“I’m embarrassing you!” Kapoor exclaimed. “I’m sorry.”

Aster raised her head and smiled. “I’m supposed to show you this.” She handed Kapoor a sheet of paper from a pile on the coffee table. “My ‘policies.’”

Kapoor laughed. “Ah, the lawyers!” He quickly read the single sheet. “This isn’t that well thought out. There are some places that lack clarity and might favor the buyer.”

“You mean, you.”

“Yes, indeed! But I am completely on your side and I want you to protect yourself.” For the first time he looked around. “May I see some work?”

Aster sighed. “That rack thing over there, that’s holding what’s available. Some of it will sell at Gallery Lulu and some I’ll be selling.”

Kapoor nodded and got to his feet. “And those?” He pointed to the tacked-up Berkshire Stream paintings.

“I was thinking that I might not be going forward with those,” she replied. “I was just trying them out ...”

“Really?” He glanced at her speculatively. “So you’re not sure about them?”

“Not at all!”

“I am,” he said quietly. “I would like to take all four. I would like to make that

‘preemptive offer.’”

She sat down. Kapoor joined her and waited.

“They’re just landscapes!” she exclaimed suddenly.

“Some of the great Van Gogh’s are ‘just landscapes’,” Kapoor replied calmly.
“Cezanne did almost nothing but ‘landscapes.’ Wyeth--”

“But a twenty-first century painter can’t do landscapes!” Aster insisted. “Not and be anything but old hat!”

“That really remains to be seen.” He half-turned to look at the paintings. “Do you know what they are about?”

She threw up her hands.

“They are about you trying to convince yourself about something,” he said. “And I think that at the end of the process you will have convinced yourself; you will have decided. And I will have the paintings that record the decision-making process.”

Aster stared at the Indian billionaire.

“All right,” she said. “You should have them.”

“Thank you.” Kapoor cleared his throat. “If I understand correctly, I only need to offer a hundred thousand higher than your current highest price and then I don’t have to go into an auction. Is that right?”

Aster nodded.

“What is your current highest price?”

“Three hundred eighty thousand.”

“Then I’m offering four hundred eighty thousand for each of these. Or do I have to go a hundred thousand higher each time, as I’m creating your highest price with the one

before?”

Aster groaned. “I don’t honestly know!”

“That’s what I meant about this policy sheet not being that well thought out. I foresaw this problem.”

Aster laughed. “My lawyer will not be pleased to hear that!” She made up her mind. “Four eighty for each will be sufficient.” She hopped to her feet and began pacing. “But you have to know that my heart isn’t in them!”

“Art, like life, is a complicated matter,” Kapoor replied. “The artist thinks that his blood-red apple is his best painting, because of the feeling he put into it, but his subtle peaches become iconic. It isn’t that the artist doesn’t know and the world does, and it isn’t the other way around either. There is a painting of Van Gogh’s, of peach blossoms, that is the most beautiful thing in the world, but it wouldn’t fetch a quarter of one of his portraits or a tenth of a Sunflower or a Starry Night. Forgive my long-windedness!” the Indian exclaimed. “But this all fascinates me. You may be painting this for ‘the wrong reasons,’ from your point of view, but I believe that what I see is special.”

Aster stopped pacing. She faced her new collector.

“Then I think I will raise the price. I think we’ll go with the other calculation.”

Kapoor smiled. “Absolutely. You would have talked to your lawyer and come to that conclusion.”

“We’re still on?”

“Of course!”

She gestured across the room. “What about the others? Do you want to see them?”

He shook his head. “Those are the things you know. These are something you don’t know.”

She returned to the sofa and sat down beside him.

“Here’s what I’m trying to decide,” she said quietly. “If natural beauty trumps city life. That’s what you’re reading.”

Kapoor nodded. “That. And a lot more, I fancy.”

Aster laughed. “You are scary!”

“May I invite you to lunch?” Dev Kapoor said. “My car is outside.”

Aster got to her feet. “There is nothing I would rather do than go to lunch with you. You are ... an oracle!”

Kapoor laughed. “There is a company by that name with whom we have been fighting bitterly ...”

10.

At lunch Kapoor further confounded her.

“Another thing your policy sheet didn’t spell out.”

“What’s that?”

“Giclee prints. Will you be doing prints of your paintings? Artists find that extremely profitable, but of course collectors have other opinions.”

“I have no idea!” Aster exclaimed, putting down her fork. “It never crossed my mind.”

As soon as she got home she called Parsley.

“Willie. What about Giclee prints?”

“That’s so Thomas Kincaid!” Willie exclaimed. He hesitated. “But many reputable artists are doing it.”

“It’s a digital scan, right?”

“Right.”

“On canvas?”

“On whatever you want. Photo paper, fine art paper, canvas.”

“What do they sell for?”

“A Chuck Close sold for ten thousand. A Tillmans sold for over twenty thousand. I’ve

had Giclees at the gallery priced up to thirty thousand.”

“Incredible.”

“You should be selective, Aster. Collectors--”

“I understand.”

She stood by the window. She could sell paintings that didn’t move her, like the Berkshire Stream paintings. She could sell multiples of every image. She could have a perfect facsimile of one of her Plunging Paris paintings or her Needle Dreams paintings in galleries all over the world. She could be as omni-present as Starbucks, as accessible as fast food. She could be an industry, big business ...

She stood by the window. Down below, schoolchildren in uniform were returning from school. The girls wore their skirts so short!—Aster had to laugh. She had worn skirts even skimpier than those. The girls swarmed around the boys and the boys swarmed around the girls. They kept bumping into one another, pushing one another, whispering secrets, standing close. To paint them would be to commit child pornography!—even if she kept them clothed. Was there anything more sexually charged than a gaggle of middle school students coming home from school? Already by high school, you had so much more on your mind ...

Her cell rang.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about lecture agents--” Jennifer began.

“Lecture agents?”

“Lecture agents. They want to represent you. They’re vying for you. Especially, apparently, if you create a motivational speech for a business audience--”

“Jennifer!”

“I know! I know! One said that you could already command more than the astronauts. Apparently the hottest astronauts get up to thirty thousand a speech--”

Aster shook her head. “What exactly does an astronaut have to talk about?”

Jennifer waited. “Well? What do you want me to do?”

“Let me think about it.”

The schoolchildren had hardly made it another hundred feet up the block. All that pushing and shoving, all those stage whispers! One of the girls was beautiful: aloof, self-conscious, regal, as long-necked and long-legged as a swan princess. She was completely on everybody’s mind, the girls and the boys alike. Aster felt her own breasts tingle. The strangest thought crossed her mind: how much more desirable was she now that she was famous? And if it were true that she were more desirable now, what exactly did that imply?

Her cell rang again. She didn’t know the caller and didn’t intend to answer it. At the last instant, still caught up in some disturbing thoughts about desire, she flipped the phone open.

It was Estelle’s daughter. As soon as she heard the small, tentative voice introducing itself and apologizing for calling, something softened in her.

“I’m so glad you called!” Aster exclaimed. “I think a lot about your mother. And you!”

Lael kept apologizing. “I’m sure you don’t have the time--”

“I do!”

“I’m happy to come to Manhattan,” Lael continued in her self-effacing way.

“I wouldn’t expect you to come all the way to Brooklyn.”

“No, no,” Aster exclaimed. “I’d love to explore Brooklyn. Really. What do you suggest?”

“Montague Street is really nice. In Brooklyn Heights.”

“Great. Pick a place.”

They chatted for several minutes. Aster didn't want to let her go. She learned that Lael was studying drama at Brooklyn College, that she worked as a waitress on Seventh Avenue in Park Slope, that her name was Leslie but that she had changed it to Lael, and that she occasionally auditioned for off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway plays. They finalized their plans for the next morning.

When she got off the phone, Aster found that she was still thinking about the schoolchildren. They were gone now. Had any of them paired up? They were twelve, thirteen ... the oldest might be fourteen. At fourteen she had let boys know all about her, except for that ultimate revelation. She had a vivid recollection of walking down a San Francisco street early one afternoon, when kids this age should have been in school, glancing up, and seeing a naked boy and a naked girl of about thirteen making love right in the window. It was a bay window ... the girl was wrapped around the boy ... was it possible that they didn't know that they were on view? No, that wasn't possible.

Part of the thrill for them had been in being seen. She understood that. They wanted people to get an eyeful of their sweaty mischief. That was it!—it was all about being mischievous. You couldn't call it sin; you couldn't call it evil; it was out of the trickster folk tradition, that tradition of wolves cuckolding unsuspecting husbands and illicit trysts in the woods. She wished she could paint trickster children romping naked and having sex—if only that didn't constitute child pornography!—because that part of her was aroused and enflamed.

She knew she shouldn't do it. Still, she dressed up and took a cab to the Hudson Hotel. She wasn't going to sleep with anyone ... to prove to herself that she wasn't, she avoided the brightly lit main bar, where she would have been an obvious target, and edged her way into the crowded library bar. Squeezing between bodies, enjoying the closeness, the bare flesh, the roaming eyes, the intense babble of voices, she felt herself losing her bearings. She wasn't going to sleep with anyone ... but when the bartender appeared, she ordered champagne.

She held the glass close to her lips. The two men on her left spoke a language she didn't understand. They grew bolder in their interest. She smiled at them but in a neutral way, neither opening the door nor closing it. The couple on her right kissed. She finished her champagne and ordered another. The bar was air-conditioned but heated by a roaring fire in the fireplace. Light from the fire played on the polished wood panels. Music pulsed. Of the bodies all around her, one separated itself from the crowd... she fancied him a Spaniard ... he faced her at a distance of five or six feet, sometimes in

full view, sometimes obscured by shifting bodies.

It would be easy, natural, and, in a parallel universe where only sensation counted, completely right. She wanted him. He had everything she wanted: the hands, the wrists, the eyes, the hair, the confidence, the insolence. He wore a crisp button-down shirt, unbuttoned exactly right, and a beautiful sports jacket, perfectly cut, perfectly casual, perfectly seductive. He focused on her, never wavering, boldly single-minded, appropriately intimate. She only had to move her head a hair's breath ...

She was staring into his eyes. The arrangement was virtually concluded. She only had to make the smallest movement of agreement and in five minutes he would be undressing her. She could feel his hands; she could feel all the sensations. A painting existed before the first brushstroke; so did an orgasm. She took one long breath after another. Shadows flickered wildly; the fire was blazing. She set down her champagne glass hard and hurried out of the bar.

The night was sweltering. She couldn't walk home in her heels but she didn't want to slip into a cab and be home in five minutes. She didn't want to return to the studio at all. She didn't want to be in a place where four bits of fabric on the wall were worth two millions dollars. She wanted to be in Barcelona, in Seville ... she wanted to run naked through a champagne shower, the champagne cascading down like umbrella fireworks in the sky ... she wanted to lose her mind and not regain it.

"Cab?" the doorman asked.

Aster nodded. Ten minutes later she was home; twenty minutes later she was sleeping.

11.

In the morning she hopped the subway to Brooklyn. She got off in the middle of a housing complex half-a-step up from projects and, disoriented and uneasy, asked a passer-by for directions. In five minutes she found herself on a tree-lined street high above the East River whose rows of century-old brownstones reminded her of Henry James novels.

Brooklyn Heights was a revelation. So were the adjoining neighborhoods of Cobble Hill and Carroll Gardens. On Atlantic Avenue she stopped at a Lebanese bakery, bought a spinach turnover, and ate it in a small, leafy, bustling park in Carroll Gardens. Who knew that Brooklyn was this pretty, this intimate, this evocative? These neighborhoods were as beautiful as any she'd ever seen.

