

Neither You Nor Me

Neither You Nor Me

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There was no escape from it. She realized she had to pull down the blinds to cut off the daylight but she was too weak. After three pills taken at dawn she could not raise her head from the pillows. And yet she forced herself to get up, stumbled to the bathroom, turned on the hot water. Perched on the edge of the tub she drowsed, her hands unconsciously squeezing a thin rivulet from the shampoo bottle. The foam was already dropping to the floor, sliding down her thigh.

The shelves displayed a few knickknacks. A monk with an erect member sticking out from under his robes . . . a Pope on a throne in the shape of an urinal . . . a praying nun comforted by a playful Cupid . . .

In the tub, she immediately fell asleep. Her eyes closed blissfully, her face smoothed. She was not a beauty but had always been a success.

The elevator boomed. A man in a light raincoat stopped in front of #23, looked around, and quickly opened the door with his own key. He shot a glance at the bathroom, went straight to the bedroom, and without a moment's hesitation yanked out the top drawer of the bureau, spilling its contents all over the rug. What he was looking for was not in this drawer or the next. The bottom drawer happened to be locked. He opened it with a hardy safety pin, only to see diaries and private letters which were of no interest to him. He upturned the bed, threw the lingerie out of the closet, inspected every nook, even the sewing box. Nothing.

He paused in the doorway before entering the bathroom. The woman was asleep, one hand hanging over the edge. He unbuckled, gravely studying that placid face. He pulled the belt out and struck her bare shoulder. The woman woke with a cry. She was ducking awkwardly, to avoid the blows, then tried to slip past him, her back, shoulders and hands breaking out in purple welts. She screamed a few times but never cried for help.

“Where is it, you thief?” He wound a long, soaked tress around his hand and brought the woman's face closer. “Where’s the gun?”

“It’s not here,” she breathed out. “I swear it, Max.”

He pushed her away and started to buckle up. “By five I want that gun back--and the merchandise. You don’t want a blemish on your pretty face. Do you, Emi?”

“No.”

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“Can’t hear you.”

“No!”

“Atta girl.”

Max turned off the faucet and left, shuffling through the puddle.

After the initial shock, Emi stormed into the bedroom smashing everything she could lay her hands on, tearing up her diaries and letters and notebooks with perverse delight. Feeling spent she lit a cigarette. Outside, a band offered a spry military march. She sat on the bed letting the ash fall on the blanket. There was a sharp whistle.

“I’ll get your ass, you little brat,” a man’s voice shouted.

Somebody raced by, stomping heavily. Emi was examining her hands. She took a bottle of nail polish and painted one toenail. Her attention was distracted by a pad on the floor. On the cover a child’s hand had penciled in Polish: Elzbieta Emilia Radovicz.

Emi stretched for it. She was leafing through the pages muttering to herself and then she cracked. She leaned back on the pillows, wincing in pain. Crawling down to the rug she began to search for something among the scattered papers. There it was. An old crumbling phonebook. She opened it to the letter “R” and for a long time was lost in thought. Making up her mind, she grabbed the telephone and dialed a number. An arduous wait followed.

“Hello?” She started hearing her own voice. “*You* there?”

A malicious aside left her lips. “Who else?” Then she was again speaking into the receiver: “Drop that Polish lisp of yours, will you? Have you forgotten what they taught you at school? How is father? When did it happen? I had no idea.” She had trouble restraining herself. “I bet you heard me: I had no idea. One doesn’t ask grownups such questions. Hello? What about the neighbor, is she still alive? Do *I* miss her?” She let out a nervous laugh. “You’re being ridiculous! Did you say ‘beads’? Wait, I’ll check.”

There was a wooden chest sitting on the floor. Emptying it, Emi found a streak of toy beads and then she was back on the phone. “They’re here. I’ll bring them, yes. About seven. No, in the evening.

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Because I work nights. What do I do for a living? Curiosity killed the cat. Hold on, I need another cigarette.” She reached for a pack. “Hello?”

The line had been disconnected.

“What a bitch!” she said and started to dress.

Having set herself to rights, she plucked a live-looking orchid out of a cachepot to recover an elegant pistol.

She left the house as if it were a saloon--in a cowboy outfit--got behind the wheel of her Citroën, and threw a plastic bag on the back seat. The car zoomed forward.

Soon she was sitting in a cozy bistro. The waiter brought her appetizers. Three young shop assistants at the next table were throwing the dice to determine who was going to pay for coffee and cookies. Their agitated voices overlapped:

“Six!”

“I got nine!”

“I’m getting out of here.”

“Am I paying then?”

“Yes, sir.”

Two girls left. The loser paid and made for the door. Emi accosted her. “Can you spare me a minute?”

The girl looked askance. Emi offered her a coin.

“Will you make a call for me? I’ll dial the number.”

“And what am I supposed to say?”

“Nothing. Just listen to the voice.”

The girl nodded knowingly. It was probably about another woman. There was no answer.

“Thanks,” Emi said with a sigh of relief.

The girl sized her up. “I don’t think you have any reason to worry.”

“Really?”

“If he’s not blind, I mean.” The girl left, proud of her own shrewdness.

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Emi made a few steps toward her table, then returned to the pay phone and dialed the same number. There was an immediate response, as if the other, a child, was expecting her call.

“Hello? Speak up!” Elzbieta said with a heavy accent. “Hello? Is it you?”

Emi stood paralyzed.

“Why don’t you answer?” the other one demanded. “I know it’s you.”

The gray Citroën was caught in a traffic jam. Emi pulled over and got out. It was a gay and lesbian parade. She pushed her way forward catching a glimpse of a homemade poster: You’ll love it, Mr. President. They were chanting slogans. A gentleman with plucked eyebrows was demanding a seat in the new cabinet. Two angelic creatures played pick-a-boo. A maiden dressed up as an Amazon was blowing kisses to the bystanders. A potbelly donned and doffed a wig, exposing his bald scalp.

Across the street, among the gawkers, stood an amorous couple. A provincial girl bearing a striking resemblance to Emi fifteen years back was whispering words to a man whose face looked so familiar. Emi could not take her eyes off the happy duo. Without thinking she made a bee-line through the crowd. Somebody tried to hug her, she broke away, losing sight of the girl. Had the couple fled?

“Emily!” she cried out. “Emily!”

She rushed back and forth, searching young faces in the crowd. Suddenly she felt hatred for those fools. Pushing people away, she dashed for a pay phone. She was barely in control.

“Max?”

“Still in the tub?” His tone was humorous.

“Listen, I’ve just seen Emily and Krzysz. They were standing--”

“Excuse me?” Now he was being exceedingly polite.

“Will you call his mother? You did it once for me, you can do it again!”

“You take me for an idiot? I’m not making any calls.”

“*Please.*” She was clinging to the phone as if it were Max’s chest. “I’ll leave Paris, I promise.”

“Where will you go, may I ask?”

“Void. Elzbieta’s still there. I’ll take Emily along and we’ll both run to--”

“An institution, yes. It’s about time.”

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She flared up. “You’re going to regret it, Max. Five o’clock, remember?”

She hung up on him and began to dial again. There was a tactful knock on the glass. She gave an old lady a chilling glare.

Emi wandered through the children's store like a lunatic. She picked up a doll and put it down without so much as a glance. She wound up a musical pillow, but her attention was divided. An attractive girl appeared at her side. “Madame? What can I do for you?”

“Oh . . . I’m not sure.”

“How old is your daughter?”

Emi blushed. “Ten. Well, more like eleven.”

“She plays with dolls?”

“She plays with the idea of being an adult.”

“Then give her a Barbie.” The girl took down a polyvinyl beauty queen in a slinky silver gown. “This evening dress comes in a set with a business suit, a sports outfit, and bright p.j.’s--here. Barbie is more than a doll, she’s your older sister, your role model. What do you say?”

Emi nodded.

“You’ll take her?”

“Yes, merci. And . . . where can I find Tampax for her age?”

“Section 2.”

“Yes, and underpants. Three pairs.”

“Do you want them in different colors, Madame? I’ll take care of it and you can go straight to the cashier.”

On her way to another section Emi’s eye caught a twinkling toy pistol very much like her gun. She turned it in her hands, cocked the trigger--loud dry raps were accompanied by flashes of light. With a smirk, Emi threw it into the shopping cart.

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Vespers at the Catholic church were almost over. The flock was scanty, all familiar faces, and after the service the parishioners always stayed behind for a little chat. During the sermon a mother had tried to hush her three-year-old son, who fidgeted and whimpered about having to kneel.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he insisted. “I’m not going to stand on my knees. I’m not.”

Right in front of the lectern sat a middle-aged lady with an unattractive and somewhat haughty but thoroughbred face. Her thoughts had been wandering. As soon as the priest said his amen she went up to him.

“I must talk to you, Father.”

The priest nodded, inviting her to speak her mind. They walked to the porch. What the woman had to say hurt her pride, and that made her tone dry.

“My son has been dating a woman of easy virtue for almost two months. Needless to say, she hides the truth. Krzysztof is an exalted and proud-hearted boy. If *I* try to open his eyes for him it may embitter him all the more.”

The priest listened, the shaved feathery crown of his head slightly tilted. He disliked this cold-blooded woman, who was so good at making a fine point of her own superiority, but he didn’t show it.

“You have influence with my son, and so I thought . . .” The woman wanted the priest to jump to a conclusion.

“She may change if he decides to tie his life to hers,” the priest said cautiously. “The church tells us to be tolerant of one’s sins.”

“She lies to him! She has been lying to him from the very first day!”

“It may well be that certain terms forced her to take up this *métier*. As for her reticence, she might still be unsure that he is ready to understand and forgive. She might as well--”

“Then you’re not going to talk to him?” the woman asked impatiently.

“I don’t know this girl, do I?”

“It is Mademoiselle Radovicz.” She pronounced the name with an inimitable intonation.

This took the priest by surprise. “Emily?”

The woman acknowledged it with a dainty nod.

“And may I ask who told you all that? Your son?”

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“I was told by . . . one of your parishioners.”

“I shall talk to her,” the priest offered after a pause. “She might tell Krzyszc everything, for all I know.”

It was not a good solution, not for the woman, yet only her eyes betrayed her discontent. She kissed the priest’s hand and left as if not a word had been spoken.

It did not take Emi long to complete her business in the Arab Quarter. She didn’t even have to get out of her car. Above the confectioner’s, on the second floor, a curtain quivered, and in no time out came an errand-boy with a tart tied up with an elegant ribbon. Emi opened the window, took the tart, slipped a thick bundle into the tiny palm, which promptly disappeared in the boy’s sleeve. And that was it.

She arrived at their rendezvous just before five. She honked and got out. When Max came to the window she was already standing near the garbage can. When she was sure he was looking, she untied the ribbon, took out a big cellophane packet, and tore it open. The next moment, white powder was spilling out in a fine streak.

Max clawed at the window glass as if he were trying to scratch it off. Suddenly he stepped back: a black muzzle was pointing at his forehead. He immediately recognized his own gun. Emi steadied the pistol, holding it in both hands. As a red flash flickered, accompanied by firecracker sounds, he was slow to apprehend that this was just a put-on. So were the gawkers who happened to witness the strange spectacle.

I better hurry now, she thought. She tossed the toy pistol into the trash and drove away.

She stopped at the flea market to look for used clothes. Seeing a wealthy shopper, everyone offered her their best, but she silently moved on. She set her eyes, finally, on a worn-out silk dress with an over-bright floral design and uneven, handmade, out-of-the-orphanage-type lace. She held it up against her body. The dealer stopped breathing.

“How much?” Emi asked.

“Twenty francs,” the dealer said with such adamant finality it seemed her good name was at stake.

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“Do you have evening slippers my size?” Emi set one foot on the counter.

The dealer threw a glance at a fashionable half-boot of kidskin which had probably cost a fortune, and after rummaging in a box of footwear she doubtfully produced a pair of seedy sandals with double buckles. Emi didn't even try them on but simply dropped them into the plastic bag with the dress, put twenty-five francs on the counter, and left.

