

THE JOKER

by

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Chapter 1

She hadn't even been attracted to him at first. He had a languid way about him, out of sync with the party, which was merry with music, candles and freshly baked cookies served on large aluminum trays. She didn't like his friend either, a blue-eyed morose type slackened by heroin and punk rock, with needle marks that she recognized on his hands with her professionally trained eyes. Other than her friend Robin from the hospital she knew no one and was waiting for the alcohol to kick in. She'd had one Margarita already and was on her way to get a second glass. The languid guy emerged in front of her unexpectedly, wearing a sly and welcoming smile.

"I'm Greg," he said. "Bored?"

She shrugged neither yes nor no. Music made it hard to talk and hear. They danced, she drank, they smoked cigarettes. She began to feel dizzy and light and almost cheerful. It was New Year's Eve, a night to be happy and crazy. Greg was easy to be with – or maybe the Margaritas made it easy. She wore a skirt. She didn't object when he put his hand on her back and then on her buttocks, slightly lifting the fabric up. It was pleasant. They left early, as soon as the ball fell on Times Square and glasses were clinked in hopeful celebration of the future. How could it be, she said, that the step from one year to the next was only a second long? He shrugged his shoulders. How could it be that you live one moment and die the next?

While fireworks exploded in the sky they took a cab to her place in Stuyvesant Town. Streets were full, bars boomed with music, couples hugged and cabs swished by. Greg kissed her, fondling her breasts with cold palms and squeezing her nipples. She succumbed shyly, pressed into the cab's leather by his knee. He whispered something. She emerged from the erotic sea dazed.

“What?”

“What's your name?”

“Eva.”

“Eva,” he chuckled. “Eve. I'm Adam.”

A stupid joke but she played along, “I want my apple first.”

He laughed, heartily and excitedly, and ordered the driver to stop at the corner. Watching his long-limbed body stride into the deli, she considered escaping, but hesitated out of a strange sense of obligation. Greg returned holding an apple.

“So,” he said as she bit into the juicy flesh. It sprayed her face with tiny droplets. “It's the beginning of time.”

Upstairs, they took a shower together. He had a beautiful, boyish body, almost hairless, lean and straight, with a thin waist and firm round buttocks. In bed, his long hair tickled her face, and his hands were surprisingly soft. Their lovemaking was unhurried and sensual. “Eva!” he cried out when he came; she liked it and suppressed the temptation to call him Adam.

The next morning he didn't ask for her phone number. She took it stoically, telling herself that it didn't matter. Over the next few days, the memory of their sex lingered and she kept thinking about Greg despite herself. In the evenings she stayed in, hoping he would come or maybe leave a note. On the third night something rustled under the front door. Excited, she ran out of her room.

“What is it?” asked her roommate grumpily.

“Just a restaurant ad,” Eva replied with false indifference. “Orchid Garden. Let's order?”

They did. The food was all right, of the popular Asian fusion kind.

Picking at soft, wasabi-spiced noodles with her chopsticks, Eva tried to remember Greg's face but couldn't, only the sensation of his hair brushing against her body. After a week she was cured of love but not of shame: There must have been something wrong with her if he didn't even ask for her number. Maybe her butt was too fat.

It was a cold January night, with snowfalls and frosty wind sweeping the city. Sitting in her office in the ER, dreamily gazing out the window at the dark wind-ravaged square, Eva wished she could leave, cross the street, and, escaping the noise of the city, enter the familiar surroundings of Stuyvesant Town, with its vast tranquility, elderly oddballs feeding the squirrels, and her own quiet apartment into which she had moved after her mother, Eleanor, had left for Paris in search of glamour and money five years ago. Eva closed her eyes and sighed, imagining how she'd run a bath and change into her pajamas, and then, warm and fragrant, recline on her sofa to watch the new episode of "24." It wasn't going to happen. She knew the night shift was going to be busy; the residents' wisdom and her own experience said that such evenings brought in a lot of the homeless. She clicked on the Internet Explorer icon to check her e-mail just as her beeper went off.

"Dr. Leigh!" she answered, intoning the firm, muscle-flexing competency she used in her hospital life.

The call came from the pediatric ER, and she rushed out to evaluate a ten-year old boy, overweight and clumsy, who cheerfully told her he had eaten a whole toothpaste out of curiosity. He appeared to Eva just like a normal kid, no trace of depression, a little bored with waiting in the ER and long over the shock that still lingered in his plump mom's eyes. His stomach had been pumped and he asked Eva hopefully, "Will I lose weight?"

"Sure, just don't drink too much soda. And no more toothpaste, okay?"

In the office again, Eva checked her e-mail. There were no personal messages, just medical news, a Delta SkyMiles statement, Citibank ads and spam.

Around eight she interviewed four homeless alcoholics seeking admission to get food and shelter for the night, all with the same story: “I hear voices that tell me to kill myself.” “Are they male or female?” Eva would ask, and they would return her a blank stare. A “Mr. Jones” pulled off his boots and unbound the bandages around his feet. His toes looked like rotting tomatoes, red with black and white patches, the spaces between the toes full with maggots. Eva held her breath, overwhelmed by the stench and struggling to remain professional.

Late at night, red-eyed and heavy, she was called to see a recovering heroin addict on Methadone. His girlfriend had just passed away after taking one of his pills, too large a dose for her drug-naïve body. “I want to die!” he screamed when the paramedics arrived at his house and performed a useless resuscitation on the girl, trying to ease his despair. He was still screaming when Eva saw him, words impossible, pain tearing his vocal cords with shrill empty howls. She spoke cautiously and respectfully, letting her compassion glide over him until they found a sad melody through which to talk to one other and he settled down with the look of a forlorn child on his tired face. He told her his story, up to the details of the dress his girlfriend was wearing that night, the dress he’d bought for her at an Escada sale a month ago. Eva nodded and breathed deeply, trying not to cry with him. After he left, lucid and tamed by her tenderness, she stayed at her desk for a while, full of compassion and awe at the face of destiny – full also of pride at having been helpful, as if she, too, were one of fate’s hands, a goddess of hope and forgiveness allowed to exist only in this screening room, devoid of her own personal history.

Between patients Eva ran out to get bitter, over-brewed coffee, which she cured with cream and sugar, and to smoke cigarettes, thumping her feet on the thawing snow and warming her freezing fingers on the hot cup. At four in the morning she finally retired to the on-call room where someone was already blissfully snoring on one of the cots. She made the bed and crawled under a thin blanket that smelled of starch and anti-roach detergent. Expecting to be paged at any time, she

tossed and turned in a state of drowsy agitation until, just as she was dropping off, the beeper rang, bursting the silence with mechanical shrieks, and she jolted up, her heart thumping wildly.

“Dr. Leigh! I was paged!”

“This is surgery. We need a psych consult for a fifty-two year old female who refuses a procedure...”

Eva was light and happy as she finally made her way home at noon, mission accomplished, excitement and tiredness mixing in one. Snow was everywhere, fresh and sparkling on the roofs of the cars and by the curbs. It was a clear, luminous day, and Eva laughed and sang along with Bryan Ferry on her iPod.

And there was Greg, waiting for her outside her apartment, drawing circles with his foot in the snow. His thin grey coat was open and hands were in his pockets. A red scarf was wrapped carelessly around his neck.

“I came by last night. Your roommate told me you’d be coming home around noon,” he said timidly. “I didn’t know you were a doctor. Do I disturb?”

“Come in!” she said, smiling and unlocking the door.

After avid lovemaking he made his introduction, which was not glamorous. Stuttering through his story he told her that he temporarily lived with his parents, worked as a waiter in Luca’s Lounge, wrote songs and was a modern troubadour.

“A troubadour?” she repeated. “How romantic.”

To refresh her memory she looked it up on Wikipedia, stumbling over the description of the infamous duke: The Count of Poitiers was one of the most courtly men in the world and one of the greatest deceivers of women. He was a fine knight at arms, liberal in his womanizing, and a fine composer and singer of songs. He traveled much through the world, seducing women.

“Seducing women!” she read aloud mockingly.

“I know. That reminds me, I wrote a song for you. A song for Eva.”

And he sang his simple and sentimental song to her, and she was seduced.

Evas don't exist, just in fairy-tales.

Yes, my dear, that's fine, you may call me another name.

Is it the name of love? Is it the name of death?

Darling, just stop the cab,

and bring me a juicy apple

and a different, better name,

to deceive the serpent.

After Greg moved in with her, Eva was happy. The sense of vulnerability didn't leave her completely but was numbed by his attentive presence. They made love and talked for hours, and for those intense nights, full of life and dreams, she was grateful and forgiving. Something about her changed, she was more flirtatious and full of secret joy. And yet she lived on the verge. The feeling didn't leave her that this fullness of being could not last.

