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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Last Painting of Sara de Vos**

Written by Dominic Smith

Published by Allen & Unwin

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*For my father, Lanny Smith, with love and gratitude and hope.  
Here's to your next ten thousand walks on the beach.*



#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

During the seventeenth century, the Guilds of St. Luke in the Netherlands controlled all aspects of professional artistic life, including who could sign and date paintings. Guild members included the likes of Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals and Jan van Goyen. The historical record suggests that as many as twenty-five women were members of the guilds during the seventeenth century. But only a small handful of those artists produced work that has survived or been correctly attributed. For more than a century, the paintings of Judith Leyster were attributed to Frans Hals.

One gap in the historical record concerns Sarah van Baalbergen, the first woman to be admitted to the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke. She gained entry in 1631, two years before Judith Leyster. None of Van Baalbergen's work has survived.

Although this is a work of fiction, the novel uses such historical gaps as a springboard for invention. For the sake of storytelling, it fuses biographical details from several women's lives of the Dutch Golden Age.

THE LAST  
PAINTING  
OF SARA  
DE VOS

***At the Edge of a Wood (1636)***

Oil on canvas

30" x 24"

**Sara de Vos**

Dutch, 1607-16??

A winter scene at twilight. The girl stands in the foreground against a silver birch, a pale hand pressed to its bark, staring out at the skaters on the frozen river. There are half a dozen of them, bundled against the cold, flecks of brown and yellow cloth floating above the ice. A brindled dog trots beside a boy as he arcs into a wide turn. One mitten in the air, he's beckoning to the girl, to us. Up along the riverbank, a village is drowsy with smoke and firelight, flush against the bell of the pewter sky. A single cataract of daylight at the horizon, a meadow dazzled beneath a rent in the clouds, then the revelation of her bare feet in the snow. A raven—quilled in violet and faintly iridescent—caws from a branch beside her. In one hand she holds a frayed black ribbon, twined between slender fingers, and the hem of her dress, visible beneath a long gray shawl, is torn. The girl's face is mostly in profile, her dark hair loose and tangled about her shoulders. Her eyes are fixed on some distant point—but is it dread or the strange halo of winter twilight that pins her in place? She seems unable, or unwilling, to reach the frozen riverbank. Her footprints lead back through the snow, toward the wood, beyond the frame. Somehow, she's walked into this scene from outside the painting, trudged onto the canvas from our world, not hers.

# PART I

# Upper East Side

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NOVEMBER 1957



**T**HE PAINTING IS STOLEN the same week the Russians put a dog into space. Plucked from the wall right above the marital bed during a charity dinner for orphans. This is how Marty de Groot will tell the story in the years ahead, how he'll spin it for the partners at the law firm and quip it to comedic life at dinner parties and over drinks at the Racquet Club. We're dipping shrimp in cocktail sauce, working Rachel's best china out on the terrace because it's mild for early November, you understand, while two thugs—middlemen disguised as caterers, let's say—are swapping out the real painting with a meticulous fake. He'll be particularly proud of that last phrase—*meticulous fake*. He'll use it with friends and insurance agents and the private investigator, because it sets up the rising action of the story, suggests that a prodigy or mastermind has been patiently plotting against him, just as the Russians have been conspiring all these years to colonize the stratosphere. The phrase will also help disguise the fact that Marty didn't notice the beautiful forgery for months.



What he'll omit when he tells the story to most people is that *At the Edge of a Wood* has been in his family for more than three centuries, bequeathed to him on his father's deathbed. He won't mention that it's the only surviving painting of Sara de Vos, the first woman to be admitted, in 1631, as a master to a Guild of St. Luke in Holland. And who could he tell that he liked to stare up at the girl's pale and cryptic face while he made slow, contemplative love to his melancholic wife in the years after her second miscarriage? No, he'll keep all that to himself, like a private faith to a fickle god. He's agnostic but prone to bouts of wild superstition, a personality flourish he tries to conceal. He will come to suspect that the painting's disappearance has caused Rachel's long depression to end and accounts for his firm finally making him partner. Or that the cursed painting explains three hundred years of gout, rheumatism, heart failure, intermittent barrenness, and stroke in his bloodline. Wherever the painting hung—in London, Amsterdam, or New York—the previous owners, he comes to realize, never lived past the age of sixty.

