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The Rules of Civility

Written by Amor Towles

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RULES of CIVILITY

AMOR TOWLES

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For Maggie, my comet

Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.

—Matthew 22:8–14

Preface

On the night of October 4th, 1966, Val and I, both in late middle age, attended the opening of *Many Are Called* at the Museum of Modern Art—the first exhibit of the portraits taken by Walker Evans in the late 1930s on the New York City subways with a hidden camera.

It was what the social columnists liked to refer to as "a superlative affair." The men were in black tie, echoing the palette of the photographs, and the women wore brightly colored dresses hemmed at every length from the Achilles tendon to the top of the thigh. Champagne was being served off little round trays by young unemployed actors with flawless features and the grace of acrobats. Few of the guests were looking at the pictures. They were too busy enjoying themselves.

A drunken young socialite in pursuit of a waiter stumbled and nearly knocked me to the floor. She wasn't alone in her condition. At formal gatherings, somehow it had become acceptable, even stylish, to be drunk before eight.

But perhaps that wasn't so hard to understand. In the 1950s, America had picked up the globe by the heels and shaken the change from its pockets. Europe had become a poor cousin—all crests and no table settings. And the indistinguishable countries of Africa, Asia, and South America had just begun skittering across our schoolroom walls like salamanders in the sun. True, the Communists were out there,

somewhere, but with Joe McCarthy in the grave and no one on the Moon, for the time being the Russians just skulked across the pages of spy novels.

So all of us were drunk to some degree. We launched ourselves into the evening like satellites and orbited the city two miles above the Earth, powered by failing foreign currencies and finely filtered spirits. We shouted over the dinner tables and slipped away into empty rooms with each other's spouses, carousing with all the enthusiasm and indiscretion of Greek gods. And in the morning, we woke at 6:30 on the dot, clear-headed and optimistic, ready to resume our places behind the stainless steel desks at the helm of the world.

The spotlight that night wasn't on the photographer. In his midsixties, withered by an indifference to food, unable to fill out his own tuxedo, Evans looked as sad and nondescript as a retiree from General Motors middle management. Occasionally, someone would interrupt his solitude to make a remark, but he spent whole quarters of an hour standing awkwardly in the corner like the ugliest girl at the dance.

No, all eyes were not on Evans. Instead, they were trained on a thin-haired young author who had just made a sensation by penning a history of his mother's infidelities. Flanked by his editor and a press agent, he was accepting compliments from a coterie of fans, looking like a sly newborn.

Val took in the fawning circle with a curious gaze. He could make $10,000 in a day by setting in motion the merger of a Swiss department store chain with an American missile manufacturer, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure how a tattletale could cause such a stir.

Always mindful of his surroundings, the press agent caught my eye and waved me over. I gave a quick wave back and took my husband's arm.

—Come on, sweetheart, I said. Let's look at the pictures.

We walked into the exhibition's less crowded second room and began working our way around the walls at an unhurried pace. Virtually all of the pictures were horizontal portraits of one or two subway riders seated directly across from the photographer.

Here was a sober young Harlemite in a gamely tilted bowler with a little French mustache.

Here was a four-eyed forty-year-old with a fur-collared coat and a wide-brimmed hat looking every bit the gangster's accountant.

Here were two single girls from the perfume counter at Macy's, solidly in their thirties, a little sour with the knowledge that their best years were behind them, riding with eyebrows plucked all the way to the Bronx.

Here a him; there a her.

Here the young; there the old.

Here the dapper; there the drab.

Though taken more than twenty-five years earlier, the photographs had never been shown publicly. Evans apparently had some sort of concern for his subjects' privacy. This may sound strange (or even a little self-important) when you consider that he had photographed them in such a public place. But seeing their faces lined along on the wall, you could understand Evans's reluctance. For, in fact, the pictures captured a certain naked humanity. Lost in thought, masked by the anonymity of their commute, unaware of the camera that was trained so directly upon them, many of these subjects had unknowingly allowed their inner selves to be seen.

Anyone who has ridden the subway twice a day to earn their bread knows how it goes: When you board, you exhibit the same persona you use with your colleagues and acquaintances. You've carried it through the turnstile and past the sliding doors, so that your fellow passengers can tell who you are—cocky or cautious, amorous or indifferent, loaded or on the dole. But you find yourself a seat and the train gets under way; it comes to one station and then another; people get off and others get on. And under the influence of the cradlelike rocking of the train, your carefully crafted persona begins to slip away. The superego dissolves as your mind begins to wander aimlessly over your cares and your dreams; or better yet, it drifts into an ambient hypnosis, where even cares and dreams recede and the peaceful silence of the cosmos pervades.