She strolled back to Brooklyn Heights and followed Montague Street to the Esplanade, with its world-famous view of the Manhattan skyline. The view captivated her. She sat on a bench, dreaming and growing calm. To her right loomed the Brooklyn Bridge—she thought of that famous Joseph Stella painting and how something of that image had infiltrated her Plunging Paris paintings. There was a way in which they were related, Paris and Brooklyn, though it sounded fantastic to say. What surprised her was how calming she found this unrivaled view of Manhattan, a Manhattan that by some trick of the mind and trick of the eye seemed close enough to touch.

Lael was waiting for her at a café on Montague Street. They greeted each other awkwardly.

“What would you like?” Lael asked. “A mocha--”

“Let me look around.”

They were about the same age, the same height, even the same coloring. Lael had a complexion that Aster knew must give her trouble, eyebrows that had crossed from fashionable to bushy, and a body whose thinness seemed unnatural. You imagined that her true weight was ten or fifteen pounds heavier, which made you wonder which brand of starvation she chose. A second later she revealed her method. Lael pulled out a pack of cigarettes and dropped it on the table.

They smiled and chatted but very soon the conversation petered out. Aster bit the bullet.

“I’m supposed to rub off on you!” she exclaimed. “How weird!”

“I know.” Lael shook her head. “You really impressed my mom. And she really doesn’t impress easily.”

Aster nodded.

“So what’s your secret?” Lael asked.

What was her secret? Staring off, she sipped her coffee. She had encountered enough practicing painters and would-be painters to sense how she differed from them. But she had never tried to put it into words. What was it? They seemed happy with subject matter that bored her—their subject matter seemed morally neutral, which was a sin, or else morally repugnant, like Paolo’s. She couldn’t tolerate a horse in a field, a stand of trees, a bunch of flowers, a bull-man raping a maiden, an array of stripes, an array of circles—there were a million things she couldn’t tolerate in a painting. These painters were the equivalent of civil servants, timid, correct, average ... or else self-indulgent, spoiled, ironic ... finally she shook her head.

“I think the secret is love,” she replied. “You need so powerful a love that you just have to organize your whole life around it.”

“Like your love of painting, you mean?”

“No.” Her answer surprised her. “Painting is my puppy love.”

“Really?”

Aster shrugged. Suddenly she exclaimed, “And lots of other things! Boldness. Networking. A fierce resentment of humbug. Love and anger!” she laughed. “And luck! Love, anger, networking and luck!”

Lael laughed too. “Love, anger, networking and luck!”

“Oh, and hard work!”

It was a poor synopsis. She picked at her scone and washed the pastry down with cold coffee.

“And a gun,” she said.

“A gun?”

Aster nodded. “A gun.” She opened her purse. “Like this one.” She held her purse open and let Lael get a good look. “You think I’m kidding? I hate fear. I won’t tolerate it!”

The almost-rape occurred after she had left John, the alcoholic painting professor, and before she had met Esteban. It was a period she could no longer get clear in her mind, probably because she had been drinking so much back then. Those three months between John and Esteban were opaque. But she remembered the party. That event flashed before her eyes.

“If I carried a gun I’d audition more?” Lael said softly. The idea seemed to intrigue her and even thrill her.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe I would.”

Aster smacked the table. “How far is Coney Island?”

“Half-an-hour on the subway.”

“Do you have the time?”

“Absolutely!”

They caught the subway at Borough Hall, rode it underground for several stations, then shot out of the dark subway tunnel with the suddenness of an amusement park

ride. They climbed steeply to an elevated station above the Gowanus Canal. Aster peeled her nose to the grimy window and watched Brooklyn pass below. Hassidim boarded. Veiled Arab women exited. The subway clacked along on hundred-year-old rails.

Coney Island smelled of the ocean. It was seedier than she expected and made her nostalgic for something she'd never experienced. They strolled side-by-side along the boardwalk in the direction of Brighton Beach. As they approached Brighton Beach they began to hear Russian. Soon they were accosted by a pair of Amazonian Russian blondes, six-foot-four in their boots, barking them into a lunch spot.

“Russian food! Piroshkis! Blini! Strudel!”

Aster and Lael laughed, made their getaway, and headed back the way they'd come. When they found an empty bench facing the Atlantic Ocean, they sat down. The sun blazed overhead. Aster felt its full brunt on her neck. She tried to let the hot breeze off the ocean seduce her into believing that she might not be burning.

“What do you think of my mother's paintings?” Lael asked.

“I like them! But it's complicated.” She stared out at the dull Atlantic. “Your mother is baring her soul but also thumbing her nose. That doesn't work very well in the same painting. It's like a performer turning on his audience. If you do that in a charming way, if that's part of your routine, if you're self-deprecating, you can get away with it. But if you step over the line ... she keeps stepping over the line.”

Lael shook her head. “She's devoted her life to painting.”

“I know.”

“Been working as a waitress for fifteen years.”

“I didn't know that.”

“I'm probably making a big mistake trying to be an actress,” Lael muttered. “A terrible mistake. I'm exactly as self-sabotaging as my mother.”

Aster held her tongue. Finally she said, “I think I'm getting burnt.”

“Me, too.”

They made their way back to the subway. The rattling train drowned out the possibility of speech. But Aster kept silent for another reason. She had no answer to Lael’s predicament.

“Thank you for today,” Lael shouted above the din.

Aster waved her thanks away. “I only wish—”

“No! You did me a world of good. Really.”

Aster shook her head. Lael, sensing Aster’s concern, smiled and touched her on the arm. At the Borough Hall station she leaped up and, waving, darted from the train. Aster shut her eyes. She got off at Christopher Street and trudged slowly through the fumes and stifling heat of the Village, stopping at a market on Hudson Street for sunburn lotion and a ten-pound bag of ice.

12.

The next week Tol came for a visit. They lay in bed after making love and stared out at a big full moon.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Good.”

“You don’t much want to live in the Berkshires, do you?”

“I don’t.”

He nodded. “I keep a New York apartment--”

“Is it high up?”

“Very.”

“I wouldn’t like that.”

“And not the house in Malibu?”

She laughed. “Sorry to be difficult!”

He stroked her leg. “I don’t care about any of them. I’ve never known where I wanted to be. Do you want to be back in San Francisco?”

“No.” She sat up. “I want to be here. Not necessarily in this studio, but here in the Village. Is that impossible?”

He shook his head. “It’s hard. It’s hard to maintain security. But it’s not impossible.

What are you picturing?”

“A three-story brownstone. I’d want to paint on the third floor—for the light.”

“Would you ... do you want us to look?”

She slipped off the bed and got on some jeans and a shirt. Her eye caught the Berkshire Stream paintings. They weren’t a mistake. Dev Kapoor even reckoned them a great success. But they were not what she would have painted if she had not met Tol.

“Is that a no?”

“It isn’t! And it isn’t a yes and it isn’t a maybe.”

“What does that leave?”

She kissed him hard, without reservation. “What’s the cliché I’m about to utter?”

“That you need more time?”

“That’s the exact one! But it captures nothing of what’s going on in my head. I love you and we are going to live together and be together. I don’t need to postpone that; I don’t doubt that; I’m not fighting that. But I’ve been doing my work for such a short time, only for a few months, and I’m afraid ... I’m afraid I’ll cut my journey short if we start living together. I’m afraid I’ll start censoring myself--”

He seemed genuinely surprised. “Censoring yourself? Why?”

“It’s hard enough for anybody to tell the truth. It must be that much harder to tell the truth if you’re also trying to spare another person’s feelings.”

“My feelings about what?”

She sat down beside him and took his hands. “Wouldn’t you be careful not to hurt me in your songs? And wouldn’t that cut something off?—something of your spirit?”

He understood. She watched him think through whether he agreed with her or not.

She saw him conclude that he didn't.

“No?” she said.

He shook his head. “I understand the danger. I'm not worried—about either of us.”

She hugged him ferociously. “That's the right answer! That's the answer I want to land on. But when I start to make pictures like these woody monstrosities...”

He stood up. She rose with him.

“Paint something of the right sort with me in the room,” he said.

She stared at him. Suddenly she nodded. “That's brilliant!” She pulled him toward the nearest painting wall. “Here, help me get a canvas up!”

They got a primed canvas tacked up.

“Do you mind if I sing softly,” he said. “To disturb you?”

“That would be perfect.”

“I'm thinking Dylan's ‘Just Like a Woman.’ ‘She takes just like a woman, she makes love just like a woman—’”

She slapped him playfully on the side of the head. “It might take hours--”

“That's exactly the sort of thing you don't even have to say.”

It would have to be about sex. But not just about sex: it had to be about infidelity, betrayal, treachery. She couldn't paint herself in the embrace of another man, not because that was too cruel but because it was too literal. Nor would she have ever exposed herself that way, Tol or no Tol. She might as well have posed nude for Playboy! But the painting would have to be absolutely clear. You had to understand the harm being done, the mischief being made.

She'd slept with her first boy when she was sixteen. There had been so much drama

associated with that, so much built-up tension that the reality had been even less than an anticlimax. The boy had been sweet and had come out the next year. She took up with another boy after that, then a man, then an older man, then a boy again. She couldn't get a clear picture of that time from sixteen to eighteen, when she was at her wildest and most unsettled. In a way, none of that had been mischievous. It had felt very serious.

Did you get more mischievous the older you got? She thought of that great Alice Neel painting, "Joe Gould With Three Penises," as simultaneously serious and playful as a painting could get. She thought of Camilla and that striking gesture of hiking up her skirt, a gesture that went right to the gut. That reminded her of the famous Marilyn Monroe image, Marilyn holding her dress down against an upshot of air. Then there was Marilyn in Gottfried Helnwein's parody of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Helnwein had replaced Hopper's diners with Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean, the three of them served by that first great Elvis Presley impersonator, Elvis himself ...

Her arm was moving.

She found herself standing on her tiptoes, as if looking out over a crowd. She was getting the perspective right, imagining in her mind's eye what the crowd at the Hudson Hotel library bar would look like to a man taller than ordinary, to a man seven-and-a-half feet tall. What would he see? He had to be able to see the woman and the man, the two strangers who were about to betray their respective partners. Those two were at the center of the painting—not at its physical center, as she found herself working in an elliptical way, as Renoir had in "Luncheon of the Boating Party"—but its emotional center.

Hours passed. The man and the woman appeared on the canvas, solemn as they prepared for mischief. Later they would say that it had been primitive lust; or the champagne; or the bodies pressed together; or the unrivaled beauty of the other. Here you read the truth. They were being bad, pure and simple. Her arm flew. She recognized references to Manet's bar scenes, to Toulouse-Lautrec. In a glittering sea of bodies, in a place all about sex, a woman and a man stood staring at one another ...

Dawn was breaking. There was a little more to do—that would come later. She glanced around. Tol was fast asleep on the sofa. She crossed to him and shook him gently awake. After he got his bearings he murmured, "Did we pass?"

"Come see."

He rubbed his eyes, got unsteadily to his feet, and crossed the studio. Aster followed. Tol cocked his head and stood motionless, staring at the painting. She watched him carefully. He had to conclude four things: that she had succeeded; that his presence in her life had not inhibited her; that she was dangerous; and that she was worth the risk. Finally he turned and approached her. When he touched her, she had her answer.

When they were through making love, she whispered, "We can start looking." She blinked several times. "If you still want to." He nodded. He asked for no assurances; nor could she give him any.

Part 4. Fall

1.

Mid October arrived. Everything she had painted had been sold. The Hudson Hotel paintings were a particular smash. They had some iconic energy that sent their desirability through the roof. Museums had wanted all four but they couldn't compete with the pocketbooks of collectors. On Willie's advice—and Harry and Tol agreed—she sold two of the Hudson Hotel paintings to lower bidders, the first, the one she had painted as their test, to New York's Museum of Modern Art, the second, the last in the series, to San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art.