THE RENT-A-BEATS are Rachel's way of trying to rouse herself back to the living. Feeling bored by the prospect of gently drunk patent attorneys in French cuffs, with conversations about real estate and Nantucket sailing jaunts, she'd remembered an ad she'd clipped from an alumni magazine and fetched it from her recipe box. *Add zest to your Tuxedo Park party . . . rent a Beat. Completely equipped: beard, eye shades, old army jacket, Levi's, frayed shirt, sneakers or sandals (optional). Deductions allowed for no beard, baths, shoes, or haircuts. Lady Beats also available.*

If they were going to raise money for the city's orphans every year—it sounded Dickensian, even to her—then why not let the city in, bring up some grit and color from the Lower East Side and the Village. When she called the number in the ad a woman with an adenoidal voice answered, apparently reading from a script. For a flat rate of \$250, the woman promised without inflection, you can have two artists, two poets, and two intellectuals show up at a designated time. Rachel imagined a basement in Queens where divorcées with headsets sat like African violets under fluorescent lights. She imagined out-of-work actors trawling in from Hoboken with her address written on a matchbook. The woman asked, “How many Beats would you like, ma’am?” and “Do you prefer the women in Mexican shawls or bolero jackets?” By the end of the call, Rachel had chosen their complete wardrobe, right down to the ballet flats, berets, sunglasses, and silver earrings. That was weeks ago and now—on the day of the event—she wonders if the whole idea isn't in bad taste. A Russian dog is orbiting the planet and she fears her little prank will be judged as frivolous and unpatriotic. She broods about it all morning, unable to tell Marty that a troupe of bohemians will be arriving at nine sharp, during after-dinner cocktails.

MARTY HAS PLANNED SOME FUN OF HIS OWN, a little demonstration for his guests and colleagues. He keeps it to himself while Rachel bustles among the caterers. By five, all three floors of the prewar penthouse smell like lilies and bread and it jolts his senses awake. He stands by the French doors on the top floor, out of the way, watching the rooms burnish with late-afternoon light. There's a fleeting sense of nostalgia and

satisfaction as dusk pours through the space. Everything seems impossibly solid and real at this time of day and year, every object flushed with significance. Growing up, he'd always found this room distant and museum-like. The woody, gloaming interiors in the background of seventeenth-century Dutch portraits felt oppressive, the lacquered oriental boxes seemed austere and aloof, but now that these things belong to him he finds comfort in staring at them in that hour before the first lamp is switched on. A life contained, parsed into objects. When he closes his eyes he can smell the linseed oil in the seascapes or the Turkish prayer rugs that somehow smell like warming hay. He pours two fingers of single malt and anchors himself in the Danish leather recliner—his Hamlet chair, Rachel calls it. Carraway, the ten-year-old beagle, comes trotting from down the hallway, scampers across the parquet floor, his metal tag jangling. Marty drops one hand and lets the dog lick his fingertips. And that's when he sees Rachel through the doorway of the galley kitchen, moving among the caterers in their crisp white aprons. Head bent, one hand idling her pearl necklace, she's conferring with such diplomacy that it could be a matter of national security they're talking about instead of rice pilaf and wild salmon. It occurs to him that she's always been at her best in the throes of preparation—a trip, a dinner, a party. Lately, there's been the quiet fatigue they both ignore. She's constantly on the verge of a breathy intake of air and whenever she walks into a room, it seems she's had to pause out in the hallway to first gather herself up, like an actor walking onstage. Sometimes, when he comes home late from the office, he'll find her asleep in the living room with

all the lights out and Carraway curled beside her. Or he finds empty wineglasses around the house, in the library, beside the bed, and Russian novels tucked between cushions or left out on the terrace to bleach and dog-ear in the weather.