It happens to all of us. It's just a question of how many stops it

takes. Two for some. Three for others. Sixty-eighth Street. Fifty-ninth. Fifty-first. Grand Central. What a relief it was, those few minutes with our guard let down and our gaze inexact, finding the one true solace that human isolation allows.

How satisfying this photographic survey must have seemed to the uninitiated. All the young attorneys and the junior bankers and the spunky society girls who were making their way through the galleries must have looked at the pictures and thought: *What a tour de force. What an artistic achievement. Here at last are the faces of humanity!*

But for those of us who were young at the time, the subjects looked like ghosts.

The 1930s . . .

What a grueling decade that was.

I was sixteen when the Depression began, just old enough to have had all my dreams and expectations duped by the effortless glamour of the twenties. It was as if America launched the Depression just to teach Manhattan a lesson.

After the Crash, you couldn't hear the bodies hitting the pavement, but there was a sort of communal gasp and then a stillness that fell over the city like snow. The lights flickered. The bands laid down their instruments and the crowds made quietly for the door.

Then the prevailing winds shifted from west to east, blowing the dust of the Okies all the way back to Forty-second Street. It came in billowing clouds and settled over the newspaper stands and park benches, shrouding the blessed and the damned just like the ashes in Pompeii. Suddenly, we had our own Joads—ill clothed and beleaguered, trudging along the alleyways past the oil drum fires, past the shanties and flophouses, under the spans of the bridges, moving slowly but methodically toward inner Californias which were just as abject and unredeeming as the real thing. Poverty and powerlessness. Hunger and hopelessness. At least until the omen of war began to brighten our step.

Yes, the hidden camera portraits of Walker Evans from 1938 to 1941 represented humanity, but a particular strain of humanity—a chastened one.

—

A few paces ahead of us, a young woman was enjoying the exhibit. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two. Every picture seemed to pleasantly surprise her—as if she was in the portrait gallery of a castle where all the faces seemed majestic and remote. Her skin was flushed with an ignorant beauty that filled me with envy.

The faces weren't remote for me. The chastened expressions, the unrequited stares, they were all too familiar. It was like that experience of walking into a hotel lobby in another city where the clothes and the mannerisms of the clientele are so similar to your own that you're just bound to run into someone you don't want to see.

And, in a way, that's what happened.

—It's Tinker Grey, I said, as Val was moving on to the next picture.

He came back to my side to take a second look at this portrait of a twenty-eight-year-old man, ill shaven, in a threadbare coat.

Twenty pounds underweight, he had almost lost the blush on his cheeks, and his face was visibly dirty. But his eyes were bright and alert and trained straight ahead with the slightest hint of a smile on his lips, as if it was he who was studying the photographer. As if it was he who was studying us. Staring across three decades, across a canyon of encounters, looking like a visitation. And looking every bit himself.

—Tinker Grey, repeated Val with vague recognition. I think my brother knew a Grey who was a banker. . . .

—Yes, I said. That's the one.

Val studied the picture more closely now, showing the polite interest that a distant connection who's fallen on hard times deserves. But a question or two must have presented itself regarding how well I knew the man.

—Extraordinary, Val said simply; and ever so slightly, he furrowed his brow.

By the summer that Val and I had begun seeing each other, we were still in our thirties and had missed little more than a decade of each other's adult lives; but that was time enough. It was time enough for

whole lives to have been led and misled. It was time enough, as the poet said, to murder and create—or at least, to have warranted the dropping of a question on one's plate.

But Val counted few backward-looking habits as virtues; and in regards to the mysteries of my past, as in regards to so much else, he was a gentleman first.

Nonetheless, I made a concession.

—He was an acquaintance of mine as well, I said. In my circle of friends for a time. But I haven't heard his name since before the war.

Val's brow relaxed.

Perhaps he was comforted by the deceptive simplicity of these little facts. He eyed the picture with more measure and a brief shake of the head, which simultaneously gave the coincidence its due and affirmed how unfair the Depression had been.

—Extraordinary, he said again, though more sympathetically. He slipped his arm under mine and gently moved me on.

We spent the required minute in front of the next picture. Then the next and the next. But now the faces were passing by like the faces of strangers ascending an opposite escalator. I was barely taking them in.

Seeing Tinker's smile . . .

After all these years, I was unprepared for it. It made me feel sprung upon.

Maybe it was just complacency—that sweet unfounded complacency of a well-heeled Manhattan middle age—but walking through the doors of that museum, I would have testified under oath that my life had achieved a perfect equilibrium. It was a marriage of two minds, of two metropolitan spirits tilting as gently and inescapably toward the future as paper whites tilt toward the sun.