Eva's mother called from Paris, where she lived a slovenly, isolated life, getting fatter and more hypochondriac by the day, and complaining of imagined diseases, of the French, and of boredom. She had moved to Paris with her third husband five years ago, then still a freshly plump woman, and stayed behind after he divorced her, fighting battles in court to get part of his family estate. The lawsuit dragged on in an unhurried European fashion, and over time Eleanor lost the will to return and settled into a small and greedy routine: spending Claude's money, bingeing on food, and worrying about getting sick. Conversations between her and Eva were always the same.

"Oh, thank God I finally get to talk to you," her mother would say, sighing loudly into the receiver. She was a master at sighing, at all its different kinds of heaves, inducing alternately guilt, compassion, and a shared sense of irremediable boredom and tragedy of existence. "My back pain

isn't getting better," she'd said just the other day, and then paused, implying that Eva's advices of the previous week had failed her and therefore it was Eva's fault she wasn't improving.

"Mom, I told you to go to the doctor if you continue to have pain," Eva said with tired defensiveness.

"You're not listening! Doctors here are bad. And they don't understand me! They don't even try! It's not America. They're arrogant decadents, all of them."

"Then come back," Eva said, wishing guiltily that her mother would stay in Paris forever.

"Well, you live in my apartment now. Do you know how much money you're saving? Oh," she sighed again. "This city is so expensive. I wish I had a rent-stabilized place."

"Isn't Claude paying, anyway?" Eva asked irritably.

"Well, all his money goes toward the rent! I don't have friends because I don't have money to go out. And, of course, they don't like Americans here anyway. I told the grocer the other day, I am not Bush! Don't blame me! I can't even afford theatre tickets!"

You don't even speak French, why would you go to a theatre? Eva thought, but didn't say anything. "And the pains are killing me. I think I have breast cancer. I sweat at night. I watched Dr. Gupta on CNN the other day. Did you know that night sweats are a sign of cancer?"

"Mom, night sweats are a general symptom, they're not specific for any illness."

"Don't you talk down to me!" her mother shrieked and then let out her longest and most miserable sigh, followed by a tense silence.

"Okay. I've got to go now. Hope you feel better," Eva said flatly.

"How's this boyfriend of yours? What's his name again?" her mother went on as if Eva hadn't said anything at all.

"Greg."

"Yes, the Russian. Is he working yet?"

"He works in a bar."

“In a bar! Be careful! Russians are crude, uncultured and alcoholics. Surely you know this. A Russian in a bar!”

Eva had hung up. Her resentment, sense of duty and pity for her mother bubbled in one pot, finding no outlet. She couldn't resolve it with Eleanor. Sometimes, she tried to love her mother and forgive her, remembering little good things of her childhood, the simple comforting intimacy of mother and daughter baking cupcakes together and then watching “adult” movies on TV, where men fought wars and women were kissed and then got pregnant, giving rise to little Eva's theory of procreation: The kissing couple's saliva would mix and go down to the stomach, where it would form a tiny baby that would grow over many months – much like “Grow the Monster” worked over a couple of days. At these memories Eva attempted to smile now, but they became juiceless and worn from frequent use over time.

Then the pain of an unloved and abandoned child would return. Having lost her father early, she was shipped from relative to relative, once staying under the care of a schizophrenic uncle of her mother's second husband for a month. The man, whose name escaped her now, was hunched, old and kindly in the clumsy way of someone who had never had a child. He taught her to play the piano, and while she pressed the keys, he sometimes mumbled to himself behind her back, filling her with affection and fear of his strange, rare illness. Mother had a terrifying presence: yelling, slapping, ignoring, and yet herself needy and craving of absolute love. “Do you love me more than anyone in the world?” she demanded daily of Eva, and, with downcast eyes, Eva would nod and say yes. Eva craved her mother's love. It took years for her to realize that Eleanor was too enveloped in herself. The world was there to serve her; other people were not real, and her little daughter was just a shadow of Eleanor's own self, existing to obey, admire, and serve.

It was still hard for Eva to talk about this to anyone. She would become breathless with anxiety, as if the omnipotent mother of her childhood could suddenly emerge in front of her and slap her back into nothingness with her perfumed, cruel hands. Eva would feel guilty. She had

grown up feeling guilty and deserving of punishment, but also angry at her mother and entitled to love, and, in her other dimension, feeling an urgent, unbearable at times, sense of purpose. During those moments of inspiration teenage Eva would stand in front of the mirror and dance to the rhythms of the Pet Shop Boys, Michael Jackson, and REM. She could be strong and light only when she was alone. Among people she faltered, feeling awkward and ugly, just like Eleanor told her she was, daily and well into her adolescence.

Awkwardness still befell Eva frequently, although maturation helped her to feel more “normal.” That was the word she used with herself: normal.

“Normal?” Greg laughed. “I haven’t known anyone more normal than you. You transcend normalcy. You’re beautiful.”

“In med school, I interviewed a patient once and asked one of those naïve questions that med students ask: ‘Why do you use drugs when it’s so bad for you?’ He was still a young man, but very thin, almost toothless, and sick. He closed his eyes and said with this explosive yearning, ‘That first time I shot heroin I knew what people meant when they said they were normal.’”

“Wow! So, did you ever try drugs?”

“Not heroin. Although tempting, it was a cautionary tale. Also, I was afraid of the whole package that comes with it: needles, AIDS, abscesses, toothlessness. But I did try cocaine once, and LSD. And pot, of course. The last time I smoked I spent half the night in someone’s bathroom staring at a doorknob unable to move, and that was it. Booze is good enough.”

In college, Eva discovered another self. She learned to be gregarious in her dorm life, and sexy and attractive with her boyfriends. That second self co-existed with the first, always fighting for the upper hand in the battle for her self-representation. But only with Greg was it allowed to shine, casting her dark and guilty side into exile. She had never known such a pure joy of togetherness.

Sometimes, in those early winter evenings, snug under the old moth-eaten plaid on the sofa in the living room, lights dimmed and candles burning on the table next to their empty dinner plates, they would sip tea and play strange games that Greg called “psychological.”

“If you had to live on an uninhabited island until the end of your days, and could choose just two companions, who would they be?”

“You, and...”

They would giggle then, nervous and grateful, and content with the metaphor of marriage not chosen but thrust upon them by shipwreck or punishment.

She loved being adored, seeing herself through his eyes. Even when talking about her unhappiness, she was perfect, and confessions of imperfection were abstract, understood, and worked through like the accounts of Freud’s cures resting on her bookshelves.

“You’re my holding environment,” she told Greg. They had just made love, and still breathing hard, Greg asked,

“What’s a holding environment?”

“It’s a concept adopted by one of the early psychoanalysts, Heinz Kohut. He believed that psychotherapy should offer a protective and loving environment to compensate for unhappy childhoods. His patients stayed in therapy for ten or more years, five times a week.”

“Just five times a week? That makes me a super-holding environment,” Greg whispered stroking her cheek.

Later, in the privacy of a shower, hot water gushing over her face, Eva felt skeptical of Kohut’s theories. She wondered whether Kohut’s method made an infant of a patient, creating dependency that could be very hard to break later on. Neuroses often went away without any intervention, and after ten years it would be impossible to say if it was therapy that helped or just life and chance finally kicking in. Wrapped in a towel, she stepped into the coziness of her living room. Greg lay on the sofa watching TV, his slippers overturned on the carpet. Eva stretched out next to him and

wrapped her arms around his neck. Suddenly it seemed too cumbersome to explain the intricacies of her thoughts. Psychiatry had to remain whole, untainted by doubt and magical, transferring those qualities onto her. It was a conscious process. She was the shaper of her happiness.

One day Greg returned with a cat.

“Her name is Ska!” he said lovingly, scratching behind her peaked ears. The cat was white with brown spots on her sides and a black tail. She purred, rolling on her side, then walked to Eva’s leg, brushing against it.

“Our building doesn’t allow animals,” Eva answered cautiously.

“I know, but no one’s going to find out. She’s not going out, she’s a cat!”

Ska stayed, and with her arrival Greg acquired a slightly different status in Eva’s house, as if it weren’t a cat but an engagement ring, holding promise and binding them together.

A couple of months passed. Greg became more relaxed and confident. He did not feel obliged to shave daily or comb his hair in the mornings, and he was less talkative. He often stayed behind when Eva left for work in the mornings, yawning while kissing her goodbye, his blue eyes dreamy and soft. He stopped announcing glamorous plans for each day, such as his attendance at recordings and rehearsals, and twice he failed to pay his half of the rent. Eva sometimes worried about these changes, but she was grateful for having him. In the evenings, they read and watched TV, her head on his chest, his hair tickling her face. They made love, and Ska would jump up on their laps, purr and brush them with her fur. Greg cooked and cleaned; from time to time he gave Eva a little smile or a quick warm embrace and it sufficed just to be together and comfortable without talking. It was the way of happily married couples, Eva thought. Greg was her friend, her cook, and her lover, great in all his roles.