She catches his eye and comes toward him. He rubs behind Carraway's ears, smiling up at her. The last five years, he thinks, have taken twenty years off the clock. He turned forty in the spring, a capstone to his stalled-out career and their inability to bring children into the world. It occurs to him that he'd started everything late—law school, a career, the first overtures toward a family. Inherited wealth held him back, stunted him until his early thirties. Seven years, up or out, was the conventional wisdom for aspiring partners at the firm, and now he is in his seventh year. He sees it in Rachel's gaze as she draws nearer—*Why did we wait so long?* She's eight years younger than he is but less resilient. Not frail, but cautious and easily bruised. For a suspended moment he thinks she's approaching with a staid, wifely kiss, one of those rehearsed gestures she occasionally plucks from the folds of her depression. Instead, she tells him not to get dog hair on his dress slacks. She passes close enough that he can smell burgundy on her breath and he suddenly wonders what the caterers think of her, then despises himself for caring. He watches her as she heads down the hallway toward the bedroom and disappears. He sits there until the room bloats with darkness. Eventually, he gets up and walks room to room, switching on the lamps.

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A LITTLE BEFORE SEVEN, Hart Hanover, the building doorman, calls up to tell the de Groots that he's sending up Clay and

Celia Thomas, the first of their guests. Marty thanks him and remembers to ask Hart about his mother, a woman quietly dying of cancer out in Queens. “Soldiering on, Mr. de Groot, thanks for asking.” Hart has been the doorman at the corner of East Eightieth and Fifth Avenue since before Marty’s father bought the penthouse in the late 1920s. The narrow, fourteen-story building has only six apartments, and each of the residents treats Hart like a kindly uncle fallen on hard times. Marty tells him they’ll send down a dinner tray from the caterers and hangs up. He and Rachel take the stairs to the lower floor and wait for the elevator. The managing partner and his wife are always the first to arrive and the first to leave, a couple in their sixties who host summer dinner parties that end while it’s still light out.

The elevator doors open and the Thomases step out onto the black marble floor of the foyer. Rachel always insists on taking coats and hats herself and there’s something about this ritual, this pretense of domestic humility, that gets Marty worked up. The housekeeper, Hester, is probably up in her room watching television, since Rachel made a show of giving her most of the night off. He stands there watching his wife take his boss’s camel hair overcoat—it’s too warm for such a coat—and Celia’s cashmere shawl. In the first moments after arrival, Marty remembers how uncomfortable Clay always looks when he comes over. Clay is cut from a lineage of pious New England Brahmins like a slab of blue slate; he’s from a bloodline of clergy, intellectuals, and taciturn privilege. He seems to silently begrudge Marty’s inherited wealth, works his jaws a little like he can taste iron in his mouth every time he comes over. Marty suspects this is the reason he still hasn’t been made partner—his

triplex with unobstructed views across the Met and Central Park offends his boss's sense of patrician restraint.

Clay thrusts his hands into his tuxedo pants and leans onto the balls of his feet, his face brimming with forced good cheer. He looks to Marty like a man who's been out chopping firewood in a dinner jacket, invigorated by a moment of bracing contact with the elements.

Clay says, "Did you add a new floor to the place, Marty? I swear it gets bigger every time we come over!"

Marty offers up a chuckle but refuses to answer. He shakes Clay's hand—a gesture he would never make at the office—and kisses Celia on the cheek. Behind his guests, he sees Rachel half-engulfed by the shadow of the coat closet, running her hand over the plush of Celia's shawl. She might go into that closet and never return, he thinks.

"He made us trek all the way north along the park," Celia says.

"Let's get you both a drink upstairs," Rachel says, guiding them toward the stairwell.

Clay removes his heavy spectacles and rubs the lenses with a handkerchief. In the lamplight of the hallway Marty notices an angry red welt on the bridge of Clay's nose and thinks of a country parson on the brink of a fiery sermon.

Clay says, "If we're financing orphans, I thought we should walk. Plus it's a beautiful night. We'll taxi it back, don't worry, darling. I'm warning you, Marty, I'm famished from that walk. Ready to eat like a Viking."

"You're in luck," Marty says. "Rachel's hired every caterer in the state."