The internal pressure was growing. It was as if an invisible ship captain was demanding more power of his chief engineer and the chief engineer, against his better judgment, was stoking the ship's engines past the danger point. She could hardly sleep. Whenever Tol came to town they would look at brownstones, first in Greenwich Village, then in the Village and Brooklyn Heights. She had a growing fondness for Brooklyn Heights and Tol, who was skeptical at first, began to share her fondness. When he was in town she slept and felt human. As soon as he left, that invisible captain would cry, "More power, chief engineer!"

She would be turning twenty-three. She'd been in New York ten months. To say that her meteoric rise was improbable was to misunderstand the modern world. Every season some actor, filmmaker, musician, or television personality vaulted from obscurity to riches. One television comic had, after two successful seasons, been rewarded with a fifty million dollar contract—only to walk away from the show in its third season for mysterious reasons. She was living those "mysterious reasons." It had to do with some internal ratcheting up of pressure that, unlike blood pressure, could not be named.

She hadn't started shooting heroin or sleeping in her tub. She hadn't begun giving her money away to strangers or filling her studio with stray cats. But she paced for hours, avoided a significant percentage of the thousand daily tasks associated with being Aster Lynn, Inc., Parsley's not-so-amusing new name for her, and fought not to start drinking at ten in the morning. She felt at once trapped and insanely privileged, successful and lost. Tol understood what she was feeling, but understanding wasn't a cure. What was the cure?—but first, what was the illness?

One morning Jennifer called.

“You have six collector appointments next week ...”

“I have nothing to show them!” Aster cried. “We have to cancel--”

“I told them that. They still want to meet you. Probably they hope to make some kind of pitch for your next work.”

She had eight blank canvases up, four on each of her painting walls. She had trouble seeing them as anything but dollar signs. In fact she now understood why Andy Warhol painted money. Instead of painting, she had taken to renting movies. Sometimes she watched three movies a day—one day she watched five. She watched German movies, French movies, Spanish movies, Scandinavian movies, movies set in Siberia, movies set in Iran. When she watched, she sat transfixed; the moment the movie ended agitation overcame her. She wanted to do work that powerful, that large; she wondered how such things were done. She knew how to make a great painting; how did a human being bring a great film into existence?

One afternoon she watched a movie by a Turkish-German director, a violent, brilliant love story about the impossibility of stepping out of the shadows cast by your formed personality. You rooted for the main characters, two tormented souls you hoped could save one another through love, and winced at the reality: they couldn't. As soon as the movie ended she called Harry.

“I just saw something,” she exclaimed breathlessly.

“Aster, are you all right?”

“I'm fine! I just need to know your thoughts--”

She told him about the movie, about what it meant to her, about what movies were coming to mean to her, about how a painting couldn't do what a movie could accomplish. She wondered if she should try to make movies. Harry replied that he hoped she wouldn't rush off impulsively into a genre about which she knew nothing. She could paint; who knew if she could make films? She already had an amazing career; why start at the bottom in a field that destroyed ninety-nine percent of its aspirants?

She understood his doubts and pledged not to do anything rash. She paced all evening

and finally had to take the edge off at the Lost Note, where the noise and the Scotch calmed her for a few hours. The next day she sat herself down and had a talk. It was up to her to get a grip on her mind. There was no ship captain ordering some chief engineer to rev up the engine: there was only her. She was twisting herself into a tornado. She could take little satisfaction from her amazing year or she could take great satisfaction. She could worry about betraying Tol or losing Tol or losing herself in Tol; or she could love him. She could find it obscene, absurd and disorienting that her paintings now commanded enormous prices or she could make sense of her new position. She could indulge herself; or she could stop it.

“We’ll see about movies,” she murmured. “Right now I paint.”

Within seconds of that decision, a great silence descended and the internal pressure vanished. She sat without moving. In that hypnotic state a series of images arose in her, snapshots of a tryst. She got up slowly and prepared her palette. The silence deepened. She knew that her arm was moving but she couldn’t feel it. She painted.

It was a bedroom, a second-story bedroom. You knew its elevation just as you knew the elevation in a Hopper painting, by the way the light filled the room and played on the walls. You couldn’t quite tell the class of the room; it wasn’t seedy, it wasn’t elegant. It reminded you of a neutered room, not a hotel room but a room in a boarding house, something from another era, or something timeless. The queen-sized bed with its rumpled sheets predominated. The action of the painting was the dismal aftermath of illicit sex.

A naked man on the right, standing, was slipping into his pants. A woman in a full slip, not quite slumped but more slumped than erect, was sitting on the side of the bed—on the left side of the bed, facing away from the man. They were done with each other; the man was hurrying off, the woman was full of regrets. It was an image and a story that you knew almost too well; but this was its iconic rendition. No woman, taking in this painting, could ever say that she didn’t know what she was going to feel after betraying her husband.

She called it “Infidelity.” She wanted a clear title. She worked slowly, more slowly than usual. She took her time with the bedposts, the folds of the sheets. Capturing that the man was hurrying arrested her. It reminded her of the magic of motion in a Van Gogh painting. His wheat fields waved; you could feel the wind move through them. A filmmaker had his magic; she had hers, that with a static image she could portray pulsing life. The smile didn’t move from her mind to her lips but she knew that internally she was smiling.

For the next three days she painted. She called up Tol and told him that she loved him. She rented no movies. She drank nothing stronger than cranberry juice. She shopped for produce, made large salads, and enjoyed them. For a few hours each day she attended to business. No hurricane roared through her studio; no hurricane grew offshore, either. She painted, satisfied herself with her painting, and slept well. She thought to cross her fingers, but decided against it. She knew that you couldn't keep the hurricane away with a gesture or a painting. It would always have its season.

2.

Harry Goldstein threw a Halloween party at his East Side brownstone. Aster invited Jimmy to act as her escort, since Tol was on the road. Something was brewing in Jimmy but Aster didn't know what.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Things are up. Nothing to talk about.”

She didn't press him. She presumed that it was about his painting. They fell silent on the cab ride uptown. In front of the lit-up brownstone they waited for some trick-or-treaters and their parents to pass by before climbing the steps to the party.

Inside Willie Parsley rushed up to her.

“Aster!” he exclaimed. “That charity case of yours? What's her name?”

“Estelle. And don't call her that.”

Parsley shrugged. “I looked at her slides. Well, I'd never touch her paintings with a ten-foot pole. They're a dime a dozen. But I told her that I'd take one. Know what she said?”

Aster glanced at Jimmy, whose face had flushed.

“What did she say?”

“That she wasn't interested. She couldn't have been more dismissive.”

“I'll talk to her,” Aster said.

“Really, don't bother!”

Aster circulated. In attendance were editors, writers, a curator from the Met, collectors, an installation artist visiting from Israel. A well-known German painter from Cologne brought his skinhead lover, a fellow charmingly decked out in Nazi regalia. Actors, musicians, filmmakers, lawyers, investment bankers, and a murderer or two from Harry's client list wandered from room to room, from snack to snack, and from bar to bar in Harry's three-story mansion.

She ran into Harry on the top floor.

"Dervis Ebiri is here," he said. "The director of that movie that made such an impression on you."

Aster felt her heart stop.

"He was in New York, wanted to meet you, and got wind of this party." Harry paused. "I almost said no." He studied her reaction. "I think maybe I should have."

"Introduce us," she said.

The young Turkish filmmaker was standing in a corner, talking with a white-haired gentleman and an erect elderly woman—a conductor and a dancer, Aster fancied. He was making an effort, smiling and nodding, but looked nothing but uncomfortable. He had riveting brown eyes, wavy brown hair, and the countenance of a sad gypsy. Harry led Aster over, apologized for the interruption, introduced Aster to the three of them, and invited the couple to have a peek at his latest acquisition, a Nicolas de Stael. When Harry and the couple were out of earshot Aster lowered her gaze and said, "I saw Chess in Munich a few days ago."

"Did you like it?"

She smiled. "Did I like it? I hated it. I hated it that someone got to make something like that and that I didn't. I hated how it agitated me, how it got under my skin. I thoroughly hated it."

Dervis smiled. "Yes; and I hate your paintings. Hatred can be a powerful bond."

She looked at him over the rim of her glass. He was probably about thirty, handsome

but not to a fault, and wry rather than ironic. He had a good smile, at once merry and mournful, and a lean athleticism that suggested weekend soccer and ocean swims. He stared at her as she stared at him. Finally he laughed.

“Would you hate me less if I told you that movies are miserable to make?” he said. “You wouldn’t envy me one second of the year it takes to bring a film in. With each film I come this close to a breakdown.”

Aster nodded. “I can imagine. The million details. The finances. Trying to hold a vision and not knowing if the parts amount to a whole. The subject matter itself--”

Dervis smiled. “You sound like a filmmaker!”

Aster cocked her head, returned his smile, and said nothing.

“Well.” He studied her. “You’re thinking about it? Interesting.”

“I was thinking about it,” she replied. “Then I stopped thinking about it. Now I don’t know.”

He nodded. After a moment he said, “I’m shooting my next film in France.”

She waited.

“You could come and watch. It would be hell and I would be a madman—but it would be an interesting hell.”

The room swam before her eyes.

To accept this once-in-a-lifetime offer would be to betray Tol. She had no doubt about that. It was guaranteed. Dervis was already too close to her. He hadn’t moved—or perhaps he had—or perhaps she had, but in any event they were standing inches apart. She couldn’t be on a film set with him for months, interacting with him, learning from him, without also sleeping with him. They both knew that.

“Can we stretch our legs?” she said.

“Of course.”

The second floor was crowded and brightly lit. It contained the main living space, a great room that stretched from leaded-glass bay windows to a wall of books. The room had recently been repainted in a baby blue that complemented a new painting over the mantle, one that had replaced an old master floral: Aster’s Washington Square painting. Aster and Dervis refreshed their drinks, which put them in the vicinity of the painting. Dervis nodded in its direction.

“I believe that commemorates something,” he said.

“It does.”

“And you’re with that someone? Who isn’t just someone.”

“That’s right.” Aster glanced at him. “You’ve been reading up on me.”

“I have. Like a million other people, I watched you paint and fell in love with you. So, yes, I read up.”

She looked away.

A commotion erupted on the stairs. She saw Harry back into the room, his arms raised in protest.

“You can’t--”

“Harry, Harry, Harry! This will be a great moment for you! We’ll protect the furniture, the rug, the women and children--”

It was Paolo’s voice. She turned to Dervis.

“I can’t,” she mumbled. “It mustn’t happen!”

Paolo burst into the room. On his heels appeared two young men, one carrying an easel and a canvas, the other lugging Paolo’s painting kit and a folded-up tarp.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Paolo cried. “I, too, will paint live!”

The crowd in the living room parted. Paolo halted in the middle of the room and surveyed the space.

“There!” he exclaimed, pointing to a space by the window. His assistants went to work, laying down the tarp, unfolding the easel, positioning the canvas, and organizing Giamenti’s palette. Paolo smiled as he watched them work. Guests whispered and positioned themselves for the best view. Harry stood uncertainly, his hands on his hips, and Jimmy appeared next to him, his neck muscles pulsing in anger. Aster turned away from Dervis. He touched her on the shoulder.

“Please,” he whispered.

Aster recoiled and shook her head.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Paolo announced, mimicking a circus master of ceremonies, “we were all inspired by the live painting performance of Aster Lynn!” He gestured in Aster’s direction. “Aster, please take a bow!” Aster stood frozen. “She challenged all of us who hide in the studio and paint in secret to come out and show the world what we can do. I will do that this evening! Please, drink, chat—nothing will disturb me! Now—I shall begin!”

He removed his far-fetched patchwork jacket with a flourish to reveal a white peasant shirt, pirates’ trousers, and a scabbard at his belt. One guest saw fit to applaud. Everyone else waited, gauging in their own mind whether they were about to witness art or insanity.

