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## A kitten at the feet of Olympia

S G Collins

There's the chance that this is really happening to you. That it's no dream, that by way of several painless impacts, each one sapping some of your starting momentum, you have just come to rest in an unlikely spot. In an unfamiliar position. Looking entirely like someone else. But is this the real you now, this you cool blue nude and compromised, this you staring out through shopglass on a day when the stores don't open? Or are you somehow still who you were at midnight last night?

Her phone is ringing again.

"I found something, maybe I found her, I dunno. I'm going somewhere, not sure where, here I go. Call you tomorrow, bye."

A breathless voicemail blinking in the sky over Malibu.

What time is it in California anyway? The arithmetic eludes her just now. Now, just before midnight as she walks out of the Martyrs club in St Germain and crosses a wide sidewalk toward a waiting black Renault, the echo of that promise stirs her intestines. *I'll call you tomorrow*. And will she survive tonight? The back door of the sedan swings open and she lifts a foot diagonally to step in. Her new red shoe. Her stiletto. The point of her toe.

Her companion inside, whose real name she doesn't know — *for now, just call me Sabine* — has just hiked up her slippery blue skirt and loosed one black stocking from the clips. Her thumbs peel it down to expose the whitest moonglow thigh. The car is moving now, moving fast.

"May I borrow your phone?"

Nica reaches in her fuzzy black handbag and passes the mobile. "Who are you calling?"

"No one. You'll get it back later." Sabine leans on the power key and the phone goes dark, sayonara. Then she's reaching for Nica's shoulders, slips the stocking behind Nica's neck, under her hair. "I hope you don't mind," she says. *Mind what*.

"Mind what?"

Sabine wraps the black nylon over Nica's eyes. It grows snug.

"Forgive me. You mustn't see where we're going."

She's tying a knot just above Nica's left cheekbone.

"There. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"I didn't know you were holding up any."

"The answer is two."

"Who's the guy?"

"He's the driver."

"What are you doing now?"

"Putting my shoe back on."

"Oh."

The silence presses her eardrums. Away from the pounding trance of the Martyrs where they just met half an hour ago — *take your time, finish your drink, I'll wait for you downstairs* — this woman's voice sounds Brit. Maybe she's not, but her English teacher was.

"May I kiss you?" the voice asks.

"I'm a little drunk, though," Nica says, and wonders why she said that. Could she have said *normally I wouldn't, but?* She has been trying not to lie to herself lately.

"I'll take that," not just a voice but hot breath beside her right ear, "as a yes."

*Departed Blvd St Germain just before midnight, Nica scrawling sudden diary entries in the black sand of her mind here, accelerated, she touched her lips to my lower lip, not quite a nibble. Liquid waxiness of her lipstick. Slowed and turned right again. What time is it in California? What is Becky doing? Lips opened and I felt the tip of a tongue. Her body temp runs a bit cooler than my own. Faint taste of vodka and orange. The car bearing right now, or maybe left, and we turned again, and turned.*

Sudden slowdown, she hears him downshifting. Sabine, now astride her, falls back against the front seat with a shriek. "Chat," says the driver by way of apology, and speeds up again. Nica never caught a glimpse of his face, but feels just a smidge safer knowing the driver of this car wouldn't even hurt a black cat crossing his path. The woman calling herself Sabine has fallen sideways off her, giggling in microtremors. Nica waits for her to come kiss her again. Her sweat is turning

clammy from the air conditioning. She feels around on the cool leather. Sabine's hand finds hers and encloses it.

"What's really going on, is something bad gonna happen to me?"

"What's happening is you're giving up control, and a tiny piece of your dignity. When you surrender something, you receive something."

"Follow your bliss, that's my advice," Becky says, and her fingers stab into the sky like points on the Statue of Liberty's crown. "Follow your fucking bliss already."

Sitting outside Gladstone's, Becky with her back to the Pacific. In her sunglasses Nica sees a fisheye view of her own confused self slumping there in post-sunset glow holding a glass of beer. What the fuck. It's already decided she's staying right here in LA for her Masters in Applied Proteomics. What's the big deal if she takes a little time alone? Two weeks.

Quietly she repeats. "I am coming back."

"What for? You're already gone. This little obsession of yours is getting a little —"

"Obsession? Is that what you —"

"Oh. *Oh.*" Turning away as if to puke.

"Becky."

"Go to Paris."

"Becky?"

"Go to Paris."

Their waiter asks if there will be anything else. There won't be.

"You wanna sleep with her. Don't you."

Blink. "I *what?*"

"Just admit it, it's okay."

"How can I sleep with a girl who died in 1927?"

"That's what you've been trying to figure out." Becky pins her with a glare. "You want to. You *wish* you could."

In the sunglasses Nica sees herself shaking her head in slowmo.

"Just admit it," Becky says.

Nica doesn't admit anything just then. She puts down her glass, rises from the table and walks down the steps and tips the valet and drives home alone and starts packing.

"Your father doesn't understand," says Mom.

Mom doesn't like one bit the idea of a twenty-three-year-old woman travelling alone in Europe, and as usual deals with the conflict by bashing Nica with a blowup doll of her father.

"You've already *been* to Paris. We took you to Musée d'Orsay when you were fifteen."

"Put him on. I can tell by your voice he's sitting right there."

"No."

"It's something I gotta do, Mom. Please don't worry." *Please just shut up and pay for my ticket.*

"Flying over to Paris just to look at a couple of paintings. Can't speak a word of French. Can that phone of yours call transatlantic?"

"Yes Mom."

"Cuz not all of them —"

"I've seen to it, Mom."

"Well your father doesn't like it. And I can't say I blame him, Nicole."

"Just tell him ..." Nica smiles, phone tucked between her jaw and shoulder as she folds her prettiest top. "Tell him I'm in love."

"You are?"

"People do crazy things for love."

Silence.

"Mom. Chill. I promise I won't get in any trouble."