And yet, I found my thoughts reaching into the past. Turning their backs on all the hard-wrought perfections of the hour, they were searching for the sweet uncertainties of a bygone year and for all its chance encounters—encounters which in the moment had seemed so haphazard and effervescent but which with time took on some semblance of fate.

Yes, my thoughts turned to Tinker and to Eve—but they turned to Wallace Wolcott and Dicky Vanderwhile and to Anne Grandyn too. And to those turns of the kaleidoscope that gave color and shape to the passage of my 1938.

Standing at my husband's side, I found myself intent on keeping the memories of the year to myself.

It wasn't that any of them were so scandalous that they would have shocked Val or threatened the harmony of our marriage—on the contrary, if I had shared them Val would probably have been even more endeared to me. But I didn't *want* to share them. Because I didn't want to dilute them.

Above all else, I wanted to be alone. I wanted to step out of the glare of my own circumstances. I wanted to go get a drink in a hotel bar. Or better yet, take a taxi down to the Village for the first time in how many years. . . .

Yes, Tinker looked poor in that picture. He looked poor and hungry and without prospects. But he looked young and vibrant too; and strangely alive.

Suddenly, it was as if the faces on the wall were watching me. The ghosts on the subway, tired and alone, were studying my face, taking in those traces of compromise that give aging human features their unique sense of pathos.

Then Val surprised me.

—Let's go, he said.

I looked up and he smiled.

—Come on. We'll come back some morning when it isn't so busy.

—Okay.

It was crowded in the middle of the gallery so we kept to the periphery, walking past the pictures. The faces flickered by like the faces of prisoners looking through those little square openings in maximum security cells. They followed me with their gaze as if to say: *Where do you think* you're *going?* And then just before we reached the exit one of them stopped me in my tracks.

A wry smile formed on my face.

—What is it? asked Val.

—It's him again.

On the wall between two portraits of older women, there was a second portrait of Tinker. Tinker in a cashmere coat, clean shaven, a crisp Windsor knot poking over the collar of a custom-made shirt.

Val dragged me forward by the hand until we were a foot from the picture.

—You mean the same one from before?

—Yes.

—It couldn't be.

Val doubled back to the first portrait. Across the room I could see him studying the dirtier face with care, looking for distinguishing marks. He came back and took up his place a foot from the man in the cashmere coat.

—Incredible, he said. It's the very same fellow!

—Please step back from the art, a security guard said.

We stepped back.

—If you didn't know, you'd think they were two different men entirely.

—Yes, I said. You're right.

—Well, he certainly got back on his feet!

Val was suddenly in a good mood. The journey from threadbare to cashmere restored his natural sense of optimism.

—No, I said. This is the earlier picture.

—What's that?

—The other picture was after this one. It was 1939.

I pointed to the tag.

—This was taken in 1938.

You couldn't blame Val for making the mistake. It was natural to assume that this was the later picture—and not simply because it was hung later in the show. In the 1938 picture Tinker not only looked better off, he looked older too: His face was fuller, and it had a suggestion of pragmatic world-weariness, as if a string of successes had towed along an ugly truth or two. While the picture taken a year later looked more like the portrait of a peacetime twenty-year-old: vibrant and fearless and naïve.

Val felt embarrassed for Tinker.
—Oh, he said. I'm sorry.
He took my arm again and shook his head for Tinker as for us all.
—Riches to rags, he said, tenderly.
—No, I said. Not exactly.

NEW YORK CITY, 1969

WINTERTIME

CHAPTER ONE

The Old Long Since

It was the last night of 1937.

With no better plans or prospects, my roommate Eve had dragged me back to The Hotspot, a wishfully named nightclub in Greenwich Village that was four feet underground.

From a look around the club, you couldn't tell that it was New Year's Eve. There were no hats or streamers; no paper trumpets. At the back of the club, looming over a small empty dance floor, a jazz quartet was playing loved-me-and-left-me standards without a vocalist. The saxophonist, a mournful giant with skin as black as motor oil, had apparently lost his way in the labyrinth of one of his long, lonely solos. While the bass player, a coffee-and-cream mulatto with a small deferential mustache, was being careful not to hurry him. *Boom, boom, boom,* he went, at half the pace of a heartbeat.