3.

Paolo stood there. Aster watched him carefully. You could read volumes in a painter's posture and attitude. Paolo held his hands loosely clasped in front of him and his head cocked to one side. His brushes waited; his palette waited; he looked lost not so much in thought as in memory. Aster knew this moment well. Sometimes she traveled the whole history of art as she stood in front of canvas, not to find something to copy and not precisely for inspiration but to find her place and her way—and to make sure that she did no copying.

She would go back thousands of years to the cave painters, run through the caricatures and flat perspective of Greek art, remind herself of the medievalists and their icons and ornate curls, calm herself with the gray Dutch palette, jaunt through Africa with Delacroix, spend a little time with Manet, arrive at the modern era and commune whole seconds with Van Gogh, then feel the fracture and tumult of the twentieth-century revolution, Picasso and the Fauves and everything suddenly possible, before rushing through Pollock and Rothko and the last half-century of good and bad news. Did this take even a minute?

She wondered what Paolo's journey looked like. He had this love affair with Arabian iconography; he almost certainly went there, to a place of blue tile mosaics and crescent moons. He probably traveled among the surrealists: she suspected that he had a wide knowledge not only of Dali, Magritte, Miro, Breton, De Chirico and Man Ray but of all the minor tributaries; that was his homeland. When he arrived nearer his own time he probably communed with Francesco Clemente. That seemed likely. Aster nodded to herself. Paolo's journey was exactly like hers, except that they didn't share a single artist in common.

Many seconds passed. He had made his journey; now he found himself confronted by the question that every artist faced on a daily basis. Would something rich and right bubble up, or wouldn't it? It wasn't that it was taking too long, as there was no timetable for such things. But Aster had the sense that a door was closing rather than opening. Paolo began smiling. It was the smile of a would-be warrior, forced to back down, now trying to make a joke of his cowardice.

“Requests?” Paolo said over his shoulder.

A few guests laughed nervously. His smile grew more ironic. The clock ticking had gotten to him; the crowd at his back had gotten to him; his own personality, with its fault lines and grand conceits, had gotten to him. He made a theatrical gesture, as if to say, “I’m ready!”, and reached for a brush. He wasn’t ready; Aster knew that. In fact, everyone in the room knew it. It was a gesture to make every audience member anxious and suspicious.

He broad-brushed on a cobalt field using his fast-drying acrylics. It took him two or three minutes. It could have been water; it could have been sky; it could have been anything or nothing. Right now it was inert. He sensed its inertness and made a “not to worry” gesture to the crowd. To Aster, that meant that he was worried. Indeed, you could see it on his face. He hadn’t broken into a sweat, but he looked like an actor in the wings whom you knew not to bother. After several seconds of anxiety he made an effort to release the tension.

“Done,” he said, stepping back and gesturing with a flourish.

That generated nervous laughter from the guests. In fact, it was a brilliant gambit. It was a great deflection to put everyone in mind of the monochrome, of Yves Klein and Ad Reinhardt and other advocates of one-note painting, because when you had them in mind it was impossible not to shake your head at all of modern art, and once your head began to shake that way you were bound to accept that anything went, including pathetic ugliness. To call this all-blue painting done almost guaranteed that anything he painted would have to be accepted. It almost inoculated Paolo against defeat—almost, but not quite.

He went for red next, made squiggles, trapezes, tent-looking lines, a circus motif, tried to drop in a horse in brown, couldn’t make sense of the composition, turned the horse into something like a compost heap, tried some creamy yellows to bring some life to the canvas, some cream-of-corn life, then tried green, an ugly lifesaver green, which neither helped nor hurt, since nothing was working. He splashed about, feigning inspiration.

Dervis was pressed up against her. Aster, annoyed, glanced back at the Turkish director.

“At least have coffee with me,” he whispered.

“I can’t!” she whispered back.

“You could help design the look of the film. You could even be assistant director--”

She whirled on him. “Stop it!”

She was just loud enough that Harry and Jimmy, standing together near the bar, glanced at her. She gave them a small gesture of reassurance.

“All right,” Dervis said. “I’ll be back in New York in May. Maybe you’ll take my call then. Six months is a long time for relationships.”

Paolo was painting up a storm—and increasing the mess. Someone laughed. Paolo spun around and glared. When he turned back to the canvas he went at it with a new vengeance, punishing the canvas. The more he worked, the sillier, more amateurish, and more unimportant the canvas became. The squiggles conveyed nothing; the splotches conveyed nothing; he had failed at balance, composition, color effect, at everything. In the studio, you would abort a mess of this sort and not think twice about it. Maybe it would depress you for two minutes, but a beer and some pretzels would take the sting away. Now he had to stand before it and either make some claim for it, lying through his teeth, or announce that he had failed, just as every artist sometimes failed, though never so publicly.

Paolo understood that he couldn’t continue applying paint. He put down his brush and stared at the canvas. The palpable fear in the room was that someone would laugh and that others would follow. Everyone knew that they were on the verge of humiliating Paolo Giamenti, who had failed at his stunt. Paolo nodded. Slowly, deliberately, with a military flourish, he withdrew the curved knife from the scabbard on his belt. He swung it viciously from right to left. The sound of canvas ripping filled Harry’s great room. People gasped. The second slash, from left to right, effectively destroyed the canvas. The now-flaccid canvas was hard to shred further, but Paolo continued slashing away at it, as if to obliterate it. Finally he stopped.

“Take this piece of crap away,” he said to his assistants.

As he still had the knife in his hand, they refused to approach. Slowly he replaced the knife in its scabbard. He turned to the crowd and bowed in Aster’s direction.

“What you did now takes on even more luster,” he said. “I just upped your prices.”

Aster stood perfectly still. Paolo nodded, as much as to say, “My work here is done.” He proceeded to cross the room toward the stairway. He had his head down; you thought he was beaten. But at the last moment, just as he reached Aster, he turned on his heels, stepped toward her, and kissed her on the lips. Instantly Harry came toward him; Jimmy came toward him; even Dervis took a step forward. Paolo threw up his hands. His stare remained insolent and his smile ironic but his posture of defenselessness protected him. He backed out the room, his assistants flanking him and protecting him.

Aster took a tissue out of her purse and wiped her lips. At the other end of the room several of the guests had gathered around the canvas. One of them turned and called out to Harry.

“Who gets this?” he cried greedily. “It’s still a Giamenti!”

4.

The kiss caused her to dream. In a sweat, she woke up from a nightmare about the almost-rape that had occurred while she was a student at San Francisco City College. She sat straight up in bed. Pitch darkness surrounded her. She touched her bedside lamp for reassurance but didn't turn it on.

She had gone to a party. Where had it been? She had a vague recollection of it being somewhere near a television tower with red blinking lights. She had taken a bus from Bernal Heights, changed to another bus, walked along a narrow, winding uphill street of attached, nondescript houses from the Fifties. How had she heard about the party? She didn't remember. She'd had a few drinks at home, vodka and grapefruit juice, heavy on the grapefruit juice. Her mother was still at work, at the boutique on Church Street where she sold original dresses to women in their thirties. How old had her mother been? Fifty, Aster reckoned; thirty-two years older than her only daughter.

Anna, her mother, had wanted to be a painter. What did "want" mean in such a sentence? Scared, even as a young girl, of becoming a bag lady, of finding herself on the street sleeping on cardboard and urinating in public, her mother had studied graphic design rather than painting. As if graphic design led to a secure livelihood! It might have been the worst of all possible choices, one bred from a combination of fear and ignorance, fear of the "real" artist's life and its attendant risks, ignorance about the graphic designer's life and its risks, including never having enough clients to pay the rent.

Her mother didn't complain. But she got sick too often from opportunistic illnesses that took advantage of the hole in her heart. And she tied her wagon to too many artistic, pseudo-artistic, and would-be artistic men. Aster couldn't remember a one of them that she felt safe around. Each one presented or represented some danger, this one dangerous because of his short fuse, that one a poster boy for near-comatose depression. Her mother had never let any of them move in; but that didn't mean that they weren't coming and going from the bathroom or sprawled out on the sofa.

Aster couldn't get her mind around the idea that her mother had fired her father for gambling and then taken up with one immature, half-worthless man after another. Did she want her husband back? Did she crave risk even though risk petrified her? Was she punishing herself by clinging to a lower class way of being? Aster sat very still, willing

an answer to wash over her. Why had her mother slept with so many inferior men?

Aster would be out of the house before her mother got home from work, since too often her mother would return, generally after a quick stop at a bar, with this boyfriend or that one. So one night, as on so many other nights, she found herself searching among dark houses for the address of a party about which she knew nothing. She arrived at the only loud, lit-up house on the block and entered with that cocky air that was one part her and one part camouflage.

She didn't like the vibe from the first instant. Somebody who had been to the Bahamas had brought back a recipe for mushroom tea and had made a batch with maybe the right mushrooms or maybe the wrong mushrooms—an unfriendly debate raged in the shabby living room. The men looked angry and dangerous, the women high and loose. A crowd in a corner was playing a drinking game that came with undressing. Two women had their tops off and a man was pulling off his pants as Aster passed the group. She had a bottle of beer in her hand; she reckoned it a weapon and not refreshment.

She did a single circuit of the house, downstairs and up, and decided that she would leave. To get back downstairs she had to negotiate a narrow hallway blocked by bodies. As she passed by the open door of one of the bedrooms a man in the hallway bodied her inside. Aster knew what was happening. He slammed the door shut with his foot. She thought to scream; but something like pride stopped her. She backed away; he stood staring at her, a bad smile on his lips.

The small room was just large enough for its double bed. She found herself between the bed and the wall in a narrow space, backed up against a nightstand topped with half-a-dozen trophies. The man in front of her looked like a college athlete. There was a blank expression in his eyes that she would never forget. If he desired her at all, it was with the same part of the brain that caused genocides. She glanced behind her at the trophies and slowly put down her beer bottle. A trophy would make the better weapon ...

When she glanced back she saw that he was coming. Something in her mind snapped. She took two steps forward and scratched his face with both hands. She heard two fingernails crack and felt his flesh come off under her nails. He screamed and covered his face with his hands. She couldn't get by him, so she hopped onto the bed, bounced once or twice on the cheap innerspring mattress, and darted off around the far side of the bed and out the door behind him.

She elbowed her way out of the party and, when she got outside, ran. It was entirely possible that he would come after her and bring friends. She ran for three blocks through completely empty streets. No one seemed to be following her but she kept running. When she got to the bus stop, she vomited. On the bus ride home, she couldn't stop shaking. When she got home she went directly to the bathroom, ripped off her clothes, and took a burning hot shower, obsessively working with an old toothbrush to get the man's flesh out from under her fingernails.

What she learned wasn't that she could be raped. That she had always known. What she learned was that she could kill. If she had grabbed one of those trophies and managed to land a blow with it, she wouldn't have stopped with that single blow. She would have beaten him to death. She would have crushed his skull. She hadn't a single doubt about that and that knowledge colored everything. It explained why she traveled armed. She carried her pistol to protect herself; but it had a place in her purse because her vigilante heart hoped to use it.

5.

The following week, on a crisp, bright November day full of yellow light and falling leaves, Tol visited the studio. They spent a quiet day walking in Central Park, crunching leaves underfoot, lunching on fish-and-chips at an Irish pub on the West Side, and watching each other. Mid-afternoon Tol was recognized, which changed the complexion of the day and caused them to catch a cab and return to the studio.

They were in love but preoccupied. As preoccupied as she felt, Aster noticed that Tol's preoccupation rivaled her own. He sat on the sofa nursing a glass of wine. Every so often he shook his head, as if upset by some inner calculation or realization. She sat beside him, sketching a little from imagination; she thought to sketch him but decided against intruding. She wasn't sure that she liked the way that certain painters—many painters, actually—used their mate as a permanent in-house model. Would she paint portraits of Tol? Would she paint portraits of their children? For now, she spared him that scrutiny.

