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Written by Michael Marshall

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We Are Here

Michael Marshall



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Prologue

He drove. There were times when he stopped for gas or to empty his bladder or buy cups of poor coffee out of machines, selecting isolated and windswept gas stations where no one was doing anything except filling up and staring vacantly at their cold hand on the pump as they waited, wanting to be back in their warm car and on the road to wherever it was they had to be. Nobody was looking or watching or caring about anyone who might happen to be doing the same thing. Nobody saw anything except another guy in bulky clothing getting into a big car and pulling back out onto the highway.

Sometimes it was raining. Sometimes there was sleet. Sometimes merely the wind coming across the great flatness. He did not listen to the radio. He did not consult a map. He didn't know where he was going and so he did not care where he was.

He just drove.

He had barely slept beyond nodding out for short stretches in the driver's seat, the car stashed behind abandoned farmhouses or in the parking lots of small-town businesses that would not open for several hours after he was back on the road. Other than bags of potato chips or dusty gas station trail mix, he hadn't eaten since he left what used to be his home. He already knew he wasn't going back there. He was light-headed with hunger but he could not eat. He was exhausted but he could not sleep. He was a single thought in a mind no longer capable of maintaining order. A thought needs somewhere to go, but flight does not provide a destination. Flight merely shrieks that you have to be somewhere other than where you are.

He had to stop. He had to keep going, too, but first he had to stop.

A little after four o'clock on the third day he passed a sign for a motel farther up the road. As is common practice in parts of the country where you can drive mile after mile without seeing anything of consequence, the business had given travelers plenty of warning to think about it and check their watches and decide yes, maybe it was time to call it a day. He had driven past several such signs without registering them. This one looked like it had been there forty years or more, from when drives cross-country were everybody's best hope of a vacation. It showed a basic-looking mom-and-pop motel with a foreign-sounding name. It was still thirty miles ahead at that point.

He shook his head and looked back at the road, but he already knew he was going to stop. He'd said no to a lot of things in his life, especially in the last month.

He'd gone ahead and done them anyway.

Half an hour later he pulled up outside a single-story L-shaped building down a short road off the highway. There were no cars outside the guest rooms, but a dim light showed in the office. When he went in, an old man came from the room out back. The old man looked him up and down and saw the kind of person who arrives alone at out-of-the-way motels in the back end of nowhere; he had never been a curious person and had stopped giving a shit about anything at all when his wife died three years before. The man paid him in cash for one night and got a key in return. A metal key, not one of those credit card swipers found everywhere else these days. A real key, one that opened a particular door and no other. The man looked at it, becalmed, trying to remember if he'd locked the door to his house when he left. He wasn't sure. It was too late to do anything about it. He asked the owner for the nearest place to get something to eat. The old man pointed up the road. The driver took a handful of matchbooks from the counter and went back out and got in his car.

Fifteen miles away he found a small store attached to a two-pump gas station that had nothing he wanted to eat but did sell things he could drink and smoke. He drove back to the motel and parked in front of Number 9. The rest of the lot remained empty. It was full dark now.

In the room he found a frigid rectangular space with two double

beds and an ancient television. He locked and bolted the door. He shoved the closest bed over until it blocked entry. Years ago the bed had been retrofitted with a vibrating function—no longer working—and was extremely heavy. It took him ten minutes and used up the last of his strength. He turned the rusty heater on. It made a lot of noise but gradually started to make inroads on the cold.

In the meantime he lay on the other bed. He did not take off his coat. He stared up at the ceiling. He opened the bottle he'd bought. He smoked cigarette after cigarette as he drank, lighting them with matches from matchbooks. His face was wet.

He wept with exhaustion. He wept because his head hurt. He wept with the self-disgust that permeated every cell of his body, like the imaginary mites that plague habitual users of crystal meth, nerve misfirings that feel so much like burrowing insects that sufferers will scratch and scratch and scratch at them until their arms and faces are a mass of bloody scabs, writing their affliction for all to see.

His affliction was not thus written, however. His was a text only he could read, for now. He still appeared normal. To anyone else he would have looked like a chubby man in his early thirties, lying on a motel bed, very drunk now, sniveling by himself.