They arrive on 14 and walk down the hallway toward the terrace, passing the closed doors of the bedrooms. Marty gets this quirk from his dead father, a Dutch banker with a strong preference for the separation of public and private space. Marty even keeps his favorite books in the bedroom instead of the library because he considers them a kind of confession. As they pass the kitchen and come upon the great room, Marty can hear the string quartet starting up outside and above the terrace wall he sees the apartment towers across the park lit up like ocean liners, stippling the darkness above the tree crowns. He hears the faintest sigh leaving Celia's mouth and knows it's the sound of envy. He thinks of the Thomases' sober stone house with its narrow windows and the chalky smell of a rectory. Clay clears his throat as they survey the terrace banquet tables piled with hors d'oeuvres, the pyramid of glinting ice and shrimp.

Swallowing, Celia says, "As usual, it looks wonderful, Rachel."

"All I did was make some telephone calls."

"Hardly," Marty says. "It's been like planning the Normandy invasion around here for weeks. Anyway, we thought we'd capitalize on the weather. Feel free to be inside or out."

"Steer me toward a gimlet and a handful of peanuts," Clay says.

Marty hears Clay jangling some loose change in his pockets and pictures him standing before an austere bureau or secretary, plinking quarters and dimes into his tuxedo pants. He's certain there's a penknife in one of those trouser pockets. He says, "Sorry, Clay. You might have to settle for brie and shrimp." He throws one arm out, gesturing to the terrace.

The doorbell chimes and Rachel hurries down the hallway before Marty can stop her.

AT TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS A PLATE, the Aid Society dinner attracts roughly the same sixty people each year—uptown lawyers, surgeons, CEOs, philanthropist wives, a retired diplomat. It's always black-tie and assigned seating, little place cards in calligraphy on ten round tables. Once a year, Rachel calls a Japanese artist in Chelsea with her guest list. Three days later the place cards arrive in an envelope made of rice paper. Marty keeps a seating chart, a trick he learned from a friend who runs the European art auctions for Sotheby's. He puts the wealthiest guests nearest the silent auction table and instructs the catering staff to replenish their wineglasses every fifteen minutes. This strategy has made a decade of hosting these dinners for the Aid Society the most profitable on record. It yields wildly inflated auction bids on Caribbean cruises, opera tickets, fountain pens, and subscriptions for *Yachting* magazine. Marty once calculated that Lance Corbin, an orthopedic surgeon who didn't even own a boat, was paying \$120 for each issue of his maritime monthly.

The dinner tables are laid out with lilies and antique silverware in the great room, overlooking the terrace. Because it's so warm, cocktails, champagne, and dessert can be served outside, but Marty insists that dinner take place inside, where the lighting is better for signing checks, where Dutch and Flemish genre paintings and landscapes suggest, if not orphans, at least an atmosphere of underprivilege—the peasant hauling an animal haunch into a stone cellar in bad weather; the tavern revelers



throwing spoons at a cat; the Avercamp of red-cheeked peasants skating on a frozen canal.

When Rachel calls everyone inside to dinner, the string quartet switches from Rossini sonatas to Bach concertos and adagios. As usual, Rachel and Marty sit at separate tables to maximize their interactions with guests, but several times during the meal Marty notices his wife looking absently into her wineglass. Clay Thomas tells his annual stories of being a World War I medic, of playing soccer with the Italians in a field of mud. Marty routinely swaps out guests from this table but always puts himself dutifully on the Clay Thomas roster. Until he makes partner he'll pretend he's hearing these war stories for the first time every year.

AFTER DINNER AND THE AUCTION, the guests drift back out onto the terrace. A long table has been set up with flutes of champagne, tiers of profiteroles, ramekins of crème brûlée, Belgian chocolates. As in past years, Rachel leaves the important mingling to Marty. She can never find her way into the banter of the men, or the partners' wives, who all send their children to the same schools and colleges, so she's content to find the outliers. The sister of the important socialite or the out-of-town cousin of some charity board member—these are the people she's most comfortable with, the ones who don't ask if she'd ever wanted to start a family. Marty accuses her of hiding in her own home, of having cramped, awkward conversations with total strangers. He tells her that the partners think she's aloof instead of shy and fragile. From the corner of the terrace, from the trailing edge of a conversation about the stray

mongrel the Russian scientists found on a Moscow street, Rachel can see the ornate clock on the wall of the great room and realizes the Rent-a-Beats will be here in less than half an hour. She surveys the crowd to calculate how the troupe might go over. She can't decide if she's trying to add levity to the evening or ambush the entire event. If she's misread the situation then she'll meet the bohemians in the foyer, pay them their cash fee, and send them back into the night.