In the car she changed and rouged her lips Pompeian red. Now she was ready for the Bois de Boulogne.

Once there, she chose a bench in a busy alley, rolled up her dress, lathered her legs, and started to shave them. She could easily have passed for a half-wit. Passersby turned around; an old-timer nodded her head sympathetically. Men rested speculative gazes on the bared flesh. One even returned and seated himself on the opposite bench, opening a newspaper.

Emi spread her legs to give him a better view. She stroked her thigh, rolling languid eyes skyward. The man put away the paper, came over and sat beside her.

“What's your name?” he asked.

Emi gesticulated.

“So you are deaf-mute.” This somehow pleased the man, who was now shooting sidelong glances. Emi was already down on her back moaning quietly. “Not here, you nincompoop.”

He yanked her off the bench and pointed to an oak grove nearby. Emi bellowed accord, shouldered her satchel, and with a dancing gait set out for the shady arbor. She sensed the man was following.

Well up in the wood, she looked back with a coquettish smile and broke into a run. She knew the place down to the ground and could easily outrun her pursuer. She let him get close enough, in fact so close that she saw his jagged front teeth and scarred cheek, and then, once again, she was about thirty feet ahead. He overtook her by the hazel-bush. “Is this some cat-and-mouse nonsense?” He went for her panting heavily, then saw a gun and froze.

“Out of breath,” Emi said compassionately. “Haven't lost your balls, have you?”

He gaped at her, speechless, as if she were a spook.

“Still want to fuck? Then drop your pants. Well?” She cocked the trigger.

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The man opened his fly, and his pants dropped to his ankles.

“Go on! I said, go on!”

He pulled his underpants down to his knees and paused, uncertain.

“Jerk off!” she commanded.

His small puffed eyes became two slits. She waved the muzzle right under his nose. “Don’t try your blinkers on me. You know how to do it? Then do it!”

He did as he was told, and that was when she fired. She emptied the whole cartridge into him, then put the gun in her satchel, and taking a detour to avoid the immobile body, ducked between the overgrown shrubs.

The traffic sign said “No passing,” nonetheless the gray Citroën dashed forward. All of a sudden, the streets were deserted, the windows dark, yet she had an eerie feeling that the car was under constant surveillance. Another lifeless quarter. She saw a pay phone and braked. For a while, she didn’t move. Finally, she came out and picked up the receiver. Dead silence. She wasn’t a bit surprised. She went over to a picture window to get a closer look at designs long since out of fashion.

Again the Citroën roamed the narrow streets. It had started to drizzle. Emi parked the car. Now it was raining in earnest; warm puddles were bubbling cheerfully. Emi ran up a stone porch and rang the bell, a one-long-two-short warning. The automatic lock clicked, the door opened. She was greeted by a blast of music from the underworld.

Emi descended to the basement and found herself in a murky lounge with men and men only seated around five or six tables. On the dais, submerged in a pink haze, a sex show was in full swing.

“Wrong place, babe.” She was suddenly confronted by a maître-d’ who would rather have ushered the intruder without having to touch her. “The audition’s over. Do I make myself clear?”

“Stay cool, turkey,” she snapped back. “Max will be very upset if I leave now.”

“Don’t you push me,” he grumbled, leading her to a corner table.

Emi looked at the stage. On display were tableaux for all tastes--twosomes, threesomes, lying positions, standing positions. Yet only one of them caught her attention: a young maenad kissing a mulatto to wake her from her slumber.

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The waiter brought a menu, but she already knew it by heart.

“Whiskey for me and Pernod for Emily.”

“For Emily?”

“Pass the word that I’m waiting for her.”

“Yes, Madame.”

Emi was nervous. On the stage, a girl with impressive breasts was igniting matches pasted to her nipples. Emi turned away and ordered more whiskey.

From behind the door-curtain the young maenad made her entrance. She had changed into a smart if somewhat old-fashioned dress with a sham corsage. Emily came up to the table and halted.

“Take a seat,” Emi said.

“I did, now what?”

“Now we’re going to drink. This is Pernod, your favorite.”

“I’m not drinking.”

“Come on, it’s all right.”

“I don’t and I won’t!”

“You have a date?”

Emily burst out, “What are you doing here, anyway? You bummer! Is it money? Okay! How much? A hundred? Two hundred?”

“Did I tell you you look great? No kidding. You’ve got a complexion of a farm girl.”

Emily gave her a spiteful glance.

“No snake in the grass. You really look swell, I’m almost envious.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Me? From you?” Emi seemed genuinely surprised.

“You have your life, I have mine.”

“Oh? How very interesting.”

“I know what you want! You want me to become you. Is that right?”

Emi took her time lighting a cigarette. “Why should I want something that will happen anyway?”

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This presumably harmless remark had an astounding effect: Emily swept the tumbler off the table, smashing it to pieces. Men turned around, but she was too mad to notice. “I’ll never be like you! Got it? Never! Your own life may be a mess, but don’t you worry about mine. Everything is tiptop here. And I am happy, if that’s what’s bugging you!” She laughed hysterically. “And you don’t even know what it’s all about. We don’t share and share anything alike!”

“How about a bracelet?”

“A what?”

Emi brought down their left hands, side by side: both their wrists were adorned with absolutely identical niello silver bracelets.

“Shall I tell you who gave it to you? And for what kind of services? No?” She turned to the garçon. “Another whiskey for me and Pernod for the young maenad.”

“I--”

Emi cut in. “A mint kiss, it’s real cool. Is that how your friends would say it? By the way, where’s your date? I’ll drive you there.”

“On your back?” she snapped more from reflex.

The garçon brought their drinks.

“Thanks, Eugène,” Emi said with a friendly nod.

Emily waited until he left and smirked. “Still remember them by name?”

Emi let it pass. “We’ll drink to the two of you, and let it be tiptop all the way.” The other one looked at her point-blank, searching for a hidden trap, but she went on without a blink, “Krzysz, he’s a good boy. From a decent family.”

“Just so he doesn’t find out about my job!” It slipped away from Emily before she even knew.

“He won’t. No way.”

“I’m quitting anyway, see if I don’t! I’ve thought it all over!”

“Great.” Emi’s face brightened. “Let’s drink to it.”

They toasted and drank bottoms up. The maître d’ stopped by and, stooping down to Emi, whispered in her ear: “I had a call from Max. He’ll be here any moment now.”

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That made her scurry. She tossed a few bills on the table and gave Emily a slight push toward the exit. “We’ll wait for him in the car,” she told the maître d’ on her way out.

“But--”

“There’s your share of the tip,” she said reassuringly, almost breaking into a run across the lounge.

“Hey, why the rush?” Emily asked her on the stairs. “And what does Max have to do with it?”

“Later!”

“Listen, if thirty minutes from now I’m not in--”

“You see the gray Citroën? Get in!”

“It’s *yours*?”

Emi did not waste time on explanations. In a matter of seconds the car lurched forward.

She took sharp turns, making the brakes scream. Emi was looking in the rear-view mirror to make certain they weren’t followed. She thought she was doing a good job.

“Rue de Vaugirard?” Her question was more of a statement.

Emily startled. “How do you . . .” Then she dismissed it with a laugh. “I keep forgetting, you know. So what about Max? You rubbed some salt in his wound?”

Emi snickered. “It was something even better than salt.”

“He *is* an asshole. Me, I’d skin him alive. Someday I’ll let him have it!”

“Suppose you already did.”

“Look, this can’t be your limo!”

“You think I stole it?”

“Well, no.” Emily turned her head and saw an all-leather cowboy suit on the back seat. “Wow!”

“You can put it on for your date.”

“No kidding?” Emily would have choked Emi in the tightest of embraces had the latter been slower to react.

“Hey hey!”

“Right now?”

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“Be my guest.”

Emily didn't give her time to reconsider. As awkward as it was, she undressed with surprising agility--to remain briefly in her bikini--and just as nimbly slipped into the pants and jacket.

“What do you think?”

“Terrific.”

The tires swished softly on the wet asphalt. The Citroën was overtaken by a cavalcade of motorcyclists--easy riders, all female, no helmets, no clothes, no neuroses. All they needed from modern civilization were these roaring engines, which made their naked bodies vibrate ever so sweetly. They opened their souls up to the future as simply and guilelessly as their knees.

“Have you met his mamma yet?” Emi asked after a pause.

“Yeah, once. ‘Your father supports you financially? And how much do *you* earn?’ Like some tax inspector. So I sold her a few gold bricks.”

“You mean she bought them?”

“She didn't have much choice, did she. Can I smoke?” Emily popped a joint in an ivory cigarette-holder, lit it, transferred it from right hand to left hand, and only then puffed on it. Emi closely watched these manipulations, then grinned.

“We seem to enjoy books about the beau monde.”

“Are we on time? Krzysz hates to see people late.”

“What else does he hate?”

“What else?” Emily gave it a thought.

“Forget it. Let's confine ourselves to what he likes. *Eh bien*, he likes . . .”

Emily readily joined in the game. “Starched shirts, pretty cuff-links, artsy cafés, Dutch tobacco, slim legs . . .” She was quickly bending down her fingers.

“Now that's something we probably don't have to worry about,” Emi dropped in.

“Also, he likes Ingres, Magritte, Sibelius, Vian--”

“What a memory!”

“And then he likes . . .” she stumbled.

“Yes?”

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“When I let him kiss me here.” She showed with some embarrassment.

“Have you often allowed him that favor?” Emi lit a cigarette and, by instinct, transferred it to her left hand.

“Just once. And please don’t smile. With others, you see, it’s, well, like seeing your doctor--in, out. Here . . . I’m scared. Oh, not of *this* but of what’s going to happen *after*. What if nothing? He’ll have his Ingres, and his Dutch tobacco, but not me. Do you think I’m being stupid?”

Emi braked belatedly, almost missing a red light. When she finally spoke her voice was strangely subdued. “Yes, I remember. Tenderness and fear. After, it was different. After, those two would be apart. Like in a restaurant: apéritif, cold entrée, hot entrée. Yes, he liked to kiss me there. His lips were very dry. Or, maybe, *my* lips dried out. ‘Are you not inviting me in?’ ‘Not tonight, Krzysz. It’s really better this way.’” She paused. “A familiar tune: It’s really better this way. Better how? Better for who? And he didn’t even protest! I never met the likes of him. Boy, did I not want him to leave! Come on, I would urge him silently, ask for a glass of water, use the bathroom.”

“Right,” Emily took the lead. “I sometimes see it so vividly: he steps in and goes to the bedroom while I close the door ever so gently, and then we both stand still. Him--there, me--here.”

“And I’m all melting . . .”

“And I’m all melting,” Emily echoed, then added: “But of course he’s already down the stairs, speaking to the concierge, and she’s shouting at him to repeat what he said.”

“She was always asking guests to repeat.” Emi gave a nod of assent. “Probably assumed she’d be getting more for her deafness.”

“I’d be awake half the night. Was it the same with you?”

Emi nodded again.

“It’s a nightmare. Maybe he’s a virgin?”

“Who?”

“Krzysz.” Emily’s eyes were searching for an answer.

“You’re asking me?”

“Who else?”

“Does it make big difference to you?”

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Emily shrugged. “Can you give her some gas?”

“You bet I can.” The Citroën smartly beat out one car after another.

“How long since you bought her?”

“Take it easy. Someday it’ll be all yours.”

They were on the quay de la Seine. Up the river a barge was inching along, illuminated like a sternwheeler. Now that their destination was at hand they both were suddenly thrown into excitement, yes, excitement and unaccountable anxiety, as if this date were crucial for their shared fate.

Krzysztof walked up and down in front of the cinema house jingling the small change in his trouser pockets. He saw Emily when only a few steps were left between them. She reached out with a joyful “Krzysz!” which sounded like “I’m here!” But he didn’t even take his hands out of his pockets.

“Krzysz?”

“Who’d you get out from under this time?” he delivered his well-prepared phrase.

The smile on her face just would not quit.

“Enough for two theater tickets, I hope? Ah well, you must be in a hurry. Aren’t you earning more at striptease? You slut! You dirty rag!” Having completed this series of fine passes with a handsome *coup de grace*, he had all but lost his air of the young dandy. “And you were being such a touch-me-not! You scum!”