Eva dreamed of going through a dark wet tunnel with a flashlight, running away from an invisible danger. Greg was with her, helplessly lagging behind, and repeatedly she had to urge him to hurry up. When the shrieking began, she yelled for help, sitting upright and with blood-chilling horror realizing that the screams were coming from Greg. It took a couple of seconds for her own dream to retreat and her scientific mind to kick in. Shaking his shoulders, she shouted,

“Greg, it’s okay! It’s just a bad dream! Wake up!”

But he wouldn’t wake up. He continued to scream, piercing the air with the unnatural guttural sound of a hurt and frightened beast. Eva turned on the lights. Greg’s eyes were half-open, his irises drowning behind his eyelids. He wailed and violently flailed his arms. With her orange eyes Ska watched from the corner, her back curved, and Eva shooed her away into the living room. It’s a sleep terror, it will end, she kept telling herself. She held him, stroked his long blond hair and whispered tender words into his ear, although she knew he wouldn’t remember them: neither his dreams and fright nor her tenderness. It felt liberating to do something good without the expectation of a payback. How had other women reacted? Eva wondered. How many of them had left him on account of this?

Greg shrieked for fifteen minutes, and then it ended as abruptly as it had begun and he drifted into a deep, quiet sleep. Eva tossed and turned for a while, leaving the lights on.

The next morning, Greg woke up in a foul mood and stumbled around the kitchen as if still possessed by his dream.

“You screamed last night,” she said gently. “For a long-long time.”

He stole a glance at her and nodded.

“Does it often happen?”

He put a slice of toast on the plate in front of her and poured a glass of orange juice.

“It happens once in a while,” he said. “I was a ‘lunatic’ as a child.”

“A lunatic?” she repeated and burst out laughing.

“That’s what my parents call nightwalkers,” he explained, blushing with a soft smile.

“They do? That’s funny.” Tenderly, apologetically, she stroked his arm, not letting him go.

“That’s what Russians call nightwalkers,” he continued in a brighter voice. “Called by the moon.”

“It was pretty awful. You should’ve told me.”

“I thought that maybe once I met you it would go away.”

“You flatterer! Do you know you’re a flatterer, lunatic?” She laughed again.

“God, am I lucky to have a doctor for a girlfriend! Do you really have to go to work today, after working the night shift? We could cuddle a little and then go back to sleep.”

It was tempting, and Eva took two sips of coffee before answering.

“No,” she said. “I can’t. I have patients scheduled.”

“I love you. I mean it.”

“You must have frightened off all the other girls,” she said, her heart bursting with joy. She didn’t feel the need to reciprocate, and was grateful for that. It was too early to talk about love. Love meant marriage and kids and living happily ever after.

Greg always got up with Eva, made her toast with butter and strawberry marmalade and a hot latte on the Nespresso machine he had purchased with her credit card shortly after moving in. In his striped boxer shorts and the torn pink t-shirt he slept in, he would move around the kitchen with a tired expression. Was it a ritual that saved him from guilt?

“You don’t have to get up!” she suggested a couple of times. “Go back to sleep.”

She remembered: That was how their living together had started.

“Go on, go to work, I’ll clean up. Really, I mean it!” he said – and stayed on, first one day, then another, until his beaten suitcase arrived with its roaches and holey socks and he moved in for

good. At the time, his idleness seemed a small price to pay. How big was the price, really, she sometimes wondered nowadays, trying to reason her way out of the flashes of irritation.

“All services provided!” Greg announced after each time he made love to her, cooked her dinner, washed the dishes or fed the cat. These announcements amused Eva even though she could sense he wasn’t entirely joking. He said it flatly and mechanically, the way people mutter “fine” to the question “How are you?” She didn’t grasp right away that he was defining himself in this unassuming way.

It irked her to return from work to see Greg still there, dazed and lazy from lying around all day, often with moisture in the corners of his eyes and his hair tangled as though he had just woken up. She wanted to shake him alive and make him do things: go to college, work, be ambitious.

“How can I look for a job if I’m a housewife?” he would retort.

“I didn’t hire you, for God’s sake! Just get off your butt and do something! Anything!”

Eva was efficient and mature in the common sense of these words, but she could also be prickly, with an edge in her voice that was loud and sharp, like a knife sticking out. She hated this voice for its shallow and squashed ugliness. It was partly the reason why it was so hard for her to discuss her differences with Greg. His deep and smooth baritone absorbed her little pricks like a river, leaving her helpless and frustrated in her inability to express herself. Her best arguments happened when she was drunk, and in time Greg came to learn that her pouring herself a third glass of wine over dinner often meant an imminent fight. His tactic was simply to agree with her, repeating and accepting the words she used to describe him – a psychological technique called mirroring. It had not come as easily to Eva in her professional training; Greg used it instinctively.

“I know I’m wasting my life. I wish I could figure out how to change myself. Maybe you can help me,” he would say, and her anger would pass. Eagerly, he dreamed with her together about all the things that could be his someday, and this brought Eva an intense satisfaction, undiminished by her knowledge, deep-down, that he was a pleaser. Even when she yelled at him she wanted to

weep and hold him and say she was sorry. He was soft, gentle. He loved her in a way of fairy-tales, like no one else ever had.

Trying to picture her life before Greg, Eva recalled an incessant hunger for life, an unquiet existence, empty and bare like a long white wall. She was happy now, and if she felt mad at times, it was surely her fault: her own ambitions she imposed on Greg, her overblown ideas of autonomy. She had to learn the art of kindness from him. Of course, sooner or later, he had to start a more normal life. But she had to be patient. She had in her the power of empathy and persuasion that made her a good psychiatrist. She would help him grow up. His idleness was a small price to pay.

Chapter 2

Greg was from a Russian family. In this other life of his, his parents called him Grisha or, when the talk was serious, Grigory. He was five when they emigrated from Moscow, a child of repression and totalitarianism. This background added a new spiral of romanticism to Eva's feelings about him.

Next to his parents Greg became different in ways Eva couldn't fully understand. He was full of glossy aplomb and reassuring smiles and he lost his self-deprecating humor. Turning to Eva to explain or interpret, he smiled differently – sheepishly and sadly, an awkward apology in his eyes for himself and for his parents. He was embarrassed by how they dressed and by their home, by their accents and by little hints and meanings in their cautious questions that ran like avenues of irritation straight from his childhood, of which Eva knew so little.

Eva found Greg's parents endearing. Everything about their life seemed old-fashioned and cozy to her, even Greg's gentlemanly father Vladimir, a fussy, diminutive man who often looked frightened and perplexed at the same time and held strong opinions about life and politics. His favorite word with Eva was "wonderful." She looked wonderful no matter how tired; everything she said was wonderful; his wife Olga was consistently wonderful and the world was a wonderful place in which to live. Sometimes it seemed to Eva that Vladimir tried to cancel her out by acting agreeable, but she kindly ignored this. Vladimir was insecure. He had a thick Russian accent that she had to wade through to arrive at the meaning of his words. He was a self-made man. He endeavored to be pleasant. And, he was Greg's father.

Greg often told Eva different stories: of Vladimir's volatile temper, his drinking, his shouting sprees with Olga, his stinginess, his insomnia, his hatred for America. Father and son quarreled a lot on the phone. Although it was in Russian, of which Eva knew only a couple of words, she sensed that it was over the same topic that fueled her own arguments with Greg: work, future,

responsibility. She remained quiet, studying Greg for signs of awakening. Maybe his father could bring the message home. Or maybe having several messengers would make a difference.

Greg's mother Olga was kind-hearted, musical and superstitious, often knocking on the wood and spitting three times over her left shoulder whenever she wanted a wish to come true. Was she worried about Greg too? Eva often wondered, looking into Olga's calm eyes, which smiled at Eva through heavy-framed glasses.

There was no special occasion for this particular Sunday visit, and yet Greg was unusually excited on the way to his parents' house, talking non-stop and fondling Eva's hand affectionately on the train.

"What is it?" she asked, yielding to his caresses. It had been over a year that they lived together, but their lovemaking was as intense as in the first week, and she was silently proud of it. Erotic longing made her move closer to Greg. He laughed happily, touching her forehead with his.

"You're going to meet Anna today," he said.

Anna was a healer whom Greg's family had known forever. Years ago she and her husband had treated – and apparently cured – Vladimir's stomach cancer after his doctors had given him a death sentence. Greg had been fifteen at the time and could not remember all the details.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Eva asked. "I almost thought you were planning to announce our engagement."

He turned red. "Sorry, I didn't think about that. But you wouldn't..."

"No, I wouldn't. It was a joke."

They fell silent, their hands falling apart.

Greg's parents lived in Bay Ridge, in a small townhouse they had bought years ago before the real estate boom. Vladimir owned a grocery store, which he had named Papa's Deli, featuring mostly Russian but also Spanish food to suit the neighborhood market. He ran it well, in his thrifty

way, and Greg believed his father had amassed a small fortune. “My pension!” Greg called it. But if the Spasskys did have money, nothing of it showed on the surface. They continued to rent out their second floor and seemed never to buy any new clothes, frozen in the fashion of their youth.