The spare clientele were almost as downbeat as the band. No one was in their finery. There were a few couples here and there, but no romance. Anyone in love or money was around the corner at Café Society dancing to swing. In another twenty years all the world would be sitting in basement clubs like this one, listening to antisocial soloists explore their inner malaise; but on the last night of 1937, if you were watching a quartet it was because you couldn't afford to see the whole ensemble, or because you had no good reason to ring in the new year.

We found it all very comforting.

We didn't really understand what we were listening to, but we could tell that it had its advantages. It wasn't going to raise our hopes or spoil them. It had a semblance of rhythm and a surfeit of sincerity. It was just enough of an excuse to get us out of our room and we treated it accordingly, both of us wearing comfortable flats and a simple black dress. Though under her little number, I noted that Eve was wearing the best of her stolen lingerie.

Eve Ross . . .

Eve was one of those surprising beauties from the American Midwest.

In New York it becomes so easy to assume that the city's most alluring women have flown in from Paris or Milan. But they're just a minority. A much larger covey hails from the stalwart states that begin with the letter I—like Iowa and Indiana and Illinois. Bred with just the right amount of fresh air, roughhousing, and ignorance, these primitive blondes set out from the cornfields looking like starlight with limbs. Every morning in early spring one of them skips off her porch with a sandwich wrapped in cellophane ready to flag down the first Greyhound headed to Manhattan—this city where all things beautiful are welcomed and measured and, if not immediately adopted, then at least tried on for size.

One of the great advantages that the midwestern girls had was that you couldn't tell them apart. You can always tell a rich New York girl from a poor one. And you can tell a rich Boston girl from a poor one. After all, that's what accents and manners are there for. But to the native New Yorker, the midwestern girls all looked and sounded the same. Sure, the girls from the various classes were raised in different houses and went to different schools, but they shared enough midwestern humility that the gradations of their wealth and privilege were obscure to us. Or maybe their differences (readily apparent in Des Moines) were just dwarfed by the scale of our socioeconomic strata—that thousand-layered glacial formation that spans from an ash can on the Bowery to a penthouse in paradise. Either way, to us they *all* looked like hayseeds: unblemished, wide-eyed, and God-fearing, if not exactly free of sin.

Eve hailed from somewhere at the upper end of Indiana's economic scale. Her father was driven to the office in a company car and she ate

biscuits for breakfast cut in the pantry by a Negro named Sadie. She had gone to a two-year finishing school and had spent a summer in Switzerland pretending to study French. But if you walked into a bar and met her for the first time, you wouldn't be able to tell if she was a corn-fed fortune hunter or a millionairess on a tear. All you could tell for sure was that she was a bona fide beauty. And that made the getting to know her so much less complicated.

She was indisputably a natural blonde. Her shoulder-length hair, which was sandy in summer, turned golden in the fall as if in sympathy with the wheat fields back home. She had fine features and blue eyes and pinpoint dimples so perfectly defined that it seemed like there must be a small steel cable fastened to the center of each inner cheek which grew taut when she smiled. True, she was only five foot five, but she knew how to dance in two-inch heels—and she knew how to kick them off as soon as she sat in your lap.

To her credit, Eve was making an honest go of it in New York. She had arrived in 1936 with enough of her father's money to get a single at Mrs. Martingale's boardinghouse and enough of his influence to land a job as a marketing assistant at the Pembroke Press—promoting all of the books that she'd avoided so assiduously in school.

Her second night at the boardinghouse, while taking a seat at the table she tipped her plate and her spaghetti plopped right in my lap. Mrs. Martingale said the best thing for the stain was to soak it in white wine. So she got a bottle of cooking Chablis from the kitchen and sent us off to the bathroom. We sprinkled a little of the wine on my skirt and drank the rest of it sitting on the floor with our backs to the door.

As soon as Eve got her first paycheck, she gave up her single and stopped drafting checks on her father's account. After a few months of Eve's self-reliance, Daddy sent along an envelope with fifty ten-dollar bills and a sweet note about how proud he was. She sent the money back like it was infected with TB.

—I'm willing to be under anything, she said, as long as it isn't somebody's thumb.

So together we pinched. We ate every scrap at the boardinghouse breakfast and starved ourselves at lunch. We shared our clothes with

the girls on the floor. We cut each other's hair. On Friday nights, we let boys that we had no intention of kissing buy us drinks, and in exchange for dinner we kissed a few that we had no intention of kissing twice. On the occasional rainy Wednesday, when Bendel's was crowded with the wives of the well-to-do, Eve would put on her best skirt and jacket, ride the elevator to the second floor, and stuff silk stockings into her panties. And when we were late with the rent, she did her part: She stood at Mrs. Martingale's door and shed the unsalted tears of the Great Lakes.