People leaving the cinema turned their heads. A fat lady ogled them as she ate mouthfuls of popcorn. Emi watched the scene from her car. Each time a crude word left the young man’s lips she started.

“I feel like--” He got his hand ready, but suddenly made an about-face and drifted away.

What happened next was a surprise to all concerned. He had hardly walked twenty paces when a gray Citroën sped by, right through a puddle, splashing him from head to heels. Outraged, he looked around but, strangely enough, did not see the wily car, which had stopped some thirty feet along. Emi reversed and, coming abreast of Emily, leaned out the window.

“Get into the car.” The other looked at her blankly. “Well? Are you stuck in the middle of the street?”

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“I have to explain to him . . .”

“What are you going to explain? That this is all a lie?”

But she was already running toward the man. Emi could not hear the words but she saw it very clearly: Krzysz was cleaning the dirt on his sleeve and silently listening to whatever Emily was telling him. His eyes wandered to her half-naked breast in the tight leather jacket. He got hold of the metallic ring and yanked the fly all the way down. Emi closed her eyes and began to moan as if she had a toothache.

After a while, the front door was opened and slammed shut. Emi started the engine and slowly drove off, without so much as a sidelong glance. When they got to the highway the car picked up to a good 75 mph. The city was left behind. Emily asked no questions.

An hour went by before she broke the silence.

“I’m hungry.”

Emi nodded. When she saw a billboard assuring drivers of a hearty meal and a warm bed, she took an exit. The hotel, a nondescript bungalow, was called Embarcadero.

“A big prick in little pants,” Emily cackled.

She was the one to pull the bell cord. The response was immediate, as if this portly old man had been standing behind the door for months waiting for the rare guest.

“What a happy coincidence!” he exclaimed in lieu of a greeting. “I had just set my mind to a good supper. May an old gentleman like myself hope that the charming ladies will make him company?”

“The ladies are absolutely exhausted,” Emi replied. “If you could bring us something to eat and drink.”

“Most certainly. An omelet, ham, pancakes with maple syrup. The choice is limited, I know, but then the Chablis is vintage ’39, none other than my father’s. And shall I tell you that he had a taste for--”

“How wonderful. And now, with your permission, we would like some rest.”

“Forgive me. Your room is on the second floor, next to the stairs. The key is in the door.”

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They found themselves in a shiny room with two beds made to perfection and chamomiles in a glass. Emily stretched out on the bed. Emi took a terrycloth bathrobe, slippers, and sundry little but oh-so-important things out from the plastic bag. “A nice old guy.”

“Who dyes his hair,” Emily offered with her eyes closed.

“And drinks the blood of his victims.” Emi went into the bathroom. She left the door ajar.

“What color towel do you want? The blue one or the pink one?”

“The blue one.”

“I can’t hear you!”

“The blue one!”

Fifteen minutes later Emily was devouring an omelet and ham, snatching pieces from the frying pan. Emi made do with wine and toast. Having brought the meals to their room, the old man quietly sat in the corner.

“God.” Emi snorted. “How quickly all his haughty airs evaporated.”

“Who do you mean?” asked Emily, her mouth full.

“Your dear Krzysz. Who else? Didn’t I tell you? Three years ago, in August, I had a little-bitsy affair with him. Go on, eat. I checked into a slick hotel on the French Riviera. Once a year I allow myself to kick up my heels. So, here I am sunbathing in a solarium when I hear loud voices: someone wants access to the private beach. I take a close look and I see some hack thrusting his ID in the janitor’s face, and the man keeps telling him: ‘It’s against our rules.’ Hey wait, I tell myself. Do I know this voice? Gosh, if it isn’t Krzysz! And it was. Same old Krzysz . . . actually, fifteen years older. Dressed in a cheap suit, and a scarf with one end hanging loose. ‘Here, Krzysz!’ I cry out loud. ‘Here I am!’ Next moment, the janitor lets him in. I tie two little straps around myself and come out.

“Okay, number one: he works for the radio, a Polish bureau. Number two: on the Riviera, he’s wooing an actor. He has to write about him or something. Anyway, his thoughts take a different turn. He is suddenly very breezy. Like, ‘What am I?’ and ‘Where am I?’ and ‘Why don’t we chitchat somewhere?’ ‘Fine with me,’ I say. ‘There’s a smart restaurant over there.’ He says, ‘How about a cafe? Like in the good old days?’ No problem. Whatever. So we’re sipping two cocktails in a cafe. And he begins to spin the glass in his hands, and he says, ‘I shouldn’t have called you what I did.’

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‘Which was what?’ I ask him. ‘Well, a slut and all that.’ ‘It’s hard to judge about *all that*,’ I tell him, ‘but there’s obviously nothing wrong about a slut, so you don’t have to apologize.’ And he says, ‘It has yet to be proven whose profession is more ancient.’ Sneaked out of it, more or less. ‘Where now?’ I ask. He hems and haws about the room being so-so, and the landlady next door. So finally I have to invite him to my suite.”

There was a long silence while Emi sipped the old wine.

“Well?” Emily asked impatiently.

Emi grimaced squeamishly. “C minus. Nothing to write home about.”

“It’s all bluff!” Emily threw out her fork. “You’ve made up that affair! And even the encounter! And a chic suite! You’ve made up all of it!”

“Then why this bitterness?” Emi said quietly. “You’ll have a chance to find out, you know. In about fifteen years.”

“All right, all right. We’d better get some sleep.” Emily stood up briskly and almost upset the frying pan. “Can I use your bathrobe?”

She stripped to her slip, put on the robe, and went to the bathroom.

A glass of wine in hand, Emi reclined on the bed. A paperback lay on the nightstand. She opened it at random and started to read.

The old man was embarrassed. The girl undressed so unexpectedly and so quickly that she left him no time to excuse himself. He decided to wait. They’d fall asleep at some point, and then

Emily came out, shed the bathrobe on the bed, slipped into a short see-through nightie that was laid out for her, then moved to the mirror to comb her hair.

“Where’s my bed?” she asked with her back to Emi.

“And where do you prefer to sleep?”

“By the window.”

“So do I. What a coincidence.”

Emily caught a sly eye-shot in the mirror and gave a serious warning, “I won’t let you sleep, you know.”

“You’ll have the worst of it.”

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Putting aside the glass with some wine still left, Emi adopted a sitting position and began to take off her clothes, letting them land every which way. Four eyes watched closely. After she left for the bathroom, Emily put down the hairbrush and, still facing the mirror, started to caress her body through the fine cloth. The old man was glued to his chair. Their eyes met in the mirror. The poor thing felt a chill, but all his fears were ungrounded: for both women he was just another piece of furniture.

When Emi returned, the bed was shaking from Emily's sobs. She put her hand on the girl's shoulder but the latter threw it off by abruptly sitting up.

"Why? Filth, filth! From the first day! Not an exception to the rule! That last one, too. Hears some buzz and beats a retreat. If I could lay my hands on the motherfucker who squealed on me, God, I'd have . . ."

"Take it easy." She stretched out on the bed, locking Emily in her arms.

"I hate them all." The words were still coming through, although somewhat muffled, helpless, pathetic. "I don't have to take this shit. Enough is enough. I'm not letting them do this to me again!"

Emi rocked her and kissed her and whispered in her ear until she dozed off. Emi, too, soon fell asleep. The old man groped his way out and quietly closed the door behind him.

Emi woke to a loud hubbub. The hotel was all hustle and bustle. Doors banging, music playing, a couple bickering. Brakes squeaked right under the window, and a rowdy company busted out of the car. Then the curtains began to flap in the breeze. And then the dawn broke out.

Disengaging herself gingerly from the embrace, Emi walked to the window and drew the curtains apart. A mile away, the sea shimmered. It was such a vivid *déjà vu*: the piers, the steamers, the quay still deserted except for two pedicabs hungry for early risers. For one moment she was back in the Sheraton, on the eleventh floor, and there, down below, was the Wharf, the fishing boats, San Francisco Bay

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" she called out absentmindedly.

A meticulously combed red head popped in. "You wanted to be woken up early."

"That's right. Thank you."

"Would you like some fresh shrimps for breakfast?"

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“Fresh shrimps?” Emily demurred, half-asleep, not even bothering to cover her nudity.

Beaming with pride, the old man solemnly brought in a big plate full of something steaming, rose-hued.

“An early morning catch!” He set the plate on the bed--for the doubtful whose skepticism would disappear along with these fragrant vapors.

Emily picked up a fleshy thing. “Mmm. I’ll be damned.”

“*Bon appétit*,” the old man said. He gave Emi a meaningful look and left.

“What sea? Is he nuts?”

Emi sat at her side and tried a shrimp.

“Californian. Believe it or not.”

“Aw, come on. Now *you’re* pulling my leg.” Emily made herself more comfortable and set to cracking the frail shells in earnest.

Later, when they were checking out, the host, truly embarrassed, asked them to sign in the register.

“It’s not that I’m such a formalist,” he muttered. “People seldom stop here on their way, let alone fine ladies. There will be something to remember you by.”

They signed. When he had seen them off, the old man peered into the register and his brows went up. Both signatures were surprisingly similar, though maybe the young woman’s letters came out sharper. But that was not the main issue. Both entries were identical: Elzbieta Emilia Radovicz.

Emily got restless in the car. She lit a cigarette and dipped into the road atlas to conceal her fervor.

“Where are we?” Emi asked.

“Between Vitry and Bar le Duc.”

“The tank’s empty.”

She pulled into a small gas station. There were only two pumps, and both were in service pumping gas into a rundown Ford pickup and a Chevrolet with the scurrilous license plate: URNS.

“While this wise guy’s refueling I’ll go buy us some beer,” Emi said, stepping out. “Another couple hours and there won’t be any air to breathe. What’s your favorite?”

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“Bass,” Emily answered distractedly.

“Why ask, right?” Laughing good-naturedly, Emi disappeared behind the doors.

The first to leave was the Chevrolet. Emily reached it in no time, unlocked the right side door through the open window, and slid into the front seat.

“Let’s go!” she said in a commanding voice, her own boldness making her all the more cheeky, yet she shunned the stranger’s gaze.

“Where?” the man asked after a brief pause.

“Paris,” she said, her heart missing a beat.

“*Where?*” he asked again. “Do you know, kid, how far it is from here to Paris?”

Kid! He called her a kid! Emily could not see herself and yet she had this feeling: somehow, she had become Elzbieta all over again. The same girl who had run away from home five years ago.

The car started off smoothly. The man turned the rear-view mirror slightly to get a better view of his teen-age passenger. She must have been fifteen, sixteen at the most. A real country girl--solid body, full calves . . . quite alluring. Large gray eyes, a slightly protruding lower lip. Lovely hair with a golden tinge. Maybe if she grew it just a little longer

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Elzbieta.”

“Polish?”

“Aha.”

“Aha,” he teased her. “Run away from home?”

“No!” Fright flickered in her eyes. “No, you’re wrong. I’ve just--”

“Yeah, it’s always just.” He gave her a brotherly nod.

Elzbieta shot a sidelong glance at the mirror. She found the man interesting. Black goatee touched with gray, a large nose--a sure sign of hot blood. If he just weren’t so old

“Hungry?” the old man (who was barely forty) asked.

“As a horse.”

“There’s a straightforward girl.”

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He parked in front of an attractive motel that resembled a giant mushroom. Check-in took half a minute. “Monsieur and Mademoiselle Legrand” scribbled the man, and he took his key.

Finding themselves inside, he locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and went to the bathroom. Elzbieta was standing in the middle of the room, immobilized. She kept going hot then cold. She was in a motel! With a man! What she had dreamed of so passionately was going to happen now. She kicked off her sandals and ducked under the covers.

The man came out in his shorts. He was pleased to see her in bed. She had time to observe that the man was hairy as an ape. She also made a note of how he tore open a gleaming cellophane pack and, turning his back, hid it in his shorts. He pulled down the covers and knit his brow.