In their modest two-bedroom Olga decorated the walls with striped wallpaper and put in dark wooden cabinets, massive bookcases, and two-ply curtains: breezy white to shield themselves from their neighbors’ eyes, and heavy dark, pulled shut to block out the sun. On the floors were two large, worn-out carpets brought from Moscow; a smaller Eastern rug hung on the wall in the living room. Pots with plants and flowers crowded the window-sills and in the kitchen Olga nurtured a wide arrangement of different herbs: fresh dill, cilantro, rosemary, spring onions and basil sprouting out of long wooden crates built and painted green by Vladimir. Dried pumpkins of different shapes and colors sat on top of the kitchen cabinets year-round. When visiting children took them down to play, the gourds rattled and stained little fingers with a film of dust that covered them like hats of snow.

Olga met her son and his girlfriend heartily, planting three fragile kisses on Eva’s cheeks as if Eva were a flower. As was customary in their house, Eva took off her shoes, even though it was a dry summer day. Olga offered fluffy pink slippers that Eva refused with an amiable chuckle.

Greg spoke softly with his mother.

“Anna’s here,” he said turning to Eva. They heard voices from the kitchen.

Holding hands, Greg and Eva entered, Olga following behind. The early afternoon light was streaming in from the window, and Eva could not see Anna’s face clearly at first, just the full shape of her seated body. Anna and Vladimir rose. Greg and Eva were cordially greeted and seated at the table, already set for the meal.

“Anna is like our sister,” said Vladimir seriously.

“Greg has told me about you,” Eva said, nodding pleasantly in Anna’s direction. Anna answered with a soft smile. Her plain face was framed by salt-and-pepper shoulder-length hair that

made her look older than she was. She wore no makeup. Her gray eyes were clear and deep with a calm and friendly intelligence. And yet, there was something subdued in her shape.

“Would you like some cabbage soup, Eva?” Olga asked, and Eva nodded. Anna was watching her. When Eva shifted uncomfortably, Anna stretched her palm toward Eva without touching her.

“Anna and Ben saved my life,” said Vladimir.

“Ben is my husband,” Anna explained in flawless, almost accent-free English.

Eva was thankful when the soup was served. She did not believe in wonders, and, although she was curious, she did not feel like asking questions just now. Instead she said,

“Your English is so good.”

“I have to thank Ben for it,” Anna replied eagerly. “And for everything I am.”

They ate golubtsi, chewy beefsteaks wrapped in cabbage leaves. Complimenting Olga on her cooking, Eva noted,

“Cabbage must be very popular in Russia.”

They talked about food. Then, inevitably, politics.

“What do you think of Putin?” Eva asked innocently. Greg giggled.

“I wish you wouldn’t start them on that!”

“My wife doesn’t share my opinion,” Vladimir explained. “But here is what I think: Putin is a criminal, and that’s all there is to say.”

Olga carried away the dirty dishes, dried her hands on her apron, and nervously settled down.

“I think Putin is a good president. Economy is growing, people’s life improved, mafia is being ruled in,” she said. “There is a lot of propaganda against Russia in America today. When Anna Politkovskaia was gunned down in her elevator, the press here did not even mention that in two days she was scheduled to appear in a criminal court hearing as a main witness. They wrote, she was a human rights activist opposing the war in Chechnya, and her biggest foe was Putin. Readers make conclusions. Politkovskaia had criticized Putin for a long time. Why should he be involved?”

It makes no sense to me. Or, take Berezovsky, the Russian billionaire who lives in London now. He is hailed here, but his hands are bloody. In the early days of perestroika, there were no honest businessmen in Russia, they were all mafia. They all killed,” Olga talked quickly with a pleasant, defensive smile. She avoided looking at Vladimir who grew red and agitated and attempted to interrupt her several times.

“Finished?” he asked acidly. “I’ll tell you once again: Putin is a criminal. Why he does all these things? Simple! To frighten. Like Hitler.”

“You can’t...” Olga said helplessly opening her hands.

“Yes I can!” Vladimir shouted banging his fist on the table. “That’s why there’s no freedom of speech left, and all TV is state-controlled in Russia! What freedom always goes first? You tell me!” he challenged her, his fists clenched. Olga gave him a startled look.

“Yes, papa, we know, the freedom of speech.” Greg turned to Eva. “I told you, it’s always like this with them. Who cares anyway? We’re here now, a democracy that bombs others for freedom. Sorry, papa. Hakuna matata!”

Anna stayed quiet, not taking sides. Her face remained calm and friendly, which impressed Eva, who was drawn into the emotions of aggression and defensiveness against her will.

With the second bottle of wine, the tensions subsided, and Olga and Vladimir recounted their first meeting on a train to a ski resort in Uzbekistan.

“Olga was so beautiful that I proposed the same evening,” he said, putting his thin, freckled arm around her shoulders. Blushing, Olga giggled.

Conversation was easy, and Eva, a little tipsy now, relaxed and lost the feeling that she was being put to some kind of test. They settled for tea in the living room, Anna next to Eva and Greg on the sofa full of laced cushions, Olga and Vladimir opposite to them in the armchairs.

“Card time,” announced Vladimir, rubbing his palms. “Ready, Annushka? Eva goes first.”

Anna took a deck out of her handbag, shuffled it, and asked Eva to draw a card for her blindly. Eva shrugged and pulled. King of Hearts.

“Were you a healer in Russia, as well?” Eva asked.

Spreading the cards in front of her, Anna smiled and began her story. As she talked, her voice acquired a detached and dreamy quality, as if she had forgotten about her audience, even though her hands continued to mix and spread the cards in perfect rows on the table.

In Russia she was a high school teacher, she said, a bluestocking teaching physics and algebra to pimple-faced youth. Now that life seemed to her a blur with islands of still pictures: her mother, her two aunts, the communal apartment with a yellow rusted bathtub and underwear drying over it, the family’s daily squabble and bickering until Anna’s scandalous, unpatriotic emigration. The things she remembered were mostly small and insignificant: the smell of rotting onions and potatoes stored under the window sill, the crew-cut and khaki uniform of her boyfriend Igor, later killed in Afghanistan. Anna kept a couple of photos from the past, but that was all. It was too long ago. Her mother had been dead for years. Anna never went back to Russia. “Don’t think I have bad memories,” she added, her eyes downcast. “I think I was happy. People like the familiar. I was young, too. People are happy when they are young.”

Harder times came when Anna arrived in New York, riding the last big wave of Jewish emigration. Her father David – yellow, grumpy, and disabled by renal insufficiency – met her at the airport. Other than him, she had no one here. “I was very lonely,” Anna said, crossing her legs into a lotus position and shuffling the cards again. “But it was worth the loneliness.” Everyone listened attentively, and she continued, lower and dreamier than before.

She descended into a hell of her father’s petty tyranny and cultural isolation, her days spent caring for his endless needs, listening to reproaches and demands of gratitude to him for supporting her new life. She cried and learned English at night. Eventually she worked cleaning strangers’ apartments and as an aide in a nearby Brooklyn hospital. She was just thirty-five but

already saw herself as an old woman. “He wasn’t a bad man, just confused and unhappy, and sick,” Anna explained. “I felt young again when his coffin was put into grave and I threw a handful of earth on it. It was like a miracle. I wish I could say I had loved him.” The funeral repast at the shabby one-bedroom apartment that still smelled of misery, urine, and medication was for Anna the best party she had ever hosted. She didn’t allow herself to suffer guilt for her joy; it was the first time in years that she felt alive. It was at the funeral, through friends of her father’s, that she met Olga, Vladimir, and little Greg.

Soon afterward, at her local yoga class, she met Ben. He was kind and generous, with a lingering smile, and she didn’t care that he was odd: a vegan and a poet. She was not frightened when he confessed to conversing with ghosts, nor even when he claimed, in a poem, to be a “psychic prodigy working with energy.” And then Ben discovered Anna’s gift, and wrote her fate into another poem on a flowery Thank You postcard that Anna preserved carefully among her valuables in a jewelry box. She was to become a healer. She was to become his wife. She said yes to both. That was all; happiness just came to her, as if someone had stored it for her through all those parched years of misery. She couldn’t wish for a different life.

Anna lifted her glazed, dreamy eyes to Eva. “That’s it,” she said. “My life. How about you? Are you happy, Eva?”

“I guess I am. Happiness is a big word,” Eva replied uneasily, instinctively searching for Greg’s hand. Anna’s tale made an impression on her: her hardship, her honesty, her happiness – of which Eva felt jealous. Am I happy? Eva asked herself, leaning back, Greg’s fingers stroking her palm. No, she decided; she was not. Suddenly the magic of Anna’s story lifted and gave way to a nagging discomfort of being exposed to those around her as the unhappy one.