Finally she put down her pencil.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Tol shook his head and shifted on the sofa. “A thousand things are up.” He put down his wine glass. “Our drummer Dave collapsed and went into the hospital last night. I think I know what it's about but I don't want to get ahead of the diagnosis. Then, the studio hates the Irish album. They don't get it at all. And our last tour was stupendous but somehow a failure, because it didn't generate the sales everyone was expecting, which makes them fear the Irish album even more. But it isn't any of that.” Tol looked away. “Two years ago I was writing good songs on a regular basis. A few of them were even great. Now nothing's there.”

Aster waited to see if he was finished. Then she said, “In the months I've known you, you've taken virtually no time off from performing and doing business.” She waited to make sure that he was listening. “You've been a warrior, doing things every day that virtually no one does even occasionally. You've set the bar at this impossibly high level, where you hope to perform nonstop, do business nonstop, and also create. I know we both think that we can do anything--”

He stared at her, thinking. A long moment passed. Finally he let out a massive sigh. “Can you come up to the Berkshires for a few days?” he said. “I need a real rest.”

“Of course.”

“There’s no painting studio--”

“I don’t need to paint all the time.”

They spent three days in the Berkshires. They were in love; but Tol couldn’t relax, and neither could she. Tol would go off for a few hours to write, but his song-writing sessions produced nothing. While Tol wrote, Aster attended to her emails, turning down this charity event, making a date to do this print interview, mulling over an editor’s offer that she compile a coffee table book of her favorite women painters. She peered into the future and saw a time when events that loomed gigantic in the imagination of artists — one-person shows, museum purchases, book offers — would become commonplace for her. They might even actually bore her. Indeed, “boredom” was the word hovering around the two of them and frightening them badly.

On the third day Tol said, “Should we go to Malibu for a few days? And walk by the beach?”

“All right.”

They flew in his private eight-passenger Gulf Stream and were met at the airport by a stretch limousine. It was just a plane and a car, after all, just what money could buy, and did nothing to change their mood. Even his Malibu place, which was extraordinary, was still just a house with rooms, just a shelter, albeit with a view of the Pacific that startled your neurons. They went to parties, shook hands with studio types and music execs, palled around with celebrities. They didn’t fight; they smiled a lot; yet each felt disgruntled and knew that the other was feeling the same way.

This was no artist’s life. It was pleasant, privileged, and perfect, if you had no inner life, no ambition, and no need to matter. You couldn’t fault the cuisine or the sunsets but you couldn’t live on them, either. On Thursday afternoon she sat them down in the sun-drenched living room of his Malibu home and took a deep breath.

“This is weird,” she said.

“I know,” he replied quietly.

“I’m not painting and you’re not composing.”

“I know.”

“We love each other a lot.”

“We do.”

“But we’re not getting our work done.”

“It’s even more than that.”

She hesitated. “I know.”

Tol changed the subject.

“We have that charity thing in New York tomorrow.”

Aster nodded. “Wonderful.”

They didn’t finish the conversation. The next day they arrived in New York in bad weather. It drizzled as they crawled from the airport to the city and rained harder as they collapsed, as if exhausted, onto the living room sofa in Tol’s Manhattan apartment. The windows fogged over and the room, though enormous, closed in on them. It was four in the afternoon. They had a charity event at Carnegie Hall to attend and then a party at a new club in Midtown. The housekeeper brought in lunch and set it down in front of them. There was cold salmon, a pasta salad, champagne, but they couldn’t even smile.

“What should we do?” Tol said.

Aster moved next to him on the sofa. “Not worry!” She took his hands in hers. “And maybe take a few days off and do our work.”

They fell silent. Tol ate. After a few moments Aster fixed herself a plate.

“Is there something we’re missing?” she said. “Something else that explains how we’re feeling?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it just that we haven’t been working? Just too much leisure?”

Tol put down his fork. “I think we keep wondering if a walk by the stream is going to do it for us, even a walk by the stream with our three beautiful children, even a walk by the stream with our three beautiful children after you’ve painted for six hours and I’ve recorded in the studio for six hours. We don’t doubt us. I know that we don’t doubt us. Even with this dry patch, I don’t doubt that music will come. I think that we doubt ... I think that we doubt that being settled is tolerable.”

Aster felt frightened. That was exactly what she was feeling. But she’d supposed that Tol was only worried about his current dry spell, about the unavailability of new music. She had no idea that he, too, had doubts about a calm, loving life proving tolerable. She got up and paced to the window. A sleety rain slashed at Manhattan. Suddenly she turned. She made up her mind and knew something for a certainty. She strode back to the sofa and got Tol to his feet. She held his hands and stared into his eyes.

“Let’s do this,” she said.

Tol stared back. She watched his expression clear. Finally he smiled.

“Meaning exactly?”

“Let’s do a real Thanksgiving in the Berkshires. Let’s have your family. Let’s start our traditions. Let’s--” Her eyes clouded over.

“What?”

“This part may be a mistake.”

“What?”

“I’d like to hire a detective and find my father.”

Tol nodded. He kissed her on the lips.

“He loved you,” he said after a moment. “You told me that.”

“He did!” She shook her head. “But not a word from him in twenty-two years.”

“Maybe your mother convinced him not to get in touch with you.”

She kicked at the rug. “I couldn’t find him on the Net. You’d think you’d be able to find a living person on the Net nowadays.”

Tol nodded. “You’d think that.”

So it was likely that he was dead. Tol took her hand.

“I agree,” he said.

Aster stared at him. “That we are a permanent item?”

“Yes.”

“Undaunted by the specter of stability?”

He laughed. “Just as Shakespeare would have put it.” Some look came into his eyes. She knew that look; it was like staring into a mirror.

“Go!” she said. He had music to write.

At seven they began dressing for the benefit. As they had to undress first, that caused them to make love. Then they had to rush. This would be Aster’s first red carpet: she had decided on a simple, classic black dress and damn the consequences. She knew that the photographs of them together would appear everywhere. They would be in the papers tomorrow; in the tabloids by next week; in magazines of every description for

months to come. That thought only made her stand a little taller.

They didn't return home until four in the morning. A fire was blazing in the fireplace. They got out of their red carpet clothes and into nightclothes and sat in front of the fire.

“Want to do the cover for the Irish album?” Tol asked.

After a moment she replied, “I should see Ireland first.”

“You should.”

“And hear the album.”

“Of course.”

“Let me think about it.”

The fire blazed. Aster stretched out on the sofa, put her head on Tol's lap, and dreamed first of Ireland, then of the children they would have. Soon she was sound asleep.

6.

She returned home in an excellent mood.

The complicated time with Tol, with its internal ups and downs, had left a residual feeling of bliss. They had been together for enough days for Aster to know many things. She understood that his inner life, his concerns, and his preoccupations would not cease just because they were a couple and in love, and neither would hers. But now, having experienced it firsthand, she reckoned it a molehill and not a mountain.

They had been calm with each other, considerate of each other, and trusting of one another. She would do her best to manage her wild streak and the river of sorrow that flowed through her. Tol would do his best to manage his demons and his everyday despair. Being together would not amount to a set of shackles and an invitation to boredom. No, being together would make them happy. She found herself singing out loud, running through tunes from the Sixties that her mother had loved.

“I got sunshine on a cloudy day--”

Parsley called and exclaimed in his breathless way, “Paolo’s in Mt Sinai! They’re calling it exhaustion but I’m hearing stories. He looks like he’s been in a car wreck! Big bruises on his face ... I thought you should know.”

Aster nodded.

“I think he got beat up,” Willie whispered. “Somebody gave him a savage beating!”

Aster thought about that. “What about his hands?”

“His hands?” Willie paused. “I have no idea. Do you want me to find out?”

“No! That’s okay.”

It didn’t spoil her mood but it made her think. She had seen countless crucified

Christs in her life and so had everyone else. If you pictured a beaten man, were you bound to evoke that residual Christ feeling, that feeling of common humanity, and feel compassion for the man, whether or not he deserved your pity? Was there a way to depict a man who had received a beating and make the viewer understand that he deserved it? The question intrigued her. She paced up and down, thinking.

Images began to come to her. She stood stock-still. She saw a turn on that famous Michelangelo painting, “The Creation of Adam”: in her version God had his massive arm outstretched and was twisting the arm of an evil man who writhed in pain. She could do that against a background of flowers, purple-blue-black flowers, bruises as flowers. She would call it “A Bouquet of Pain.” Was that right? She studied the painting in her mind’s eye. It had an undeniable rightness to it: after a moment she shook her head. It was also completely wrong. She let the image evaporate and resumed her pacing.

She lost track of time. At some point she found herself in front of a canvas, without any recollection of getting there, and realized that her arm was moving. She was painting. She saw nothing in her mind’s eye; she couldn’t have said what she was intending. Yet her arm had knowledge. She was working with blues, purples, and blacks, and also with colors that would bring a man into existence. It was a naked man, facing the viewer, glimpsed through cascading bruises-as-flowers. His expression would tell the story, but that would come later. Now her arm worked the flowers.

When she awoke the next day she remembered that she had a collector’s appointment at one. She’d have much preferred to resume painting but instead she straightened up the studio, dressed for company, put on a pot of coffee, and then remembered that the collector—Lord something-or-other—was British. She filled the kettle with water.

Jennifer called at twelve-thirty to remind her.

“Lord Randall,” she said.

“That’s it,” Aster replied, remembering.

“Very rich but very ... idiosyncratic.”

“Idiosyncratic how?”

Jennifer hesitated. “I don’t know. He goes native in the Andes, buys villages,

becomes king, everyone loves him and reveres him--”

“I get it,” Aster said. “The colonial master.”

“Something like that.”

Lord Randall arrived promptly at one. Tall, rail thin, and past seventy, he wore an explorer’s outfit—pockets everywhere—and carried a substantial cane sporting a giraffe’s head fashioned from what Aster took to be silver. Jennifer had already informed him that Aster had nothing to show and that this would amount to a meet-and-greet, but Lord Randall nevertheless immediately exclaimed, “Show me something!” He tapped his cane imperially on the rug.

Aster laughed. “Tea?”

“My dear, how thoughtful!”

This was his charming pose. He had switched from imperial to charming without missing a beat. Aster recognized that he was completely two-faced and untrustworthy. She lit a fire under the kettle and waited by the stove.

“Let me look around while I’m waiting,” Lord Randall called out.

“There’s nothing to see.”

“Ridiculous! I see something over there that you’re working on. Looks floral.” He crossed to the painting that Aster had begun the day before. He glanced at it and cried out, “I have to have this!”

Aster laughed. “You can’t just have it. I have some policies.” She crossed to a library table, retrieved a sheet from a pile of revised policy statements, and joined Lord Randall in front of the painting. She held out the sheet. “Read this, if you would.”

He took it between two long, delicate fingers and let it flutter to the rug.

“My dear, I don’t deal with policy statements. I want this one and I will have it.”

The smile left Aster's face.

“You won't. And, you know, you can leave.”

“What did you say, girl?”

His eyes bugged out. Beside him was a low table surmounted by a squat red ceramic lamp. Lord Randall raised his giraffe's-head cane and swung it at the lamp, smashing it to smithereens. Aster jumped back and kept backing away. Lord Randall had his cane poised over his head. “I need this painting and I shall have it,” he said. “I have lost out on too many things in my life and this won't be one of them. My board of directors pushed me out of my own company! They were jealous of the way my workers adored me--”

His cane poised above his head, he continued ranting and approaching. Aster edged toward her purse. She opened it, keeping her eyes on the mad colonial, retrieved her pistol, and flipped the safety off as she brought it out into the open.