“Is this a joke of some kind?”

“I thought that maybe . . .”

“This is no place for thinking,” he said benevolently, helping her out of her dress.

Of what followed Elzbieta remembered only the pain and a sweaty palm on her mouth.

“You take a rest,” he suggested as he was getting dressed, “and I’ll go downstairs to buy us something to eat.”

After he left she showered and returned to bed. She was feverish. She covered herself with a second blanket, and the next moment she was sleeping like a top.

She came to as if she’d been shoved: 4:45. She’d been asleep for almost five hours! Elzbieta rushed to the window: there was no beige Chevrolet in the parking lot. She got dressed, peeped out the door, and seeing no one, rushed off down the lobby.

“Mademoiselle!”

She looked back sheepishly. “Me?”

“Can I clean your room?” the housemaid asked.

“Yes . . . you are very kind,” she stammered, taking flight. But she failed to slip past the desk clerk.

“Mademoiselle Legrand, are you leaving?”

She opened her mouth and was unable to find the right words.

“Your father said you would pay the bill. A day here is 70 francs.”

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She looked blank. “How much?”

“70 francs,” the desk clerk repeated. “Is that cash or check?”

Elzbieta turned red.

“I don’t have that much,” she mumbled almost inaudibly.

“And how much do you have?” the desk clerk asked in a mocking voice.

“Me?” She was trying to delay the inevitable.

Down the stairs came the housemaid. She crossed the main lobby, went up to the desk clerk, and began whispering in his ear. He listened, never taking his eyes off the girl, his lips a squeamish grimace. All of a sudden he grabbed her arm above the wrist. Before she knew it she was in a tiny back room with an angular couch.

“Are you going to pay?” The desk clerk, his tone rigid, made her retreat toward the couch.

“Monsieur, I really don’t . . .” she whined plaintively, but he had already made a sign to the housemaid, who was guarding the exit.

The woman left her post, approached Elzbieta, and began to search her all over. She was quick to trace the money inside her girdle. Biting off the thread, she ripped open the seam, got hold of the girl’s Blue Monday currency, and smartly counted the bills.

“A hundred and eighteen,” she said, giving the money to her boss.

“For the lodgings, for the stained bedsheets . . . plus the tax.” He fingered some small bills and handed them to the housemaid. Then he turned again to Elzbieta. “You bring another client, I call the police. Today I’m in a good mood, so you’d better go now.”

Elzbieta did as she was told and trailed off toward the highway to hitchhike. To those who cared to stop--and they were not too many--she obstinately said, “Paris?” Two hours later, she was told to get in.

Never before had she met a man like this. Neither the heat that made your clothes cling so disgustingly to your body nor the road dust that settled on your hair could belittle the perfection of Noah. He had the best brows, as thin as if they’d been penciled, a Roman nose, smooth skin of a remarkably beautiful

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opaque color, wavy blond shoulder-length hair--he had the looks of an actor. Not someone in particular, but An Actor, so to speak.

Time and again, Noah would extract a perfumed tissue from a pretty case and wipe his face, neck, hands. His hands had no cuts or calluses, which stunned Elzbieta no less than his lacquered nails.

After he had introduced himself and asked her her name, he had lost any interest in her whatsoever. All he had to do to please himself was turn on different music. This made Elzbieta jump all the more when he asked, "You're not hungry, are you?"

She was dizzy from hunger but her latest adventure was fresh in her memory, so she asked him bluntly, "You mean you want to check into the motel?"

"Why should I want that?" Noah's face showed surprise.

"To make . . . to make me . . ."

He came to her rescue. "No, that is not in my plans. So, do you want to eat?"

Elzbieta nodded gravely. He bought her a bottle of Pepsi and sandwiches in a snack-bar, which she devoured in the car, without chewing, like a boa constrictor. After eating, she took a wholesome interest in his daily affairs.

"Do you live alone in Paris?" she asked.

"Why?"

"I can wash your clothes and all that."

"I think we need to reach an understanding about all that. And there's no washing to do."

"No washing? But what happens to your dirty socks and underwear and . . ."

"I throw it away."

Elzbieta was silent for a long time. "I'm also good at grilling pork," she said finally.

"I don't eat meat."

Elzbieta thought she had missed the point. "You don't eat pork?" she reiterated, to be sure.

"Any meat. I'm a vegetarian."

"I see." She nodded knowingly.

"Don't take it to heart. We'll find a way."

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Now that her mind was somewhat at peace Elzbieta let herself to relax. She fell asleep without even noticing it. When she opened her eyes it was dark outside and there were lights, thousands of lights.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“Paris.”

About the apartment they entered one could probably say that the owner had recently moved in, but who this owner was remained totally unclear. It was a spacious empty affair with graffiti on the walls and a cheerfully crackling fire in the middle of the main room, where all sorts of people who felt very much at home were hustling and bustling about. They came without notice and went without a good-bye. Each entertained himself as he pleased.

Elzbieta, likewise, was left to her own discretion, and she quietly sat down in a corner beside a girl who was groping for something on the floor.

“What did you lose?” Elzbieta asked anxiously.

The girl looked up. There were tears in her eyes. “It’s so smooth. Why didn’t anyone tell me how smooth it was?”

In the hall Noah was chatting with a boy maybe two years younger than Elzbieta. They were sharing a cigarette. They were joined by a man whose commanding presence made him stand out in the crowd.

“Got it?” he asked Noah by way of greeting. He was promptly given a package. “You still owe me some pocket change.”

“How about this one?” Noah pointed to the far corner. “She’s your best bet, Max.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Check her out.”

They approached Elzbieta, who readily stood up to meet them.

“Have you decided against climbing the Tour Eiffel?” Noah asked her.

“Of course not! I--”

“A brave girl,” Max intervened, offering her a cigarette-case.

“Oh no, I don’t smoke.”

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“This *is* your tour F-L, sweetie.” Noah broke out laughing. “A ten-minute trip from France to Laos.”

“Make it five,” Max said with a grin, lighting a joint and giving it to Elzbieta.

She inhaled timorously. While she was coughing it off, Noah poured her a glass of wine.

“Second time’s easier.”

He proved right. After the fifth drag her knees betrayed her, and she was prone on the floor.

“Well, how’s Laos?” Max asked her. “Hot?”

“Yes.” She could hardly move her swollen tongue.

“Better take off your clothes.”

They undressed her and let her lie on the floor. Suddenly Elzbieta began to crawl. Nobody paid any attention.

“She must think she’s an alligator,” Noah said.

“Then let her swim in the Mekong.”

They carried her to the bathroom, plugged the drain, and turned on the water. Elzbieta started to choke. They helped her out and sat her on the stool. She licked her parched lips and moaned, “I’m hot!”

“Want an ice-cream cone?” Max asked.

“Yes yes yes.”

“All right,” he reassured her undoing his fly, then added with a chuckle, “Only don’t bite it off, gater.”

The rest was all mixed up in her head. She was standing nude on the scale in some untidy apartment. Then she’d be ransacking the kitchen for food and, finding none, standing on the scale again. Her own future depended on what it said! She would fall onto the bed, exhausted. And from the armchair in the corner Max would speak to her, enunciating every word:

“Elzbieta is dead, dig it? For my clients you’re Emily. Get on the scale. Well, pretty close.”

She tried the balcony door--strangely enough, it was not locked. Max, a smile on his face, was anticipating her next move. She got hold of the railing, shifted her body up, and plunged headlong with dizzying speed.

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Someone was shaking her by the shoulder.

“Emily! Wake up!”

“Did I scream?” she asked looking around.

“God, you scared me. A bad dream?”

“I ran away from you, hiked to Paris. And it all happened again . . . that motel, Max, the hunger pangs. Oh, I hate him so much!”

They were some two hours from Void. Emi did not want to arrive without presents, so now and then she would take an exit. They would buy stupid things or even nothing. Emily fumed. In spite of the stifling air the windows had to be raised because of the dust. They opened two cans of Bass--the beer was lukewarm.

They arrived in Void in the worst of the heat. Population 351, said the plaque; one figure, the first or the last one, seemed to be missing. Neat white houses clung to the river on both sides, as if it were a watering hole; six or seven had broken from the herd and were grazing on the green slopes. Here and there, tricolor flags hung like tatters. There were more flags than people.

“Void.” Emi was the first to break silence. “Highest per capita patriotism in the country.”

Emily made a wry face. “Give them the chance, they’d storm the Bastille seven days a week. I can imagine what it will be like on the fourteenth of July.”

The car mounted a steep rise, where a tile roof poked out between the trees. The house was guarded by a homemade wooden cross trimmed with paper lilies and strips of foil. There were blinds on one window and grilles on two others.

Emi tooted. The house was silent.

“Want to wait here?”

Emily shrugged indifferently, busy with the radio. Emi went up the porch and, after a moment's hesitation, walked through the open door. The entrance hall was fairly dark. She had hardly taken a few steps forward when the telephone on the wall boomed like thunder. Overcoming her first fright, she lingered, allowing somebody to answer the phone, but the house was dead silent. She lost her nerve and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

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“So how was the trip? The heat’s a killer.”

“Max?” She was dumbfounded. “How did you know I was here? I’ve just--”

“Run away. Without bidding adieu.”

“Who gave you this number?”

“Elzbieta.”

“*Who?* “

The membrane droned with laughter.

“You must be really off your hinges, sis. Talk to you later. My best to the others. I mean, Emily, Elzbieta. Nice company, huh?” Max grunted and hung up on her.

Emi cradled the receiver, stood still for a moment, then made for the living room. The light was oozing through the blinds. She circled the room touching familiar objects: an oppressive, wide-hip buffet with a jagged upper plank, a long table placed as if deliberately to get in one’s way, chairs in handmade slip covers, a wardrobe with a loose frame that was kept shut by a four-fold sheet of paper. Emi pulled the knob--the sheet fell out. She unfolded it and read: “I will give you a dressing-down, all of you!” She folded it again and fixed the frame in its original position. The silence was onerous. She moved a chair to the wall to start the pendulum. She checked her own watch--it was 8 p.m.

In the bedroom she picked up an elastic garter. This was somehow embarrassing. She turned it over, then dropped it. The bed was unmade, the linen unclean. On her way out she glanced unconsciously at a mirror and did not see her own reflection. That puzzled rather than scared her.

The invariably running water in the kitchen sink caught her attention briefly, but she moved on, and having reached the end of the front hall, stopped short before entering the playroom. It had become so foreign: rag dolls standing, for some obscure reason, on their knees, a wooden cradle, a diary. She did try, dark as it was, to read a few lines from it, but then she became aware of two unblinking eyes and recoiled. That must be the cat, she told herself, and cried out, “Shoo! *Va t’en!*” The creature remained still, and this made Emi all the more uneasy. She threw down the diary and promptly left, her back feeling the cold gaze.

Emily was still sitting in the car, smoking, pounding out the rhythm of a song.

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“Well?” she asked.

“We’re unpacking.”

And that was it. With bags in both hands Emily was leading the way up the porch when some strange creature darted out the door and seized her in its deadly grip.

“My darling is back! My Lucky Ducky!”

“Elzbieta, please. You’re going to strangle me.”

“No no no no . . .”

“There’s a savage.” Emily, laughing, finally unlocked those tubby hands.

The two of them walked inside. The little girl did not even bother to look at Emi.

“Where is Father?” Emi asked.

The girl waved in the direction of the closet. Whether the gesture meant disgust or indifference was hard to tell. Without letting go of her guest, Elzbieta dragged her to the playroom. Emi looked in the closet. When her eyes had adapted to the darkness she discerned a huge chest with a pile of rags on top of it. On the floor was a tin bowl of leftovers, beside it a crust of bread. It smelled of must. She had an eerie feeling that the pile was stirring.

Back in the living room Emi raised the blinds and everything became even more unlikable: scratched floor, faded curtains. She wanted to unpack, but the table, like everything else, was covered in a layer of dust. She found a wash-basin, changed into a plain robe, and started washing the floors in the front hall, where she could overhear the voices in the playroom.

“Try it on.” Elzbieta was pressing her elder. “I put it away the same day you left. See? As good as new!”