“Where is Ben now?” Eva asked, pouring more tea into her cup.

“He never comes here,” Anna said quietly. “He’s very sensitive to the environment. There’s a hungry ghost in this house, he says. I don’t feel it. But I’m not as powerful as he is.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Eva said bluntly.

“She’s a doctor,” Greg interjected by way of apology.

This irked Eva, and, turning to him, she asked, “Well, do you believe in ghosts?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve never seen one, but it doesn’t mean other people haven’t.”

Anna had finished sorting the cards and was turning them up one by one, humming to herself. Olga and Vladimir leaned closer. Anna uncrossed her legs and, with a gesture, invited Eva to edge closer to her. “Your destiny,” she said.

Eva smiled, awkwardly accepting the invitation. “I don’t believe in cards either.”

“That’s you, the Queen of Diamonds,” Anna explained patiently. “Behind is pain, disillusionment, success, a journey overseas. Lonely girl, very lonely. A gathering coming, and an Ace of Hearts again next to Eight of Courts: a big prophesy you might not like. The King of Hearts and the King of Courts: difficult decisions. And the Joker coming in. Again. Not the first time I see it.” Silently she turned the Joker over in her hands. “A man or child take your heart. A lot of pain is coming your way. A lot of Spades, a whole palette, and the Joker on top. But in the end you’ll be fine with the King of Courts.”

“I’m not following,” said Eva. Olga and Vladimir’s faces were worried and tense, as if she had been just given a bad diagnosis.

Anna looked at her soothingly. “Do you want to know?”

“I don’t believe in cards,” Eva repeated. “Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom.”

Anna gathered the cards. “You will need my help one day,” she said.

Eva shrugged her shoulders. She was annoyed. You will need my help one day, she wanted to say, but she kept silent out of respect to Greg’s parents, who sat still and close to one other in the dimming light of early evening.

Chapter 3

Shortly before graduating from her residency, Eva went out to celebrate at Luca's Lounge, in the East Village, where Greg continued to serve tables twice a week. It was the middle of June, a soft summer evening full of tipsy songs, street bands and high hopes. On the way, Eva and Greg held hands, and, full of excitement, Eva walked close to him. "I love you," she wanted to say, but when she turned to him and their eyes met, she asked instead, "Isn't it great?"

"You graduating?"

"Everything. Life!"

Her colleague Robin was already at the lounge, fake gold chains dangling around her neck, her dress flying, her answers cryptic and funny. Eva's other residency classmates arrived soon after. Bill showed up wearing a hat and settled at the table's corner like a character out of Fassbinder, sipping his drinks, his face hidden in the hat's shade.

"Dr. Jacobs!" she called teasingly. "Come closer! Have you met Greg?"

As she introduced them to one another, she felt tense, as though Bill could by a remark, or a gesture render her love for Greg ridiculous. But just then Greg's friend Nestor, the one with the needle-marks, walked in, with his scrawny chicken neck, his pockmarked skin, and his nasal voice, and Greg turned to greet him. Nestor was wearing holey jeans that slipped from his hips and a Kinks t-shirt that hung sharply on his stooped shoulders. He was in an exuberant mood.

"I'm a tigarassa!" he announced, roaring. "Big tiger! In Spanish!" A waitress serving their drinks raised her eyebrows, and Eva gave a short derisive chuckle, displeased to see him.

"C'mon," Greg whispered guiltily. "He's a good guy; give him a chance."

Grazing the back of his hand with her fingers, Eva noticed how handsome Greg looked that evening. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I have manners.” She put up a smile and kissed Nestor’s cheeks, feeling the unevenness of his skin on her lips and breathing in the pungent reek of the cologne he had splashed generously on his face.

Nestor and Bill hit it off right away, cracking dumb jokes and discussing girls. Eva’s classmate Kathy arrived, muscular, broad-shouldered, stressed, stains of baby food on her dress and above it all a nervous face. Before long she had taken out her cell phone and was shouting feeding instructions to her hapless husband, who had stayed home to watch their new daughter. Less than half an hour into the party she left with an embarrassed and angry smile.

“Children! How boring!” Robin said loudly and yawned. Everyone laughed.

Robin and Nestor sang karaoke songs, their voices amateurish, twisting like snakes around one another and upsetting the rhythm. Greg hopped onstage when Lambada came on, wrenching the microphone away from Nestor in a comic struggle. There was so much laughter that the rest of the girls also joined in on the dancing and singing, carried away by the group’s enthusiasm. Shoes came off and the party reached its peak. Eva came face to face with Nestor. Vodka and excitement softened her toward him and she laughed, flailing her arms in the air. Nestor took her hands, pulling her hard toward his bony chest and then letting her fall back over his arm in a dramatic dip. Eva always found it hard to follow rather than lead, and she giggled, stumbling and panting.

“I need a cigarette!” she said at last.

“I’ll come too,” he offered, and they stepped out.

“Are you two still together?” Nestor asked then, bending to accept the flame that Eva held steady with her cupped palm.

“What do you mean?”

“You and Greg,” he said nasally, exhaling smoke.

“Why shouldn’t we be together?”

“It’s just that he’s, like, going out with someone else. Sorry to tell you.”

Eva fell silent for several seconds. The sounds of music oozing from the lounge mixed unpleasantly with Latino pop blasting from a passing limo.

“Well that’s news to me,” Eva said finally, her mouth dry.

Nestor held a long pause, studying Eva with his brazen blue eyes.

“You should drop him. Go out with me.”

“Sorry to tell you,” she imitated Nestor passive-aggressively. “But it’s, like, I don’t like you.”

“That’s okay, no need to get angry. I ask, you say no. No bad feelings, okay?”

“And why should I believe you?” Eva asked, gesturing for him to stay.

“Everyone knows. Robin knows; ask Robin. Her name is Clair. A ballerina.”

Nestor did not rejoin the party. The others were still dancing, Bill whirling with a microphone and trying to sing Rigoletto, to everyone’s delight. Eva ordered a Cuba Libre and sat down heavily at the bar. Her legs were weak. She had been so happy just moments ago. “King of Hearts!” she said into nowhere, suddenly remembering Anna’s prophesies. Greg, who had an almost supernatural gift for detecting distress in others, possibly spurred by a dirty conscience, pulled Robin offstage before approaching.

“Where’s Nestor gone?” he asked innocently, Robin at his side.

“I don’t know.”

Bill came down too, unwittingly saving the evening. “I’m starving!” he said throwing his hat in the air and catching it with his head.

They ate at a table in the garden. Eva ignored Greg and made polite conversation with her classmates.

“I’ve just finished a biography of Kohut,” she announced loudly. “It’s a sad account of his life, really.”

“Why?” Bill asked.

“Because of the ingrained deceptiveness of the human psyche. There’s profound weakness in man that’s not remediable, not even in one of the biggest and brightest and most influential representatives of the psychoanalytic movement, like Kohut. He was a Jew whose family perished in concentration camps, did you know that?”

“No! Kohut wasn’t Jewish,” Robin said with conviction.

“He was. And until his death he denied it and pretended to be Catholic. He got baptized and went to Mass, and lied about his origins when people asked him about them directly.” Eva was aware of Greg’s eyes upon her face.

“I thought you liked it! What about the holding environment?” Greg said. “You didn’t tell me any of this other stuff!”

“Sometimes people don’t tell each other everything.”

They arrived home late and Eva cried in bed for a long time with her back to Greg. She resisted and yet craved his attention until Greg removed her clothes and turned her tears into moans.

“Nestor wanted to go out with me,” she confessed then.

“Has he gone mad?”

“He said everyone knows except me that you’re dating another girl, a dancer named Clair. So he assumed I was free.”

“That’s crazy! Clair is just a friend I met at a rehearsal.”

That night Greg had sleep-terrors again. Eva didn't comfort him.

She slept in the next day and awoke with a hangover around noon. Greg was still in bed, curled up, his lips parted, his eyelashes trembling. Her hurt returned, made uglier by her headache.

After a quick shower she ran out with her cell phone.

"Robin! Hi!"

"Hi! What's up? Nice party yesterday."

"Nestor told me about Greg and Clair and said I should ask you, because you know."

"He said to ask me? Why me? I don't know anything!" Robin cried this out with a cheerful ease that was like armor around her.

"I want to know," Eva persisted, fighting the humiliation of having to beg for what she had the right to from her best friend – and for Robin's compassion. "He said everyone knows that Greg has been dating another girl."

"How can you listen to Nestor, darling? He's funny in the head. You're the psychiatrist, you must know!"

"I thought you were my friend," Eva said.

"Of course I am. And I'm telling you to forget it. Are you happy with Greg?"

"I don't know. I'm jealous."

"Don't be. Maybe Greg just kissed some unimportant girl once and that's all there was to it. Go out and kiss someone if it will help. Then forget about it."