“You have to sell it to me!” he cried. “You--” He saw the pistol and smiled. He kept coming. “Girl, I've had Mayans come at me with machetes. I've had--”

She put a bullet over his left shoulder. The bullet sparked where it hit the brick wall at his back, chipping a brick. She aimed a second time, right at his heart, and squeezed ever so slightly. Then, catching herself, she released the pressure. Lord Randall's jaw dropped and he blinked several times, as if awakening from a trance.

“My dear,” he said, “how shrill of you!”

“Get out of here!”

“My dear, please, really--”

He'd become his charming self. How many thousands of times had this imperial narcissist played this game? Beaten a servant—then blinked and exclaimed, “Oh, dear, what happened?” Struck his wife, his children, his assistants—and then apologized, a day or a month late?

“Of course, if you can't part with it--”

“Get out of here!”

“You know, I’m not usually treated—“

She aimed the pistol.

He nodded—the smallest nod possible. “Of course.” He waved the cane jauntily. “Warhol threw a fit just like yours. That was a similar misunderstanding, my dear, completely unnecessary, but maybe proof--”

“Get out of here!”

She circled him as he left. He chattered away, engaged in a monologue that Aster stopped hearing. When she heard the tapping of his cane recede down the hallway she shut the door and threw all the locks. Then she looked at her weapon. If her pistol had a hair trigger, Lord Randall would be dead now. She knew that for a certainty.

7.

Twenty minutes later, her nerves more settled, she hurried down the hall to Jimmy's studio. She knocked; Jimmy opened the door with a look that confused her. She glanced beyond him to the interior of the studio and saw packing boxes everywhere. He wore a grave expression and invited her in with a nod.

"What's going on?" Aster asked.

Jimmy resumed filling a cardboard box with books. He glanced up at her and continued packing. "I'm through with painting," he said, standing up. "Do you know how tired I got of painting those damned spumoni paintings?"

"Jimmy!"

"It's okay!" He put up his hand. "I'm not knocking myself. It's just that for some reason I paint anemically. I don't know why, because I have a billion watts of energy in me. I can feel this fierce thing inside of me--"

He glanced at the sofa and Aster followed his glance. With a start she recognized Paolo's scabbard and short scimitar.

"That Paolo's," she said.

Jimmy nodded. "He came around once too often. It was a couple of days after that party. He came skulking around ... I got tired of it."

She bit her lip. "You beat him up?"

"I did."

Aster sat down on the sofa, at the far end from the knife. After a moment she opened her purse and pulled out her pistol.

“I almost killed a man with this a few minutes ago,” she said. “I wanted to kill him—that’s the thing. I came over here to see if you would get rid of it for me.”

Jimmy sat down beside her.

“Who was it?”

“Some collector. He came at me with his cane because I wouldn’t sell him a painting. An insane British colonial. I put a warning bullet over his shoulder.”

“That bullet wasn’t the problem,” Jimmy said quietly.

Aster nodded. “It was the second one. The one I almost let loose.”

Jimmy got up, went to the kitchen, and brought back a bottle of wine and two glasses. As he filled their glasses, Aster glanced at the empty walls.

“It was the same with Paolo,” Jimmy said. “He had no right to throw a brick through your window. He had no right to slash your paintings. He had no right to kiss you.” He shook his head. “And he had no right to come skulking around here with a knife. He deserved the beating. Except ... except that I didn’t restrain myself. I just didn’t feel like restraining myself.”

“But you didn’t hurt his hands?”

“No, I didn’t.”

She touched him on the wrist. “Then you did restrain yourself.”

“Not really.” He shook his head. “I’m getting on my motorcycle and riding. Maybe I’ll go all the way to the tip of South America. Maybe I can find a place where they need someone like me.”

Aster put the pistol back in her purse. Jimmy made a face.

“Now you don’t want me to get rid of that?” he said. “You don’t trust me?”

“It’s not that!” Aster replied. “I need to take care of it myself.”

“But you’re disappointed in me.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Paolo came around with a knife. I’m not forgetting what that means and neither should you. You didn’t go looking for him.”

“Well, I still disappointed myself.” He made a sweeping gesture at the bare walls. “I like the walls much better this way. There are thousands of painters out there whose studios would look better if they took down their paintings.”

Aster got to her feet. “You won’t leave without saying goodbye?”

“I promise.”

In the hall, Aster ran into Estelle.

“I was just coming to see you!” Estelle exclaimed. “Thanks for that Gallery Lulu thing! I thought that snot Willie was going to heave his lunch offering to hang one of my paintings. You could hear his sigh of relief all the way in Canarsie when I told him to shove it!”

Aster shook her head. “I like them.”

“Oh, I believe that you like them! But I know that he didn’t like them. So I had to say no.”

“You don’t think--”

Jimmy’s door opened. He appeared and began piling boxes in the hall.

“He’s leaving?” Estelle whispered.

Aster nodded.

“And giving up painting?”

“I think that maybe he is.”

“Well, I’m not!” Estelle exclaimed. “It’s that or jump off a bridge. I’d rather keep trying!”

When Aster got back to her studio she disassembled the pistol and cracked the firing pin with the third blow of her hammer. Then she went at the barrel like she was hammering brass, hammering Lord Randall’s face in, hammering Paolo, with some blows hammering her father. Then she wrapped the pieces in paper, wrapped the paper package in a sweater meant for the Good Will, and shoved the lumpy sweater into a plastic garbage bag. She took the package down to the dumpster behind the building, got the lid up just high enough to accommodate the package, and tossed her pistol away.

8.

The next morning she called Mount Sinai Hospital, learned that visiting hours commenced at two p.m., and caught a cab at a little after one-thirty. At a few minutes to two she entered the hospital cafeteria, purchased a cup of black coffee, and found a table by the window. She was still making up her mind. What did she want from a visit with Paolo?

If he looked terrible, that would only provoke her sympathy. If he looked well, her only wish would be that someone administer another beating. Did she have something to say to him? Did she need him to confess something or announce that he had gotten a grip on his childish need for revenge? Her coffee was too hot to drink. She stared out the window, deciding.

When she turned back to her coffee she spotted them. They were gathered at a large, round table some distance from her. Camilla had on tight jeans, a maroon leather jacket, and dramatic sunglasses made more dramatic by the fact that she was indoors in a hospital cafeteria. Paige wore a yellow top and green pants and looked like a daffodil. Paolo's obese children, a boy of about nine and a girl of about eleven, pushed and shoved one another in a constant commotion over food. The boy, finished with his fries, wanted his sister's. The girl stabbed with her fork at her brother's brownie.

Camilla and Paige sat turned away from one another. Camilla, as still as a statue, the workings of her eyes invisible behind her sunglasses, touched but did not drink from her bottle of juice. Paige glanced at a travel magazine and sipped from a bottle of water. Not a word passed between them. The children gobbled, guarded their food, pushed, shoved, stabbed, yelled, complained, and threw tantrums. Camilla and Paige might have been on another planet, as much notice as they took of Paolo's children.

Word came over the public address system that visiting hours had begun. Paolo's son jumped up and returned to the food line; his sister followed in hot pursuit. Aster made up her mind. She took the elevator up to Paolo's floor and walked slowly down the corridor. Something about his failed effort to paint live remained with her. He had wanted to succeed. It was a stunt, yes, and a part of his vendetta, but once he found himself standing in front of that blank canvas he had—for the first five minutes, at any rate—taken the task seriously. She saw him in her mind's eye, waiting for inspiration, praying that something might arrive that would do justice to the moment and stand up

to scrutiny. For five minutes he had hoped to do excellent work.

An ordinary painter would have skipped those five minutes and immediately proceeded in his customary fashion. Jimmy would have done Rothko; Shelley would have done O’Keeffe; Estelle would have done Dali-meets-Delaunay. Paolo had wanted to find something real inside of himself, had made that effort for five minutes. Then he gave up, settled, reverted. For five minutes he had been like herself, like Tol, like Dervis Ebiri. Because of those five minutes, she was visiting.

She found his room, a single room with an expansive view, and entered quietly. Paolo was awake but not alert. He turned his head, winced, and looked at her with unfocused eyes.

“Aster,” he said, nodding vaguely.

“How are you?” she replied.

“Some internal injuries.” He seemed to be speaking from memory. “And I may have trouble walking. But my hands are fine.”

Maybe he was drugged. She kept her distance. The bluish-black bruises on his face were not going away soon. He winced when he moved and had trouble getting comfortable, moaning as he shifted. Getting comfortable preoccupied him and he took no notice of her as she took a seat near the foot of his bed. She wasn’t even sure that he’d placed her, even though he’d called her by name. She watched him as he shut his eyes and labored at his breathing.

After a few minutes he opened his eyes and looked at her. He seemed more present. She smiled; she didn’t mind gifting him one smile.

“Your hands and arms are fine?” she said.

He nodded. “I’ve even begun to miss sketching.”

“Would you like to sketch?”

He sat up slightly. “That would be nice.”

She pulled out the small sketchpad and leather pencil holder that she always carried, rose out of her chair, and handed them to the invalid.

“Can I sketch you?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

She sat quietly and watched him sketch.

“I knew you’d model for me,” he said.

She smiled involuntarily. He sketched in slow motion, wincing and sometimes groaning. But after a few minutes a change occurred. He grew noticeably stronger. The wincing ceased. A new light entered his eyes—the old light of insolence. An ironic smile began to dance on his lips. Aster nodded to herself.

“I’m surprised you slashed my paintings,” she said in the mildest voice. “That isn’t something an artist does.”

“I didn’t--” He shrugged. “Thank you for calling me an artist.”

“So?” she persisted.

He shrugged again. “You’ll laugh. I knew you’d repaint them better than ever. I was presenting you with an opportunity to help your career along.”

She lost her good humor.

“That’s what you were feeling with your knife in your hand?” she said.

He met her fiery gaze with his insolent one.

“No.”

“No,” she agreed.

“But it wasn’t hatred and it wasn’t envy,” he said, putting down the sketchbook. “It was an intimate feeling. We were very close in that moment.”

“That’s what killers say.”

Paolo shrugged. “Can you push my tray over? I’m thirsty.”

She didn’t move.

“Did you pay for my beating?” he said, breaking the silence.

“No.”

“Was it a favor to you?”

“No.”

“But you know all about it?”

“I know nothing about it. Except that you richly deserved it.”

He shook his head.

“Well, I’m feeling much better now. Much more settled. I’m going to Rome and I’m going to learn how to really paint. I’m going to start fresh. You know that Renoir did exactly the same thing? At the height of his career he decided that he didn’t know enough. He made an Italian pilgrimage to study the Vatican frescos of Raphael. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“I’m sure your children will love Rome,” Aster said, getting to her feet. She knew precisely what Paolo would say.

“My children? I would never take those elephants!”

She nodded. “I understand. You have a sacred journey in front of you that a man must make alone. I envy you your new period of learning.”

She watched his eyes. She didn't care that he knew that she was mocking him. She didn't care that mocking him once before had thrust him obscenely into her life. She wanted a last look at those eyes. She nodded as she read their message. In return, she communicated her final warning, her ultimatum.

Paolo laughed.

“Not to worry!” he exclaimed. “I may stay in Europe. New York is such a self-centered place! In Rome nobody takes things so seriously ...”

She strode up to him and ripped out the sketchbook page bearing her half-finished image. She tore it into a dozen pieces and dropped them into the bedside trash container. Then she faced him.

“My sketchbook,” she said. “And my pencils.”

“They're right here.”

They were on his chest. Aster stepped forward. One by one, she replaced the pencils into their leather holder. She felt his breath on her face. She knew that he was smiling. Would he heed her warning? She gathered up the leather holder and her sketchbook and stepped back.