Slightly constrained, Emily disposed of her Paris clothes and put on the innocent dress she wore five years ago. It was too loose for her now, but Elzbieta in her exultation overlooked that.

“May I try on yours?”

“Sure.”

Elzbieta, chubby as she was, pulled in her tummy, held her breath, and arduously corkscrewed herself into Emily’s dress.

“Look, look!” she triumphed. “To a T! It suits me, doesn’t it?”

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“It does. You can wear it if you want.”

“I can?” Catching Emily off guard, the girl clung to her like a bulldog. She then brought out her treasure-box. It contained two pearly buttons and an unmatched earring with a semiprecious stone, hairpins, and even a cameo with a barely recognizable female profile. They were arranging all these riches on the bed when Elzbieta suddenly asked, “Is she leaving soon?”

Emily shrugged.

“Why did she come anyway! *I* didn't invite her. Next she'll be telling us what to do. Gee, let's . . .” The girl, her eyes glittering, whispered something in Emily's ear.

“Phooey!” The elder pushed her away lightly, laughing rather nastily.

“You have a house in Paris?” Elzbieta asked.

“More like a palace.”

“If I could just take a peep. And what do you do for a living?”

“I dance.”

“Naked?”

Emily looked her closely in the eye but saw nothing except keen interest.

“What do you think?”

“Naked!” Elzbieta blurted out ecstatically.

“Would *you* like to dance like this?”

The young one spread out a patchwork quilt and asked in turn, “And who are you going to sleep with? Me or her?”

“Umm. I haven't thought about it, really.”

“Then it's me,” Elzbieta said flatly. “You want tea?” Without waiting for an answer she towed away her darling.

In the kitchen Emi was cleaning blackened casseroles with sand. The table, covered by a new cloth, was set for a light supper. The teapot was sweating under a quilted cozy.

“And what did I tell you!” the little girl blurted out, her words meant for Emily. She stood arms akimbo, no longer a girl but a grown-up, and arrogantly addressed Emi's back, “We can scrape them off ourselves, Lady Clean!”

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“All set,” Emi said propitiously, leaving the casserole in the sink. “Shall we start?”

“I am ravenous,” Emily admitted, promptly popping a slice of cheese into her mouth.

“We’ll sit here, and she will sit over there,” the young one commanded, speaking of Emi in the third person.

“How about Father?”

“Later.” Elzbieta waved it off. Having waited for everyone to take their seats, she put her palms together in front of her, said a prayer in Polish under her breath, and fell upon the cookies.

During supper Emily avoided Emi’s eyes. For the two of them the silence was overwhelming, but not for the little girl, who finished a box of petit fours herself, after which she took an opened can from the refrigerator, warmed up three sausages with some gruel and swept it all out into a tureen.

“Here.” She persistently refrained from calling Emi by name. “Now you can feed him.”

Emi left. In the lobby she sniffed the sausage. It smelled funny. She pinched off a bit to taste it, and spit it out immediately. They were cat sticks.

“Father?” she addressed herself to the darkness of the closet.

From under the tatters poked out a disheveled head, untouched by gray, on a powerful neck. There was some bustle, then a dim light flashed. The old man breathed in the air as if he didn’t trust his own eyes.

“Ah, it’s you.”

He lowered his feet in thick woolen socks, and one trouser got stuck revealing rustic drawers. A knit jacket was fully buttoned. The old man shivered and said, “Where’s the blanket?”

“Do you want me to bring it?” Emi asked just to be sure.

The old man stirred noisily, probably reliving a deeply rooted insult. “Do I want it!” he grumbled to himself. “Day after day I ask her, and she won’t spare it!”

Emi decided it was time to straighten things out. “Father, don’t you know who I am? It’s me, Emi.”

“Call yourself the Pope, you’re not going to be any better. And don’t addle my brains. Where’s my food?”

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Emi doubtfully handed him the tureen. The old man ate noisily, scraping out the last morsel. He no longer seemed to notice Emi. But then he stealthily glanced upward to make sure she was looking in the other direction, and with surprising agility whisked out a flask from behind the chest to take a gulp before quickly shoving it back. He wiped his mouth with a sleeve and let out a sigh. “So you turn your nose away from me. When your mother was alive you were quiet as a mouse. Now you’re acting brave, huh?”

“Can I go, Father?”

“Take the bowl. And the other one, too. Ah, Elzbieta, Elzbieta”

Out in the lobby, Emi leaned against the wall. Her head was swimming.

“Slut! You slut!” she repeated several times.

Peals of laughter came from the kitchen. She set the dirty bowls on the floor and turned toward the front hall.

Hearing a car door slam, Elzbieta rushed to the window. “She’s leaving!” The girl clapped her hands. “She’s leaving, she’s leaving.” The theme was developing, enriched by jubilant variations. Emily joined her at the window. The Citroën indeed had vanished.

All hell broke loose. With hoops and whoops the little girl made an express tour of the house, after which she fell prostrate on her parents’ bed, where packages in fancy wrapping were scattered. She tore open one to try on a man’s knit jacket; it reached to her shins. In another she discovered chocolate bars and savored them by the mouthful. Then she noticed a chamois purse and swept out its contents. This was what she had always cherished! A cosmetic bag! Seizing on a black pencil, rouge, and eye shadow, she settled down in front of the mirror and began to daub at her face, with swift strokes, turning herself into a *femme fatale*.

“Let me show you,” Emily offered, reaching for the black pencil.

“I’m doing it myself!” the other one shrieked.

Her cries made the old man crawl out of his kennel. He shuffled to the bedroom and stared myopically at the rainbow face. Elzbieta was not a bit nonplused, but rather jumped at the opportunity: the game had taken a new turn.

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“Le Marquis?” she exclaimed with feigned surprise. “Am I dreaming? How dare you, dressed as you are, pay a visit to a lady?”

Hips undulating, Elzbieta approached her father. She was planning to pull off his greasy jacket in an offhanded, princely manner, with two fingers, but the old-timer caught her wrist in mid-air and pushed her vigorously, sending her flying into the corner. The would-be lady went wild. She spun like a top around the man, pinching him mercilessly. His awkwardness cheered her up. Sneaking up on him she tugged at the loose end of his belt. The old man let out a grunt, catching his trousers at the last moment. This aroused the two of them all the more. Attacking him from different sides they stripped him of this and that, as if plucking feathers, until they finally pleased themselves by revealing his bare flesh. He took to his closet holding up his drawers, and Elzbieta, very much elated, chased him to the door before locking him up.

Now they could enjoy their freedom. They climbed the table in the living room and broke into a jig. Then something occurred to Elzbieta; she cautiously climbed down and with a cry--“I’ll be right back!”--rushed to her playroom.

It was a barrel organ. She turned the crank--the organ played the Polish hymn as if it were pavane. Emily was quick to take the lead: she did the dance, moving at a slow pace to the far end of the table and back. The little girl picked up speed--now it was polka.

They finished off with a cancan.

Later, they lay tired out in the bedroom, smoking at their leisure. Well, this mostly referred to Emily since Elzbieta was choking on smoke and rolling her eyes.

“What’s missing is good wine,” Emily sighed.

“I’ll bring it!” Elzbieta responded instantly, her eagerness the result of either a will to serve or a desire to dispose of that horrible cigarette.

A jug of homemade wine was kept in a clever hiding place lest the old man smell it. In the kitchen, it occurred to her as an afterthought to fetch the antique rummers in the cupboard, which really meant breaking a taboo. What Emily heard next was an explosion and the sound of shattered glass.

“Maman would’ve swooned,” she exhaled with the smoke.

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Elzbieta appeared in the door frame holding two glasses in one hand and pressing a two-quart jug to her heart with the other. “Now it’s all mine. I can do what I please.”

“Mine, yeah,” Emily agreed. “Let’s drink to that!”

They drank to this and to that, until the little girl had a drop too much. The bed looked like it was littered with cookies, and a bright red stain adorned the pillow. Elzbieta was lying and thinking: This is how the *queans* spend their time, more or less. That’s what her father sometimes said, and he might as well have meant *queens*, for all she knew. The thought made her head swim even faster.

“What’s he gibbering about there?” Emily asked.

“Who?”

“You know who.” She waved her hand vaguely.

“He’s co-o-o-old!” the little one drawled mockingly. “Was I cold when he locked *me* barefoot in the closet!”

“Right.”

“I was doing thank-you-ma’am, and he just didn’t care a hoot.”

“Let her cry, maybe she’ll grow some brains between her ears,” Emily quoted. Those were her father’s favorite words, and he would use them to stifle any attempt on her mother’s part to speak for their daughter.

“Aha.” Elzbieta rolled over on her stomach. “Maybe *he* ’ll grow some brains. Oh, *that’s* cute!”

Emily took a small memo book bound in morocco from her. It had fallen out of Emi’s purse. Names, phone numbers.

“Her cavaliers.” Emily winked playfully as if this had no relation whatsoever to Elzbieta or herself.

“Shall we call?” The little one sprang to her feet and ran for the phone in the hall. Luckily, the cord was long enough to reach the bedroom. They distributed the roles: Elzbieta would dial a number, and Emily would do the talking.

“Ricardo . . . What do you mean who? When I needed an abortion to get rid of your child you remembered my name better than your own. Strain your brain, man. Nope. Nope. You keep a harem or something? Uh oh!” She spelled out to Elzbieta speaking in undertone: “He wants my number.”

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And again, into the receiver: “You’re a pig, you know that? Whipping off like that! *Eh bien*, it’s over. Like I said, it’s over. See me? I’m not sure. Tomorrow I can’t. No, can’t either. Saturday? Saturday might work. Yes, seven seems fine. Which one? All right. Ciao.”

Elzbieta had held her breath throughout the conversation. “What’s an abortion?” she asked.

“When they get rid of the babies.”

“Like Mother got rid of me sending me away for a month to her sister?”

“Yeah, pretty close.”

This made Elzbieta lose all interest in abortions. She had something more important to worry about. “You’ll keep it, right?”

“What?”

“Your date! On Saturday!”

Emily broke out laughing. “You silly! That Saturday is years from now. Maybe three, maybe ten. Well. Dial another one.”

Once she was recognized by her voice. “Emi?” the man at the other end said. “Is it you?” Caught off guard, Emily hung up quickly.

When this game got too boring they invented a new one called “Emi.” As in “Emi cleans a pan.” Elzbieta would clutch an iron sponge and delicately, so as not to ruin, God forbid, an imaginary manicure, stroke the blackened side of an aluminum casserole. Or: “Emi washes the floor.” Having carelessly wound a wet rag round the mop, Elzbieta would cover the floor with ingenious arabesques.

When Emi returned she was met by a strange silence.

Vests and jackets were scattered all the way down the hall. The smell of something burning was coming from the kitchen. In the bedroom the curtains were fully drawn, and in the dark she did not see the two sleeping forms--they had dropped off all of a sudden, amid this holy mess. When Emi paused in front of the sitting room, where a dirty rag hung from the chandelier, she thought she was imagining queer sounds.

She approached the closet--the sounds were coming from there.

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“Father?” She tugged at the door. “Father?” She heard muttering: “It’s cold . . . it’s cold . . .” She turned the key, which had been left in the lock. The old man, wrapped up in his late wife’s overcoat, was perched on the chest.

“It’s cold.”

She picked up the scattered clothes, stacked them beside him and looked away. The old man, sobbing, began to dress, missing a sleeve now and then.

“That’s how we are,” he was muttering to himself. “My granddad, my father. Me. And you. All the Radovicz. That’s why you don’t have children. No more freaks. You think I didn’t know what bugged you as a kid? Sure I did. Why else would I beat you? They hadn’t beaten it out of me--I tried harder on you. Now don’t turn away from me. You don’t mind whoring, you don’t mind bruises. My hand was lighter, maybe. Home sweet home, huh?”

Emi had buried her face in his lap. She was talking incessantly, but the old man could not make head or tail of it. Then he suddenly guessed rather than heard. “What do I do now?” she was saying, again and again.

