

The Deflowering of Rhona Lipshitz  
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In loving memory of my mother, Rebecca Dean.  
And for my children, Andrew and Jamie, who fill my life with  
love and light.

Wednesday, August 11, 1971

If Millie Rosenblatt hadn't bitten into that empty frankfurter bun without realizing the boiled meat had quietly slipped to the floor and rolled under the table, I might never have left my husband Stuie.

Millie and I had a lot more in common than one might suspect, particularly if one were basing an opinion on outward appearances. Where she was somewhere past fifty, I was barely eighteen, where she was short, rotund and brassy blonde, I was tall and slender with dark brown hair. But we shared more important qualities than looks. What united Millie and me was the fact that we truly believed we were taking huge bites out of life when the sad truth was, our lives -- much like Millie's roll -- were actually quite empty. There was no real meat for either of us to taste, but no matter. We were determined to conceal what was missing with mustard and sauerkraut and convince ourselves that everything was totally fine.

All this became clear to me in that perfect moment, as Millie took the bun into her mouth and ran her tongue across those full lips, savoring the phantom hot dog that by now had come to a full stop under Gertie Bernstein's chair. On that hot and sticky Thursday night at the weekly Temple Beth Shalom bingo game, I knew I was meant to soar like a falcon above the badlands of northeast Queens, New York, and there was no way in hell Stuart Martin Weiner was coming along with me.

I knew Stuie from the day I was born, although nobody ever called him Stuie, except for me and his mother and the principal at P.S. 206. In our neighborhood, the Walnut Garden Apartment complex just off the Long Island Expressway, he was known as Skully because he had such a preposterously big head. Sometimes Selma, my former mother-in-law, would be hanging the wash out the window, and without warning she'd scream, "Stu-eeeeee," kind of like a pig farmer calling in the herd, and after a few efforts that always ended in vain, she'd give off one loud "Skull!" and he'd stop whatever he was doing and shout back, "What do you want, ma?" from the stoop, or the gutter, or wherever he happened to be hanging out, usually with me, his steady girlfriend since the third grade.

The Weiners -- Sam and Selma, Stuie and his eleven year-old sister Nola, lived at the end of the block in the building right over the garbage room. Every night after dinner I'd haul two bursting trash bags to the windowless room with the big metal cans that smelled of rotten herring and decaying banana peels, and as soon as I'd swung the bags into a bin and slammed the lid shut, I'd call Stuie's name and he'd pull back the green and blue plaid curtains in his bedroom and give me a half-hearted wave, not unlike the Queen of England acknowledging her subjects as her carriage rolled down Buckingham Palace Road.

I don't think there was ever a time when the sight of Stuie poking his head between the curtains or coming down the block excited me, at least not since junior high. Back then I actually thought he was cute with his curly brown hair and dark eyes, and I especially liked the way he could make the kids laugh in Mrs. Pullman's ninth grade science class by flinging pieces of dissected frog across the room. In junior high the names 'Skully and Ro' went as naturally together as 'bagels and lox' or 'cookies and milk,' and that made me feel cared for and safe, the way my mother said girls were supposed to feel. Most of the guys couldn't commit to what they

wanted for lunch at Manny's Deli let alone who they would marry, so the fact that Stuie was willing to spend his life with a girl he'd known since infancy separated him from the others, at least a little.

Once we got to high school my feelings for him cooled quite a bit, and by eleventh grade I was aware of the fact I didn't love him the way I assumed I was supposed to. But it never occurred to me to do anything about it. He was Stuie, the only boyfriend I'd ever had, the first and only boy who wanted to marry me, and at Walnut Gardens, that was a big deal. My mother had always stressed the importance of marrying within the faith and within the neighborhood. She wanted me to marry a person with whom we were well acquainted so there'd be no unwelcome surprises later on. Like the other parents on the block she stayed out of her daughter's business but every now and then she had something important to say, like who I was supposed to spend my life with, and she expected me to listen.

Stuie went along with the whole thing and never questioned our engagement, either, behaving right from the beginning as if I belonged to him. Even in the fourth grade he enjoyed putting his hands all over my body, groping me beneath my undershirt. He was understandably thrilled when I graduated to a training bra at age twelve and he was even more excited when I moved into my first B cup three years later. Stuie loved fumbling with the triple hooks on my bra and the buttons on my blouse, but he hated kissing. He'd shut his mouth as tight as he could, screw up his face and hold his breath until it was over, as if I were his bearded grandfather or worse, his bearded grandmother. Stuie was so repulsed by the act of kissing that we avoided it altogether, turning our faces away from each other's during our intimate moments, thus never having to pretend we were enjoying it when the truth is, I would have preferred doing just about anything more than kissing Stuie, even playing bingo with the women on the block.

On our block, bingo was the highlight of the week, the night when the women piled into my mother's brown Chevy Biscayne and made their pilgrimage to the temple. Sadie Hochberger, Gertie Bernstein, and my own particular favorite, Millie, were usually in their best housecoats from EJ Korvettes, often in their bedroom slippers, always with plastic curlers beneath their kerchiefs. My mother prepared for the game several days in advance.

"Don't forget we're having scrambled egg sandwiches on Thursday."

"I won't, ma."

"Don't forget I'm leaving early for bingo."

"I won't, ma."

She talked about the game for days afterward, and I was amazed by her memory. "I can't believe he called B9. I was one away from winning the Round Robin." Bingo was a sacred word in our apartment, spoken with reverence, almost a prayer, and when I turned sixteen the women deemed me worthy to sit beside my mother as she spread her cards across the long wooden table. I was only too eager to tag along, Thursday night being the only real time my mother and I spent together, since she was the cashier down at the hospital and spent every waking minute at the job she loved. The caller, Morty, would shout, "G54" and my mother would spring into action, stamping like a crazy person with her bingo-player's broad stamping pen, repeating G54, G54 with every card she scanned, trying to avoid a potentially humiliating mistake. If Morty called the same number twice in one evening, Gertie, never the shy one, would yell out, "Hey Morty, shake your balls" and everyone would whistle and cheer their approval.

I learned a lot about reverence at the Temple, not during the High Holy Day services, but on bingo night. Morty, the ersatz Rabbi who by day worked at the Kosher butcher shop, would take his seat on the stage. The room would fall instantly into a hush, with no more laughter, no more chatter. Just the sound of his commanding voice bellowing "O68" or "N36" and the dull thumping of the ink pens and occasionally the crow of a lucky winner shouting "here!", her fleshy arm flapping above her hairnet. The voices in the room would rise in unison, an angry chorus from the sanctuary.

"...I needed N35."

"...He should've called N37, the putz."

"...He called N36 last game. Hey Morty, you got a problem tonight or what?"

I watched the players, part of the sisterhood now, and I wondered, if Sadie wears her curlers on the biggest night of the week, for what event does she actually show off her hair? Then came the defining moment that set my life on a different path. Millie slathered mustard on her Kosher dog and leaned across my mother with that

big laugh of hers, oblivious to the fact the frank had slid under the table. She took a hefty bite and rolled her eyes in what looked to me like sheer ecstasy, breaking her reverie only to brush breadcrumbs from her enormous bosoms. I watched as she chewed in slow motion, wiping her lips with the back of her hand, her mouth open and filled with roll and mustard, the meat on the floor hidden beneath Gertie's chair. I was riveted. And I became painfully aware, right then and there, that a whole world existed of which I knew nothing about, where people were different from the ones who surrounded me at the bingo table. There were people who stayed in school beyond the ninth grade, unlike my father. People who aspired to more than assistant manager of the Expressway Lock and Key Shop. People who had actually traveled west of the five boroughs, who woke up eager to greet the day, who had questions they wanted answered. I thought about my boyfriend Stuie up at the schoolyard with his slothful friends, cupping a smoldering Marlboro and taking a long, deep drag. I had a feeling he wasn't my destiny, but I wasn't quite sure how to change it.