The temperature has dropped ten degrees and many of the guests have reclaimed their coats. Earlier, during cocktails, Marty built a fire in the outdoor brick fireplace, and she'd watched as Clay and the other partners took turns offering counsel, drinks in hand. At one point, Clay put on a pair of asbestos gloves and took up a cast-iron poker to rearrange the logs at the center, telling the younger men that they needed more blue flame and air at the base. Now there's a huddle of them by the replenished fire, lawyers with cigars and loose metaphors talking philosophy, urban decay, client billing. Through the French doors, she watches the caterers ferry the dinner plates toward a clearing station they've set up in the back hallway, the old servants' corridor that flanks the rear bedroom doors. Marty used to call it bedpan alley and claimed he could remember his senile Dutch grandmother—a heavy gin drinker—putting her “thunder pot” out there for the servants to fetch. But there were no servants, just an overworked housekeeper who had decommissioned the corridor years before and who didn't find the bedpans until the smell came through the walls. There must be a dozen caterers back there by now. She has the idea that she should go and check on things, make sure there isn't broken

glass or waiters drinking from the bottle, but then she notices Marty conferring with Hester. She'd more or less given Hester the night off, after the flowers were set out, because she wasn't getting any younger, so she wonders whether Marty pulled the poor woman from her bedroom.

Hester walks from the terrace toward the library and then returns wheeling a metal cart, a sheet draped over the top and a tangle of extension cords trailing behind. By this time, Marty is holding Carraway in his arms and looks as if he's about to say a few words to his guests. A few glasses of wine and he turns into his father, ready to speechify at the slightest provocation. When they go badly, these speeches are tone-deaf and sentimental. He's gotten weepy-eyed over less than orphans before, so Rachel fears the worst as guests begin to gather around. A Bach adagio peters out from one corner of the terrace, then abruptly stops.

Marty stares a moment at the faces in the firelight, tenses his bottom lip. "Well, I thought I would say a few words . . . Thank you to everyone for coming and for supporting such a good cause. As usual, we raised quite a sum tonight."

He pats Carraway's hindquarters as he holds him in one crooked arm, his free hand holding a cigar.

"As you all know, this week the first living creature was launched into space orbit on a one-way journey . . ."

Rachel takes up a glass of champagne from a passing tray. She thinks, *Is he really going to segue from space orbit to orphans?*

"I'm told that when the dog eats the last of her food rations in a few days, the final meal is laced with poison, or that there's a gas for euthanasia that's released. Apparently, this is how the Russians treat their canine space explorers . . ."

A tremor works its way into his voice as he trails off. A few of the partners sip their drinks, staring into the embers of the fireplace. Rachel wonders if they're averting their eyes in embarrassment or patriotic reflection.

"Now, I can't help thinking about our little beagle Carraway here and thought we could involve him in this historic moment."

By now, Hester has brought up a kitchen chair and Marty gently places the dog in a sitting position. He uncovers the cart to reveal his ham radio set from the library, complete with headphones and a chrome-plated microphone.

"As it happens, Sputnik Two is giving out the same signal as the first one, so if I can find the right frequency we should be able to hear the Russkie mongrel orbiting above us. According to some of my ham radio buddies in Chicago, the signal should be within range right about now . . ."

Marty looks at his watch and moves Carraway's seat closer to the microphone. "I'm going to let Carraway listen to his competition because he could use a little wake-up call. Let's face it—I can barely get him to walk in the park in December."

This gets a genteel chuckle.

Rachel looks out across her guests. The women are smiling at Carraway as he nuzzles the metal gauze of the microphone. The men are less enthused, side-mouthing comments to each other. Marty brings the contraption to life, flipping buttons and turning a large dial in the middle. A lick of static comes in, then a stray newscast from Canada and a burst of polka, before they finally hear the signal—a bleeping, underwater tone. The ping-  
ing is almost painful to listen to, a lunar plink that contains quiet, Soviet menace.