For the first time the old man smiled. “Repentance was your mother’s cup of tea. Don’t ask me.”

Her parents’ bedroom had a dim alcove with a large crucifix. Emi had pressed her lips to it and silently begun to pray when someone’s strong hands took hold of her shoulders and a man’s voice said mockingly, “Pious girls make the best whores. Who else could offer herself with such zealous, almost mystical exultation? Who else could roll her eyes up so passionately? And shake as if she were in a trance? And cry out the Lord’s name as if she, and not Danaë, had opened her legs to the Creator?”

Two huge palms cupped her breasts, and then the right one slid toward her belly, and lower still, feeling each and every fold, rudely, possessively. Emi groaned. She didn’t even try to fight back.

“But first comes initiation. Introduction to the rites of whoredom. You have to be ready for the initiation. Are you ready?”

His fleshy finger journeyed between her legs.

“Yes, quite.”

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She screamed from pain. She would have fallen over if not for the support of the two powerful hands clasping her hips.

“There. Our Lord has entered Jerusalem. Now we have Passion Week ahead. You’ll find out about the agony of flesh. About cold sweat. And then you’ll be resurrected to a new life. And you’ll pursue what you’ve found. Only more. And more. And more.”

With each word he penetrated her even harder, and she puffed out like someone taking blows right under the solar plexus. The crucifix floated in on her and away, in and away. Her head was swimming, but somehow she could not make herself close her eyes.

Suddenly the iron vise eased its grip and she realized she was falling. She had lost all sense of time. She was burning inside, and lying on the floor was a comfort. She could not stir, though, for every cell in her would start to ache. At last, she made an effort to get up.

When finally she staggered out of the alcove and saw a great hall full of wax, stucco, and bronze statues, she knew she was in Ian Rush’s studio. She also knew she was a different person: Emily, again.

A surprise was in store for her. Tied up with a clothesline, Ian sat in the armchair, a tall red Welshman, and without a sound of protest sustained a whipping from a dark-skinned, narrow-eyed girl.

Emily approached them slowly. The girl handed her the lash.

She drew back her hand and struck the red-bearded man with all her might. He clenched his jaws in a deadlock to stifle a groan. A bloody scar swelled up on his shoulder. Emily went berserk. She had found an outlet for the hatred she had been holding back for years.

“This is for my father! For my mother! For the alligator and the ice-cream! For the pious girls! For more, and more, and more!”

Her voice became hoarse. Half-strangled, she was being drawn away by Tabitha. She contrived to drive her teeth in the girl’s flesh. With a shriek, Tabitha retracted her hand, jumped like a wildcat on Emily’s back, and began to strangle her in earnest.

“It’s okay,” said Rush with a wry smile.

Tabitha let her go, and again Emily prepared to strike when she met his gaze, measuring, devilish. The lash stopped in mid-air.

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“Now we both need a bath,” Rush said rising to his feet. The clothesline untied, as if by magic. He picked her up and walked away, very much at ease, with a passing remark, “Two towels, Tabitha.”

The last one to wash her, at the age of ten, was her mother, whose rough peasant hands had turned her stomach. *His* rough hairy hands, used to knead clay and squeeze women’s haunches, gave her pleasure. She guiltily stroked his purple scar. Rush nodded forgivingly.

Back in the studio, he put her on the couch under a plaid blanket and made her take a shot of cognac. Later Tabitha appeared with a bandaged hand and sat down, unabashed, across from them.

“Now girls, let’s drink a glass to peace,” Rush said, pouring one for Tabitha and telling them to clink glasses. “What are we going to listen to?” He was looking tentatively at Emily, as if setting her to music, and finally chose the ball scene from Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet.

Emily closed her eyes, ravished. A minute later she was sleeping.

When she woke up Rush was sitting nearby in an armchair. In the urn stood gladioli of every possible shade of violet.

“I must have dozed off,” Emily said, slightly embarrassed, and then she saw the flowers. “I think I’m still dreaming.” She remembered something. “And where’s Tabitha?”

“Cooking a very special dinner.”

“Today is a special day?” she asked surprised.

“The Passions of Ian Rush the Martyr.”

She smiled guiltily. “It must really hurt.”

He shrugged. “Hungry?”

“Ravenous.”

“Tabitha?” he called out. “Are you ready?”

“Give me a second!” she echoed from the kitchen.

Rush had dressed up. Plaid shirt, jeans, high buckled boots. A Colt tucked into his boot-top was apparently missing.

“You look pretty good for a martyr,” she said.

“You too.”

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In came Tabitha carrying a tray with smoking clay pots.

“Now you have to eat this with sticks,” Rush said excitedly. “And pant like a setter who’s been chasing a rabbit.”

“A setter? Why?”

“You’ll find out.”

It took Emily three clumsy attempts to hook a slippery mushroom, but the taste was so rewarding she moaned lustily. She had swallowed two or three pieces of meat almost without chewing, then suddenly her tongue showed, and she was breathing spasmodically, doglike.

“What . . . is it?” she asked, frightened, unable to shut her mouth.

“A Chinese flame-thrower, Tabitha’s trump card. All right, relax, take a spoon.”

But the only thing she cared about now was putting out the fire inside her. As for the other two, they were eating their heads off, sticks flashing like knitting needles. After he had all but emptied the bottle by himself, Rush fixed his gaze on Emily, a gaze that was new to her, and told her curtly:

“Undress.”

It was a request rather than a command, but rejecting it seemed nearly impossible. Emily shot a glance at Tabitha, and after a moment’s hesitation removed her robe.

“Turn a little sidewise. That’s it. Now pretend you’re pulling up a stocking.”

A feeling of uneasiness gave way to acute excitement. Suddenly she saw herself with his eyes. No one had ever looked at her as he was now. Be prepared for another assault, she thought, her heart missing a beat. Wrong. Rush was bending wire, and sex was the last thing on his mind.

“What is it?” he fretted seeing her straighten up.

“I’m dizzy,” she complained.

“The stocking,” he told her.

Playfully, he made a wire carcass of a woman, untwisted it, and started to re-bend it from memory, his eyes closed.

“The séance is over,” he said finally. “You may throw the stocking away.”

Tabitha brought her her clothes. Watching her get dressed, Rush asked, “Why didn’t you come at once? Lose my address?”

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“No.”

“Had a grip on your whelp.”

“He’s no whelp,” she snapped.

“No, a looming bridegroom. Got dumped?”

Emily blushed but held her tongue.

“Catholic girls, that’s something. One kiss, and they’re talking about holy wedlock.”

“Aren’t *you* a Catholic?” she asked, turning involuntarily toward a wooden crucifix.

“Me?” He burst out laughing and slammed his bulky thighs, childlike. “What do you say to that, Tabitha? Ian Rush, a descendant of King Solomon, with probably as many whores and ladies of gentle blood on his record, a redheaded Pan with a prick for a pipe, repenting for his sins in St. Peter’s Cathedral! Ho-ho-ho! If I have to kowtow for every woman I’ve seduced, how many days would I have to knock my head? And I wonder which would crack first, my forehead or their marble floor?”

“I’m leaving,” Emily cut in between thundering outbursts.

“Are you?” he said in disbelief, as if witnessing his own boots walk away by themselves. “So late?”

“I must, really.”

“Where are you going? Unless it’s a secret.”

“It’s a secret.”

“At least I can give you a ride. Can I?”

Emily wavered. “Okay. Only . . .”

“Only what?”

“Nothing.”

About two blocks from her destination, she asked him to stop, clung to him for a second, then jumped out of the car and disappeared around the corner. He followed slowly. She was in a hurry, and allowed herself to look back only twice, the last time at a door, before ringing the bell.

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Quite a few cars had parked nearby, and Rush had trouble finding a spot for his Buick. There was nothing special about the building. Rush pressed the bell. Dead silence. He pressed more urgently. Still no answer. He was prepared to crash his fist down on that door when he heard a voice from behind:

“Monsieur cannot count to three?”

He turned to hurl the cheeky fellow down the stairs, but the stranger was exceedingly friendly. “It’s very simple.” The man rang the bell using a secret signal--one long buzz, two short--and the door opened by itself. “Necessary precautions.” The man smiled and offered his hand. “Max.”

“Ian.” Rush shook his hand.

“Dante is ready to descend into the first circle. May I be your Virgil?”

Rush studied the man more closely, but it was impossible to read his face.

“A promising start,” Rush chuckled.

“Then follow me.” Without looking back, Max descended the stairs into the semi-darkness of the basement.

A sex show was preceded by personal appearances: each girl had a surprise in store, and the truly ingenious got a big hand from the audience. Regulars cheered their pets.

“Well?” Max was sitting with his back to the stage. “Aren’t they remarkable specimens?”

“You talk about them as if they were alligators.”

“Indeed, and all included on the menu,” Max picked up his tone, sipping from the tumbler.

“Price list available?” Rush gladly joined in the game.

Max handed him a folded sheet of glossy paper. Rush opened it; across from the names, male and female, printed in one column, there was a price. These were the only “dishes” on the menu.

“Actually, I recommend that you pay attention to this one.” Without looking back, Max pointed at the stage where a new girl had made an appearance.

Emily.

The tumbler froze on its way to Ian’s mouth. Coming up to the proscenium, the girl took off her bra and threw it to the audience, which had crowded at the dais. A youth, catching it in mid-air, brought forth a large bill from his pocket with a princely gesture. The girl accepted the bill, turned her bum to the youth, and inserting the bill between her buttocks, contracted them in a streak of effortless

pulsations: the piece of paper fluttered like wings of a butterfly. The audience whoo-hooed approvingly.

“She’s whimsical!” Max grinned. “And easy on the eyes, mmm?”

Rush gulped his drink by way of response.

“Judging by her looks you wouldn’t tell she’s suffered. Her father’s a brute, her mother’s a fanatic. At fifteen, she ran away. Hitchhiked to Paris, paying with her body. And mind you, she was completely innocent when I came to know her, and that is really beyond me. A paradox?”

Rush produced a checkbook. Max’s eyes wandered to the stage.

“It’s seven nights’ worth, which means she’s free until next Saturday.” Rush placed the check in front of the man. “It was a pleasure,” he added, standing up.

“One and seven makes eight,” Max said vaguely, pocketing the check. “The ninth circle is the last one.”

“Here’s for the liquor.” Rush tossed a bill on the table. “By the way. If I were you I wouldn’t wear that high heel. A slight limp is very manly.”

The moment Emily saw Rush waiting for her outside she knew he had found out. Ready for whatever he was going to tell her, she went out to meet him. Rush put his arm around her, as if nothing had happened, and led her to his car. She sank into the soft leather seat, and the belt buckled her in automatically. She was looking around with a quizzical eye.

“A real beauty,” she referred to a young woman whose picture was secured under a glass panel. “Your mother?”

He pretended not to have heard the question.

“You do it well,” he said. “Easy, unrestrained. Eventually one loses it. The more you know, the less you can. That ‘butterfly’ of yours . . .” He protruded his lower lip, which was a sure sign of his enchantment.

“Where do we go?” The tone betrayed her tension.

“A good question. How about paying a visit to a producer?”

“You mean, a guy in the movies?”

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“Sort of. A real character. He saw my studio and invited me over.”

“Is it far from here?”

“No. Not really.” He consulted his watch. “The timing’s not perfect, I’m afraid. He may not be home.”

“And what does he do at night?”

Rush was already playing the buttons of the car phone, so the question hung in the air. Then a voice on the other end said in a very businesslike tone, “Hullo?”

“Hi, Mike. It’s Rush. Where am I? Same Old World, but planning on the Netherworld. Your domain, exactly,” he snickered, and then his expression fell. “Oh no! And when do you get back? No objections. No, not just me. You bet!” He winked merrily at Emily. “And how are *your* girls? Yeah, she’s finicky. And Greta? You must be kidding. With that tail-wagger? Didn’t you say *jamais de ma vie*? Sounds like a Shakespearean drama. What about Vivien, still alive? She *whelped*?”

He rolled his eyes and, covering the receiver, spoke to Emily by way of explanation, “It’s a Dog Hollywood for a house. You’ll be amazed.”