The week after high school graduation Stuie and I chose Sunday, August twenty-second as our wedding date. Stuie didn't give much thought to what our lives would be like after the wedding. He wasn't fond of discussions about the future, and he certainly didn't want to hear about any dreams I might have for a better life. As far as he was concerned, this was the life we were born into whether it satisfied us or not. Changing its course didn't exist in his lexicon; nobody in his entire family had asked for more than they'd been given and Stuie was certainly not about to play the pioneer.

He didn't question who we were or what we might expect from life. He wanted to know how the Mets would hold up this season, or should we get one slice of Sicilian or two, or what's wrong with the TV and how come everyone's face looks so green? Those were questions whose answers came in black and white, not in shades of gray. The harder questions, the ones like, do you believe in miracles?, he left for minds far more curious than his own.

At least that's what Stuie would have said had he ever allowed himself to think in the abstract, which of course he never did. So rather than annoy my fiancée with talk of leaving Walnut someday in search of a richer, more satisfying life, I chose to busy myself instead with plans for the upcoming wedding, finding just the right dress in the clearance rack of Alexander's department store, choosing an affordable dinner menu with my mother, crossing names of second cousins off the guest list because they'd insulted my parents years ago, although nobody could remember the actual circumstances. In my family it was common practice to hold a grudge for twenty or thirty years. My father hadn't spoken to his brother George or his sister Bessie since the nineteen forties, before I was even born. A few years back my father saw a familiar-looking man walking along Eighth Avenue. 'Excuse me,' my father said. 'Aren't you my brother?' They shook hands and exchanged a few rounds of small talk, then they both continued on their way, never to speak again. It was pretty safe to assume that George Lipshitz and his children, none of whom I'd ever met, would definitely not be invited to my wedding.

In April, on my eighteenth birthday, I was presented with a half-carat diamond ring that Sam Weiner had been keeping in a safe deposit box down at the bank. It was the third piece of jewelry Stuie had ever given to me. The first was a silver-plated ID bracelet with his name engraved in block letters along the front. At age twelve, this signified that we were officially going steady. Eventually the ID found its way to the back of my drawer, to be replaced by a delicate ankle bracelet with two initialed hearts surrounded by tiny pearls for my Sweet Sixteen. But this, too, ended up in the drawer, as the pointy hearts caused the skin on my ankle to chafe and bleed. The third piece of jewelry was different. It was an important family heirloom, one that would stay on my finger forever. As the story went, Sam had cut the ring off some dead German woman whose body he had encountered while stationed overseas during the war. Sam was proud of the ring and the fact that it made him feel like a war hero, as if he'd single-handedly conquered the Germans and shown them who was boss. The ring was his prize, the medal he couldn't have otherwise received, and over the years it took on mythic proportions. Stuie handed it to me with great pride, telling me I'd better be a good wife or his father would have to cut it off my finger, too. I laughed and said very funny, and then Sam raised his glass and we all drank a toast to my becoming Mrs. Stuart Martin Weiner.

The ring was given to me in front of both Stuie's parents, and Sam kissed me so hard on my left cheek that I developed a canker sore and wasn't able to eat anything spicy for almost two weeks. Selma, on the other hand, simply nodded with tight lips as if it were her duty but certainly not her pleasure to acknowledge me as her

soon-to-be daughter-in-law. She told me in a clipped voice to take good care of the family's most valued possession and I promised I would do just that. We all sat down to a celebratory dinner, the four Weiners and me, at the fold-out bridge table they set up in the living room whenever a guest, like me, joined the family for a meal.

Nola started complaining right away that her lamb chops were burnt and she hated sliced carrots so could she just have some bananas and sour cream instead? Selma was too busy sucking the pungent juice from the round bone of her chop to respond, but when her daughter whined even louder, demanding her mother's attention, Selma finally put down the meat and began to get up from the table. "Sit down," Sam said harshly, equally angry with his wife as he was with his daughter. "This kid's going to eat what's on her plate and that's that." Selma frowned at Sam but said nothing while I just stayed focused on my dinner, pretending not to notice Selma's glaring, disapproving eyes on me.

The next morning I brought the diamond ring down to Bayside Jewelers for a cleaning since it had been sitting at the bank since 1945. The jeweler frowned and took one good hard look at it and said it was worth almost nothing. I told him it was European, and an antique to boot, but he said, "Let me show you something, sweetheart," and he handed me the loop so I could see close-up why my ring was so irreparably flawed.

"See that?" he asked, and he pointed to the bottom of the diamond with the stubby point of a pencil. "There's a hole right here so it's worth maybe a couple of hundred on the open market. Why don't you bring your boyfriend in and I'll show him what a real stone looks like and we'll get rid of this piece of junk." I thanked him and left the small and cluttered shop, touching my ring protectively as the security screen door closed behind me.

None of my friends were engaged, making me the source of their envy, even though they wouldn't have married Stuie if their lives depended on it. The point was, I would definitely have a husband, which meant I would definitely have kids, which meant I would definitely have a life, the quality of which was inconsequential. But Stuie and I had no money for an apartment of our own, so after the wedding we'd be moving in with his parents, into the small bedroom he currently shared with Nola. The single bed, with its engraving of cowboy hats on the headboard, housed a trundle underneath which we would pull out and push together, enabling us to sleep as husband and wife while Nola took up residency on the sofa bed in the living room. It wasn't an ideal arrangement but it was what Stuie wanted and I felt it was my obligation as his future wife to go along with it.

I always tried to go along with whatever Stuie wanted since he had a terrible temper that he must have inherited from Sam and Selma, who hadn't spoken to my parents since Stuie and I were in kindergarten, right before Nola was born. There had been some kind of fight during the men's weekly pinochle game. Words were exchanged that could not be rescinded and from that night on the two couples never spoke to each other again, which made things a little awkward when trying to arrange a wedding. My father called Sam all kinds of names in the privacy of our apartment and sometimes if the two men happened to be in the garbage room or the barber shop or just on the block at the same time, they'd turn their heads away and my father might even spit on the ground.

For the women it was just as bad. Selma wasn't a bingo player but I think she would have been part of the sisterhood if only she and my mother spoke to each other. Selma avoided my mother like the plague and if they saw each other at the Kosher butcher or on open school night or at the beauty parlor they, too, would turn their heads away as if the other didn't exist. I thought their mutual hatred would have been a reason to prevent me and Stuie from getting married but I was wrong. In some sick way they enjoyed planning the event despite each other. It gave the whole thing an added dimension, a sense of drama, something else to complain about when they'd run out of reasons to hate the world.

So Stuie and I entered our senior year of high school knowing that come June we'd begin planning our wedding at the Temple, the very place I had been spending my Thursday evenings with my mother and the women from the block. The main sanctuary started to take on a different flavor once our plans got underway. There would be no bingo balls blowing in the big metal canister on August twenty-second. On August twenty-second there would be a chuppa fashioned out of colorful flowers, and my two best friends, Rochelle Davis and Marsha Kotner and Stuie's sister Nola would be in their identical pink bridesmaid gowns, identical except for the sizes.

Rochelle, a size twelve, was big-boned and curvacious, zaftik and sexy like Marilyn Monroe, with the same full, sensuous lips as the late icon. She was more experienced than any girl I knew, having tried just about everything with her boyfriend Sal DiMatelli who was six years older than us and a guitarist in a real band. Rochelle loved having sex and craved it constantly, so naturally Sal was always eager to drive his beat-up Pontiac fifteen miles each way from his parents' house in Maspeth to Rochelle's apartment in Walnut.

Rochelle and Sal made love practically every day after school in her double bed, and it wasn't unusual for him to stay there all night, since the Davises didn't impose a bunch of silly rules for their daughter to follow. Rochelle loved to spend the afternoon lying naked in that big bed with Sal, the two of them doing it over and over slowly and sensually, enjoying the taste and the feel of each other's bodies until they'd finally fall asleep in each other's arms at day's end, damp and exhausted and totally satisfied.