"He kissed her?" Eva cried, and hung up.

With puffy eyes Eva got up for work.

In her office, bewildered and angry, she wrote an incoherent letter to Greg, explaining that she felt betrayed and asking him to move out of her place immediately. The part about her hurt feelings appeared pathetic to her on the second read, and she tore up the letter and cried again in helpless desperation. She didn't want him to leave her. All she wanted was to reverse the time and erase his betrayal from her memory so she could trust and love him innocently again. It must be love, she thought. Why else would she be so distressed? She tried to type up a case report for the SSI application, but her eyes kept gliding over the computer screen. She got up and paced around her tiny windowless office waiting for Mr. Harrison, her next appointment, to show up. Minutes elapsed slowly. She switched on the radio. The reception was bad, and she adjusted the antenna, twisting it in different directions without much success. Ad, another ad, war in Iraq, rap, Hurricane Katrina relief funds. She switched the radio off again and took a deep breath. The computer screen flickered indifferently, the clock continued to tick, and her patient was still not there. An emergency preparedness meeting was scheduled next. Seized by an irate inspiration, Eva dialed Bill's number.

"Hi!" she said, her voice hoarse from crying. "Do you have time for a coffee?"

Her heart jumped a little when she saw him come in, a rush of affection coursing through her blood. He looked tall, proud, and magnificent.

"What happened?" he asked, closing the door behind him. "Have you been crying?"

"It's okay," she said. "Let's just get a coffee."

Bill giggled the way he always did when something made him uncomfortable.

The emergency meeting was boring, and Eva kept shifting in her chair, chewing on her misery until a balding infectious disease expert took the stage to talk about Avian Flu.

“Influenza A, also called H5N1 virus, is an influenza A virus subtype that occurs mainly in birds, is highly contagious among birds and may be deadly to them. It does not usually infect humans except in cases of close contact with poultry or H5N1-contaminated surfaces. So why should we talk about it today? We’re not in the poultry business, right?”

Even Eva managed a short laugh.

“In about 300 recorded cases of human H5N1 infections there has been a staggering mortality rate: over fifty percent of infected people are dead within a couple of days. If H5N1 were to mutate it could gain the ability to spread easily among humans. Should infection with the human influenza A virus and the H5N1 occur in one individual, parts of the two viruses could combine their genetic material to create a virus monster. Or, during the adaptive mutation, the bird virus could slowly learn to attack the human cells. Then we could have a pandemic of horrendous proportions, possibly worse than the 1918 Flu – which was also a Bird Flu virus, by the way. So. Today we are going to talk about National Pandemic Influenza preparedness...”

“Fifty percent mortality,” Eva whispered to Bill. “I didn’t realize it was that bad.”

“Don’t worry, Dr. Leigh. There are so many other things to be scared about: global warming, terrorists, smoking. At least this one has a cure.”

“What?”

“Tamiflu. Available at any pharmacy.”

After the meeting, standing outside in a brightly lit square and sharing his cigarette, Eva asked Bill if he wanted to go out that evening.

“What about Greg?”

“We’re breaking up.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear that,” he said, and she saw with satisfaction that he was not sorry at all. “I’d love to have a drink with you, Dr. Leigh.”

He waved his hand at her and left, his hips swaying and his head held high. She watched him walk away until her beeper rang. Mr. Harrison had arrived for his appointment after all.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” Eva said when they met again in front of the building. Bill was, as always, late. “I just want to talk.”

She didn’t know what she really wanted, or why she had chosen Bill as her confidante, but she craved being with him now. The fact that they had long been attracted to one other bestowed on the moment a vague sense of freedom and possibility. She didn’t think beyond that. It was just emotional upheaval, a melancholic force that drove her to Bill, like an affecting song sucking her in. Something in him invited her to sing that song out, freely, at the top of her lungs, and Eva yearned to talk endlessly, with insatiable inspiration.

Bill was dark and charismatic, with a sharp profile and laughing eyes. He was gifted with a photographic memory that allowed him to quote freely from every book and every song he had ever read or heard. That his opinions were often borrowed did not diminish his brilliance in Eva’s eyes. She had almost fallen in love with him in the past, during their long talks well into midnight, but they had never even kissed. She thought she knew why. Bill was attractive and repellent at once. His fingernails were dirty and long and he often smelled like someone who took a shower just once or twice a week, despite being quite vain about his appearance.

Now, walking along with him in silence in the direction of First Avenue, it occurred to her that there might be something else to their not being together: His charisma and self-assuredness faded when closeness became palpable, not ruled in by the safety of social norms.

Bill walked, as if rushing somewhere, and swung his arms widely. He talked about music, his speech loud and uninhibited. Sometimes he sang a line or two in the flow of free associations that were hard for her to follow. There was a crazy disquiet in him, this moment exciting and tiring the next. Eva almost regretted asking him out.

They ate couscous at Mogador, then stopped at Pick Me Up on Avenue A, a cozy little café they had frequented during their residency years. Here, Eva could sip her coffee and watch people for hours, all the time dreaming of some other, vague and wonderful life where disappointments did not happen.

In the red streetlight two half-naked muscular boys swished by on their skateboards, followed by an elderly man on a strangely shaped bicycle from which hundreds of Puerto-Rican flags fluttered in the wind. The night was crisp and full of potential, and Eva's buried hurt sharpened her senses. As she and Bill approached the café, a heavily made-up woman emerged wearing a white lace dress and a straw hat, her bearing queenly and deliberate. Bill held the door for her.

There weren't many customers. A Moby record played quietly in the background. Eva ordered a glass of Pinot Grigio and a latte and sank into an armchair by a low, round table.

"Greg is dating someone else," she said in response to Bill's enquiring gaze. Saying it caused her a tearing pain, as though someone had ripped through her pride. Admission was humiliation, but she did it for the sake of friendship, for permission to spend the evening in Bill's company.

"I wish I could say why that happened or why we were together in the first place. Maybe I trusted him too much. Or maybe, and this is what's always in the back of my mind, I'm just not good enough. I mean my self-doubt. It poisons. The stupid thing is, I really tried to make this relationship work. Only yesterday I was debating with myself whether to tell him I love him. I was

always afraid of confessions. Thank God I didn't. It just shows how little we know of other people's inner lives. They're all dark, murky waters, and in the end we're totally alone."

"You're a beautiful person," Bill said kindly, and through the gush of gratefulness, she answered,

"Thank you, but I don't believe it. I get bitter and snappy with age, and somehow numbed. I do feel more secure in many ways, but it's an ugly security, like building a house that you hate. It's becoming hard for me to trust people. You know this fear all girls have of not finding 'a man.' It's a cliché, really, a front to put on things which are so much more subtle and complicated."

"You could date anyone and you know it. I have no idea why you chose a schmuck."

"He is not a schmuck!" Eva retorted, stubbornly pressing her lips together.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to say it. He seemed like a nice guy. But you could do better."

"What's better?"

"Someone who cares about you more. Someone with ambitions. You've said yourself that you can't understand a person without aspirations. Right?"

"Right," agreed Eva. "But don't all roads lead to myself, after all? Why did I choose someone inferior to me in terms of achievement and yet someone so kind and loving?"

"Your father?" Bill suggested with a smile. "Sounds like an Oedipus complex to me. You told me once he died when you were young."

"He died when I was six. He fell out a window."

"How did that happen?"

"He was a counter-phobic and a fatalist. He believed that death would only come on its own time no matter how you much you tempt it. He walked on the balcony rail more than once. And

that day he slipped. His best friend rushed over to see my father's fingers clutching the rail just before he fell."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't suicide?"

"I've asked myself that too. I don't think so. Who commits suicide when your friends are watching? Isn't suicide a private affair? No. I think it was fatalism that killed him."

"It must have been hard on you. Do you remember him?"

"Yes. He had sad, kind eyes. And he liked to carry me on his shoulders."

Bill was stroking Eva's hand, gently and yet with some edgy detachment. She watched the coiling motions of his thin white fingers on her wrist, then withdrew her hand.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago."

"Are you a fatalist too?" Bill laughed at something unclear to her.

"No. I can't be a fatalist, can I? With my father dead of it?"

"Cause of death: fatalism!" Bill laughed again. "Sorry, Dr. Leigh, I hope I'm not being insensitive."

Eva sipped her wine, which had turned warm and a little too sour, and reflected on how typical this little psychological vignette was for Bill. He strokes her hand; she withdraws it; he feels hurt and ridicules her feelings.

"You are. But I'm not offended," she lied.

"So if you don't mind my analyzing you, does Greg remind you of your father?"

"No. He's more like my child."

"A child?" Bill snorted.

"Does it sound stupid?" Eva asked disarmingly. "I guess so. He's endearing like a twelve-year-old, and totally incapable of organizing himself toward anything. It's childish, isn't it?"

“Doesn’t it irritate you?”