Suddenly he yawled into the phone, “No no no, it is *not* a deal! No, absolutely not! Where could I hunt with her? In the Luxembourg Gardens? Anyway, will you be there when we arrive? I’ll let you know the exact time. Yes. OK, Mike. All right. See you then.”

“He’s expecting us,” he said, putting down the receiver.

“Isn’t it a bit late?” she asked.

“With him it’s never late.”

The car pulled over in front of a fashionable store. It was closing time but Rush must have been a special customer, for it seemed that the personnel were ready to stay overnight, if need be, just to please him. He suggested that Emily look around, as for himself he retreated to a corner with Madame Rivoli, the storekeeper.

“Are we going to make a princess out of Cinderella?” Madame smiled as one smiles to an intimate friend or even somebody more intimate.

He shook his head. “I want you to take it seriously.”

Neither You Nor Me

“I take all your infatuations seriously. So?”

“A whole set for seven days.”

“Oh?”

“San Francisco. Then L.A. I think I know the themes.”

Madame called for three shop assistants and opened her pad, ready to take notes.

“Actually, I doubt you have all I need.”

“Monsieur?” Madame Rivoli’s posture expressed undaunted attendance.

“All right, let’s start. We deplane, she’s in a chintz dress *à la russe*, arms bare, and light, peasant-style shoes . . . *lapotchki*.” Oblivious of his reason for being here, he was spurring his imagination. “The minute we get into the car, Mike says, ‘Do you know you’re a schmuck? To give me a short notice like that!’ ‘As if you’d call off a shooting, old fart!’ I say. ‘Not for you, you son-of-a-bitch,’ he says, ‘not for you, but maybe for a charming lady . . .’ ‘The charming lady is Emily,’ I say. ‘I may not be nuts about her name, at least not as nuts as I am about the rest.’ At this point Mike grunts. We’re already in the gay quarters of the Castro. Emily is all eyes, and Mike’s goatlike tenor promptly responds with, ‘San Francisco is my favorite city: the women are strong, and the men so pretty!’

“To make it short: a chintz dress *à la russe*.” Madame Rivoli gave a meaningful look to a shop assistant who had been listening to Rush with her mouth agape.

“Yes, Madame,” the girl stammered, leaving.

Madame Rivoli jotted a note in her pad and turned to Rush questioningly.

“At the shore she’s in a very loose, see-through chiffon gown adorned with big bright flowers. White hat with a ribbon. Woven sandals.”

Madame Rivoli batted her eyelashes, sending off the second girl. Emily, whose measurements had been taken without explanation, was wandering through the deserted halls with a puzzled face.

“Now Alcatraz.”

“For a prison, a special outfit?”

“A nun’s cassock.” Rush paused for a second. “She goes past the cells finding words of consolation for each inmate. She tells Robert Straud “The Birdman” stories about canaries. She takes Al Capone’s troubled mind off his syphilis . . .”

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“She’ll be looked on as crazy.”

“The main thing is she has to be immaculately dressed.”

A third girl went off. Madame Rivoli shook her head. “What do you need it all for?”

“She needs it.”

“You’re becoming a philanthropist?”

“I’m becoming a true Catholic.” Rush clasped his palms as in prayer and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

Their tête-à-tête was broken by the first girl, who brought a dress *à la russe*. Rush nodded approvingly.

“Now the highlights--the men’s club. We arrive dressed as twins: pin stripe slacks, blazer, white vest, black lacquered shoes. I made her oil her hair and personally glued a light mustache to her upper lip. Everything checked out down to the last detail. Yet the doorkeeper sniffs something wrong and is ready to block her way, but I’m quick. ‘And this is Ian Rush, Jr.,’ I tell him, and we go on nonchalantly. After a *bien élevé* dinner, Papa Rush invites his beloved son to dance”

“There is no need to continue.” Madame Rivoli smiled charmingly. “Two club suits,” she told the shop assistant and turned a page on her pad.

“Now, Hollywood. I think one day will do. In the morning I take the kid to Disneyland. This one is obvious: sailor’s jacket, straw hat with corn-flowers, open sandals, bobbysocks. And to finish off the picture, a balloon.”

“And for the evening?”

“Ah, the evening! She’ll remember it for the rest of her life. Beverly Hills. The scent of oleanders. Arthur Miller playing whist with Jessica Tandy. Dustin Hoffman producing celluloid balls from his mouth. ‘Do you want to soar?’ he asks her. She is taken aback. ‘You mean you have a plane?’ ‘A bomber,’ he tells her quite seriously. ‘A B-52.’ Whereupon he offers her a very strong cocktail. Even in this beau monde she is a star. Or a queen of beasts, if you will. A leopard leotard is what we need!”

A victorious smile was playing on his lips. The young shop assistants were all ears, all else forgotten.

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“What about the seventh day?” Madame Rivoli asked quietly, already divining the answer.

“On the seventh day I shall drive her home. Dressing her for our last day together is the most difficult. Will you help me, Tina?”

“I will help you, Ian.”

To borrow a phrase from a nineteenth-century novel, the week passed like a single day. Tabitha came to pick them up at Orly. She saw from a distance a self-assured woman smartly dressed--black camisole with white lace cuffs and white ruff, black leather mini-skirt, doe-skin Wellington boots. Tabitha could hardly believe it was Emily. Rush also seemed different. Not that he was dressed unnaturally, but the expected after-the-trip face, bored and sour, was apparently missing. He, too, looked indecently happy.

In the car Emily was joyously telling a story, addressing herself exclusively to Rush. “You left for the rest room, and the waiter came up and gave me a card. Some count or duke, God knows. On the backside, spelled out in tiny letters: I am sitting beside the rostrum. Take a look and make your choice.”

“Was it that homo in tails?”

“How did you guess?”

“You see, I was wondering: okay, when are you guys going to take the bait?”

All of a sudden Tabitha braked. “I understand we are taking the girl home. What’s the address?”

Emily turned to Rush blankly, but he averted his eyes.

“Gare Montparnasse. I’ll give you directions once we’re there.”

From then on they drove in silence. Rush opened his mouth just before they arrived. “Sonny, I don’t have to explain anything to you, do I? You’re a big smart boy.”

Swearing, Tabitha stopped behind a white Cadillac which someone had had the audacity to park across the road. Emily pushed the door.

“Ciao, Dad.”

“Wait!” He was expecting any reaction except compliance. “Let me explain it to you.”

“It’s really simple, Ian. You abandon women like your mother abandoned you. Isn’t that so? I don’t know which way is worse for you--with them or without them. And you don’t have to pat me on the back. She’s the one,” Emily gestured with her head, meaning Tabitha, “and I am fine.”

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She stepped out of the car leaving the door open. Rush was scrutinizing the picture under the glass panel, as if trying to read his mother's face, whether it was she who had disclosed his innermost secret. Walking off, Emily looked back and waved. "I'm A Number One!"

She managed the stairs to the fourth floor as easily as those words, in no time at all. Only when the door was locked behind her did she allow herself to inhale. Suddenly her legs went weak under her, and she could barely make it to the bed. It was dark inside because of the drawn blinds.

"Welcome home," a voice said from the corner.

She screamed, and then the floor lamp lit up, and she saw Max in the armchair.

"Gee, did you ever give me a scare." She put her arms around her shoulders, she was shaking all over.

"Hey, you look great. Madame Rivoli has good taste."

She startled. "How do you know about Madame Rivoli?"

He ignored the question. "Listen, don't you think we should celebrate your homecoming? You may not be hungry but I am." Only now did she notice the bottle, two glasses, and various entrées on the coffee table. He grinned. "Where else could you find such a fatherly patron?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Max wants to drink with you." He poured the wine into glasses, then sat on the bed next to her. "To your accomplishments!"

"Accomplishments?"

"You don't have to be too modest. California . . . Hollywood . . . Not bad at all for a starter. And in bed? Was it as good?"

He drew closer, almost touching her. Emily recoiled.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"But you do." He rearranged the white ruff on her breast.

"You were spying on us! Weren't you? Weren't you?"

"No hysterics please."

"Who told you about my trip? Speak up!"

"Rush, who else."

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“Liar!”

Max calmly went over to the coffee table to refill his glass and take a sandwich. “What a shame.” He shook his head, crestfallen. “I give you a week off so that you can enjoy yourself, while I here take all the losses, and here’s your gratitude.”

Emily looked at him in disbelief. “A week off? Enjoy myself?”

Max shrugged. “His words. Okay, I told myself, let the girl taste the sweet life. It’s not every day that Dustin Hoffman pulls celluloid balls out of his mouth for her.”

Emily was going to say something, but her lips began to tremble.

Max went on. “You don’t believe me? Go ask him. Not now. Now he has other business to attend to.”

“I hate you.” Emily grabbed for a cigarette. “Oh I hate you,” she moaned angrily. Then a sudden thought struck her. “How did you get in here, in the first place?”

Max waved it off. “I think what really bothers you is what your dearest Rush is doing right now,” he said.

“Will you take me there?”

“Hm. What if I say no?”

“You won’t say no.”

“Oh. And why is that?”

Emily looked him in the eye. “Because that’s what you want.”

Max poured himself more wine but didn’t drink it. He twirled the car keys on his index finger. Then he smiled. “Preferential treatment. I’ll spoil you rotten, baby.”

Rush was mad. At himself, at Tabitha. To calm down he started to knead clay in his palm, but the tested method failed this time. Maybe a hot bath would do it. He quickly disrobed and was about to stand under a scalding shower when naked Tabitha showed up in the door frame.

“Where’s our toy?” He forced a smile.

She went to fetch a gutta-percha monkey, which was obtained after she had gravely bitten his finger.

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Returning, she found the door locked.

“Okay,” she muttered between her teeth, and disappeared in the darkness of the hall.

It took a while for Rush to come out. It was very still. He made a tour of the rooms, peeped into the studio--Tabitha had vanished. He let out a sigh of relief, poured a glassful of brandy, and that's when she jumped on his back from somewhere above. He dropped the glass to get hold of two strong hands that were strangling him.

“You want me? Say it! You want me?” she kept repeating.

“Let go . . . hurts.”

He strained his neck and tried to drag her off, but she had rubbed her body with some oil, and his fingers were slipping.

“Longing for your slut? Yes? Yes?”

“Let go!” His voice was husky.

A car door slammed outside.

Already on her way, Emily said a word or two to Max, entered the house, and too impatient to wait for the elevator, ran up the stairs. She was going to ring the bell, but hearing voices she quietly pushed the door--it was never locked. Voices were coming from the studio.

“Did you grease him well?” Tabitha was shouting. “How much to screw the stripper?”

“It's none of your business.”

Emily shrank back as if slapped and firmly shut the door. She pressed the elevator button but then her legs gave way and she had to sit on the step. Occasional words still came through, only their meaning was lost on her.

“Oh yeah!” Tabitha whirled up. They were standing face to face regarding each other with naked hatred. “I have to be chained while you fly South with another bird! Then I have to coo over your dick which looks suspiciously red!”

He was about to strike her, but she was quick enough to spring back.

“For three years you kept telling me: ‘These are one-day butterflies, you're the lady.’ So now you got yourself a new one? Romeo in love?”

“You--!”

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“Old Romeo needs a good rest. And the bird will fly alone, right?”

Rush threw her clothes at her. “Get out!”

Tabitha didn't stir.

“Go on, kill me,” Rush said with a smile. “Strangle me, poison me, saw me in two. Maybe that's what I was keeping you for all these years?”

Tabitha slowly advanced. He retreated teasing her:

“Burn me with your gaze, Tabitha. You're a ghastly monster. See, I'm trembling like an aspen leaf!”

“You asked for it,” she spelled out with just her lips.

Shortly afterward, the front door opened and out came Tabitha, dressed, as always, with studied carelessness. Emily jumped to her feet. She was going to say something by way of an excuse, but Tabitha beat her to it:

“He's waiting for you to start another life.”

Before Emily could speak, the elevator cage was gone. Not a sound reached her from the apartment. She passed through the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom, then put her hand on the railing of a wooden stair that led into the studio.