Marsha, on the other hand, was a size four bean-pole with tiny breasts and practically no hips. The boys on the block teased her mercilessly, calling her the Titless Wonder, but she maintained her dignity and never resorted to a padded bra in order to please them, and I respected her for that. The constant taunting eventually took its toll on her self-esteem, although she would never admit it. She liked to say she wasn't interested in the jerks from our neighborhood and was happy to wait for a mature man to come into her life, one who would treat her the way she deserved to be treated. She didn't need a boyfriend right away and she certainly didn't need actual sex to satisfy her, either. There were plenty of other pleasures that were just as fulfilling, like the pleasure she derived from reading one juicy novel after another. She usually chose sweeping romances and she often became so excited with a particular book that she'd leave it on my stoop with a note that said, 'You have to read this right now,' then she'd call me the next day to see what page I was up to. Sometimes the books were required reading in Marsha's advanced English class, like 'Wuthering Heights' or 'Madame Bovary,' but many of the novels were much too racy to find on the shelves at school. Those were the books that came only in paperback with realistic drawings of large-breasted women and hairy, muscle-bound men on the covers. I looked forward to every one of those books and gobbled them up as soon as they arrived, wondering if the women we knew in real life savored sex as much as the insatiable fictitious characters in Marsha's paperbacks with their aching loins and quivering lips. If they did, I certainly never saw any evidence of it at Walnut Gardens, where the women would rather play mah jongg on the front stoop than hop into bed with their own husband or for that matter, anyone else's, and the men seemed too exhausted after a day at the factory to think about sex at all.

Marsha's other passion was chocolate, and she consumed great gobs of the stuff without ever altering her tiny frame, thanks to an over-active metabolism she'd inherited from her maternal grandmother. On a daily basis Marsha would plow through entire boxes of Ring Dings, Devil Dogs, Yankee Doodles, Yodels and Suzie Qs with a big glass of cold, whole milk to wash it down, so of course she was the first to run out of the house when the Good Humor truck lumbered up the block in a ritual that was much-loved and eagerly awaited at Walnut Gardens all winter long. The old truck was synonymous with summer, arriving every evening at around seven o'clock, just as the sun began to dip behind the red brick buildings and the fragrant air became cool and breezy. By then the kids on the block were finished with supper and ready for dessert, lining up to buy root beer ices or chocolate chip pops or strawberry sugar cones from the truck that stopped at the curb in front of the fire hydrant right across from my building.

Wednesday, August Eleventh, nineteen seventy-one

It must have been past seven, and I hadn't left the house all day. I turned the volume way up as the opening strains of "In A Gadda Da Vida" filled my room. I was feeling lazy and tired, melting on my bed in the middle of a ferocious heat wave, listening to New York's best progressive rock station on the FM band, the station I stayed tuned to night and day.

My favorite disc jockey, a man as old as my parents named James Ziegfried but known throughout the five boroughs as Ziggy, was on the radio from six to ten every evening except Sunday, and I was his most faithful listener. Ziggy and I had a secret which I had never shared with anyone, not my mother or Stuie or even Marsha and Rochelle: he was my friend. When I was in the eleventh grade I had called Manhattan information and got a listing for a James Ziegfried on East Fifty-third Street. I called the number before I could think about how scared and crazy I was, and to my utter amazement that wonderfully familiar voice answered the phone.

“Ziggy? Is that you?”

“Who’s this?”

“You don’t know me but my name is Rhona Lipshitz from Queens and I bet you hear this all the time but I’m your biggest fan.”

“Well, hello Rhona Lipshitz from Queens,” he said cheerfully. From then on I called Ziggy once or twice a week after school. We’d talk for a couple of minutes and he’d ask if there was a song I wanted to hear and then he’d play it on his show that night. Ziggy wasn’t in the habit of dedicating songs to his listeners, which was just as well since nobody at Walnut would’ve believed it was me even if he had announced my address right down to the zip code. I was happy keeping the whole thing a secret, anyway; it felt good to have this special friendship with somebody as important and famous as Ziggy.

Suddenly the familiar calliope music of the Good Humor truck clashed against the heavy metal sound of Iron Butterfly. I peeked through the Venetian blinds in my bedroom, thinking about a nice cold Neopolitan sandwich, luscious ribbons of chocolate, vanilla and strawberry ice cream between two slabs of sweet chocolate cake. Marsha wasn’t around – the chocolate maven called earlier to say she’d be visiting her grandparents in the Bronx and would see me tomorrow. Only Iris Sinitsky next door, thirteen years old but not running out of baby fat, was at the curb. Iris, whose best friend was Stuie’s sister Nola, was always the second one out of the building when the ice cream man came along, right behind Marsha, her pudgy fist bursting with nickels and pennies. But tonight she was alone except for her mangy dog Scampy who was panting and drooling into his matted dog hair.

The usual vendor was a kid named Billy who had terrible acne and an unfortunate hook to his nose that made his lips look plastered to his face. To make things worse, he was always overcharging Iris, telling her it was five cents extra for a spoon or two cents more for a napkin. Iris wasn’t very well liked on the block so no one told her she was being conned, not even me, although I always felt guilty about it.

There were still fourteen minutes left of my song, so I could grab a quick Neopolitan without missing too much of the guitar riff in the middle. I hurried to the kitchen, dug through the change drawer for a bunch of nickels and dimes, and jumped down the three steps of the stoop and over to the old white truck. That’s when I saw him.

Oh, Jesus. In place of Billy, with his perverse sense of humor and nasty smirk, the most gorgeous boy I had ever seen was poking his hand into the freezer for a chocolate éclair pop. His jeans were low on his narrow hips, and his white tee shirt, tucked into his white pants, was tight enough to reveal a sculpted torso, not unlike Charles Atlas or Jack LaLanne, just lean and right. He had light brown hair cut short, green eyes and a smile that spread across his face with a perfect dimple on each side. He handed Iris her éclair and looked me over with an appreciative smile. “Can I get you something?” He didn’t have a trace of a New York accent. I had never met anyone who didn’t sound like me, not in real life, anyway.

I sucked in the evening air, hypnotized on the spot by the sound of his voice, thrown into a stupor, suddenly deaf to the words that spilled from his beautiful lips. “Excuse me,” he said when I didn’t respond. “Would you like something?” How melodic that voice was, flowing like warm honey, blanketing my body with its gentle tone. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Hello there, anybody home? Do you want some ice cream?”

“Ice cream?” The words had no meaning; they were foreign syllables from an alien tongue.

He pointed to the illustrated menu on the side of the truck, but I was lost. I didn’t know who I was or where I was or why I was standing there at all. “O-kay,” he said. I couldn’t take my eyes off him, which felt wrong and scary and absolutely wonderful.

“Hey, you forgot the money,” Iris said, handing over her nickels and taking a bite of her éclair pop. The ice cream man handed her a napkin and she awkwardly pulled two pennies from her fist but he refused to accept them.

I cleared my throat. “What happened to Billy?”

“At last, she speaks!” He smiled at me and I found myself smiling back, my heart pounding so hard I was sure my arteries would give out and I’d end up collapsed and dead on the ground the way my Aunt Estelle found my Uncle Henry on the bathroom floor three years earlier. I took another deep breath, pulling myself together, trying not to be distracted by the eyes and the dimples and the smile. “Billy called in sick so I’m taking over for him tonight.”

“Just tonight?”

“I quit in a few days. I go back to school a week from Sunday.”

“The twenty-second.”

“Very impressive. How’d you know that so fast?”

“I just knew it. So where do you go?”

“Washington University.”

“Great place. In Washington, obviously.”

He winced, careful not to embarrass me. “Actually, it’s in St. Louis.”

“Of course it is. I knew that. I must’ve been thinking of the other Washington University. The one that’s in Washington...where it belongs.”