“Sometimes, I guess. I couldn’t have a family with him, but there was always hope of him changing, or me changing him.”

“That’s rather childish too. People don’t change, not easily anyway.”

“No one said easily. People change in therapy, and in life.”

“But why would you love someone who’s infantile?”

“I think it’s my low self-esteem. He’s caring and kind. There’s no power struggle with him. It’s comforting. He’s soft. Even his body is soft and hairless, like a boy’s.”

Bill unbuttoned his shirt to reveal the dense, curly hair on his chest. He pulled on it with a comically blank face.

“Hairy men are beastly!” he announced loudly and turned around, looking for an audience. A red-haired girl at the neighboring table giggled silently, parting her fresh teenager’s lips.

“I was not passing judgment on your hairiness,” Eva said.

“Do you want kids?” Bill helped himself to a sip of her wine.

“I guess so. In the future. You?”

“Sure. I love kids. Isn’t it marvelous that we both love kids?” he winked conspiratorially.

“Oh, cut it out, Jacobs! I’m baring my soul, and you’re just being so impossible!”

He showed her the tip of his tongue and laughed again. Watching Bill’s quick ape-like face Eva felt puzzled by his bullying playfulness, which she both disliked and enjoyed. He had been a bully as a child; she knew this. Someone who pulled girls’ ponytails – Eva could picture it vividly.

“You’re like a kid who’s eaten too much sugar,” she said. “God, I feel so depressed!”

“Don’t be depressed, Dr. Leigh! Think about it like a psychiatrist, use a cognitive-behavioral approach. You’re a beautiful and accomplished young woman.”

“Sometimes I wonder whether I chose psychiatry to remedy my own insecurities. There is a study that showed that possessing a depressive predisposition makes therapists more compassionate. I guess it’s true. Helping others has a healing effect on me, as if by giving kindness I’m liberating myself from fear and loneliness.”

“There’s a reason for all of us to have chosen psychiatry, Dr. Leigh.” Bill ran his hand through his hair.

“Why did you choose psychiatry?” she asked.

“For me it was that or surgery. Both are like knives slicing in, taking out the tumor. Only psychiatry is subtler, more intellectually appealing. And of course you don’t have to be on call every other night, which leaves time to live.”

“What’s your tumor, Bill?”

“Dr. Leigh! That was brilliant!” Bill shook her hand in a mock show of professional respect. His fingers were thin, tapering off at the ends, and bore black hairs sprouting from their backs. They were weak and neurotic hands, discordant with the Hellenic beauty of his body.

“Talking about psychiatry,” said Eva, switching topics, “I had lunch with Robin recently and we played a game, picking psychiatric disorders to fit the personalities of our classmates...”

“What was my diagnosis?” Bill interrupted.

Eva laughed. “Narcissistic personality disorder.”

“Oh, you have that too,” he said dismissively. “Every achiever is narcissistic. Robin?”

“Manic.”

“And you?” Bill asked.

“I thought you’d never ask! Depression. Nothing too interesting. It’s a professional hazard to label yourself. It’s like med students who become hypochondriacs as they study diseases.”

“I’ve been through that. I thought I had testicular cancer, and Hodgkin’s and what not. What about you?”

“No,” Eva shook her head. “I’ve always thought my problems were mental. Although now that you mention it I do remember examining my moles in search for melanoma.”

They laughed and regarded one another with affection.

A lanky blond man walked past their table, causing Eva’s heart to jump. Feeling her glance upon him, he turned around, revealing his heavy features: a thick nose, a juttled jaw, a scar on his left cheek. Embarrassed, she looked away.

“See that man?” she said to Bill.

“What about him?”

“I thought it was Greg. I often mistake people for others. It’s odd, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Bill said. “I do it too. It usually happens when I have a crush on someone. You must be feeling guilty about being with me.”

He smiled. Eva rose to order them another round of wine. The stranger was standing in line in front of her. When he ordered, his voice was husky and tired, and for some reason Eva felt disappointed and tired herself. Greg was working at Luca’s Lounge tonight and wouldn’t be home until late. Eva wasn’t sure which was stronger, her guilt or her desire to punish him. Her watch showed eleven o’clock. She yawned, covering her mouth and looking around. Bill was watching her. Back at the table, holding a glass of wine in each hand, she asked,

“Have you ever mistaken someone for me?”

“Many times,” said Bill, pressing his lips together.

“Really?” she asked, grinning. Bill’s lips curled into an ironic smirk but he remained silent.

“I’m flattered, Dr. Jacobs!”

“That was a long time ago,” he said gravely, raising his left eyebrow.

Eva laughed, throwing back her chin.

“I wonder why I’m telling you about Greg anyway. It feels sick and exciting at once, like an itch.”

“Sharing is always healthy,” Bill stated philosophically. “Even when it feels sick. Imagine you live in a small primitive tribe and your hut catches fire, or there’s an outbreak of Avian Flu. Why would someone come to your aid? It’s the dopamine of compassion, the survival of the individual by group participation, programmed into our genes. One for all, all for one. That’s why you’re talking, and I’m listening, and we’re both enjoying it. It’s also why we practice psychiatry.”

“You’ve convinced me, Dr. Jacobs.”

Bill laughed a healthy, self-possessed laugh that made Eva envious of his gregariousness and the range of emotions that ran through him so fluidly, so easily finding their expression in his body. He was a perfect instrument of himself. Eva imagined a trumpet or a saxophone, a little too loud and brazen, just as proud and shining as his persona. She strived to be like him, and when they were together it seemed almost attainable. He pulled her up and gave her wings.

The café slowly emptied. They rose when the waiter started to overturn the chairs and rolled out a mop.

“Let’s have a drink at my place,” Bill offered.

It was fresh and windy outside. They walked in silence through the empty streets toward Bill’s new apartment on Avenue B. Eva had never been there before.

“It’s kind of messy,” he warned. “I haven’t unpacked yet.”

Bill had lived in hospital housing on Third Avenue, a bright and welcoming place despite its clutter of books, records, socks and unwashed dishes. He'd had to vacate it at the end of his residency, a cause for much grumbling and aggravation with New York real estate agents.

"I always wondered why all our attendings live in Westchester," he muttered, finding his keys in his pocket. "Well, here's the answer. This is what we can afford with our fabulous doctor salaries!"

The new apartment was in a dilapidated brownstone, built at the beginning of the century for factory workers. There were garbage and rats on the streets, a shabby, covered with graffiti front door, and a staircase lit by a single bulb dangling from the ceiling. Amid a stale smell of cigarettes, Bill and Eva climbed three flights of stairs.

"Welcome to my palace!" Bill said pushing the door open.

It was dark and smelled pleasantly of book dust, like the second-hand bookshops Eva liked to visit.

"Let me turn on the light," he said. "Come in. Watch out for the boxes! Take my hand."

Bill's hand was sweaty. He drew her closer to him, and she put her head in the soft spot just below his Adam's apple, which hung heavily on his neck like a stone. He stroked her back and her hair. She was anxious and excited. They kissed. Bill's tongue was quirky and sharp exploring her mouth. It was strange to be kissing him, both pleasant and revolting; it reminded her of her first kiss so many years ago. She kept her eyes closed. He switched on the light and led her to the bedroom.

"I love you, Dr. Leigh," he said in a stilted stranger's voice. Eva didn't answer. He unbuttoned her blouse and pressed his hands over her bra. She could hear him panting. They undressed. Her passion was gone, but she felt she had to stay. Maybe it would return, in time, as sometimes

happened with Greg nowadays. She let Bill embrace her with a full body touch. He trembled like a string, infecting her with anxiety. He had the virile smell of an animal. His sharp beak-like nose kept awkwardly poking her cheeks.

“C’mon, let’s lie down,” he whispered, sensing her rigidity. She followed him silently, her wordlessness enhancing the sense of growing panic.

Bill lay on top of her, bringing her knees up, and there was something nice and tender about the way he did it, encouraging her to think that maybe this wasn’t a mistake after all.

“Why are you so passive?” Bill asked, again in a stranger’s voice, this time also bearing whiny and demanding notes. His erection was gone. Softly, Eva freed herself from his arms and sat up, draping a bed sheet around her waist.

“I think I should go,” she said.

Bill was silent, and Eva rose, conscious of her body although it was dark. Bill stayed on the bed. Eva couldn’t tell whether he was looking at her. While she laced her shoes, she heard him breathing hard, and paused to listen. A second later she heard him blowing his nose.

“Are you crying?”

“No,” he replied nasally.

She switched on the light.

“Yes I’m crying,” he said.

“I just want us to be friends. I’m afraid it will ruin our friendship.”

“Bullshit! Bullshit!” he cried bitterly. Eva leaned toward him, gliding her hand over his wet face in a gush of compassion.

“Please, don’t cry, I’m sorry.”

Bill sobbed freely, abandoning his shame.