♦ ♦ ♦

That New Year's, we started the evening with a plan of stretching three dollars as far as it would go. We weren't going to bother ourselves with boys. More than a few had had their chance with us in 1937, and we had no intention of squandering the last hours of the year on latecomers. We were going to perch in this low-rent bar where the music was taken seriously enough that two good-looking girls wouldn't be bothered and where the gin was cheap enough that we could each have one martini an hour. We intended to smoke a little more than polite society allowed. And once midnight had passed without ceremony, we were going to a Ukrainian diner on Second Avenue where the late night special was coffee, eggs, and toast for fifteen cents.

But a little after nine-thirty, we drank eleven o'clock's gin. And at ten, we drank the eggs and toast. We had four nickels between us and we hadn't had a bite to eat. It was time to start improvising.

Eve was busy making eyes at the bass player. It was a hobby of hers. She liked to bat her lashes at the musicians while they performed and ask them for cigarettes in between sets. This bass player was certainly attractive in an unusual way, as most Creoles are, but he was so enraptured by his own music that he was making eyes at the tin ceiling. It was going to take an act of God for Eve to get his attention. I tried to get her to make eyes at the bartender, but she wasn't in a mood to reason. She just lit a cigarette and threw the match over her shoulder for good luck. Pretty soon, I thought to myself, we were going to have to find ourselves a Good Samaritan or we'd be staring at the tin ceiling too.

And that's when he came into the club.

Eve saw him first. She was looking back from the stage to make some remark and she spied him over my shoulder. She gave me a kick in the shin and nodded in his direction. I shifted my chair.

He was terrific looking. An upright five foot ten, dressed in black tie with a coat draped over his arm, he had brown hair and royal blue eyes and a small star-shaped blush at the center of each cheek. You could just picture his forebear at the helm of the *Mayflower*—with a gaze trained brightly on the horizon and hair a little curly from the salt sea air.

—Dibs, said Eve.

From the vantage point of the doorway, he let his eyes adjust to the half-light and then surveyed the crowd. It was obvious that he had come to meet someone, and his expression registered the slightest disappointment once he realized that they weren't there. When he sat at the table next to us, he gave the room another going over and then, in a single motion, signaled the waitress and draped his coat over the back of a chair.

It was a beautiful coat. The color of the cashmere was similar to camel hair, only paler, like the color of the bass player's skin, and it was spotless, as if he had just come straight from the tailor's. It had to have cost five hundred dollars. Maybe more. Eve couldn't take her eyes off of it.

The waitress came over like a cat to the corner of a couch. For a second, I thought she was going to arch her back and exercise her claws on his shirt. When she took his order, she backed up a little and bent at the waist so that he could see down her blouse. He didn't seem to notice.

In a tone at once friendly and polite, showing the waitress a little more deference than she was due, he asked for a glass of scotch. Then he sat back and began to take in the scene. But as his gaze shifted from the bar to the band, out of the corner of his eye he saw Eve. She was still staring at the coat. He blushed. He'd been so preoccupied with looking over the room and signaling the waitress, he hadn't realized that the chair he'd draped his coat over was at our table.

—I'm so sorry, he said. How rude of me.

He stood up and reached over to retrieve it.

—No, no. Not at all, we said. No one's sitting there. It's fine.

He paused.

—Are you sure?

—As sure as the shore, said Eve.

The waitress reappeared with the scotch. When she turned to go he asked her to wait a moment and then offered to buy us a round—one last good turn in the old year, as he put it.

We could tell already that this one was as expensive, as finely made and as clean as his coat. He had that certain confidence in his bearing, that democratic interest in his surroundings, and that understated presumption of friendliness that are only found in young men who have been raised in the company of money and manners. It didn't occur to people like this that they might be unwelcome in a new environment—and as a result, they rarely were.

When a man on his own buys a round for two good-looking girls, you might expect him to make conversation no matter whom he's waiting for. But our smartly dressed Samaritan didn't make any with us. Having raised his glass once in our direction with a friendly nod, he began nursing his whiskey and turned his attention to the band.

After two songs, it began to make Eve fidget. She kept glancing over, expecting him to say something. Anything. Once, they made eye contact and he smiled politely. I could tell that when this song was over she was going to start a conversation of her own even if she had to knock her gin into his lap to do it. But she didn't get the chance.

When the song ended, for the first time in an hour the saxophonist spoke. In a deep-timbred, could've-been-a-preacher kind of voice he went into a long explanation about the next number. It was a new composition. It was dedicated to a Tin Pan Alley pianist named Silver Tooth Hawkins who died at thirty-two. It had something to do with Africa. It was called "Tincannibal."