He laughed. “You’re funny,” he said. “Now that you’re actually talking.”

“I’ve never seen you around here before.” I regained something like composure and was starting to enjoy the conversation.

“I don’t usually come home for the summer but I got summoned by my parents.” There was a hint of disdain in his voice as he smiled wickedly and gestured to the truck. “Although this isn’t exactly what they had in mind.”

“What did they want you to do?”

“Be a law clerk downtown thanks to my family connections.” I nodded, not knowing what a law clerk did. My mother had applied once to be a file clerk at the hospital but I suspected that was different. “Any luck deciding what kind of ice cream you want?”

“I’m not really hungry. So what’s your name?” I asked, filling the silence before he could question why I had run to the curb with change jingling in the pocket of my short-shorts if I didn’t want any ice cream.

“Jeffrey. What about you?”

“Rhona. But I really hate it. I like Ro a lot better.”

He nodded. “Ro. I like Ro, too.”

“Thanks for not singing row, row, row your boat.”

He smiled. “Now why would I do that?”

“Because everyone does,” Iris said. I had forgotten she was there, and then forgot again immediately.

“Do you live around here when you’re not in St. Louis?” I asked.

“Not too far. What about you?”

“Oh, not too far.”

“Let me guess.” He gestured toward my building. “Right there.”

“No wonder you’re in college,” I said. “You’re pretty smart. Unless you made up the whole thing about Washington University and you really went to Good Humor School.”

He looked at me with a slow smile. That’s when Florence Sinitsky poked her head out the kitchen window, yelling as if masked bandits were robbing her. “Iris! Get in here!”

“I’m eating.”

“Don’t give me that! You left your whitefish bones in the sink and the whole kitchen stinks to high hell. I’m nauseous from you already.” Florence slammed the window shut. Iris winced and made her way toward the steps of her ground level apartment, her head down, the empty popsicle stick in her pudgy fist and Scampy by her side. I felt sorry for her, but relieved to be alone with Jeffrey.

We watched until Iris’ door closed, then turned back to face each other. I thought of something Rochelle once said, telling us about the moment she and Sal first locked eyes: If looks were weather, we would’ve been lightning. Jeffrey spoke first. “So.”

“So. What’s your favorite subject in school?” He blinked. Why am I so stupid? Who wants to talk about school during summer vacation?

“I’m a European History major.”

“No kidding. Must be a lot of work.”

“It’s not really work if you’re having a good time. I just spent my junior year in Barcelona.”

“Did you love it?”

“It was amazing. Most amazing year of my life. I was supposed to stay for the summer and rent a beach house with a bunch of friends on the Costa Brava.” His smile faded. “But my finances got cut off and I had to come home.”

“To be a file clerk.”

“Law clerk.”

My cheeks flushed red. “That’s what I meant.”

“I did it for a week and quit. It wasn’t a job I was interested in.”

“So what kind of job are you interested in?”

“You sound like my parents. They ask me that all the time.”

Oh, no. I didn’t mean to challenge him. I just had no idea. I’d never met a history major before. Then again, I didn’t know a whole lot of people who’d gone to college, except for a few of the older kids at the schoolyard who tried Queensborough Community for a semester or two before dropping out to get a real job. “I’m so sorry. I’d hate to sound like anyone’s parents.”

“Especially mine, believe me. They actually think I’m going to law school next year which is just about the last thing I’d want to do except for maybe joining the Marines.”

“They don’t want you to do that, do they?”

Jeffrey laughed. “No, but it’s almost as bad. My mother’s got my entire life mapped out for me. First the law degree, preferably Columbia, then join a big firm and make partner, get married, have two kids, buy a house in Connecticut -- unless I kill myself first and ruin her plans for weekend visits with her adorable grandchildren.”

I didn’t get why he was so annoyed. It sounded like a pretty good plan to me. Maybe he didn’t like Connecticut. “What would you rather do?”

“If it were completely up to me and they stopped threatening to disinherit me?”

“Yeah.”

“I’d travel around Europe for a couple of years. Maybe even live there indefinitely.”

“Wow. Do people actually do that?”

He laughed again. “You really are funny, Ro.”

He leaned back against the truck, arms folded across his chest, the hazy light of sunset making his hair shimmer. His eyes took a walk along my body, strolling from my chest down my bare legs to my bright red toenails. On the trip back up I saw his gaze stop at my left hand. “What’s that?”

“What?”

“That. You’re wearing a diamond ring.”

“I am?” Guilt swept over me like a hot breeze.

“What are you, engaged or something?”

“Engaged?” I laughed a little too heartily. “This is a souvenir from the war. Germany, I think.” I laughed again, hoping he wouldn’t see the lie smeared across my face like the yolk of a soft boiled egg.

“Germany,” he repeated, clearly intrigued.

“So where do you live when you’re not in St. Louis or Barcelona?”

“You already asked me that.”

“And you didn’t answer.”

“Sure I did. I said not too far.”

“Where exactly is that?”

“Nearby.”

“Where? Glen Oaks? Bayside? Whitestone? There’s a million neighborhoods around here.”

He sighed. “You’re pretty persistent.” He smiled when he said it, like he wasn’t complaining.

“I’m just curious.”

“Why?”

“Now you’re asking the questions,” I said. We smiled at each other. “I’ve just never seen you around here before.”

“I live out on the Island. Does that satisfy you?”



“Where on the Island?” I was teasing him now. I didn’t know why he wouldn’t tell me what town he was from. Was it someplace bad, like Levittown?

He rubbed his face uncomfortably. “Great Neck.” He looked embarrassed, like it was a crime to be rich. He shouldn’t have been embarrassed on my account. I always heard you can fall in love with a rich boy just as easily as a poor one, and I believe every woman on the block would have said amen to that. Jeffrey glanced at his watch. “I’d better take off.” He looked up, catching my eyes and holding the gaze. “I enjoyed meeting you, Ro.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I still have my own route to do.”

“But what if Billy gets sick again or what if whatever he’s got gets worse?” Jesus, how desperate am I?

“Billy’s fine. The Mets are playing Pittsburgh tonight at Shea.” He surveyed my body once more with those green eyes, glancing briefly over my shoulder at my old apartment building where the paint was peeling and the living room window screen hung askew. I could see him thinking. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t come down here after work, right?”

I nodded hesitantly, wondering how it would look if the ice cream man came over without his ice cream.

“Do you ever go into the city?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” I said carefully. “Why?”

“I thought we could go there tomorrow night.”

“You mean together?”

“It’d be a lot more fun than going separately.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not? Are you busy?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?”

I felt my face tingling. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

He moved closer and touched my cheek gently, his fingers cool from the freezer. “You’re scared, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

“Don’t be. We’ll just hang out, walk around, get something to eat and then I’ll take you home. What do you say?”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. Jeffrey watched my face carefully. “I’m not sure.” Convince me. Please.

“Come on, Ro, you need to relax and have a little fun.” He winked and it sent a chill through my body. I felt womanly and desirable in a very grown-up way.

“Okay,” I said in a small, far-away voice that seemed to come from someone far more audacious than me. “I’ll do it.”

“Great. I’ll come over at six.” He flashed a fabulous smile before I could change my mind, then he jumped into the truck, threw it into drive and took off. I watched the boxy white back as it stopped at the corner, flashed its blinker and turned left toward the Expressway, leaving me alone at the curb, raging rivers of excitement, terror and remorse converging in my body and bursting the dam of restraint.

Thursday, August twelfth

I had less than twenty-four hours to hunt down the ice cream truck and tell Jeffrey forget it, this slightly less than perfect ring I’m wearing is a symbol of my commitment to Stuie Weiner, a decent guy who lives at the end of the block and who would happily kick the butt of any guy stupid enough to ask me out.

Or I could’ve tried the truth from a different angle. I could’ve told Jeffrey it felt heavenly when he touched my cheek, but Stuie and I were getting married in less than two weeks and there was no take-backsies. But I didn’t take the high road. I took the detour -- the dead-end path of total duplicity.