That was ten days ago. Since then she's spoken to her mother seven times. Becky meanwhile has said five more words to her. *Great, thank you for calling.*

Thinking: no Mom, I won't get into any trouble, I'll just get into a big black car with two total strangers and let them blindfold me and kidnap me. What else is there to do in Paris on a Saturday night? The car has paused with a turn signal ticking. A police siren comes and goes before them, pitching down a minor third in the passing.

"Here she is. Nica, slide over would you?"

"Sorry? Oh!" Her elbow slips. The car door beside her pops open and another woman hops in, nearly on top of her.

"*Bon soir!*"

"Hi."

The new girl smells fancy. Her name is Booboo. Yes really, but Nica has to ask twice before she believes it. In French the new girl exchanges what may be quick updates with Sabine. There's a melodious lightness to her voice that strikes Nica as very French-girl French, rendering Sabine as Jeanne Moreau by comparison. It sounds nice. If only Nica hadn't let her Dad railroad her into taking German in high school (*it's a science language*, he promised), she might have a clue what these girls are on about.

"Ah beautiful, I love her," says Booboo, helping herself to a strap of Nica's top. "Where do you find this one?"

Blind, Nica recalls what she wore tonight, oh, the coppery swirly thing with glinties around the decollete. "Somewhere in California," she shrugs.

"California. Is where you come from?"

"Theoretically I'm from New Jersey. My folks are in Florida now, I live in LA."

"*O la la, Boulevard Hollywood.*" Booboo is now squirming around beside her like she's trying to get out of her skin. It's not a small car, she just has no concept of personal space, this one. Maybe she was raised by a family of housecats. Finally she settles with one elbow resting comfortably on Nica's right shoulder. *Stay cool.*

"What perfume is that?" Nica smiles. "You smell amazing."

"Errm." Booboo answers in a sunshower of French.

"She has no idea," Sabine says. "She just came from a party, and believes she smells like a lady she danced with."

Then Booboo touches Nica's hair, asks her a question in English.

"And why are you looking for Victorine?"

Nica is silent for a moment. She touches her tongue to her upper lip.

Christmas vacation six months ago. Nica first comes out to her mother in the Winn Dixie parking lot in Port Orange, Florida. The big event is not unlike a spring-driven toy you wind up for a long time, only to have its action play out in three

rattling seconds. It's just beginning to rain. Mom insists on pushing the cart herself, she likes to have something to lean on. They are now approaching the minivan. Nica knows that if she waits till they're inside, she won't say what she has to say — what she's been stoking the courage to say since two days before she got on the plane to Daytona.

"Uh."

"Yes dear?"

Mom glances back at her, squeezes her keyring, the minivan goes *bloop*. Mom's not exactly Susie Homemaker here, but she has always appeared in the role of the good girl, the registered Republican, the loyal wife, the community spirit, the shoulder to cry on, the blah blah blah *omygod how am I gonna do this*.

"Can we talk about sex for a minute?"

"Sure!"

"I dunno how else to put this. Um, sometimes I go with girls."

She watches carefully as Mom eases the cart to a halt and opens the hatchback.

"So you're gay."

"I didn't say that."

"Why didn't you?"

"Maybe I haven't quite made up my mind?"

Mom smiles and bites her lip. "Well that's par for the course."

She sounds more teasing than critical, but Nica's so pre-cranked she still takes it the wrong way. Steps back a bit with her hands on her hips.

"What, so I have to decide about that too? I need a plan? Jesus I hate this. Stickpinning the possibilities before you even know what they are. Like those experiments where some *man* forces a photon to go through one slit or the other, and all the wave patterns disappear. I hate that. The universe hates that. The universe abhors particularity. It wants to be a big swirly gooey mess."

"Like your room." Mom nods. "You wanna help me with the groceries dear?"

Nica steps up to the shopping cart and grabs the thirty-pound turkey, and hefts it like a boulder — like she's gonna use it to crush Jerry Falwell's head or something.

"I don't know much about cosmology, hon," says Mom. "But at some point, yes, you *will* have to make up your mind about *something*. It's just inevitable."

"So what if I said I was gay?"

"I'd say so am I."

"Mom, fuck off, I'm serious."

"I'm serious too."

They look at each other. The rain is starting to come down, tiptapping on the open hatchback window above.

Maybe she didn't hear right. "Mom, I'm telling you I'm a lesbian."

Mom shrugs but doesn't flinch. "I'm a lesbian too."

"Mom."

"Honey, would I lie about a thing like that? Now think hard."

There are three bags left in the shopping cart.

"Don't tell your father."

The windshield wipers are on medium as Mom takes a right onto Big Tree Road.

"I'm confused."

"I know."

"If you're really gay then why did you marry Daddy?"

"Maybe I just didn't want to make up my mind yet."

Quick glance, a wry smile from the girl twisted up in the passenger seat with her back to the foggy window.

"Anyway," Mom says, "It's not such a bad deal. The sex kinda makes your skin crawl, you feel like a two-dollar whore sometimes, but that doesn't last. And besides." Mom peers at the sign in front of a Sunoco station, apparently checking gas prices. "Women go through all kinds of unpleasant and meaningless things to get what they want. I've thought about this. We're strong that way. Or at least we've had a lot of practice. How long have we been mammals now?"

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"It's like anything else, Nicole. You make certain disgusting compromises, and then you get something you want. Hopefully something good."

She stops at the traffic light by Route 5, and stares at her left turn blinker.

"I, for example, got you."

Nica looks at Mom's no longer soft and supple hand on the steering wheel.

"And Timmy," she says.

"Yes," Mom says, distending the curve of her voice with chicken wire. "Him too."

Left turn on arrow only.

This egg was supposed to be over easy, not scrambled. She was planning to shock her mother max gently with her so-called alternative lifestyle, not to discover that Mom's a lifelong dyke and both she and Dad have had a series of illicit lovers since before Nica was born — all in the time it takes to drive home from Winn Dixie.

"What's she crying about now?" Timmy asks Mom as they walk in with the groceries.