With his tightly laced spats he tapped out a rhythm and the drummer brushed it up on the snare. The bass and piano players joined in. The saxophonist listened to his partners, nodding his head to the beat. He eased in with a perky little melody that sort of cantered within the corral of the tempo. Then he began to bray as if he'd been spooked and in a flash he was over the fence.

Our neighbor looked like a tourist getting directions from a gen-

darme. Happening to make eye contact with me, he made a bewildered face for my benefit. I laughed and he laughed back.

—Is there a melody in there? he asked.

I edged my chair a little closer, as if I hadn't quite heard him. I leaned at an angle five degrees less acute than the waitress had.

—What's that?

—I was wondering if there's a melody in there.

—It just went out for a smoke. It'll be back in a minute. But I take it that you don't come here for the music.

—Is it obvious? he asked with a sheepish smile. I'm actually looking for my brother. He's the jazz fan.

From across the table I could hear Eve's eyelashes flittering. A cashmere coat and a New Year's date with a sibling. What more did a girl need to know?

—Would you like to join us while you wait? she asked.

—Oh. I wouldn't want to impose.

(Now there was a word we didn't hear every day.)

—You wouldn't be *imposing*, Eve chastened.

We made a little room for him at the table and he slid up in his chair.

—Theodore Grey.

—Theodore! Eve exclaimed. Even Roosevelt went by Teddy.

Theodore laughed.

—My friends call me Tinker.

Couldn't you just have guessed it? How the WASPs loved to nickname their children after the workaday trades: Tinker. Cooper. Smithy. Maybe it was to hearken back to their seventeenth-century New England bootstraps—the manual trades that had made them stalwart and humble and virtuous in the eyes of their Lord. Or maybe it was just a way of politely understating their predestination to having it all.

—I'm Evelyn Ross, Evey said, taking her given name for a spin. And this is Katey Kontent.

—Katey Kontent! Wow! So are you?

—Not by a long shot.

Tinker raised his glass with a friendly smile.

—Then here's to it in 1938.

—

Tinker's brother never showed. Which worked out fine for us, because around eleven o'clock, Tinker signaled the waitress and ordered a bottle of bubbly.

—We aint got no bubbly here, Mister, she replied—decidedly colder now that he was at our table.

So he joined us in a round of gin.

Eve was in terrific form. She was telling tales about two girls in her high school who'd vied to be homecoming queen the way that Vanderbilt and Rockefeller vied to be the richest man in the world. One of the girls loosed a skunk in the house of the other the night of the senior dance. Her rival responded by dumping a load of manure on her front lawn the day of her sweet sixteen. The finale was a Sunday morning hair-pulling contest on the steps of Saint Mary's between their mothers. Father O'Connor, who should have known better, tried to intervene and got a little scripture of his own.

Tinker was laughing so hard you got the sense that he hadn't done it in a while. It was brightening all his God-given attributes like his smile and his eyes and the blushes on his cheeks.

—How about you, Katey? he asked after catching his breath. Where are you from?

—Katey grew up in Brooklyn, Eve volunteered—as if it was a bragging right.

—Really? What was that like?

—Well, I'm not sure we had a homecoming queen.

—You wouldn't have gone to homecoming if there was one, Eve said.

Then she leaned toward Tinker confidentially.

—Katey's the hottest bookworm you'll ever meet. If you took all the books that she's read and piled them in a stack, you could climb to the Milky Way.

—The Milky Way!

—Maybe the Moon, I conceded.

Eve offered Tinker a cigarette and he declined. But the instant her cigarette touched her lips, he had a lighter at the ready. It was solid gold and engraved with his initials.

Eve leaned her head back, pursed her lips and shot a ray of smoke toward the ceiling.

—Now, what about you, Theodore?

—Well, I guess if you stacked all the books I've read, you could climb into a cab.

—No, said Eve. I mean: What *about* you?

Tinker answered relying on the ellipses of the elite: He was *from Massachusetts;* he went to *college in Providence;* and he worked for *a small firm on Wall Street*—that is, he was born in the Back Bay, attended Brown, and now worked at the bank that his grandfather founded. Usually, this sort of deflection was so transparently disingenuous it was irksome, but with Tinker it was as if he was genuinely afraid that the shadow of an Ivy League degree might spoil the fun. He concluded by saying he lived *uptown.*

—Where uptown? Eve asked "innocently."

—Two eleven Central Park West, he said, with a hint of embarrassment.

Two eleven Central Park West! The Beresford. Twenty-two stories of terraced apartments.