I locked the door of my tiny bedroom and sat there all day Thursday, except for two trips to the kitchen for a Hershey bar and a bologna sandwich, and played with a thread on my chenille bedspread, keeping the world at bay while I anguished over the crime I was about to commit.

I had never told a lie in my whole life, at least not with any malice. In my house the white lie was a completely permissible and even necessary means of survival. Returning a dress to May's department store after wearing it a couple of times was a white lie. Telling my neighbor Solly he looked thin when he'd actually packed on an extra thirty pounds was a white lie. Sneaking off to the storage room with Stuiie was a white lie and telling my mother that Rochelle was still a virgin so she wouldn't hassle me about our being best friends also qualified. But accepting Jeffrey's invitation to Manhattan didn't seem like a white lie at all, even with my limited exposure to dishonesty.

I couldn't decide if I was truly evil or just following my heart, allowing romantic thoughts of Jeffrey to waft through me uncensored. Until recently I had never even thought about being with another boy, mainly because all the boys at Walnut were no better than Stuiie. But lately, now that I'd turned eighteen, I found myself fantasizing about adult relationships with romance and possibly even real sex, the kind that sounded so good in Marsha's books. I used to laugh when I read things like, He touched her in that place where she was woman, but I wasn't laughing anymore. I wanted to be touched in that place where I was woman. I wanted it a lot.

The problem was, I couldn't share my fantasies with Stuiie since they didn't include him: they were about me and someone else, an unknown gentle person, a faceless, mature man who would take me in his arms and kiss me the way I longed to be kissed. Suddenly I could put a real face on my fantasies. Jeffrey's face.

Just the thought of being with Jeffrey made me feel like I was naked in cool water, but swimming right next to me was the shark of fear that I would hurt Stuiie in a way nothing would ever fix, something I didn't want to do for all the money in the world. Poor Stuiie. It wasn't his fault he couldn't thrill me. He'd tried to be a decent boyfriend and as far as everyone else was concerned, he succeeded. He had never even looked at another girl since the third grade and when my mother suggested we get engaged he said yes without a moment's hesitation. "Don't take it for granted," my mother had whispered to me so Stuiie couldn't hear. "Most high school boys don't know from such commitments."

Sitting alone in my room in the middle of the empty candy wrappers and the soda bottles, my scalp burned when I thought of myself as the betrayer. But here I was, letting my heart open for the first time in my life, and to a boy other than my betrothed. I wasn't proud of what I was doing but these strange thoughts weren't my idea -- they jumped me when I wasn't looking. I wondered whose happiness I was responsible for, Stuiie's or mine. Was I supposed to sacrifice my own to make sure he got his?

My mother knocked only once, to ask if I wanted to go with her to bingo. I told her I'd be going out with my friends later and she said there were a couple of hard-boiled eggs and a bagel waiting for me in the refrigerator, and I thanked her and said I wasn't hungry and wanted to be left alone. Except for the broom closet of a bathroom I shared with my parents, my room was the smallest in the apartment, but I loved it because it was mine and mine alone, my sanctuary where I could think and read and listen to the radio and write poetry long after the world had gone to bed. I didn't know where I'd be without my poetry. I'd filled so many notebooks that I was running out of places to hide them. Every time I opened the closet I held my hands over my face, fearful a notebook might fall from the shelf and conk me on the head, knocking me out cold and sending me off to the emergency room. I could see the headlines of the New York Post: POETRY GIVES LOCAL GIRL CONCUSSION.

Marsha called six times and Rochelle banged on the door practically every hour, but I told them I was sick and couldn't see anybody today. I needed solitude, even if it meant dodging the two best friends I'd previously trusted with every secret. But this one was different -- I was about to make a decision that might affect my entire future, and I had to make it myself, without the benefit of my friends' wisdom.

My bedroom, with the bright orange walls I'd once painted out of sheer boredom, was illuminated by a single overhead light. There was gold shag carpet on the floor, the narrow closet in the corner, and a small casement window facing the street. Stuiie banged on it once while I was hiding out but I told him I was coming down with the flu. He accepted the rejection easily and ran off with Buffa and Larry, who were far more interested in a game of stickball down behind the laundry room than hanging out with Stuiie's girlfriend, who would no doubt want to talk about the menu for the wedding. Our guests, it had been decided, would be eating chicken with rice for dinner, which at Temple Beth Shalom meant ninety per cent rice and ten per cent chicken. I wanted to go with the more expensive prime rib but it wasn't within my parents' allotted budget so chicken

and rice would have to do. "If they don't like it," my father said, "let them stop for a hamburger on their way home."

I sat on my bed all day, listening to the radio and wondering what other women would do if they faced the same dilemma. Maybe they'd go where destiny took them without so much as a parting glance; but they weren't me. I knew the meaning of commitment, I had heard the words "duty" and "responsibility" every day, even if I couldn't give a dictionary definition. There was no way I'd go out with Jeffrey without analyzing the situation first, turning it upside down and inside out and looking at it from every angle. Let other women blithely put their future in jeopardy. I needed time to muse, journal open on my lap, pen poised in my hand, while I tried to quell the guilt with iambic pentameter.

By four-thirty I needed a break from so much thinking, so I called Ziggy, who was friendly and charming as usual. "How's everything in Queens?" he asked once I identified myself. I always made a point of telling him it was Rhona Lipshitz from Queens right off the bat just in case there were other Rhonas in his life, or even another Rhona Lipshitz.

"Pretty good, except it's still really hot out."

"Summer in New York," Ziggy agreed. "I'd rather be in Paris."

"Or Barcelona," I added. "Lying on a beach on the Costa Brava."

Ziggy chuckled. "Now you're talking. So what can I play for you tonight?"

"Could you play it between six-fifteen and six-forty-five?"

"No problem, Rhona Lipshitz from Queens. What do you want to hear?"

"I'm kind of in the mood for Led Zeppelin. What about 'Heartbreaker'?"

"Funny you should pick that. Robert Plant called last week from London."

"Are you serious? He actually called you?"

"Yeah, he always calls before he comes to New York. He likes to stop by the station."

What a life Ziggy must have. London, Paris, rock stars calling on the phone. He probably goes to parties in long white limousines and gets into any concert he wants for free. I thought it would be great to meet Ziggy in person, but my life was getting too complicated already so I just thanked him and hung up the phone. I had made my decision: I would throw caution to the wind and follow my heart wherever it would lead me. I was ready for romance and adventure, two things that had never blipped on the radar screen of Stuie's life.

My romance-free fiancé preferred to bypass the mushy stuff and cut right to the sex, begging every time to leave third base behind and go directly to home plate. But I always said no way, I'm not giving it up until we're officially married.

"But none of the girls is a virgin except you!"

"Not true," I would respond. "Marsha Kotner's a virgin and she has every intention of staying that way."

"Yeah, but that's only because no one wants to do her."

He first began pestering me about sex back in the tenth grade but I flat-out refused: "The answer is no and it's gonna stay no until the gold ring has been slipped onto my finger and the Manishevitz heavy Malaga has been sipped from the silver-plated cup." If my parents taught me one lesson over my entire eighteen years, it was that a woman gives herself to the one man she instinctively knows will be her soul mate for life, and she does it in holy matrimony.

Until then Stuie would have to be happy with third base, which for us meant me dipping my fingers into the tubs of Pond's cold cream both our mothers kept in their bathroom cabinets. I'd get a good glob of the stuff and caress Stuie while he touched me awkwardly beneath my bra, making sure there were plenty of tissues on hand. The first time we tried it, shortly after Stuie's Bar Mitzvah, it was so illicit and exciting that I wanted to do it again and again, which was just fine with Stuie. We called our newfound diversion a 'creampuff,' and Stuie would say he was in the mood for one right in front of my parents. We'd sneak off in plain sight to the storage room under my building where bicycles and dirty little secrets had been kept for generations. It wasn't unusual to find a used condom behind a rusted-out two-wheeler; one time Buffa found a forty-six double-D bra and put it on over his winter coat to the amusement of everyone on the block. As far as my parents were concerned, Stuie and I had gone off to Cappy's Bake Shop for a real creampuff, never realizing we were down in the storage room while their future son-in-law was enjoying the forbidden fruit of our sexual act. But like most new

things, the novelty of the creampuff started to wear off, at least for me, after the five or six hundredth time, leaving me to wonder if real sex would lose its luster over time, too.