Something is calling her. Standing in the middle of her big swirly mess, feeling too tall in here, not wanting to remember the day she helped pick out this ruffly pink polka-dot bedspread, ignoring the track and field awards and the Cabbage Patch doll on the shelf behind her, Nica just looks out the window at Mr Hannigan dragging a Christmas tree out the back of his gold Taurus wagon — and senses change in the air. She can't shake the feeling that something is *coming* for her, that all this is somehow leading up to something.

"Thinking about that Masters?" Dad says halfway through Christmas dinner.

"Arthur. You promised."

"What? I'm just asking my genius daughter a simple question."

Nica smirks from behind a forkful of mashed. "Uh-huh."

"What's the answer?"

"The answer is uh-huh. I'm thinking about it. I haven't quite made up my mind yet."

Dad rears back with a smile and regards his knife and fork, and takes a breath.

"This is just my view, but I think Proteomics is now where Astrophysics was in the time of Galileo."

"Oh Christ," says Timmy.

"There's still room for a bright mind to become a legendary mind, that's all I mean to say. Think about the impact on drug discovery."

"Okay," Nica says, and makes like she's thinking.

"Right now drug discovery is kinda like duck hunting in the dark with a machine gun. But once we start to really understand how proteins interact, we can literally —"

"Daddy, you're absolutely right, but listen. You're not on MSNBC right now, you don't have to talk in sound-bites. Relax. It's fucking Christmas."

Dad looks at her, and looks at Mom, then nods, and stabs a hunk of white meat.

"Anyway if I do it, I'm going with UCLA. The internships pay better."

"Fair enough," he decides. "Good school. Not quite the *level* of the Johns Hopkins program, but that's just my opinion. I'll support whatever you wanna do."

*Really?*

She looks across and quickly hates him for that lie, and for pretending she's dumb enough not to hear it. The passing sunbeam of her hate briefly illumines the spiderweb of blackmail stretching between her parents. But she ignores it, her clouds return, and she just smiles at Dad as if she's been offered free Ben & Jerry's for life. He'll support whatever she wants to do.

"Cool."

*I wanna be spanked in public by Juliette Lewis in a rhinestone mask.*

"Timmy can you pass the stuffing?"

"Don't worry Nic," Timmy tells her in the pool. "You'll cap this Proto-metric thingy just like you capped Molecular Bio-thingy."

Morning of the day she'll fly up to Boston to see her ex-girlfriend. The sky is pearl gray with dark shreds blowing through it. It's chilly, but the pool is heated. Her eighteen-year-old brother's sitting on the edge, dangling his legs in the water, but wearing his sweater from Ireland. He looks ridiculous, especially with that Heineken in his hand.

"Proteomics," she says, and turns over to float on her back.

"I read that paper you wrote. Survey of Bionic something."

A survey of Bioinformatic workflows in Systems Biology. "Whadya think?"

"Kinda boring."

"Mmm. You see my dilemma."

"But dude you got published in like *Bio-IT World*. How many undergrads can say that? Dad thought you did awesome."

Reaching the shallow end, she stands up in the pool. The cold from the hips up is momentarily refreshing.

"I can *learn* anything, Timmy. Molecular Biology is just there, like washing the dishes or folding laundry. A lot of things are just there. But not everything is on fire, not for me. Like I really wanna spend two years logging mass spectrometry numbers just so I can get a great job prostituting myself for Big Pharma?"

"What big farmer?"

"And stop looking at my tits."

Timmy shrugs. "Stop having tits."

A big blond dog is trotting across their lawn. Someone whistles and it runs back out to the street.

"Trouble with you, Nic? Everything's too easy. That's why you have trouble deciding anything. Me I have to fight for every little scrap of appreciation. But you, nothing's ever hard for you."

"That's not true Timmy."

"Name one thing."

She starts to lower herself into the water again.

"True love. Finding true love is hard."

Timmy shrugs. "Only cuz you're a girlhomo."

Splash, she stands back up to glare at him.

"Who told you that?"

"I may be dumb but I'm not blind. I've seen you in love."

She wants to slap those blank beady eyes right out of his acne disaster of a face. But there is just the tiniest squiggle of compassion in his voice, something only a close relative could even detect.

"What, you just like *knew* I was gay the whole time?"

Timmy shrugs. "Did you know I'm adopted?"

"What?" She feels one side of her face get longer.

"I'm adopted."

"No you're not."

"Yep. Hannigan told me."

"Timmy, I was in the room, I saw you come out of her. You're not adopted."

"Oh."

He stops looking at her tits.

She wades forward through the pool until her feet run out of slope, then freestyles a few strokes before floating on her back again. Timmy gets to his feet and kicks a bit of gravel into the pool, and stares into the water like he's waiting for a TV show to come on there. He shakes his head over some private puzzle.

"Weird. I hate you sometimes, but I still miss you."

"Yeah I miss you too."

"Even if we are related."

He glances at her for a click, then turns and saunters dripping along the concrete toward the screen porch of the house. Nica watches his wet footprints for a minute, then dives under the water. A fluttering gurgling, the chlorine stings her eyes. Featureless aqua. Silence.

And why *are* you looking for Victorine?

Like so many great loves it begins inside a blind spot, something she can no longer clearly see. She's in Boston to meet her old lover's new lover. Drinks out in some ersatz Irish pub. Sleeping on the sofa while they make love in the bedroom without even closing the door. Brunch. January. Filthy snowbanks, slush, car horns, a cruel and fickle wind, subway tokens, a streetcar rising out of the earth into a most hostile light. A bronze Indian on a horse in front of a white stone building. They are a civilized threesome quietly roaming the Museum of Fine Arts. A big rotunda with sculptures and a grand staircase. An exhibit of nineteenth century European painting. A surplus of Frenchmen. Degas Cezanne Monet Manet Millet. Renoir. Gauguin. These French guys seem to have had a lot of time on their hands. Nica is getting bored way too soon.

At one doorway she turns, and all the paintings disappear. All but one, this square little rusty thing hanging there dwarfed by the magnificent unseen.

A young woman is staring back at her from 1862.