Under the table Eve kicked me again, but she had the good sense to change the subject. She asked him about his brother. What was he like? Was he older, younger? Shorter, taller?

Older and shorter, Henry Grey was a painter who lived in the West Village. When Eve asked what was the best word to describe him, after thinking a moment Tinker settled on *unwavering*—because his brother had always known who he was and what he wanted to do.

—Sounds exhausting, I said.

Tinker laughed.

—I guess it does, doesn't it.

—And maybe a little dull? Eve suggested.

—No. He's definitely not dull.

—Well, we'll stick to wavering.

At some point, Tinker excused himself. Five minutes went by, then ten. Eve and I both began to fidget. He didn't seem the sort to strand us with the check, but a quarter of an hour in a public john was a long time even for a girl. Then just as panic was setting in, he reappeared. His face was flush. The cold New Year's air emanated from the fabric of his tuxedo. He was grasping a bottle of champagne by the neck and grinning like a truant holding a fish by the tail.

—Success!

He popped the cork at the tin ceiling drawing discouraging stares from everyone but the bass player whose teeth peeked out from under his mustache as he nodded and gave us a *boom boom boom*!

Tinker poured the champagne into our empty glasses.

—We need some resolutions!

—We aint got no resolutions here, Mister.

—Better yet, said Eve. Why don't we make resolutions for each other?

—Capital! Tinker said. I'll go first. In 1938, the two of you . . .

He looked us up and down.

—Should try to be less shy.

We both laughed.

—Okay, said Tinker. Your turn.

Eve came back without hesitation.

—You should get out of your ruts.

She raised an eyebrow and then squinted as if she was offering him a challenge. For a moment he was taken aback. She had obviously struck a chord. He nodded his head slowly and then smiled.

—What a wonderful wish, he said, to wish for another.

As midnight approached, the sound of people cheering and cars honking became audible from the street, so we decided to join the party. Tinker overpaid in freshly minted bills. Eve snatched his scarf and wrapped it around her head like a turban. Then we stumbled through the tables into the night.

Outside, it was still snowing.

Eve and I got on either side of Tinker and took his arms. We leaned into his shoulders as if against the cold and marched him down Waverly toward the carousing in Washington Square. As we passed a stylish restaurant two middle-aged couples came out and climbed into a waiting car. When they drove away, the doorman caught Tinker's eye.

—Thanks again, Mr. Grey, he said.

Here, no doubt, was the well-tipped source of our bubbly.

—Thank *you*, Paul, said Tinker.

—Happy New Year, Paul, said Eve.

—Same to you, ma'am.

Powdered with snow, Washington Square looked as lovely as it could. The snow had dusted every tree and gate. The once tony brownstones that on summer days now lowered their gaze in misery were lost for the moment in sentimental memories. At No. 25, a curtain on the second floor was drawn back and the ghost of Edith Wharton looked out with shy envy. Sweet, insightful, unsexed, she watched the three of us pass wondering when the love that she had so artfully imagined would work up the courage to rap on her door. When would it present itself at an inconvenient hour, insist upon being admitted, brush past the butler and rush up the Puritan staircase urgently calling her name?

Never, I'm afraid.

As we approached the center of the park, the revelry by the fountain began to take shape: A crowd of collegiates had gathered to ring in the New Year with a half-priced ragtime band. All of the boys were in black tie and tails except for four freshmen who wore maroon sweaters emblazoned with Greek letters and who scrambled through the crowd filling glasses. A young woman who was insufficiently dressed was pretending to conduct the band which, due to indifference or inexperience, played the same song over and over.

The musicians were suddenly waved silent by a young man who leapt onto a park bench with a coxswain's megaphone in hand, looking as self-assured as the ringmaster in a circus for aristocrats.

—Ladies and gentlemen, he proclaimed. The turn of the year is nearly upon us.

With a flourish, he signaled one of his cohorts and an older man in a gray robe was foisted up onto the bench at his side. The foistee was wearing the cotton ball beard of a drama school Moses and holding a cardboard scythe. He appeared to be a little unsteady on his feet.

Unfurling a scroll that fell to the ground, the ringmaster began chastising the old man for the indignities of 1937: *The recession . . . The Hindenburg . . . The Lincoln Tunnel!* Then holding up his megaphone, he called on 1938 to present itself. From behind a bush an overweight fraternity brother appeared dressed in nothing but a diaper. He climbed on the bench and to the merriment of the crowd took a stab at flexing

his muscles. At the same time, the beard on the old man became unhooked from an ear and you could see that he was gaunt and ill shaven. He must have been a bum that the collegiates had lured from an alley with the promise of money or wine. But whatever the enticement, its influence must have run its course, because he was suddenly looking around like a drifter in the hands of vigilantes.