I would have asked my parents if this were true, if sex becomes obligatory and uninteresting for everybody, but they believed good girls like me didn't think about sex or talk about it. My father warned me over and over again not to embarrass him. I never knew what he meant, but I had a feeling we'd all be a lot more than embarrassed if he found me in New York City with a boy I'd met the day before.

I stared at my flawed diamond ring in the glare of the overhead light. If I wore the ring with Jeffrey he would ask more questions and eventually learn the truth about my engagement. There was only one solution: the unthinkable.

I am not a bad person. I am not a bad person. I took a deep breath and removed the half-carat ring from my finger, wrapping it in a Kleenex and placing it carefully behind my beloved FM radio on top of the cherry wood bookcase we had bought with green stamps from the A&P that now housed an outdated set of World Book Encyclopedias and a family of pink ceramic kittens. It was a terrible act, one that repulsed even me. I felt dirty, like one of those women in the movies who plots to murder her husband and run off with the insurance money.

I filled the tub with cool water and slipped in, letting my mind drift to the worst possible scenario if I were caught with Jeffrey. I'd have to face Stue and my parents and all my neighbors at Walnut and admit the truth: I had betrayed every one of them and yes, I had embarrassed my father. Rabbi Marks would be asked to counsel me, and the women from the block would shake their heads every time I walked out onto the stoop, cautioning their own daughters about Rhona's cataclysmic mistake. Selma Weiner would hate me even more than she already did, and Stue would run away in shame, maybe even to Canada to join some of the boys we knew who were living in Montreal to avoid the draft. My parents would be forced to move back to Brooklyn, the land of their birth. They'd never see Jeffrey as a fine boy from a good home, only the bum who had stopped a marriage ten years in the making. I would be infamous at Walnut forever, the subject of hushed stories told at sleep-overs and at the bingo tables. I got out of the tub, shivering despite the heat.

It was all too horrible to imagine. Luckily, that didn't stop me from trying on everything in my closet in preparation for my date. As my ringless fingers deftly sorted through mini-skirts and skimpy sundresses, I realized that my usual wardrobe, fine for the schoolyard, would not reflect the refined tastes of the woman I wanted Jeffrey to greet at the door. Tonight I had to look sophisticated yet demure, tantalizing yet innocent, Audrey Hepburn at her best. The only contender was my graduation dress. White and lacy with a pink dirndl sash, it was probably too fancy and too scratchy, but it fit the bill better than anything else in the closet. I put my hair up in a French knot and fastened it with an ivory comb, just like I did on my graduation day back in June. I remembered my mother saying I looked like her little kewpie doll in that dress, and hoped it wouldn't have the same effect on Jeffrey. Not tonight. Tonight I'm a woman. I twirled around and around in front of the living room mirror, my arms over my head ballerina-style, my pointed toes propelling me into the air.

As I stepped into my pink high-heeled pumps I pondered how I was going to avoid one of Stue's boys or God forbid, even Stue himself while en route to Jeffrey's car. And what about little Iris Sinitsky? She was the only one who could point out Jeffrey in a line-up. If he showed up in a clean shirt and his own car she'd know in a flash what we were up to, and her childish envy knew no bounds. She'd be so mad he was going out with me and not her that she'd run to Nola and tell her everything before Jeffrey's car had even turned the corner. Then Nola would share the hot gossip with her parents and her brother in two seconds flat.

I sniffed the spray bottle of White Shoulders cologne my mother had bought herself at Walnut Drugs the previous Chanukah with her accumulated bingo winnings. I spritzed the sticky-sweet stuff behind my ears and along the inside of my thighs, praying I would make it safely from my front door to the curb without those treacherous obstacles, Iris or the guys from the block, getting in my way. This must be what it's like negotiating land mines in Phnom Penh. I gently rubbed a bit of Revlon pancake into my face, some creamy rouge above my cheekbones, then carefully painted a thin black line with a little tail that looked like a tadpole above my eyelids, finishing the whole thing off with an exuberant application of black mascara.

It was an amazing transformation. I looked like a slut, like the hitter chicks who hung out at the candy store long after my friends and I had gone home and crawled into bed, with their painted-on slacks and teased up hair and ghost-white lips. They always scared me a little, those girls with no curfew who rode around in open convertibles deep into the night. I certainly didn't want Jeffrey to think I was one of them. He was a college boy

at a real university I'd never heard of before, who knew about masters degrees and junior years abroad in places like Barcelona which was either in Spain or possibly Portugal. Geography wasn't one of my favorite subjects but the point was, I couldn't let Jeffrey think I was nothing more than a sleazy hitter chick from the Walnut Garden Apartments.

I licked the end of a Q-tip and erased the eyeliner, tightened the comb in my hair and dared myself to imagine what it would be like to have Jeffrey kiss me. I took the dare, which made the blood drain so fast from my head I had to hang onto the bathroom counter for support. As I blotted my glossy lips on a Kleenex I felt my heart race at the memory of his green eyes looking right through me while I stood breathless at the curb.

I told myself sternly for maybe the billionth time that it was okay to go out with Jeffrey. My interest in him was perfectly normal behavior for a healthy woman like me who had had so few experiences and was just beginning to live. Better to live now than when I'm too old to enjoy it. I ran to answer the door, taking a split-second in the kitchen to check my reflection in the toaster-oven. I wasn't going to look any better than this no matter how hard I worked at it. I peered through the peephole at Jeffrey's perfect face.

"Good luck at bingo," I called to my mother's bedroom, shutting the front door behind me before she had the chance to pop out and ask where I was going in my graduation dress. Jeffrey stood in the hallway wearing a denim work shirt, his hands thrust into the pockets of his faded jeans. He smiled with surprise when he saw me in my fanciest outfit, my hair piled high above my head.

"You look adorable," he said as my own smile faded just a little. He extended his arm and escorted me to the gleaming white Cadillac Coupe de Ville at the curb, holding the passenger door open while I climbed in. I made a mental note that my fiancé had never held a door for me in his life (although my next thought was that nobody had ever taught him to).

My eyes scanned the block nervously. No neighbors were out in the heat to witness my indiscretion, except for Lila across the street who was hanging her clean wash out the window, reaching into the big pocket of her apron for wooden clothespins. I ducked low and stayed that way while we passed Stuie's building, my stomach jumping into my throat as Nola came out of the apartment with two heaping bags of garbage.

The Cadillac turned the corner and I heaved what must have been an audible sigh of relief because Jeffrey raised a curious eyebrow in my direction. "Everything okay?"

"Just fine," I smiled, my face frozen with fear, my heart racing. He smiled back as the car swung onto the Expressway toward the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. I noticed his hands on the steering wheel. He had beautiful fingers with groomed nails that looked as if they had never been bitten. I thought of Stuie's fingernails, ragged and chewed down to the nubs, the tips already discolored from nicotine. The dashboard read quarter after six. "Oh, can we listen to Ziggy?"

"Sure." He reached over my knees and turned the knob. I began to relax a little when I heard the sound of Ziggy's voice, as if my dear friend was next to me on the black leather upholstery, reminding me to sit back and have a little fun. At six twenty-three my requested song by Led Zeppelin came on without fanfare and I smiled to myself. Just watch me, Zig. For the first time in her life Rhona Lipshitz from Queens was going to have herself all kinds of fun.