The colors are almost exclusively siennas and umbers. Even the featureless backdrop could have been done in dried blood. Whatever is not actually brown is scarcely permitted to be anything else: the seemingly blue ribbon bowed across the girl's head is in truth battleship gray. Her blouse, presumably yellow, is struggling just to achieve a greenish ivory. The light comes crashing down on her from above, then bounces back up to illumine the shadow side of her cheek in a perfect, straight-from-the-tube flatness. Her hair seems a blondish flavor of red, tucked back into a dark bonnet, except for the one loose tuft beside her left temple. There's an appealing tiny cleft in her rather pointed chin. Her lower lip is recessive, not voluptuous. Her eyebrows, if she has any, are very faint. And her eyes —

Her eyes.

The mind stops at her eyes. Thoughts can no longer form.

"Yoo hoo," at her shoulder, the ex-girlfriend's new girlfriend. Kind of a mousy little thing with pointy eyeglasses and a slightly bulbous nose, but there is probably something cute about her. She smiles at Nica. "We're going down to see the Egyptians."

The details blur. Does Nica actually say anything then, or does she just nod, and turn away to stare again at the *Portrait of Victorine Meurent*?

She lands at LAX convinced Edouard Manet is a genius, but that impression fades like a smile. In the public library, poring over one slick art volume after another, Nica soon realizes that Manet's only truly notorious paintings — those either emphatically rejected by the Salon, or hung high enough that some enraged mob couldn't quite take a coal-chisel to them — are those of Victorine Meurent. It's not Manet she's after. He's just a window onto Victorine.

"Victorine Meurent, a popular artist's model of not especially high birth..."

"Victorine Meurent, who also appeared in early French pornography..."

"Victorine Meurent, who died an alcoholic in abject poverty..."

"The prostitute Victorine Meurent..."

"So what's with the art fetish all of a sudden?" Becky will ask, nibbling on a granola bar. And Nica will try her best to explain.

What's scandalous about Victorine is not that she is sometimes naked, but that she is naked and looking right at you and she doesn't care. There's nothing either seductive or abashed here. She's just looking at you. And that is unforgivable. How many critical essays have spurted over her arresting gaze, her cold, wanton, bemused, alluring and/or confrontational stare? No one, not man not woman, can endure the possibility that she really doesn't mean anything by it. They are compelled to shower her with interpretation.

Here she is sitting naked on the grass with two fully clothed men, they ignoring her, she ignoring them. The basket of plums, red grapes, peaches and kaiser rolls spills across her discarded dress, a fine still life in its own right. Lip moist, hand to her chin, eyes wide open, Victorine turns to us across what's left of the picnic as if to say *help yourself to a grape if you're hungry*. Surely she must be a prostitute. And here she is again, nude on high satin pillows, looking a tad jaundiced from head to

high-heels (*I paint what I see*, says Manet, *not what you wish to see*), with maybe a magnolia in her hair, maybe a diamond pending from the tiny black ribbon snug at her throat. If someone has possessed this woman and displayed her for us here, then why is she so disturbingly self-possessed? The inappropriately black servant woman is just now presenting the flowers that you, the viewer, are supposed to have brought. For she lying here is Olympia, common alias of Parisian courtesans of the time, while you approaching the canvas are her John. One writer postulates the artless lay of her hand across her crotch as some kind of proto-feminist statement; the next tells us it's Manet himself in Victorine's body, warning that he alone will set the terms of this cultural transaction. The cat, we're told, was Baudelaire's idea. At the foot of the bed, a black kitten stands with its tail crooked in the arc of a backward question mark. Perhaps in this frozen-forever moment Victorine is about to decide whether you may or may not have her.

Or maybe she's just looking at the guy with the paintbrush.

She does look a little bored, doesn't she? Is it possible, just faintly, that all this neurotic mythmaking we've splattered onto young Victorine has nothing to do with her? Does she really gaze out from some inner repose, radiating profound sexual confidence? Or is she thinking Manet should trim his beard soon? Is she saying *go on, think what you will — and by the way which of you is not also a prostitute?* Or is it *hmm, how about fish tonight?*

In Nica's eye, Victorine Meurent pays no attention to the cat, the servant, the bouquet or all your precious theories. She's just looking at you.

And what does she see?

Or rather — where are her paintings?

"Where are her paintings?"

"I dunno hon. Can I borrow something to sleep in?" Becky opens Nica's fridge and drinks from the carton.

"Help yourself," Nica says, buried in a hardcover of Duchting's *Manet: Images of Parisian Life*. "I mean she was a really productive artist in the 1870s, and no dilettante either, she was showing in the Salon even when Manet was *refusé*. But every scholar I've read tells me the paintings of Victorine Meurent have been lost. And they just leave it at that."

She sits back at the dinette table and looks at Becky.

"Lost. What the fuck does that mean?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

"I mean the fucking Dead Sea Scrolls were lost for a while, right?"

"Right. So you're uh, staying up all night again with this?"

"No, I uh ..." She looks at her watch, turns a page, her finger searching for a thought that was here a minute ago.

"Nica. You coming to bed or not?"

"Jesus Becky do I have to decide right now?"

She looks up at her, and in that instant she knows she is going to Paris.

"Art is pain," she tells the needy young man sitting beside her at Café Depart St Michel.

She's due to go home in two days, and still feels no closer to whatever she came here looking for. She's got no shame now, she'll talk to any English-speaking warm body about her little craving. Random curators in little galleries. Cute museum docents with stylish black-rimmed eyeglasses. A librarian. A policeman. Even some Ethiopian-looking sweet boy in a pretty brocade shirt, who sits down next to her at a street café and hopes to take her dancing.

"Art is fucking pain," she tells him.

"Yes."

"What does *lost* really mean? If I burn all my old love letters, that's one kind of lost. If I just can't remember where I put them — in an envelope under the old magazines, or tucked in the back of my college yearbook? — that's a whole different lost. Doesn't mean I'll never find them, they're only lost until I do."

"I see," says the sweet boy, lighting an American cigarette.

"So maybe she had to sell her paintings off piecemeal during the lean years. Maybe she traded *Une Bourgeois du Nourembourg* for two bottles of absynthe. So her canvases are scattered to the winds, okay. One's in a seaside hotel lobby, another's in some attic in Avignon. That doesn't make them lost. There's no record of a spectacular bonfire. See what I mean?"