“Good to see you,” Paolo said. “Maybe you'll visit me in Rome.”

Aster turned on her heels and strode off.

9.

There were ten days left before Thanksgiving. Aster called Tol and invited him to Paris. On Wednesday they found themselves sitting close together on a cold stone bench in a tiny park in a hidden corner of the Marais, staring at rows of bare rose bushes. A wan November light deepened the silence around them, a silence broken every so often by the tinkling of the resident cat's collar bell.

They had already said many things in a very few words. Again it happened. Aster laughed and said, "So what are our girl names and what are our boy names?"

"Elvis, for a boy--"

He'd adopted the name Tol as part of putting together his first band at the age of eighteen. Tol had come from For Whom The Bell Tolls; he wasn't a particular Hemingway fan but he appreciated the sentiment. No one gave his given name, Adam Levy, any thought anymore.

Aster nodded, playing along with the joke. "Elvis Lynn-Levy for a boy. Madonna Lynn-Levy for a girl."

"Possibly we should give this some more thought."

That evening they sat outdoors at a Montmartre café. Night fell quickly. They shared a bottle of burgundy and listened to the French conversations around them, picking out the occasional word. It was almost too cold but they wanted this precise Paris experience. The crowd was young. Beautiful women eyed Tol; handsome men eyed Aster. At one point a woman several tables away got up from her chair and approached them.

"Light?" she asked Tol in English, holding out her cigarette.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head.

"What a shame."

What was there to say? After awhile they got up and strolled. The antique curios in a shop window caught Aster's eye and she entered the shop to the tinkling of bells. Tol followed her in. She had never seen lovelier photo frames than the ones strategically placed about the shop; each of the small art nouveau frames tugged at her heart. She glanced at Tol; he smiled and nodded. She picked out six of them.

"For baby pictures," she whispered.

She lined them up. They were only in the neighborhood of eighty dollars apiece but she had never spent five hundred dollars this way—so extravagantly, she heard herself say.

"Should I get them all?"

"Of course."

"I guess I can afford them."

"I think we can."

She left thrilled with her purchases.

"This may be the beginning of shopping," she said.

"Then all hell will break loose."

They had a late dinner at a fancy restaurant near the Place des Vosges. The five courses came slowly, in the French way. She made the mistake of ordering a salad as her appetizer, not realizing that there would be a salad course—and a cheese course ... they sat down at nine and were just approaching dessert after midnight.

The waiter poured them more champagne.

"Your first time in Paris, Mademoiselle?" he said.

Aster lowered her eyes. "No." She looked at Tol. "My second."

“And you, Monsieur?”

“Many times,” he replied. Aster and Tol smiled knowingly at one another.

It was freezing outside but they walked back to their hotel. Huddled together like any Parisian lovers, their collars turned up against the November wind, they stopped now and then to kiss.

Thanksgiving approached. Aster grew excited. She would be meeting Tol’s family; Harry was coming; there would be visiting musicians from Ireland. In fact, they were entertaining a crowd of more than thirty. She hadn’t made the move to look for her father yet, but the possibility that one day he, and her half-sisters, half-brothers, nieces and nephews, if by chance there were any, might attend their Berkshire Thanksgiving, gladdened her heart.

Suddenly the strangest thoughts started running through her head. During spring semester of her junior year at Kenyon College she’d taken a private monoprinting class from an eccentric print-maker who lived just outside of town. He’d taught at the college at one time but had lost his university affiliation because of some scandal. He was irascible, absent-minded, and loved blue in a way that changed her mind about color. He printed the most gorgeous blues and talked about blue with such feeling that a chill ran down your spine.

She would come a little early for her lesson and wait in her car, a beat-up, fifteen-year-old red convertible that would only last another few months, and listen to the radio. Although he infuriated her, she would listen to a pastor who called himself “The Bible Answer Man.” What came back to her from that show was the debate between Christians who believed you were redeemed by faith and Christians who believed you were redeemed by action. She saw herself sitting in her red convertible, mustard flowers turning the vacant field across from the printmaker’s ramshackle house a sea of yellow, and grimacing at the Bible Answer Man’s mean-spirited answers. No good works were necessary, he assured his corner of the Midwest: keeping the faith was a Christian’s only obligation.

She remembered asking the printmaker if he found printmaking the equal of painting. She was on her high horse back then; there was only painting and every other art came in a distant second. To her consternation the printmaker replied, “That depends on whether or not you plan to have children.” She had no idea what he meant and found herself afraid to ask. “Well,” he persisted. “Do you plan to have children?” Finally

she nodded. “In that case, it is absolutely its equal.”

As she thought about that strange man and his enigmatic pronouncements, her next suite of paintings came clear to her. She would do the printmaker’s ramshackle house, that field of mustard flowers, the blue sky, her red convertible, Halloween pumpkins, and something else that wasn’t visible yet. Each painting in the suite would be made different by the blue of its sky, one as different from the next as the blue skies in Van Gogh’s paintings, those blue skies that her mother had made her memorize. She dubbed her new paintings Blue Faith and began on the first one in the series.

She was thinking about birds—about the sinister blue sky and death-announcing crows in Van Gogh’s last painting, “Wheat Field with Crows,” about the magpie in the Monet at the D’Orsay—when her cell phone rang. It was Harry’s special ring.

“I’m a block away,” he said. “Can I come by for a minute? I have a little present.”

“Of course! I’m painting. I just need to clean up—”

“Don’t stop on my account!”

“No, I’m ready to stop.”

When he arrived she hugged him tight.

“This is for you,” he said.

Harry handed her a package. Aster felt the frame through the wrapping paper. She got the paper off and found herself staring at a small, exquisite Utrillo, a Paris scene of a snow-covered street. The main devices were the spire of a church and pedestrians bent against a winter wind. It was barely ten-by-fourteen inches but an absolute classic.

Harry was standing in front of the quarter-done Blue Faith painting, shaking his head.

“Thank you,” she said. “What can I say?”

He turned and smiled. “Nothing.”

“I should give you another painting!”

“Not on your life!” He raised his hands in protest. “Two paintings were more than we agreed on.”

“I keep getting legal services for free--”

“My services don’t appreciate! Your paintings do. Did you know that one of your Shattered Glass paintings got auctioned off in Europe this weekend? Did Willie tell you?”

Aster shook her head.

“One million, two hundred fifty thousand dollars,” Harry said. “You can have some free legal advice any time you want.”

Aster heaved a sigh. A moment later she found herself inexplicably sobbing.

10.

She had forgotten to invite Shelley to Thanksgiving. That omission occurred to her as she sat on the sofa. Harry had reluctantly departed after she'd assured him that the tears meant nothing—it was the Utrillo, her auction price, a million complicated things, and none of them bad. Unconvinced, he left only after she agreed to call him in a few hours.

Ten minutes later Aster knocked at Shelley's door. Shelley was slow to answer. When she finally appeared, she looked haggard and unfocused. Aster felt the tears well up in her as she stared at her friend.

“Let's sit down,” Aster said.

Shelley nodded and followed Aster to the living room sofa. The shades were drawn and the studio felt cold and unused.

“Can I make us some tea?” Aster said.

Shelley nodded.

“Anything else?” Aster asked.

“I would like to be well.”

Aster took her hand. “What would help?” she said after a moment.

Shelley sighed. “A lot of expensive medication. That's about it. I'm in the stupid position of dying because I'm poor. The medicine costs \$75,000 a year. I barely have a spare seventy-five dollars.”

Aster tightened her grip on Shelley's hand.

“Let me help you,” she said.

“Every little bit would help. But I need this cocktail—”

“I don’t mean a little help. I mean the annual seventy-five thousand.”

Shelley raised her head. She stared into Aster’s eyes for a long minute. “I should say yes but I don’t really like the idea.”

“Why?”

She extricated her hand from Aster’s grip.

“Maybe I prefer to die.”

Aster watched her. “I don’t have a speech to make about life and death. But if you have some reasons to live—”

Shelley thought about that.

“It would be for a niece I love. That’s about it. I would like to see her grow and do well.”

“Then let me write you a check right now.”

“Make the tea. Let me think about it.”

Aster got up and put on the kettle for tea. In a few minutes she returned with two cups of peppermint tea.

“Well?” she said.

“I would feel better if I could barter. Would you take some of my paintings in exchange?”

“I’d love to!”

She had no interest in Shelley's paintings. She wished that she did; she wished that she loved them. A thought raced through her mind, about the Dutch government's subsidy program for painters. As payment for the stipend it provided, the government took a percentage of the artists' work. Not knowing what to do with all of those unwanted paintings, they stored them away in warehouses, where they rotted. Aster felt a stab in her heart but kept smiling and feigning enthusiasm.

"If you mean that," Shelley said.

"I do! Let me have a couple a year--"

"I would give you maybe ten--"

"Three would be superb! I won't have enough walls for more."

Shelley smiled. Aster opened her purse. It was the first time in a long time that she'd rummaged there without encountering cold steel. She extracted her checkbook and wrote Shelley a check for the whole amount. Shelley held the check in both hands, staring at it.

"This is amazing," she said.

"Listen to me," Aster said. "I also get a picture of your niece. All right?"

"You do."

Shelley sat back and told Aster about her niece, a beautiful girl of thirteen who lived in Philadelphia. She danced; she wrote poetry; she had her sights set on stardom.

"You can be too full of life, you know," Shelley said. "You can want the moon and just set yourself up for terrible disappointment. It might be better never to open that bottle of dreaming. I don't know." She shook her head. "I tell my niece that she can do anything, but I don't mean it. We can't just do anything. Life isn't like that." She glanced at Aster. "Though you come close."

"We're having Thanksgiving in the Berkshires--"

“You and Tol?”

Aster nodded.

Shelley shook her head. “I can’t come. Those smells make me nauseous. Frying smells ... I’ve lost all pleasure in eating. Maybe after I start taking the cocktail ... maybe next year I can come.”

“With your niece.”

“Who will be just a little star-struck.”

They sat together for an hour. Then Aster had to select her first three paintings—Shelley insisted. When she got back to her studio she called Tol.

“Have you started a foundation yet?”

“I haven’t,” he replied. “What are you thinking?”

“Artists with life-threatening illnesses. Shelley ... she needs \$75,000 worth of medication a year to live. I’m going to give it to her—”

“Unless our foundation did.”

“Can we get right on this?”

Two days later they met with lawyers at a posh suite of offices in a midtown skyscraper. Aster and Tol sat through a painstaking crash course in the mechanics of creating a foundation. The ten million dollar endowment that Tol had in mind as his initial contribution would only, after the expenses of running the foundation, produce two or three hundred thousand dollars in annual grant money. That didn’t seem like very much. Chagrined, they stepped outside for a moment.

“Do you think there’s a better way to spend the ten million?” Aster wondered.

“It almost seems like there’s got to be.”

“Let’s get a cup of coffee.”

The building had its own spa, fitness club, and café on the top floor. One of the lawyers called up to secure Tol and Aster admission. Lost in thought, they rode the elevator up sixty stories. A guard at the entrance to the sky-high facility checked their identification and made them sign in. Inside, they sat at a window table with a startling view of the Hudson River and New Jersey. A waiter served them coffee from a silver pot and petite-fours from a silver tray.

“We could just give money to causes,” Tol said. “Write checks. Lend our presence.”

Aster nodded.

“Tol?”

“Yes?”

“Do you need the New York apartment and the Malibu house?”

Tol shook his head. “I don’t need them. Somehow ... I acquired them.”

Aster nodded. “I want a New York brownstone and the Berkshire place. That’s a lot. That’s more than enough.”

Tol frowned. “I have so much stuff in the Malibu house. I don’t know where it all came from.”

“It came from money,” Aster said softly.