In his mind, however, he wept. There was majesty to it. A hero, lost and alone.

Sometime later he started from a dream that had not been a dream. He'd been getting a lot of these since he left home, waking possessed by shadows he wished were dreams but that he knew very well to be memory. The wall in the back of his head was breaking down, wearing out like something rubbed with sweaty fingers too hard for too long. His mind wasn't trying to mediate through dramatization any longer. It was feeding up the things it had seen through his eyes or felt through his fingertips. His mind was thinking about what had happened even when he was not.

He didn't lie to himself. He knew he wasn't innocent, and could never be again. He knew what he'd done. He wouldn't have done it alone, maybe, but that didn't mean it hadn't been done. By him.

The other man had suggested things, but he had done them. That was how it had always been.

He'd waited and watched down alleys and outside bars and in the

late-night parking lots of the town he'd called home. He'd made the muscles in his face perform movements that looked like smiles. He'd selected forms of words that sounded helpful and charming. The other man planned the sentences, but it was he who'd spoken them aloud. The other had researched what would work best, but he'd been the one who slipped the ground-up pill into the wine he'd made available, offered casually, as if it was no big deal, and oh, what a coincidence—it just happens to be your favorite kind.

The other man invented the games he and his guest had played until she suddenly got scared, despite how drunk and confused she had become. Who had then raised his hand for the first blow? Impossible to tell. It didn't matter, when so many others had followed.

All he'd ever done was follow, but he'd wound up at the destination anyhow, and of course it's true that when you submit to someone's will then it's you who gives them power. You follow from in front. You can follow a long way like that. You can follow too far.

You can follow all the way to hell.

He rubbed his eyes against the last shards of the memory and sat up to see the other man was sitting in the armchair. He looked smart and trim and presentable as always. He looked strong. He was holding one of the motel matchbooks, turning it over in his fingers.

"I don't want to do it again," the man on the bed said.

"You do," the other man said. "You just don't like that you do. That's why you've got me. We're a team."

"Not anymore. You're not my friend."

"Why don't you have another drink? It'll make you feel better."

Despite himself, the man on the bed groped blearily for the vodka and raised it to his lips. He'd almost always done what the other man said. He saw two necks to the bottle. The alcohol had caught up with him while he dozed, and he was far drunker than he'd realized. Might as well keep drinking, then.

"You left a trail," the other man said. "Deliberately?"

"Of course not." He wasn't sure if this was true.

"They'll be turning the house upside down tomorrow, or by the next day at the latest."

"I cleaned up."

"They'll find something. Then they'll come looking. Eventually

they'll find you. Wherever you run." The man's face turned cold. "You fucked up, Edward. Again. Always. Always with the fucking up."

The man on the bed felt dreadful fear and vertiginous guilt mingled with relief. If he was caught then he could not do it again. He would not find himself returning to the same Chinese restaurant night after night, hoping for a glimpse of one of the other customers, a young single woman who worked in the bank across the street and sometimes came to grab a cheap bite at the end of the workday, though with infuriating unpredictability. He would not gradually come to know where she lived—alone—and where she went to the gym, where and when she shopped for groceries, or that her basket always included at least one bottle of wine.

The man on the bed shrugged, trying to feel glad that something like this could not happen again, though he knew every single moment of it had held a terrible excitement and that there could be other such women in other towns, if he chose to keep driving down this road. "They catch me, they catch you."

"I know that," the man in the chair said. He opened the matchbook. With effort he managed to get one of the matches out. After a couple of pulls along the strip, he got it lit.

The man on the bed noticed, too late, that he'd piled all the other matchbooks on the bedspread of the bed that now blocked the door. The bedspread was old, not to code, flammable. Very flammable, it turned out.

"I'm not going to jail," the other man said as he stood up from the chair. "I'd rather die right here."

He dropped the burning matchbook on the pile.

It didn't happen fast. The man on the bed, whose name was Edward Lake, had a little time to escape. He was far too drunk now to move the heavy bed from the door, however. He was too drunk to understand that the dead tone from the phone by the bed was because the other man had unplugged it while Edward crashed out.