He nods and takes another drag. "Another capuccino?"

"Sure."

She laughs at herself then, exchanges another glance with the honey-haired woman at the next table, and leans back in her chair, trying to call herself to the world. *Be here now*. She looks out at the traffic on the boulevard and the fountain across the way. Peruvian pan-flutes echo from somewhere down in the Metro station. The curved iron fronds flanking the *Metropolitain* gateway sprout into red glass lamps in vaguely sinister seedpods, like those Martian robo-tentacles in a 1960s *War of the Worlds* she fell asleep to on the couch once, and they gave her bad dreams. Now a lady with long shiny black curls is trying to stop bus 96 for Gare du Montparnasse by placing herself bodily in its path. But the bus won't wait. Paris is urgent. It feels crowded even when nobody's around. It's the smell of all the people who ever were here, mingling with the psychic fury of all those who ever will be. A maelstrom of sloshing volition in grimy white barrelvaulted escalators. You wade through and try your best to be here now. But you've stumbled into the deep mine of time, of everything it means to flatter yourself that you are more than an animal. *O, the Humanity*, cried the man with the microphone as the zeppelin Hindenburg collapsed in fire.

"Oh, the humanity," Nica exhales.

The mint green bus pulls away now, revealing the huge figure of archangel Michael in the fountain, sword held high, standing triumphant over an annoyed demon with bat wings. From this angle he almost seems to be dancing on the head of the honey-haired woman at the next table, who looks at Nica once more across her sunglasses. A tiny smile quivers on her lips.

That was yesterday.

Time is running out.

She's hiked around Montmartre. She's wandered the Maubert neighborhood where young Victorine, having escaped the nuns who'd taught her, once held court among the criminals. She's stood catatonic on the platform of the RER-C train, scanning the eyes of a thousand passing women for her own lost look, for any sign that she's not alone in this affliction. Nothing. Come Monday afternoon she'll be flying back to Cali with the same glazed expression she rode in with. But she will visit the museum one more time.

One last staircase up from the RER station leaves her facing the Seine, a warm June wind, and some desperate guy who would sell her bottled water. Nica turns. A gray male rhinoceros guards the plaza before doorway A, *visiteurs individuels*. It's early, no sweating horde of proles yet. She darts through the zigzag of crowd control tapes and in under the glass-petal awning. Through the metal detector, across to the ticket desk, normal price seven euros, *merci*. Even a flicker of smile. The guard who marks her ticket adds a wink of recognition. She passes through into a space vast and light and arching, a former railway station of the Belle Epoque. There's no more gasp, no quickened pulse at this grandeur. The staff at Musée d'Orsay seem to know her face. A sympathetic nod from the lady at the audio-tours counter. A genuine *bonjour* from that too-cute bespectacled docent in the striped top, trotting up the broad staircase with her photo badge bopping around on a string by her hip. Even some of the sculptures acknowledge her. The painfully beautiful Apollonie Sabatier, after 157 years still lying there twisted in her nude white marble agony as Clesinger's *Woman Stung by a Serpent*, has just now turned in mid-convulsion, perfect bosom thrust and head thrown back, to appraise Nica with blank white eyes — *you again?* — as she walks up the ramp on the left side of the sculpture gallery.

Are they starting to wonder about her? Can they sense her increasing desperation? Can they tell she's no art student, only a stray biologist? Or have they seen this sort of thing time and again, these lonesome members of the sisterhood of the mystified wandering, seeking each other in this dreamy frosty glow? Yep. Victorine junky, they wink behind her back.

She turns left at the doorway to Salle 14, and turns again.

Unlike the top level, where *Dejeuner* bathes in baffled skylight, this room is subdued. Five Manets suspended on rosy tan stone. On the left there's the flamenco lady and the bullfight scene. On the right, the young fife-player in his red pants. In between them, *Olympia* lives in a broad gilded frame carved with all things curly and botanical. She's been reduced to sharing a wall with a security camera and a seated portrait of Emile Zola. Zola's desk is mountainous with books. He looks up from the volume in his hand, but does not quite look at us. The wall behind him is decorated with small artworks — including a charcoal sketch for *Olympia*, minus the cat.

*Olympia* in person discloses shades and details Nica never saw in the art books. The drapes behind the maid normally go to blackish mud in print, but they are deep

mossy green. Victorine's shoes are satin, with powder-blue ruffles. The left shoe is actually off the foot, the right one loose at the heel. A simple floral border lines the ivory bedspread she softly clutches in her right hand. At one point the spread is pulled back to reveal reddish couch upholstery, and the signature: *Ed. Manet 1862*.

Two women and a man have wandered in behind her. She steps back. After a minute or two, one woman says something in Spanish to the man, and they turn and become a couple, moving up the steps to the Seine Gallery. The other woman lingers, steps closer to the painting. Her figure slender and pale, her hair red-gold and wavy. Nica watches from behind, studying her strange grace, thinking *is she one of me?* But when the woman abruptly turns to cross the room, Nica catches only a tick of her glance before averting her eyes. What's happening here? She's not this shy.

The woman stands behind her then, hovering somewhere beyond her right shoulder. *Say something you idiot*. Nica steps forward. Like taking turns displaying ourselves to each other, she thinks. She looks at Victorine's left hand, lying across her lower belly with the fingers on her right thigh. She stares into Victorine's eyes, and feels, as usual, absolutely nothing. The blankness in person is still blank. Manet refuses to let us in.

The craquelure in the fleshtones is more severe than in the colors used for the draperies and bedding. Is it the chemistry of the paint, or just the effect of millions of eyes baking Victorine in her nudity? Looking up she sees a lone gob of paint frozen in the glare of warm spotlights. Now she feels the metal barrier against her shins. She's within sniffing distance of the canvas. Wondering: would it be completely inappropriate to taste it? Just unravel two more threads of her decorum, and lean forward for a quick lick? Then what? Would the pour soul who may be watching this security-cam even believe his eyes?