She was suddenly seized by fear.

“Rush?” she asked doubtfully. And again, louder: “Rush?”

She made it to the third step, the fourth, the fifth--and then she saw him. He was lying about thirty feet away, and at first glance you might assume he was fooling around, pressed to the floor like some huge lizard waiting for a catch. She clenched her teeth. Then she came up slowly, squatted, and closed his eyes.

When she left the house there was no Cadillac or Max to be seen. Emily looked around for a white car and then quickly crossed the street. In fact, she was running. That was when the white Cadillac pulled over.

“I hate to show my gorgeous schnoz in public,” Max explained after she had taken the front seat.

This was all he said.

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Both women had nightmares. Emi moaned on a narrow sofa in the living room. In the bedroom Emily tossed and turned like someone in a delirium, then suddenly sat upright with a contorted face. Elzbieta, frightened, popped out of the bedroom.

She grabbed Emi and shook her. “Wake up! Are you dead or what?” She remembered how her mother had lost consciousness and her father had slapped her face to make her come to. Elzbieta gave Emi a slap on the cheek and stepped back to avoid a slap in return.

“What’s up?” Emi asked, instantly awake.

“Come on.” The little girl was tugging at her unceremoniously.

“Where are you dragging me?” Emi asked, offering almost no resistance. “Is it morning?”

A gray haze inundated the outer world. The pendulum clock had stopped at 8:00, and time seemed to have stopped along with it. Was it dawn or dusk? In the bedroom, the blinds were drawn and twilight reigned. Emily sat immobilized, her lips soundlessly working. She was soaked in sweat. Emi put an arm around her shoulder.

“A bad dream?”

Emily flinched, feeling the chill.

“Bring warm water and a towel,” Emi told the little girl, and perched on the bed. “I dreamt something dismal, too, best forgotten.”

“Who’s Rush?” Emily asked, her voice husky.

Emi winced. “How do you know his name?”

“In my dream I had an affair with him. We took a plane to America, met all kinds of celebrities in Hollywood. He dressed me up as a queen, and then . . .” She fell silent, clasping and unclasping her fingers. “What happened next?”

“Why?”

“Because, for me, there’s no nothing. No Rush, no America, no leopard leotard. So, what happened next?”

“Odds and ends.”

At this Elzbieta came, a towel over her shoulder, an iron basin with a floating sponge in her hands.

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“I’ll do it,” she said, elbowing the older one aside and beginning to croon over her dearest Emily. “Now we shall pull off the wet nightie, like this, good girl, and wash you all in warm water, here go, that’s it, then we shall rub you with a towel, and look at this girl now, so clean, so fresh”

“All right. After you’re finished come to the living room. I’m going to straighten knickknacks.” Emi picked up the packages that were scattered all over the floor and went out.

Later, in the living room, everyone took their time undoing the crisp wrapping paper and getting out their presents. Emily got perfume; father, a coarsely-knit homemade cardigan; Elzbieta, a doll with an impressive wardrobe.

“That Barbie, she’s got some tits!” the girl whispered in Emily’s ear. “Can you see her running?”

“Your beads. And also this.” Emi gave her Tampax and three sets of underwear.

The little girl turned the blue carton in her hands. “What is it?”

“Tampax. You’re supposed to insert them when you start your period.”

“Insert them where?”

“*There.*” Emi squinted at her father. “Don’t you know or are you putting on a show?”

The girl opened the box in no time, extracted a tampon, and was about to give it a first try but was stopped at the last moment.

“Not now.” Emi laughed. “And please, no amateur performances. There’s a picture inside, explaining how to do it. As for underpants, I’m afraid I miscalculated. They may be too small for you.”

This time they weren’t quick enough to stop Elzbieta, so everyone had a glimpse of her sturdy proletariat rump, which showed briefly from under the dress.

“A filthy broad,” the old man muttered to himself.

Elzbieta was fast to bite back:

“Papa, are you going to sleep in this jacket or will you store leftovers in it?”

The old man turned red and hastily began unbuttoning his new cardigan. The little one had already forgotten all about him, having found a new target:

“You brought your gifts, now you’re proud of yourself! Shoulda brought bed sheets, he stained ’em all! And who needs your princess, anyway? Trotting out like that to show how good she is!”

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Elzbieta was throwing out the doll's outfits. Then she snatched the flacon of perfume from Emily and smashed it against the stove.

For a few seconds everything came to a standstill. On the verge of tears, Emi clutched Barbie to her breast. She was looking from Emily to her father, expecting them to take her side, but Emily had turned to the window and her father was struggling with those wretched buttons. She broke down and ran outside.

Behind the garage, which was badly in need of fresh paint, a kitchen garden had been laid out. A woman in a kerchief was diligently weeding, now and then waving away harassing mosquitoes. Emi came nearer. Tears forgotten, she watched a sinewy hand with bulging veins remove sticky rootlets from a hoe. The woman straightened up, and her faded eyes met Emi's.

"Don't get upset. Here, eat some, you used to like them." She spilled shelled peas into Emi's palm.

"What are you doing here, Mother?"

"See how overgrown it is. It'll keep me busy until dark."

"Can I help you?"

"What help can a city girl like you be? Go on, my child."

Emi walked away, past the vegetable beds. Then she glanced back to make sure her mother wasn't watching her anymore and threw out the handful of tiny dots.

After Emi ran away in tears, quiet settled in the house. "I'm bored," said Emily, and she retired to the kitchen for a game of solitaire. Elzbieta headed for the playroom to clarify matters with her dolls, who had already spent three days on their knees in a dark corner. The old man tiptoed to the master bedroom and bolted the door from the inside.

The little girl carried her rag monsters to bed, nagging at them: "And I'm not going to repeat it! One more time you get in bed with dirty feet, I give you a thrashing. And what is this?" She jabbed a plastic saucer under the nose of another doll. "Am I supposed to do your dishes? You should be grateful I didn't throw you out like that Barbie. All right, one hour for playtime, but you'd better be quiet as a post!"

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Her attention was caught by loud voices. She dropped her dolls, prowled to her parents' bedroom, and peeped into the keyhole. Her father and the neighbor woman were doing *it* ! Lying over the quilt with her skirts drawn up, the neighbor had enclosed father's torso in a tight embrace of her mighty thighs as he tried to break away, abusing her with four-letter words. For some reason the neighbor enjoyed that a lot and kept begging: "More! More!" Father jerked and swore even worse, and that bitch kicked his liver with her heel, the loosened stocking at her ankle, and whinnied. All of a sudden he froze: someone was watching them closely through the window.

"Hey there! You fall asleep?" the neighbor asked playfully.

This time father managed to break away, and trotted to the window in his woollies.

"Get lost!" He pounded on the glass. "Get lost, I tell you!"

"Are you ashamed to do it in front of the dead?" the neighbor jeered, sitting up and tidying her skirts.

"Shut up, bitch!" the old man snarled.

"Go away. You'd better tell me where my garter is." She got down on all fours and started groping under the bed.

"Later, later," the old man urged, lifting her boldly and pushing her toward the door.

The woman kicked and screamed weakly, "Get your paws off me! Don't touch me, you!"

Elzbieta recoiled from the keyhole.

The little girl was praying on her knees before a crucifix that her father had chiseled for her. She mumbled the words hurriedly, very much aware of Emily's presence in the nearby kitchen:

"Lord, you probably didn't know that Emily danced nude, and Emi stopped going to church. Wouldn't you punish them, otherwise? And you would see to it that *I* lived in Paris. Because *I* can repeat all my prayers smooth as silk. And my beads are real beads and not some necklace, like the one our neighbor wears. My only sin is I eat too much. Well, I could stop baking sweet rolls, if you say so. I would eat those lousy peas, which make you do you know what, if only you coop them up in here forever! Didn't you take my mother when I asked you to?"

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Why don't *they* wash the bed sheets, and scrape the dirt off the floor, for a change. Let *them* feed that stinky old pig. *Please?*"

Elzbieta waited for a sign of divine presence, then cast a glance at the door, and whispered warily, "You want me to tell you about *my* sin, first? *Okay*. Last month"

Suddenly, a fearful cry reached her ears:

"It came out! It came out!"

Elzbieta sprang to her feet and rushed to the kitchen. The old man poked his nose out of his kennel. Emily was looking in disbelief at the cards lying on the table.

"What's got into you?" Elzbieta demanded. "I nearly peed my pants!"

"The solitaire, it came out," Emily said brokenly. "We're not going to leave this place."

At this the little girl eagerly clapped her hands, provoking an outburst of blind rage on Emily's part. "You fool, what are you so pleased about? I laid it out with *us* in mind. Her, she'll leave all right. And who are we, anyway? There's no future for us, do you understand? A blank! She's robbed us of every hour and every minute!"

Elzbieta's face bore a dogged expression. "She'll leave, ha!"

"She will too!" Emily felt the tears coming. "She will, and we're going to rot along with this house!"

"Shut up," Elzbieta said evenly. "Are you crazy? I'm telling you she's not leaving. Let's go."

"Go where?"

"The garage. Where else?"

Emily gave it a thought. "Well, maybe you're right." She made for the door and then stopped uncertainly. "I don't know anything about cars."

"He does." The little girl motioned toward the closet.

They went out into the hall and collided with the old man, who pulled in his head, clearly embarrassed. Elzbieta snorted: "Even you, Papa, can be of some use. Let's go. Where would you be without me!"

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Emi returned to a vacant house, but for her it wasn't vacant. She saw strange shapes that seemed to withdraw as she approached, she heard footsteps and hushed voices:

"She's back!"

"What did I tell you. She's goofy."

"Huh?"

"See her swiveling her head? She thinks she hears our voices."

"No way!"

"She believes we're just like her. Very much alive."

"Is she nuts?"

"Shh."

Emi wanted to overtake them, to talk it over. "Why would you say that?" she spoke up reproachfully. "What wrong have I done you?"

But they had already hid themselves, giggling. There was an odd creak. She looked into the living room and saw her father fixing the wardrobe frame. He seemed younger now, he looked sixty--his age when he died. The old man sensed an intent gaze on his back. He squinted at his daughter and, frowning, began to oil the hinges. Emi carefully closed the door so as not to interfere with his work, and then he said loudly enough:

"Some dumbbell!"

In the playroom Emi seated her rag dolls on the floor in a circle. She sat in the middle and started reading her childhood diary out loud:

"In Paris, I shall live in the Chalet Royal. I shall lie in a bed with a canopy and *all kinds* of men will fight to possess me! You think you are so exceptional? But you are not even good at hiding things. It's just that I don't want your money, see? If I need money I can get more than all of you could dream together. Tell you where? Under the tail of a mare!"

Here Emi burst out laughing.

The phone rang. She got up reluctantly and walked to the bedroom.

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“Hello? Emi?” Her face brightened. “How nice of you to call. What? It was *me* who called? Oh yes, I was wondering what you were up to. You’re reading them your diary? Are they enjoying it? They *are* cute. Emi? You know I’ve just--”

Phrase unfinished, she leaned forward, dropping the receiver. Her mother was looking at her in the mirror. She recognized herself, years later, in that face. She turned around brusquely and found herself in her mother’s arms. She started to cry. Then she knew she was being rocked in her mother’s lap, to the old tune:

Lullaby dreary.
Candle burns to coal.
Are you weary,
My poor soul?
Now be at ease,
Take the air
Where to the breeze
The grass says a prayer.
I hear the wings flapping
Above the snowy trail,
Or is it your king galloping
In the dale?
The king of kings,
He passes by,
Old midwife sings
A lulla-die.

Emi shut her eyes and saw it all so clearly: a pie hissing in the oven, a horse chewing hay, Rush, the tile roofs of a city at night, the blinking lights of a plane “Am I en route to another life?” she thought, ceasing to think.

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Max had been waiting and waiting for her. When he finally dialed her number, almost involuntarily, and heard the busy tone, he assumed that she was chirping on the phone and flew into a rage. He sped off to Ivry-sur-Seine, a pretty suburb of Paris, prepared to put an end to this story, but the story had taken care of itself.