By the time he got around to trying, he could not get past the flames to the window. He was too scared, and the truth is that the only real and meaningful thing Edward had done in his entire life was kill a woman, and there's no good way forward from that. So it's also possible that, deep inside, he did actually just want to die.

*

As his former friend burned alive, the other man watched from the parking lot. He knew the moment when Edward died, and was surprised and awestruck by what happened next.

The death of the girl back home had felt powerful. But this . . . this was completely other. This was something else.

He felt altered, very different indeed, and knew in that moment that he was finished with following, even if by the end he and Edward had been traveling side by side and hand in hand.

People who walk alone travel faster. It was time for new horizons and bigger goals.

Everything would be better now.

To mark the occasion, he glanced up at the motel sign—lit by flames as the remaining rooms of the structure caught alight and the owner choked to death in his bed—and renamed himself. Then he turned from the blaze and walked away up the road into the darkness, savoring with every step the solid feel of the earth beneath his feet.

Even with the immense degree of will at his disposal, it was a long and very tiring walk. The dawn found him sitting exhausted by the side of the road. A passing salesman, who'd risen early after a bad night's sleep and was running early and of a kindly disposition, stopped and gave the man a ride. The man realized what it meant to have been seen by a stranger, and he got in the back of the car with a faint smile on his face.

After fifty miles the salesman glanced in the rearview mirror to see that his passenger had fallen asleep. In this rare moment of defenselessness, the man looked pale and worn through.

But this all happened five years ago.

He is much stronger now.

Part One

The number of people here who think alone, sing alone,
and eat and talk alone in the streets is mind-boggling.
And yet they don't add up.

Jean Baudrillard
America

Chapter 1

It should have been a wonderful day—a day to photograph and frame, to Facebook and Tweet, an afternoon to cut out and save in that album of updates and keepsakes you return to in daydream and memory; the pressed flowers of our lives that we'll hold up to God or his gatekeeper when our moment comes, to prove we are worthy of entrance and have not merely been marking time.

It should have been one of those days.

And until the very end, it was.

They arrived at Penn Station just after ten, on the kind of fall morning when it's warm in the sun but chill in the shadows of the skyscraping monoliths; when the city feels pert and alert and struts with head high, marching to work with tightly specified coffees and a bounce in its step as if someone loosened everyone's bolts in the night. David was in town not as some sightseer or nostalgia seeker, either, but for a meeting followed by lunch—the Lunch of Legend that people conjure in their minds to keep them strong through the months and years spent doing lone, heroic (or merely stoic) battle against the Blank Page of Infinity and the Blinking Cursor of Doom.

Suddenly, David was going to be published.

No, seriously.

He'd assumed they'd take a cab uptown, but the streets were so traffic-tangled—not to mention they were *very* early, Dawn having selected a departure time that allowed for everything from minor delays to a full-scale terrorist attack on the line—that they strolled the twenty-some blocks instead. David was struck by how unfamiliar it all seemed. It wasn't merely that everywhere was much cleaner than ten

years ago, or that he felt less likely to get attacked on any given street corner (though both were true). During his long-ago five months living in the city he'd simply been very unadventurous, he realized, sticking to the same haunts in a way that struck his older self as appallingly cautious. But when you look nostalgically back from thirty it's easy to forget how much of your twenties were spent feeling awkward and lonely, weaving a cloak of familiarity around you like the armor it eventually becomes.

They spent the last half hour in a Starbucks on Madison, perched at the window counter withstanding bland jazz and fiddling with stirring sticks. Dawn kept quiet. David didn't chatter in the face of anxiety, she knew, but gathered troops behind invisible walls. She people-watched instead, wondering as always who everyone was and where they were going.

At a quarter to, she escorted David the final block, kissed him, and wished him luck—and told him he didn't need it. She waved as she left on a lightning strike up to Bloomingdale's, a wide, proud smile on her face.

For a moment, as he watched his wife disappear into the crowds, David felt nervous for her. He told himself it was merely his own anxiety.

At 11:55 he took a deep breath and strode into reception. He told the guy behind the desk who the hell he was and who the dickens he'd come to meet, speaking more loudly than usual. The receptionist made few bones about not giving a crap, but a few minutes later someone young and enthusiastic bounced out of an elevator, shaking hand already outstretched.