Traffic was heavy in the other direction but our side of the highway was clear and we sailed through Queens in no time at all. As we neared the bridge my heart began to race again despite my futile attempts to stay calm. I wanted to tell Jeffrey that going from one borough to another gave me panic attacks, so if it was all the same to him could we just turn around? But instead I just gazed at the tall buildings of the city like a tourist from Moosehead, Idaho, anxious about being so far from home amidst the strange faces and smells and sounds.

"I have a surprise for you," Jeffrey said as we made our way up First Avenue. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out two tickets.

"What are those?"

"Tonight's the opening of the Post-Impressionist Exhibit at the Guggenheim. My mother can't make it so she said I can have them."

I smiled nervously. The last time I'd been to a museum was during our sixth grade field trip when I was so preoccupied with giggling and gossiping that I'd totally forgotten to look at the paintings.

"Ever been to the Guggenheim?" Jeffrey asked, and I knew there was no way I could tell him I'd never heard of it.

“Maybe once or twice. I don’t remember.”

“Oh, you’d definitely remember. Frank Lloyd Wright designed it. It’s one-of-a-kind.”

“Really.” We turned south on Eighty-ninth Street and found a parking spot on the street. Jeffrey opened the door and took my hand as I climbed out of the seat like a lady, mindful of my dress and my high-heeled shoes. We approached the imposing white building where a long line of art lovers in their evening finery was wrapped around the street. Jeffrey breezed past it with an air of confidence and I followed, whispering over his shoulder, “Shouldn’t we go to the back of the line?”

“My mother’s a patron,” he said, handing our tickets to a uniformed guard and leading me into the hushed silence of the museum, the smell of expensive perfume lingering in the foyer. Most of the women who gathered about in small groups were older than me by at least ten years, and I marveled at their casual elegance, gold bangle bracelets hanging from milky-white wrists, jewel-encrusted pins holding silk scarves precisely in place. Unlike me, these women probably had no problem finding the right outfit among the hundreds that lined their closets, their lavish accessories neatly tucked into mahogany boxes. They were creatures from another planet, aliens so different from anyone I’d ever encountered that I found myself observing them more than envying them. Then it hit me: These are the people in Marsha’s books, the jet setters who have torrid affairs in Paris and Rome, who spend their year-long honeymoons sailing around the world on their sixty-foot yacht.

Beyond the foyer were elaborately framed paintings on curved walls that spiraled up toward the top of the building. “Wow,” I said, stunned by the breadth and the beauty of it all.

We took an elevator to the top floor and started a leisurely stroll down the spiral. “I told you it was special.” No, it’s magical, I thought as Jeffrey took my elbow, his hand soft and warm. We walked slowly, admiring the art. He pointed out pertinent details in a quiet voice, explaining how each piece of art tied in with its period in history. I nodded and tried to absorb as much information as I could but I was distracted by his green eyes and the fact that he had more knowledge on the tip of his tongue than I had in my entire set of World Book Encyclopedias.

“How do you know all this stuff?” I finally asked with awe.

“I’m minoring in Art History. It’s interdisciplinary with the History department.”

We stopped at a painting of worn brown work shoes, the laces untied and draped on the floor. “Hey, look at this,” I said with a laugh. “Someone painted his shoes.”

“That’s a van Gogh. He couldn’t afford to hire a model so he painted whatever he saw in front of him, like his bed or the fields outside his window. Or himself.”

I was quiet for a moment. “He was that poor?”

“Right till the end.”

“Why didn’t he paint his friends?”

“He didn’t really have any. He lived a lonely and tortured life and then he killed himself when he was still in his thirties.”

“Wasn’t he the one who cut off his ear?”

“That’s what people remember about him but there was so much more. He was a really complicated man.” Like you, I thought. I reached a tentative hand toward the canvas but Jeffrey gently guided it back to my side. “They don’t like when you touch the paintings,” he said softly.

He turned to walk up the ramp but I wasn’t quite ready to follow. There was something about those shoes, something that wouldn’t let me take my eyes off them. The guy who painted them clearly needed to express everything that was boiling inside him, to fill his canvas with a piece of himself. I imagined him looking around his sparse room with frustration before settling on his own shoes as the subject of his next painting. I wondered if he recognized his own natural ability to take his God-given talent and use it to create art out of ordinary things. How resourceful he was to look at those shoes with such a fine eye that they came to life on the canvas, even in browns and grays, every crimp in the shoelace, every crease in the leather intricately and carefully depicted. Who would ever think to look for beauty in the everyday? I wanted to ask Jeffrey more about the shoes and the man who made them so real it choked me up, but I was afraid he’d think I was stupid. I couldn’t tear myself away.

After a minute Jeffrey leaned in close and whispered in my ear. “Van Gogh died before his art had value to the world. Those shoes and the rest of his paintings had value just to him, which is pretty amazing when you think about it.”

I looked at Jeffrey and a smile came to my lips. He had read my mind, he knew exactly what I was thinking. Nobody had ever understood me like that, or seen into me so deeply.

Jeffrey smiled back and guided me up the ramp to the next piece of art, this one by Paul Gauguin, one of his favorite painters. He pointed out Gauguin’s unique way of distorting nature, explaining to me how meaningful it was for the artist’s contemporaries to be given the opportunity to express themselves in a way they had never known. I listened intently as Jeffrey told me about the art scene in France back in those days: how painters would hang out together in cafes and talk about their latest projects, sharing names of art dealers and galleries and wealthy enthusiasts.

“You know what I’d love to do?” he asked. “Go back in time for just one day and sit in a Monteparnasse bistro, drinking wine and eavesdropping on their conversations.” It had never occurred to me to wish for something like that, but now it seemed like a wonderful fantasy.

“Do you think they’d like it if we turned them on to the Grateful Dead?” I asked. Jeffrey laughed, and I liked myself for the first time that day.

When we reached the ground floor again, Jeffrey said, “Hey, let’s go to the Village and get something to eat.” He took my hand and we ran across the street to the Cadillac while taxi horns blared and buses spewed exhaust. I felt excited and happy to be part of such an extraordinary city, but as the car made its way down Fifth Avenue and into Greenwich Village, anxiety invaded my body, sending adrenaline coursing up my arms and into my brain.

“Does it scare you being down here?” I asked as we headed into the bowels of the Village. “So many weird people and we’re so far from home...”

“Actually, it’s my favorite part of town. It’s good to get away from all those uptight assholes in the suburbs.” He glanced over at me. “Why, are you scared?”

“Of course not,” I lied. “Scared of what?”

Jeffrey patted my bare knee. His touch zipped through me, settling somewhere deep in my belly. We parked the car in a lot on Sullivan Street and walked south to Jeffrey’s favorite Italian restaurant. I wished we could have found a place to eat uptown near the Guggenheim where everything seemed a lot more normal, and there weren’t all kinds of strange people leaning over fire escapes or out of open windows for relief from the muggy night. I stayed close, afraid Jeffrey might disappear and leave me stranded in this dark, crazy world where groups of men, their eyes wild and demented, hid in corners passing bottles of Thunderbird wine.

These were the drunken bums my mother warned me about every time I left the house at night, and now I understood her warnings. As we walked, the smell of falafel and deep-fried fish and marijuana and scented candles hung heavy in the humid air, adding to my panic, and Jeffrey must have sensed it because he draped an arm around my shoulder, his hand dangling over my chest. I held onto his draped hand and he stroked my fingers as we walked. I inhaled deeply, feeling the full impact of his touch as my legs grew weak.

“Isn’t this great?” he asked mostly to himself, breathing in the scent of the hot summer night. We settled into a booth at the back of Lombardo’s Italian Cafe, the air warm and garlicky, the large standing fan working overtime for show. Jeffrey slid next to me in the booth, sitting close, his leg touching mine. “You’ll love this place,” he said.