Did it just happen? Did she really touch the tip of her tongue to Victorine's right thigh?

She has to look away, but she's not sure where to look. So she looks at the cat. And now she has a different problem. She's become suddenly and unendurably horny. She feels the blush, the heartbeat, the wetness arriving now between her legs. She's certain that if she turns now to speak to that fragile Parisienne, she will just hurl herself upon her and devour her. And that certainty paralyzes Nica in sadness. For a

second she even believes she can feel the woman's breath on her bare shoulder. But when she does turn, the room is empty.

At the doorway, looking back along the sculpture gallery, she just makes out that tiny silhouette, ascending the steps below the giant clock.

The heat of her face and the embarrassment of now tepid girljuice in her panties plunge Nica into a furnace of self-loathing. She rushes out of the museum, past the rhino, across the plaza, down the too-many stairs to the RER station, hoping that speed will make her invisible to mankind. But speed only makes her breasts bobble more sweetly, drawing their unwanted eyes toward her. She catches her purple ticket as it zips through the machine, presses her body forward through the turnstyle and the saloon-style gate. Left to Quai B. It's one stop east to Place St Michel, on a split level train with cadmium red handrails. Press the button *ouverture*.

I need to get laid, she decides.

Which is how she ends up in that Martyrs' club in Saint Germain on Saturday night. With her back to the bar and an almost-done martini in her hand, in her cutest rig, having dressed herself four times before committing, she poses with eyes down and soul wide open to the cosmos. From the sound system a Fluke anthem pounds her brain: *baby got a crystal ball, baby doesn't care at all, baby's having too much fun, baby got an atom bomb*. A tickle of someone's curls against her shoulder.

"Dance with me."

"Sure."

Putting down her glass. Into the wild blue throbbing yonder. *Gimme some of that*. After a minute, Nica begins to fantasize that this delicate figure moving with her on the dancefloor is that same woman from the museum this afternoon. It could be true, couldn't it? She didn't get a good look at her face. This one has a pretty smile, there's something quivery about it. Something familiar. She's twinkling. A moment comes when their hips clash, bang. Was it meant to be that violent? The woman leans close to tell her something in her ear.

"You're very cute," she says. "I think Victorine would like you."

A wave of refrigeration sweeps upward through Nica's flesh, exiting through the crown of her head.

"What did you say?"

The lounge upstairs is quieter. Another martini and a vodka with orange. They pose on the soft furniture so that the stranger's lips are at Nica's ear, but she can't see her face. She can sometimes see the long slim back of her in a mirror across the room. The stranger's hair is honey cinnamon. Her dress shiny blue slippery. Her voice is low, droning, a hypnotic incantation.

"It was an accident, I was just there. I heard your confession. To the beautiful boy in the café on Boulevard St Michel. He wanted to take you dancing. He asked if you were on holiday. You told him why you're here. I was drinking a *vodka jus*. I had a little red plastic straw. You were only a biologist. You remember me now. At first I thought oh heavens another wide-eyed ingenue searching for Victorine, hoping to trap her own truant identity in those eyes. But after observing you for awhile I began to like you. I liked your naiveté, your faith, your eyes and lips, and that you have no point to prove. I liked your pure heart, your breasts and the peculiar curve of your hips. I liked the way you let that boy down easy. But most of all I liked the way you don't really matter. That nobody cares who you are or what you think. Neither scholar nor scribbler. Just another pretty face. I like you. You remember me now. This afternoon you went back to d'Orsay once more. I found you in front of *Olympia*. You stood there with me, and the other people came and went. Most church services don't last as long as you stood in front of her. Seemed to me you were preoccupied with the cat. You saw the flowers in the maid's hands, you saw Victorine's amazing breasts and her cute little shoes, but then you watched the cat as if you expected it to jump right off the bed. I was disappointed that we didn't look at one another, but maybe that would have broken the spell. I think you wanted to speak to me, but you didn't. I wanted to touch your shoulder, in fact I wanted to kiss your shoulder. But I didn't. I had to wait. Tonight everything is ready. Tonight I'm planning to make love with you. If you come with me, and surrender to me, I will make you happy in more ways than one. I can bring you closer to her. But you will have to choose it. You'll have to show me that you want this. You must choose this."

"Who are you?"

"For now, just call me Sabine."

She feels the warmth of Sabine's breath on her shoulder, then feels her mouth touching there for several long seconds.

"Take your time. Finish your drink. I'll wait for you downstairs."

We move from the known to the unknown. That's what Nica's tenth grade chemistry teacher says. Miz Lefkowicz, who also coaches phys ed, whose girls call her Miz Lezbowicz behind her back, turns from the periodic table of the elements one spring-fever afternoon, and tells the class that science is about moving from the known to the unknown. As she turns, her eyes meet Nica's, and stay there for one second too long. Trapped recognition crosses the spark gap. *Do I know you?*

Miz Lef becomes Victorine stepping off the ship in America during the Civil War. She has a tiny ribbon tied round her throat. She is pregnant, but has grown weary of that French painter's affections. Nica follows her down the gangplank, helping with the luggage.

Sabine squeezes her hand. She's in a car again.

"Almost there."

"Oh."

The car slows, going uphill, and slows even more, turning.

"One thing to remember," Sabine says, "is that anything you say about tonight will make you sound like a blithering fool. It has to be this way. We can't have a horde of carnivores and academics descending around our ears. If you talk, they will think you're quite mad. Are you cool with that?"

"Okay."

Booboo's fingertips stroke Nica's right cheekbone to the corner of her mouth.

"There is a room," Booboo says.

"There is a room," says Sabine. "We're going in to that room together, and we're going to make love. And we're going to be observed. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Nica nods her head, slowly, and moistens the inside of her lips, and shushes that piece of her screaming *stop the car, get me out of this softcore vampire flick, I'm going back to Cali*. It's a little late now.

"And then what?" she asks.

"Then you'll see."

"You will see," Booboo giggling pokes Nica's side. "You will see."

"How many fingers is Booboo holding up?"

"No idea."

"The answer is two."

Sound of gravel under the tires. They are descending a steep incline, maybe a driveway.