“Don’t cry, it’s going to be okay.” She repeated this automatically, feeling cozy in her clothes, warm and safe from predators.

“Is it because of my erection?” he asked. “I told you I had problems.”

Eva moved closer and took his head into her hands, stroking his oily bristles and the stubble on his cheeks.

“No, not at all, stupid!” she said kindly. “Of course not! It’s just somehow not right. I can’t explain it any better.”

“I’m angry, I’m furious!” he cried, backing away from her. His eyes were moist and intense in the low yellow light.

“At me?”

“No man with a good hard-on gets into this friendship talk.”

“But it’s not because of your erection!”

“Then why are you going? Am I too good for you?”

Eva rose, dizzy and tired, feeling suddenly too distant to discuss feelings. She saw their two shadows on the wall, the dark round shapes almost immobile against each other. They could have been the silhouettes of love. But they weren’t. They were just shadows. She had sung out her song. She had probably said too much. She knew she’d hurt him.

The city noise was dying outside; the wails of a faraway siren dotted the darkness. It was two in the morning. Eva thought of Greg, but that was an empty memory too.

The bed creaked, and Eva saw Bill rising. His erection had returned. She observed it with an almost scientific curiosity. Wrapped in the sheet, toga-like around his body, he looked like an ancient Greek.

“You have a Greek nose,” she said. “I never noticed before.”

“That’s very Freudian. I thought you were looking at my penis.”

“I was, too. You have an erection.”

“Funny, isn’t it? He forgave you. But I haven’t yet.”

Bill walked with her to the living room and, with a moan, fell into a large orange sofa.

“Sit down,” he motioned, putting his feet up on the sofa’s back. “Just for a minute.”

Eva obeyed, sitting down on a box that cracked underneath her.

They sat looking at one another for a long time.

“Do you remember any poems?” he said finally. “I love poetry.”

“T.S. Eliot?” she offered.

Bill nodded, and Eva began, first hesitantly, then drawn into the music of the words. As lines streamed out of her and drew her into a particular melancholic and elevated state of mind, she felt her anxiety leaving, her whole being tailored into the harmony of the poem:

April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Bill whispered. He gestured for her to sit beside him now, on the sofa. Eva continued.

Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers.

Now Bill moved his hand to the back of her neck, cupping it with his palm, then glided his fingers down to her breasts. Eva paused.

“Go on,” he said and she continued, haltingly, struggling to remember the words.

He ran his fingers over her t-shirt and sank them in her navel. She fell silent but did not stop him when he continued downward.

“Go on please,” he said, and she obeyed.

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
with a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
and drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

He opened the button of her pants. She raised her hips to help him pull them down. He was slow, stroking her crotch, then sliding his fingers inside, separating her pubic hair.

“Don’t stop,” he said. She went on. When she couldn’t remember the words anymore, she started over. A dizzying sweetness rose in her. She let her head fall back. She wanted it to go on. He felt her wetness. She spread her legs for him. A little voice in her woke up periodically, seeking explanation. She was grateful and guilty, were these emotions not enough? She was too lost to know what she wanted. What she wanted now was this. She continued to recite the poem.

Bill moved closer and guided her hand to his penis, knobby and hard under her fingers. She squeezed it with rising pleasure. She looked down at its blind pulsating hotness, which she held like a microphone, and realized she wasn’t talking anymore, just moaning the music of the poem. Bill nudged her forward and down and she took his penis into her mouth.

“Good girl,” he said through clenched teeth, breathing loud.

I’m a whore, thought Eva, and drowning in desire ceased to be herself. She imagined a blank room somewhere in Amsterdam, a bald fat customer she had to serve. She pictured the money he would pay her after it was over, a stack of foreign bills left on her nightstand. Then the whore’s image became separate from Eva’s: a peroxide blonde from Eastern Europe with heavy tits and a

horny tongue. She was a queen, an anonymous young pussy, and she moaned together with the client, whom she called Hans. Eva inhabited the prostitute's juicy body, presenting her breasts, opening herself wider for Bill. He withdrew his fingers and then his penis from her and moved her aside to come by himself while Eva clutched his arm, whose joints and muscles she could feel moving back and forth while he ejaculated. Bill cried out. He didn't look at her. Her excitement waned but didn't leave her.

"Did you imagine I was someone else?" Eva asked.

Bill was startled.

"How did you know?"

"Tell me."

"No. Did you too?"

She laughed slyly.

"No, you tell me," he begged.

"You were a fifty-year-old fat and balding client in Amsterdam. I was a young blonde from the Ukraine with big tits. You had a stack of bills for me on the night table. You worshiped my body." The wave of excitement revived in her. She held his arm and spoke quickly to capture the moment.

"Oh," Bill replied, and Eva realized it was too late. Her heart sank with hurt as she watched him free his arm, then wipe up his sperm with the corner of a bed sheet. His face was smooth. "He sounds like a sexy man. And the money. That's a real turn on. Sorry. Don't have any for you."

Eva cringed and instinctively covered herself, suddenly sober and offended, as if she'd been slapped in the face.

"That's rude," she said stiltedly.

"Just joking, Dr. Leigh." Bill got up and walking naked across the room. "Gotta pee."

Eva gathered her things and quickly put on her pants. Her foot stuck in the trouser leg and she pulled on it furiously. She had just buckled her bra when Bill came back, still naked, his slack penis swaying between his legs. He yawned loudly and widely like a hippo, not bothering to cover his mouth.

“Now your turn,” she said.

She felt the need to keep talking, to put off the acknowledgement of her humiliation.

“What do you mean?”

“Your fantasy.”

“Oh, that. It’s boring stuff. Like you described, young, blond, large tits. No one old. No kids.”

Eva buttoned her blouse, irritated and mute.

“So tired!” he said, picking up his boxer shorts.

“Well, it wasn’t too healthy either. It wasn’t me,” she said.

“It wasn’t you where?” he asked with impatience. He was standing, waiting for her to leave.

“In your fantasy,” she said in a high-pitched defensive voice, raising her eyebrows. “You pretended I was a whore. You didn’t make love to me.”

“I don’t have much luck with love.”

Eva looked up at him.

“You don’t get it? When I fall in love, I lose my erection. Girls find me boring, understandably so. When I treat them as whores, I’m as strong as a horse. Girls love me. What does it tell you?”

“I don’t know. Never lose your erection?”

“That’s good!” he grinned. “It was my line. You should have said, ‘you must be afraid to love’ or something touchy-feely that good insightful girls always say. It’s what I expected from you.”

“Right,” Eva said. “I have to go now.”

Eva walked home quickly, running away from her hurt. She felt violated like a rape victim. She hated Bill. The brisk walk brought her some relief. When she entered Stuyvesant Town, with its rows of identical houses and calm orderly lawns smelling of freshly cut grass, it was three in the morning.

Eva cautiously unlocked the door with a hand unsteadied by alcohol and emotion. It was dark and still inside. She turned on the light. Greg’s shoes stood by the entrance, neatly lined up together. Ska didn’t come to greet her, and Eva broke down in tears at this last symbolic betrayal. Quietly sobbing she dragged herself to the bathroom and locked the door behind her, turned on the water, and finally let down her guard. She took a long shower, rubbing herself with soap until it hurt, then frantically brushing her teeth, cleansing herself of the dirt and pain. Her vagina was still excited, and she masturbated a little, not thinking about anything in particular. The desire sparkled and went away and she let it go with an angry satisfaction. She hated sex. She hated alcohol. She hated T. S. Eliot. After the shower, she wiped down the misted mirror and applied her night cream. Giving herself a wooden smile she examined the wrinkles under her eyes, as she did daily now in a sad ritual of aging. Thirty years old and so stupid, she mumbled to herself. Look at that son of a bitch. Anna’s prophesy flashed in her mind like a dark unclear sign. She pulled on her pajamas, tiptoed to the kitchen to pour herself some ice water, and settled in front of the TV to flip idly through the channels. That’s how Greg found her, miserable, hunched over a TV set.

“Are you okay?” he asked. He stood timidly in the shade by the door, prepared to leave if she didn’t want him.

“I’m okay I guess,” she said. “Go to bed. I’m coming too.”

In bed, lying at a safe distance from Greg, Eva listened for his breathing; it was relaxed and almost inaudible, spaced out in long intervals, and she decided that he was asleep. It filled her with emptiness and a silent rage. She didn't want him – and yet she still craved his love. Decidedly turning away, she resolved to cry, but tears wouldn't come. Furious thoughts boiled in her head. Get out of here! she wanted to scream. Get out you piece of shit! Punishing them both.

“Hey, Evy,” Greg called softly, using his lovely name for her. “You want me to scratch your back?”

She didn't answer, but lay down with her back toward him. He moved closer and scratched her back in long tender strides, waiting for her to relax. On the verge of falling asleep she felt him kissing her hair.

“Sleep now. It will be okay. I love you,” he whispered.

And she slept.