“Do you hear it?” Marty says. “That’s them.”

By now the guests have edged closer and Rachel sees the men transfixed, cigars limp at their sides. For a full minute they listen to the signal. Marty plugs in the headphones and places them around Carraway’s ears, lowering the volume. The beagle flinches and barks. Marty tells his guests that the microphone is off, that he’s not licensed to let the dog make noise on his call sign, that he’d get thrown out of the ham fraternity, but pretty soon guests are encouraging Carraway to give the Russkie dog some hell. “Tell them we’re coming after them,” one of the partners calls. Marty pretends to open up the microphone and with all the commotion the dog begins barking and yapping. Finally, Marty gives Carraway a peeled shrimp from a nearby table and lets him scamper back inside and everyone claps and cheers for the little patriot. Marty makes a toast to space exploration and the rising star of America. Rachel turns and over the rim of her glass she sees the Rent-a-Beats coming onto the terrace through the French doors, Hester trailing behind them in exasperation. She imagines Hart Hanover’s confusion in the main lobby, the intercom call that Hester intercepted, and now she watches the Beats approach—America’s answer to the cosmic aspirations of the Russians. Bearded, braless, barefoot freedom. There are six of them: three men and three women. One of the men—a Marxist poet or vegetarian philosopher—looks genuinely outraged by what he sees out on the rooftop.

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THE BEATS WORK THE EDGES OF THE CROWD—conversations about art shows in abandoned electrical substations, about pancake dinners in cold-water lofts on Thompson Street. At first,

they're congenial enough and even Marty has to admit this is a clever idea. The sandaled women sip red wine and dance exotically by the fireplace. One of them teaches a partner's wife how to do the fandango and the quartet has come back out onto the terrace to improvise. The bearded men in corduroy jackets and peacoats strike up conversations with the uptowners, taking an anthropological interest in the rituals of these obscure, affluent northerners. They flatter and defer, chuckle at a dentist's nervous jokes. A woman wearing dragon earrings exchanges business cards with an investment banker, only her card is embossed with the word *Woe* on the front. For fifteen minutes, no one can get over this deft party trick, and Marty comes up behind Rachel to tell her she's livened things up nicely. But then Marty sees one of the men—in a red beret and army surplus jacket—holding a small group of guests hostage in his living room. From out on the terrace, he can see the man standing on an antique chair while holding up the de Groot's fruit bowl before his vaguely terrified audience. Marty begins to move toward the house when *Woe* suddenly accosts him with a plate piled with shrimp. He wonders why the caterers haven't pulled all the appetizers by now. Were these bohos going to get food poisoning out on his rooftop? "My real name's Honey," the woman says, "and I intend to eat my body weight in crustaceans. You must be the host. Glad to meet you, host." She's drunk and barefoot, wearing a flowing skirt that looks to be made from old Amish quilts. Marty offers her an anemic smile and strains to see what's unfolding inside the apartment.

"Why on earth is your friend standing on a chair?" Marty asks.

“Benji? Oh, he’s high as a kite on Bensedrine. He’ll fuck that fruit bowl if you don’t watch out.”

Marty feels himself clench as he heads toward the mayhem. The Spanish music is laced with guffaws and olés as he rushes through the glass doors and veers right.

“Take this Bartlett pear, ladies and drones, succulent and overripe with sensuality, slumming it beside a Red Delicious . . . it’s waiting to be elevated to its highest calling.” The man plucks the pear from the bowl and brings it to his mouth, biting so hard that it sprays everywhere.

“Excuse me, I think we’ve had enough,” Marty says.

The man looks down from the chair imperiously, his beard morseled with pear flesh. Marty knows nothing about amphetamines but knows a deranged lunatic when he sees one—the man’s pupils are as big and as bright as pennies.

“Is this the head square?” he asks his audience.

“I think I’d better call the police,” Marty says. He can sense other guests coming in from the terrace, quietly fanning out behind him to watch.