"We're here."

Nica's hand reaches for the stocking.

"No, keep it on for now. Please. Let me hold your purse."

When the car door opens, the air is of a garden in the countryside. Insects are chattering in the distance. One night bird sends up occasional questions.

"Take my arm," from her left.

"Take my arm too," from her right.

Two steps up, stop, jangling keys, a lock turning. A low long squeal echoes deep into whatever is beyond. Step up. High heels on marble tiles. It's only when the door booms shut behind her that Nica's mouth goes styrofoam dry. Her heart is pounding now so hard it might tear.

"It's okay. We're with you." The whisper scattering like a dozen mice across the foyer.

Forward. A long carpeted corridor. Smell of dust, mold maybe, a trace of camphor, disinfectant cleaner. A right turn. Another carpeted corridor. A room? The scent of very old books. Stop.

They let go her arms.

"Hold still."

"Don't leave me alone."

"We are here," singsong of Booboo.

They are here. Their presence is only faint breathing, slipping and rustling. Maybe a whole minute passes until Sabine's voice is just behind her.

"Lift up your arms. It's okay."

Her top is lifting away from her torso. Her new red shoes are coming loose.

"What's going on?"

"Trust me." Sabine's voice is more cautioning now than comforting.

Her brassiere is unfastening from behind. Her jeans are unzipping and dragging down over her hips. She wonders how many people are here touching her. She's

getting ticklish. At each unseen touch her body shivers and darts against her will.

The last thing to be removed from her is the stocking over her eyes.

There's no crowd. Only the two women here in the shadows. They're both naked too now. Her first glimpse of Booboo surprises her: the smile of her voice is here in her face, but her hair is crewcut and her features and skin are deeply African.

"Let me look at you," Sabine gently urges her toward the light, and inspects her from head to toe.

Staring back, Nica slowly recognizes her, in a way she didn't before.

"You look like her," she whispers. "A little."

"Like who?" Sabine flashes a smile, momentarily flushing the illusion. But the smile relaxes to just a trace, and the resemblance creeps back. Yes. This woman's eyes are just as plainspoken as those of Victorine. Just as clear and unjudging. Her face is very gently triangular, a wide round arrowhead, a soft point to the chin, even a dimple there if not an actual cleft. Her hair is not quite red, not as long, but just as wavy. And there is the same unnerving pallor to her flesh.

"Like Victorine," she says. A shiver lurking behind her hipbones scoots up her spine like a startled tarantula.

"Let's go inside," Sabine says, and leads the way. One leg white and one black, she's still wearing a single stocking. Booboo steps forward too, passing under the arch, then turns and holds out her hand.

"Come."

The light falls softly from a single high fixture, clouded with opals, possibly real ones. The ballroom, if it is a ballroom, is transected by a long broad corridor leading into shadow on both sides. What furniture she can make out, and there isn't much, seems to be of the eighteenth century. Just where the light falls off to dimness, the walls are hung with old paintings in gilt frames. The focus of the room, where the peachy light glows brightest, is a bed. Or something like a bed. It is low, wide, and somehow distantly Roman. The many fabrics adorning it could be precious metals or potable liquids. Tubular bolsters in gold satin line one end, forming the head of the bed, beyond which Nica can see a little table bedecked with different bottles, glasses, and possibly mechanized implements of debauchery. Sabine is already on the bed, kneeling there in one black stocking, just looking at her and waiting.

Now, far away down the corridor at her left, a pianist begins to play Chopin.

A wordless panic comes, the feeling that she is more naked than before. She feels stupid, embarrassed. She starts to back away from the bed, but Booboo is there behind her, a soft caress hardening to concrete.

"Courage," Booboo whispers. And throws her forward onto the bed.

"Yes," Sabine tells her, with her hands and with her lips. "Yes. We are not alone, we are exposed. We are on display. Just like she was. Can you handle it?"

"I don't know," she confesses to the bedspread.

"Just feel."

She closes her eyes and forces herself to breathe deep. *Feel this.* The forest of stroking, the path of kisses worming its way up the backside of her thigh. *Am I choosing this?* The ambiguity is twisting inside her gut, working an effect on her of which she ought to be ashamed. She *is* ashamed. How can she be letting a thing like this happen to her? The touch of a moist tongue across her shoulderblades. A hand squeezing the inner curve of her left buttock. Consciousness grows deeper redder blacker. She twists her head to the right, and thinks she can see the wheels of a wheelchair in the corridor, before a knee occludes her view. The stocking is off now.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"I don't know," she confesses.

"I'll give you a hint," Sabine says, and uses them.

She's stretched out on her back, wrists bound together in silk, and Sabine's eyes are in her eyes, their foreheads pressed together in agony. *You remember me now.* She's on her hands and knees, using her tongue just as other tongues are used on her, just as we forgive those who trespass against us. *And put this in your mouth. Put this in my mouth.* She is under, over, between, across, within, without. *Touch me.* A moment comes when the feeling of being cared for grows so strong inside that she forgets to ask herself what time it is in California. Or that there is such a thing as California. *Baby got an atom bomb.* The light in the room is getting brighter. Someone cries out.

She sits up.

She looks toward the corridor. Booboo is there by the doorway, with her hand on the old rotary dimmer.

"Cognac?"

"Thank you."

They touch glasses. The piano music has stopped.

Nica tips her glass a long way before the liquid touches her tongue. She tastes.

"One more thing." Sabine rises from the bed. Passing, she grabs a handful of Nica's tangled hair, and brings it with her. Which causes Nica to follow, stumbling across the floor.

"Ow. You're hurting me," she says to the hardwood floorboards.

"Yes," says Sabine. "But not too much. Only just enough. I'm good that way."

Approaching the wall she flings Nica forward, so she lands with her hands on the console table. Her glass slams down on the marble, but doesn't quite break in her hand. A bit of cognac rocks out onto the back of her hand. Sabine yanks her head now, forcing Nica to look at the painting hanging there. Nica feels exposed again, as if she's about to be spanked, or sodomized, or something.