With a salesman's enthusiasm, the ringmaster began gesturing to various parts of the New Year's physique, detailing its improvements: its flexible suspension, its streamlined chassis, its get-up-and-go.

—Come on, said Eve, skipping ahead with a laugh.

Tinker didn't seem so eager to join in the fun.

I took a pack of cigarettes from my coat pocket and he produced his lighter.

He took a step closer in order to block the wind with his shoulders.

As I exhaled a filament of smoke, Tinker looked overhead at the snowflakes whose slow descent was marked by the halo of the street lamps. Then he turned back toward the commotion and scanned the assembly with an almost mournful gaze.

—I can't tell whom you feel more sorry for, I said. The old year or the new.

He offered a tempered smile.

—Are those my only options?

Suddenly, one of the revelers at the edge of the crowd was hit squarely in the back by a snowball. When he and two of his fraternity brothers turned, one of them was hit in the pleats of his shirt.

Looking back, we could see that a boy no older than ten had launched the attack from behind the safety of a park bench. Wrapped in four layers of clothing, he looked like the fattest kid in the class. To his left and right were pyramids of snowballs reaching to his waist. He must have spent the whole day packing ammunition—like one who's received word of the redcoats' approach straight from the mouth of Paul Revere.

Dumbstruck, the three collegiates stared with open mouths. The kid took advantage of their cognitive delay by unloading three more well-aimed missiles in quick succession.

—Get that brat, one of them said without a hint of humor.

The three of them began scraping snowballs off the paving stones and returning fire.

I took out another cigarette, preparing to enjoy the show, but my attention was drawn back in the other direction by a rather startling development. On the bench beside the wino, the diaper-donning New Year had begun to sing "Auld Lang Syne" in a flawless falsetto. Pure and heartfelt, as disembodied as the plaint of an oboe drifting across the surface of a lake, his voice lent an eerie beauty to the night. Though one has to practically sing along with "Auld Lang Syne" by law, such was the otherworldliness of his performance that no one dared to sound a note.

When he had tapered out the final refrain with exquisite care, there was a moment of silence, then cheers. The ringmaster put a hand on the tenor's shoulder—recognizing a job well done. Then he took out his watch and raised his hand for silence.

—All right everyone. All right. Quiet now. Ready . . . ? Ten! Nine! Eight!

From the center of the crowd Eve waved excitedly in our direction.

I turned to take Tinker's arm—but he was gone.

To my left the walkways of the park were empty and to my right a lone silhouette, stocky and short, passed under a street lamp. So I turned back toward Waverly—and that's when I saw him. He was hunched behind the bench at the little boy's side fending off the attack of the fraternity brothers. Aided by the unexpected reinforcement, the boy looked more determined than ever. And Tinker, he had a smile on his face that could have lit every lamp at the North Pole.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Eve and I got home it was nearly two. Normally, the boarding-house locked its doors at midnight, but the curfew had been extended for the holiday. It was a liberty that few of the girls had made the most of. We found the living room empty and depressed. It had scatterings of virginal confetti and there were unfinished glasses of cider on every side table. Eve and I traded a self-satisfied gaze and went up to our room.

We were both quiet, letting the aura of our good fortune linger. Eve slipped her dress over her head and went off to the bathroom. The two of us shared a bed, and Eve was in the habit of turning it down as if we

were in a hotel. Though it always seemed crazy to me, that unnecessary little preparation, for once, I turned the bed down for her. Then I took the cigar box from my underwear drawer so I could stow my unspent nickels before going to bed, just like I'd been taught.

But when I reached into my coat pocket for my change purse, I felt something heavy and smooth. A little mystified, I pulled the object out and found it was Tinker's lighter. Then I remembered having—in a somewhat Eve-like manner—taken it from his hand to light my second cigarette. It was just around the time that the New Year had begun to sing.

I sat down in my father's barley-brown easy chair—the only piece of furniture I owned. I flipped open the lighter's lid and turned the flint. The flame leapt and wavered, giving off its kerosene scent before I snapped it shut.

The lighter had a pleasant weight and a soft, worn look, polished by a thousand gentlemanly gestures. And the engraving of Tinker's initials, which was in a Tiffany font, was so finely done you could score your thumbnail along the stem of the letters unerringly. But it wasn't just marked with his monogram. Under his initials had been etched a sort of coda in the amateurish fashion of a drugstore jeweler, such that it read:

TGR

1910 – ?