The man shakes his head, incredulous. “You’re paying for this, sport. You thought the sideshow would just come and sip your champagne, read some poetry about hitchhiking and sleeping in the woods, and then we’d quietly slip away. Negative assumption, amigo. Flawed logic, compadre. We are guests now in this beau monde museum and we’re off-script . . . your shadow side and demons have been dogging you your whole pathetic life, brother. Now they’re here. Pleased to meet you.”

Honey stands beside Marty and says “Easy now” to the crazed man, as if to a riled horse.

“We’ve paid for your cab fare back,” says Rachel from somewhere in the crowd. “We’ll get you all in a taxi with some leftovers from the caterer.”

This condescension makes the man on the chair tilt and gesticulate, a street corner evangelist warming to the Apocalypse. “Oh, that kills me. We don’t want your fucking tinfoil sack lunch, Lady Macbeth. We’re not here for the food or the wine . . . we’re here because Amerika with a *k* is about to suck the phallus of Uncle Russkie and we want you to all see what a pinko commie dick looks like up close . . .”

At that moment, Clay Thomas comes bustling through the crowd. Later, Marty will think that he looks no angrier than a man woken abruptly from a nap. He seems put out, but there’s nothing like violence in his manner. En route, he takes off his jacket, unclasps his cuff links, and rolls up his sleeves, like he’s about to do the dishes. But as an old Princeton welterweight, Clay is limber and martial on his feet. Marty is about to ask him whether they should call the police when he finds himself holding his boss’s dinner jacket. Without looking up at the man, Clay positions himself behind the chair and pulls the legs from the back, forcing the beatnik to lunge into a squat on the floor. He drops the fruit bowl en route, sending apples and pears under the furniture.

“What the hell, old man!”

Clay shoves the man once, hard, in the chest. “It’s time for you all to leave.”

The man in the beret stands his ground for a moment, his eyes walled back, his hands limp. It seems equally possible that he’ll smash an antique vase over Clay’s head or run from the



house in narcotic terror. Honey and the other Beats gather in the hallway and call to their comrade in plaintive voices.

Rachel says, “The police are on their way.”

He considers this, mulls it through a mental fog. Eventually he leans back on his heels and relents, following his friends down the hallway. Clay comes after them as they head into the stairwell. Marty uses the intercom to call down to Hart Hanover and tells him to make sure the intruders leave the building when they get to the main lobby. After making sure they get into the private elevator on 12, Clay appears back on the top floor to a hearty round of applause. Marty claps along, but he feels slighted and embarrassed. He just watched his sixty-year-old boss toss the Beats out like a bunch of profane teenagers causing havoc in a matinee. To make matters worse, Rachel had actually paid for this humiliation—called up and ordered it like room service.

Clay stands beside Marty, rebuttoning his cuffs. He takes his dinner jacket back and puts it on. Clay says, “You invite the lions to a dinner party and sometimes they bite.”

Marty knows the gracious thing to do is thank Clay for handling the situation, but he can't. He watches the Thomases walk down the hallway. Other guests begin nodding their goodbyes and slipping out after them. Rachel is nowhere in sight and the guests are met by a chagrined Hester at the coat closet, her eyes averted. When the last of them have left, Marty stands for a moment with his back against the elevator doors. Hester says good night and he climbs the stairs before fumbling his way in the dark toward his bedroom. It's not until he's undressed, standing naked in the light coming from the

en suite bathroom, that he thinks of this day as a cruel hoax. Rachel is turned toward the wall, feigning sleep. He's still buzzing with embarrassment, feels it throbbing in his knuckles and teeth. He stares up at the painting, hoping to be lulled by its frozen quiet. The girl is so frail, mired between the woods and the icy river. The skaters' faces and hands are pinked from the cold. He looks at the dog trotting on the ice, chasing after the boy, and thinks of the Russian mongrel pinwheeling through space. It'll be many years before he discovers that the dog died shortly after leaving the atmosphere, that the high pressure and temperatures were too much for her to bear. He'll look back on the dead space explorer and the forgery hanging in plain sight and see himself as impossibly naive. Right now, though, he notices that the picture frame is slightly askew, dipping about two inches at the right corner. He straightens it before switching off the bathroom light and climbing into bed.