They sat in silence for half an hour. Tol had a meeting with his publicist to create buzz for the Irish album. Aster was supposed to decide about a publicist for herself. There were several award ceremonies coming up ... a marketing campaign ... she still had to find a full-time personal assistant ... Tol had to fly to Dublin to coordinate Irish publicity for the album. They were talking about traveling there together, as they’d once pledged they would. They glanced at one another. He was twenty-five; she wasn’t twenty-three yet. Tol had tens of millions in the bank; between them, tens of millions would come in annually. Aster finished her coffee and put down her cup.

“Let’s sleep on it,” she said. “We know the bottom line. We’re going to do what we can.”

They spent the night at his apartment, with its excellent security, and slept poorly. In the morning Tol’s chef made them Eggs Benedict, substituting smoked salmon for the ham, and at eleven Aster left for her studio.

11.

The next day an odd, mustard-colored envelope arrived. It was a notice that payment was due on her storage space in San Francisco. Instantly memories of her mother's death flooded back.

Aster had been in her dorm room at Kenyon, sketching, when she learned that her mother had died. Someone had come to tell her. She was taking a class in monoprinting and making sketches for her first monoprint. She loved what she'd been learning about the printing process and had even begun to think that graphics were a tolerable art form. Lost in thought, she'd heard the knock at the door.

She hadn't liked the sound of that knock. It was too small and tentative. A woman she didn't know asked if she would come out into the hall. In the hall, the woman said, "There's been a terrible accident." Aster knew what that meant and changed completely in that split second. She became an orphan. She listened to the woman, nodded, and went back into her room. She called to book a flight and, as she handled the details, noticed that she wasn't crying.

She got back to San Francisco, arrived home, and found herself in an empty apartment full of familiar things. Here was the sofa; there was the orchid. Her mother was dead. She sat in that ice-cold apartment and couldn't stop crying. She wanted to cut herself, to release the pain through a slit in her forearm, but she didn't. She sat. The silence was extraordinary, so deep that a fly buzzing in the next room sounded like a jet plane landing. She had to find that fly and let it out; its buzzing was killing her.

Everything felt impossible. But dealing with her mother's things was the worst. Every object provoked a memory. Every object made her cry. She would pick up an art book and cry for five minutes. Finally she came to the point where she couldn't touch another thing. She sat on the sofa, immobilized. Night fell on that first day. She slept on the sofa, in her clothes, unable even to bring out a blanket from the bedroom.

Her mother had kept the oddest little life insurance policy, a tiny ten thousand dollar one, maybe meant for exactly this, her funeral expenses. She couldn't afford a life insurance policy that would give Aster anything to live on but at least she'd avoided burdening her with the expenses of death. Aster had no idea what to do about funeral arrangements and finally turned to the Neptune Society. She'd have her mother's

ashes deposited at sea. Maybe there was a better plan, maybe she'd regret her decision later—but her mind just couldn't think. It was all she could do to do anything.

Should she be there on the boat when they scattered her mother's ashes over the Pacific? The "should" didn't matter—she couldn't do it. She was now into her third day away from school. She kept trying to think of what she should do with her mother's things—the landlord wanted the apartment vacated or he'd dispose of her things himself. Of course he couldn't do that; the rent was paid. But for some inexplicable reason he was making threats. Aster couldn't understand it.

On the fourth day she found herself walking the mile or so from her mother's apartment to Valencia Street. She had trouble crossing streets; she'd half-forgotten whether red meant stop or go. She walked into a funky furniture store whose owner Aster knew from her teenage days in the Mission. The store, filled with understated arts-and-crafts bookcases and brightly painted Mexican sideboards, stood empty. Aster wondered if the store was open, even though the door was unlocked.

A woman, wiping her hands, came out of the back. She took one look at Aster and made her sit down. She was the woman Aster remembered, a lesbian of a certain age whom Aster used to see, dressed in leather, roaring through the Mission on her motorcycle. Aster said, "My mother died and there's an apartment full of stuff" and started crying. Marsha said, "We'll take care of it," and made Aster a cup of tea. The tea tasted awful. Aster almost vomited.

The next day Marsha and two of her friends arrived in the shop's pickup truck. "This is how we'll do it," Marsha said. "You and I will walk up to each thing and I'll ask you, 'Storage?' You'll say yes or no. If it's storage, we'll get it boxed or whatever and get it to a storage place on Mission Street. If it's not storage, we'll sell it at the shop or figure out what to do with it. Okay?"

It was horrible, but she got through it. By the end of the day the apartment was empty. There was no feeling like it, the feeling of that empty apartment. She wasn't sure that she would ever be able to enter an empty apartment again. For a split second it occurred to her to draw something on one of the walls, to leave a message. But that struck her as so paltry a gesture that she broke down and cried a last time. That night she slept at Marsha's apartment and the next day she found herself back at Kenyon, somehow getting on with her monoprinting class and the rest of her life.

She always wondered if it had been a suicide. Her mother had been the passenger; still, a motorcycle passenger could cause a wreck. But that would have made her a

murderer, too—she didn't think her mother would do that. Who had the man been? Aster had no recollection. Were her mother and that man linked by failure? She touched the payment notice. She and Tol would celebrate Thanksgiving. She would meet his orthodox brother and his fashion-minded sister. She would meet his parents. If she hurried ... she jumped up and dialed Harry's number.

“Can you recommend a detective agency?” Aster said. “I want to find my father.”

“Tell me as much as you know. I'll get the ball rolling.”

As she hung up she had the oddest thought, that maybe they could celebrate Thanksgiving on Friday rather than Thursday, as her father must already have plans. She shook her head. Feeling empty and past tears, she pulled out her checkbook, wrote a check, and paid her bill.

12.

Tol called on the Monday of Thanksgiving week.

“Alex says he has something special to show us. Can we look tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

The three of them met midday Tuesday in front of a four-story brownstone in Brooklyn Heights. Aster, who had arrived early, already had fallen in love with the quiet, tree-lined street of stately brownstones. The street ended at the esplanade that ran above the East River. The house they were viewing was the last one on the block, overlooking the esplanade and as close to Manhattan as you could come in Brooklyn.

“I could live here,” she whispered to Tol. “With you.”

“Wait until you see the views!” their real estate agent gushed. “And the basement has a full gym, a wine cellar, and a professional recording studio. And there’s a roof garden!”

The brownstone stood vacant. Polished hardwood floors gleamed. An elegant stairway led from floor to floor. The first floor had three guest suites, “perfect for servants, a live-in nanny, or security,” Alex informed them. The second floor was a single enormous open space with a cherry wood-and-stainless steel kitchen, a marble fireplace, old-world built-in bookcases, and a view of Manhattan that amounted to only a minor miracle. The view improved as you climbed higher. The third floor sported a master bedroom suite and two other bedrooms. Alex marched them up to the fourth floor.

“And this,” he said. “Fourteen hundred square feet. As big as an ordinary-sized ranch house. And with that view.”

They were standing in a space dominated by the skyline of Manhattan. The floor-to-ceiling windows, devoid of treatments, let in the city in an almost violent way: you wanted to protect yourself from all that architecture, all that tumult. Was the view too panoramic, too jarring? Aster sat down cross-legged on the hardwood floor and stared

out at Manhattan.

“There’s also a rooftop garden--”

“I’m going to sit here for a bit.”

Tol knew to lead Alex away. “Show me the basement,” he said.

“The basement!” Alex exclaimed. “The previous owner left the gym fully equipped ... but he did take his wine with him ...” He lowered his voice. “Now he stores his wine in a bunker in Delaware.”

Aster sat. Of course, you could get curtains; but then you shut out the light. She stared at the place where artists came to make their name and their fortune. The sun moved across the face of the skyscrapers. This was not a view that a Rosa Bonheur would have picked; she lived to move among the animals she painted. This was not a view that a Mary Cassatt would have chosen; she needed her thousands of roses. But Aster wasn’t a nineteenth-century or a twenty-century painter. This view would remind her of who she was. It wanted to overwhelm you with its enormity; but embracing enormity was everything.

She had a vision. Fear appeared as a witch with grotesque makeup. The blue ocean sparkled behind the cackling witch. Aster hurried people to safety; yet she knew that the witch was weightless, one-dimensional, as insignificant as dust. No one was at risk. In fact, the witch was just a woman, a toothless hag. Yet she presented some danger and Aster cried, “Get in your cars! Drive!” Whole families hurried to their vehicles. It was probably Hawaii; she saw orchids, and some of the women wore leis.

The ocean crashed against the cliffs; the witch stood at the cliff’s edge. Aster wondered whether to rush up to her and push her over, to run, or to ignore her. A crack appeared in the sky; that was too much. She ran. She ran over lava rock. She had shoes on but it felt as if she were barefoot. The witch flew behind her, soaring and diving. The road was clogged with traffic. Inside the cars people screamed. And yet in some of the cars people smiled and listened to the radio.

The crack in the sky widened. Through it walked a middle-aged man wearing a skyscraper for a hat. He waved like the Pope or the President. The people in the cars looked relieved and waved back at him. The witch flew at the man and circled his ankles, becoming a tornado. An easel appeared where Aster was running. She

stopped; she wasn't an easel painter. "This isn't for me," she heard herself declare. But a painting began to materialize; and it was undeniably hers. She watched it appear, feeling like a student of herself.

"Interesting," she heard herself say. "I've never used black better."

Aster jumped. Tol and Alex had returned and were standing over her.

"Where were you?" Tol said, smiling. He helped her to her feet. "Still in this galaxy?"

Aster nodded. It wasn't in response to Tol's question. She moved to the towering windows with their incomparable view of Manhattan and sat down on the cushioned window seat. To her right loomed the Brooklyn Bridge. In front of her, colorful traffic plied the river. She watched a Circle Line cruise ship leave from the tip of Manhattan and begin its tour of the island. A barge loaded with girders glided down the middle passage. She glanced up at the sun: soon the tallest skyscraper directly across from her would be transformed into a blinding mirror.

Alex seemed to read her mind.

"You could tint the upper windows--"

Aster shook her head. At the same instant her cell phone chimed. It was Harry; she didn't answer it. It might be about her father. She didn't want to know that he was dead and she didn't want to know that he was living. She turned her cell phone off.

"Give us a minute," Tol said, turning to Alex.

"Of course! I'll be down on the main floor--"

Tol sat down beside her.

"What are you thinking?"

Aster shook her head. "That if I stayed up here in this perfect place all day long and painted, I'd be insane by thirty."

“Then you’ll have to get out a bit.”

They both laughed.

“Do we want it?” Tol said.

“We do.”

Tol shook his head. “I always knew that I’d be famous. I always knew that I’d find love. But I didn’t know that I’d be living in Brooklyn!”

Aster managed a small smile.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Not a thing.”

He hesitated. “I have to be away most of December--”

She nodded. She wouldn’t visit the Hudson Hotel. She wouldn’t join Jimmy on his road trip. She wouldn’t contact Dervis Ebiri or any other fascinating specimen. She wouldn’t drink herself into a stupor. She and Tol had too much life to live.

“We’ll be fine,” she said.

Tol squeezed her hand. “Should we get married?”

“Yes.”

“Here in New York?”

“Yes.”

Tol nodded. “Let’s tell Alex we’ll take it.”

Maybe she would sit quietly for a month. Maybe she would be happy. She stared at

Manhattan. After a moment she opened her purse and withdrew an object wrapped in tissue paper. She unwrapped the small blue photo frame and placed it on the window ledge. No photo graced its center—yet. She glanced around at the vast space, the marble fireplace with its hardwood mantle, the polished floors streaked with light and shadow. She and Tol would be a couple, no matter what projects or obsessions occupied them; and on most days you would find her right here, painting. She smiled at Tol and he returned her smile. Their arms linked, they stared out at the skyline of Manhattan.