I smiled, overwhelmed by the whole adventure, the Guggenheim and the Village and the promise of romance. A tired-looking waitress around my mother’s age with a pencil behind her ear and a bouffant hairdo dyed black came over and dropped two worn menus on the table before moving on to the coffee machine. Jeffrey opened his menu and placed it between us so we could peruse it together.

“How hungry are you?” he asked.

“Not very.”

“You want to share something? The portions are huge.”

“Sure. What do you have in mind?”

“Let me surprise you.” Jeffrey signaled for the tired woman who sauntered over as if she were doing us the greatest favor by taking our order at all. “Do you have baked ziti tonight?” Jeffrey asked.

"If it's on the menu it's in the kitchen," she said with some annoyance, staring at my outfit with curiosity, like she'd never seen a high school graduation dress before.

"That's what we want," Jeffrey said, undaunted by her rudeness. "We'd like to share one order."

"That's an extra buck fifty for the plate," the waitress said.

I leaned in close so she wouldn't overhear. "Isn't that a lot of money for an empty plate?" In my neighborhood a buck fifty at the corner luncheonette bought an entire meal from soup to nuts.

"Don't worry about it." He looked up at the waitress. "And two Cokes." She stuck the pencil in her apron and strolled away. Jeffrey waited until she was gone before turning his full attention to me. "I'm glad you liked the exhibit."

"I loved it. I can't stop thinking about van Gogh. Do you think he was happy while he was painting?"

Jeffrey seemed thoughtful. "That's a good question. His happiness probably came in spurts. Brief moments of it before he fell back into a depression."

We were silent for a minute. "So he never found out that people put on their fanciest clothes just to look at his old shoes."

Jeffrey laughed and put his hand over mine. "He would have been flattered to know how much you appreciate his work, that's for sure."

"You know what else I loved? The dance hall painting by...what was his name?"

"Toulouse-Lautrec."

"That's the guy. All those beautiful women in their underwear with feathers in their hats."

Jeffrey smiled. "You look beautiful yourself even without the feathers."

"I do?"

"I like you with your hair up. You have such a nice neck." He let go of my hand and ran his index finger along my jaw line. Just then the waitress came over and plunked two glasses of Coke and two glasses of water on the table with enough gusto to make me jump out of my skin.

"Welcome to Lombardo's," Jeffrey said after she'd left. "Reknowned for its crowd-pleasing service."

"Is it always like this?"

"Oh no. Sometimes it's worse. But the food's always good." The waitress returned with two plates, one containing a steaming portion of ziti, the other plate empty. She dropped them onto the table with a loud, angry thud. "You're in for a treat," Jeffrey said, picking up his fork. "Dig in." He brought the plate of pasta closer to us. The fragrance was heavenly and suddenly I was ravenous. The red sauce, the noodles and the baked mozzarella beckoned and without waiting for Jeffrey I dug right in and took a huge forkful, strings of melted cheese dripping from my fork. It was delicious. I drank my Coke in seconds flat and Jeffrey slid his own glass my way. "What'd I tell you about the food?" he asked, delighted by my appetite.

"I just hope there's enough for you," I said through a full mouth, the extra plate remaining untouched. Jeffrey grimaced and pointed to my chest. I reluctantly followed his finger and gasped at the sight of a quarter-sized blob of red sauce right in the center of my dress. I squeezed my eyes shut, humiliated.

"Don't be embarrassed, it'll come right off," he said comfortingly as he dabbed his napkin into a glass of water and handed it to me. I rubbed the stain gently, then a little harder, then harder still, succeeding only in turning the quarter-sized glob into a half-dollar.

He looked at me with compassion. "I do that all the time. Tonight it's your turn." I smiled gratefully, my humiliation dissolving into the warm, pungent air.

"I know just how to fix it," he said, helping me to my feet and placing some cash on the table. We walked out into the muggy night, the sweet and slightly scary smell of incense thick in the air, but instead of going to the dry cleaner's Jeffrey pulled me into a little boutique and bought me a string of love beads, purple, orange and green in an alternating pattern despite my coy protestations. He slipped it over my head and stood back to admire it. "Now all you can see is the necklace, not the sauce."

"Thank you," I said, smiling into his eyes, the moment frozen in time as shoppers jostled and pushed us out of their way.

After a while we walked back to the car, his fingers laced through mine, both of us tired and happy after our perfect evening, which was probably a little less perfect for Jeffrey since he didn't get any dinner. We drove all the way to Queens in peaceful silence, the lights of the city twinkling behind us beneath a black summer sky.



Jeffrey parked the car in front of my building and shut the engine. "What happened to your souvenir from Germany?" he asked with a nod toward my hand.

"I guess I didn't feel like wearing it."

Jeffrey's gaze moved from my eyes to my mouth, and I watched his lips part slightly as he moved toward me. He kissed me softly and sweetly, then he pulled me toward him and allowed the kiss to deepen right there in the front seat of the Cadillac. I don't know how long we kissed, our arms wrapped tightly around each other, but by the time he moved his lips to my neck I was sure I had stopped breathing. I had never been kissed like that and I wanted more. I wanted kisses like that every day for the rest of my life. Jeffrey leaned back and held my face gently in his hands. "Tonight was fun, wasn't it?"

"It was wonderful."

"And you don't even have to be scared of me anymore."

"Me? Scared of you? You've got to be kidding."

He smiled and pulled me toward him for a hug, his breath warm on my neck. "Let's do something special tomorrow," he whispered.

"Tomorrow," I breathed.

"I'll come over around seven?"

"Seven." He moved back into his seat and started to open his door. "That's okay," I said, glancing around nervously. "You don't have to walk me."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine." I gave him a bright smile and ran up the stoop quickly, my feet barely touching the pavement as I breathed in the warm night air, the street dark and quiet. How utterly amazing, I thought, that a few short hours ago I was a mere child from Walnut Gardens, unschooled about the complexities of life and love and art, oblivious to an entire world that existed on the other side of the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. This was the start of a new and wonderful life, a life I had secretly wished for but until that moment seemed hopelessly out of my grasp. And I knew I was teetering on the brink of being touched in that place where I was woman.

Friday, August thirteenth

I woke up at noon in a sweat, exhausted from the unrelenting heat wave and my own fevered dreams. I was on a tall wooden platform, a noose around my neck, waiting to be publicly hanged. There was an angry throng cheering below as the female executioner, who looked a lot like Selma Weiner, approached, a sinister smile on her face. Fully awake now, I reached for my neck and found the love beads instead of that nasty rope.

There was a note from my father tacked to the Fridgidaire. "Take garbage now," it said threateningly. I threw on a sundress and hauled the two smelly bags down to the garbage room, tossing them into an empty can and getting out as fast as I could. The plaid curtains parted above me and a large head poked between the panels. "Hey, Ro. Where ya been? I called for you this morning."

Damn. There was no escape. I gasped at the sudden realization I had forgotten to put my engagement ring back on, and clasped my hands behind my back. "Sleeping late," I called.

"I came over."

"I didn't hear you."

"Where were you last night? Wait a minute, I'm coming down."

The curtains swung back and my mind raced with excuses while my cheeks flushed with fear. I had developed a twelve-hour bug. I was in the middle of a really great book and I couldn't put it down. My favorite movie was on TV. I had to wash my h...

"What's going on with you?" Stuie asked. "Why weren't you at the schoolyard last night?" Stuie enjoyed showing me off at the schoolyard, marveling at the fact I was smart and pretty, as if the two were mutually exclusive. In the summer I'd wear my short-shorts with a little stretchy halter-top and he'd have his arms around me the whole night, rubbing himself against me from behind as he joked and laughed with his friends. By the time the evening was over he'd be so turned on from all the friction we'd have to make a quick stop at the storage room or go over to the electrical towers for a hasty creampie on the way home. I'd bring a travel tube of Pond's and keep it in the zippered section of my shoulder bag. Stuie would lean against the wall or the fence holding onto my hips for support until he was finished, then I'd hand him some tissues and he'd zip up his

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