"This is me keeping my part of the bargain," Sabine says softly. "Look."

A landscape with a peasant woman in a pale saffron bonnet, just in the act of hoisting a yoke with two dairy pails, seeming off balance, as if she might fall, with three crows watching her from the sky.

"I'm looking."

"Look carefully."

Her eyes drift across the dim farmland, the straw and brambles, until she comes to the lower right corner, where she encounters some writing.

V L MEUREND '78.

Nica steps back a bit, licking the cognac off her hand. She turns and approaches the next painting. Slightly smaller. A still life with forget-me-nots growing from a basket, well past their season, withering, with a scarf of expensive silk beneath them, shimmering violet echoing the tiny blooms, the folds embracing a gold locket on a chain. V L MEUREND '80.

Now her eyes are sweeping this wall, frantically gulping down forms and colors. She becomes aware of a distant pain, her fingernails digging into her scalp. She's growing quite faint now. Suddenly she remembers to breathe, and when she does, it comes sharply like a cry.

She turns. Sabine and Booboo are sitting together calmly on the bed, just watching.

"This can't be," Nica says. "Are they all ... all of them?"

Sabine shakes her head. "We think the *Bourgeois* is somewhere in Poland now. We know it was in Berlin during the war."

"The war. Oh my God the war."

"Mmm. War hates art."

She is drawn to a portrait, a man with a long white beard, sitting forward on a broad plank chair in a garden. There's something ripe about him and dead at the same time. Hands folded, lips pinched in a kind of smirk, but not one of delight. He is regarding, not us, but apparently something more beautiful than us, slightly to our right. He's not looking at us. V L MEUREND '82, it says. She would be thirty-eight then.

"Who's the guy with the beard?"

"That's Manet."

She draws a sharp breath. "There you are, you bastard. And this guy?"

"That's Stevens, I think."

"Did she paint all the men who painted her?"

"No, not all."

Nica backs away further from the wall, and turns to the next wall.

"Who owns this collection?"

"Someone quite rich."

She glances back again. "Then where do you fit in to this?"

Sabine regards her wiggling painted toes, and smiles a sneaky smile. "I'm just a friend. I'll be okay, don't worry about me."

She looks at Nica with eyes twinkling just like the lady at the picnic.

"But I don't understand." She's frowning. "Why is this a secret? There's beauty here. Why are they hidden?"

Booboo giggles. Sabine bites her lip and tips her head a little.

"I can only speculate. If the existence of this collection were made public, some expensive new security arrangements would be necessary. Then there's the barrage of inquiries from scumsucking paparazzi historians and curators and all that. And then there are potential legal disputes, because in 1945 some of these purchases would have been considered stolen property. The person who owns this collection is old, and probably doesn't want to be bothered with all that rubbish. How are you feeling?"

Nica's eyes have wandered further. Now she freezes.

"Oh. Oh."

The nudes. Two women, meaty and ferocious, back to back, their elbows locked together as if one is about to flip the other. Both faces turned slightly toward us, their eyes seeking each other's, but unable quite to reach. The one on the right, looking the younger of the two, is arching her back in a most lascivious curve. In the distance, Nica thinks she can make out silhouettes of a crowd of onlookers. In the corner, V L MEUREND '84.

"It's scandalous," Nica says. She's feeling a little dizzy.

"Better look behind you."

Nica turns around. But there are so many.

"Over the fireplace."

Nica screams.

The two women on the bed are laughing.

Nica falls across the room as if it has been turned on end. V L MEUREND '92. She slowly lifts her eyes to the face. It's a portrait of Victorine — this one by her own hand.

The face in the painting is somewhat larger than life, and longer than in youth. In this, she has neither the delicacy of Stevens' light, nor the ill-mannered flattening of Manet's. The skin is painted the way skin must really *feel*. There's something itchy, splotchy, uneven but not unbeautiful. The lower lip is receding more, now framed with deep lines that will be jowls soon enough. The hair, now pulled straight back behind her, has gone from sienna to pale peach. The eyes have drawn back a bit, sinking in, growing smaller. But none of the candor has faded. In fact they seem clearer here than in anything the others made of her.

Nica can hear herself droning the name of God, can feel the source of her voice rising up in her throat toward that place where it lives when we are weeping.

"How are you feeling?" Sabine says, just behind her left shoulder. "Are you getting sleepy at all?"

Nica turns, and looks her in the eye. And drops into her arms.

She is dimly aware of being cared for, looked after, kept warm. She feels nothing but love surrounding her. Then she feels nothing.

Then her phone is ringing. Pesky thing. She wishes it was someone else's phone, but she knows it by its song. It rings four times, then stops.

She senses daylight, but doesn't want to open her eyes, not yet. She feels herself propped up in a bed, with cushions behind her back. Must be a different bed, because there were no windows in that other place.

Out of curiosity she lifts her head and looks down at herself.

She's still naked.

Her left hand is resting across her lower abdomen, with the fingers on her right thigh. There's something tied around her throat that wasn't there before. There's something stuck in her hair. She lifts her hand to feel it: something like a flower. It is a flower, a big one. She squints. She looks at her shoes, and wonders how they got on her feet. Beyond her shoes, there's a black shape at the foot of the bed. It's her handbag. She's still picking at the flower over her ear. Then she looks off to her right — and quickly places her hand back where it was.

At which instant one of them snaps a photo. The flash blinds her.

She may be dreaming this. But no, her phone rings again, beside her on the bed.

"Mom? Yeah. I'll have to call you back."

She leans to slip the phone into her handbag.

Someone taps his knuckles on the plate glass of the shop window, wondering if she's okay. Someone else is smiling dreamily. Two more passersby stop, glance, and fall still in shock. A car horn is bleating in the street beyond. She sits up on the edge of the bed, and looks out at the people looking in.

They are old and young, tourist and domestic, bemused and horrified, smoking and non. She would study them. But some of them soon grow squirmy under her gaze, and look away, and walk away. Then others arrive to take their place. Nica watches them come and go. For now, there's not much else to do on a Sunday morning in Paris.

[v 06, 06 July 2004 Amsterdam]