David was whisked upward many floors and finally got to meet his editor, Hazel, a gaunt fifty-something New Yorker who proved fractionally less intimidating in person than via e-mail, though still pretty scary. He was given a tour of untidy offices and book-infested cubicles while a selection of affable strangers told him that his book was great, that *he* was great, that everyone was unbelievably excited and that it was all going to be just . . . *great*. A lot of hand-shaking and smiling took place, and people stood around with notepads clasped to their chests as if ready to jot down anything significant the moment it

occurred, though evidently nothing of the sort happened, because nobody did.

Then suddenly they dispersed like birds startled by a rifle shot, and Hazel took his elbow and steered him firmly toward the elevator. "Lunch," she muttered darkly, as if warning him not to put up a fight.

Dawn had just arrived back outside, and stood hurriedly. David's agent, Ralph—another character he was meeting in person for the first time—was already in position at the restaurant two blocks away, an old-school grill and steak house that prided itself on serving cow by the slab in an environment of white linen, low lighting, and disconcertingly formal service.

David realized how nervous Dawn really was only when he saw her beaming glassily at the waiter, unable to comprehend a query concerning her desired genre of mineral water (fizzy or not). David squeezed her hand under the table, realized he was smiling at Ralph in exactly the same way, and tried to relax.

He'd told himself he wasn't going to drink wine with lunch, but when it became clear that his editor sure as hell was, he relented, combating the effects with so much water that he had to visit the bathroom three times. Meanwhile, he and Dawn watched as the professionals gossiped about people they'd never heard of—feeling like a pair of venturesome kids, a Hardy boy and Nancy Drew on joint reconnaissance, ears pricked for intel about the curious new world they'd been told they would become a part of—if the capricious gods of market forces, key bloggers, and the zeitgeist willed it so.

Eventually the stupendous check was paid with reference to some protocol David didn't understand but knew wouldn't involve him. Everyone reemerged blinking into the sunlight, to part on excellent terms. Graphic artists were at work on a jacket design. Cover copy would soon be e-mailed for David's approval. David had never "approved" anything before and was looking forward to the experience. He thought he might wear a special shirt for it. Everything was going perfectly, he was assured, perhaps even a little better than that.

"It's all good," Hazel kept telling him sternly, as if he were well-known for championing an opposing school of thought. "David, it's *all good*."

By then he was in no mood to disagree.

*

They wandered down Park Avenue until David had an idea and cut across to Bryant Park. Back in the seventies it had by all accounts been a place where, should you wish to score drugs, get laid on a commercial basis, or have the living daylights mugged out of you, the locals would have lined up around the block to oblige. By the time David spent his few months in New York, it had turned around to become one of the most amenable spaces in Manhattan—and he'd spent hours sitting in it with a notebook and dreams of a future that were only now coming true. The intervening decade had kicked it up further still. Not so much a park as a grassed plaza lined on all sides with trees, now there were coffee stands and walkways lined with planters, an upscale grill and bar to the rear of the reassuring bulk of the New York Public Library, and the only mugging going on involved the prices demanded for crab cakes and sauvignon blanc.

They took glasses of the latter to a table on the terrace and spent an hour excitedly going back over lunch. A voice in David's head seemed intent on convincing him it was a mirage, that there were twenty other authors having the exact same experience this afternoon and all would be back to working their day jobs (and bitterly grateful for them) in eighteen months' time. He even glanced around the park, a little drunk now, in case he could spot any of his fellow hopefuls.

He couldn't, and this wasn't an afternoon for doubt. It was for listening to the babble of conversation and to the warmth in Dawn's voice as she told him how wonderful everything was going to be, and finally the muttering voice retreated to the cave in the back of David's soul where it had lived for as long as he could remember.

Eventually it was time to leave, and that's when it happened.

They were leaving the park and David maybe wasn't looking where he was going—wrapped up as he was in the day and with yet another glass of wine inside him. The sidewalks were a lot more crowded now, too, as the end of the workday approached and people set off for home.

It wasn't a hard knock. Just an accidental collision of shoulders, an urban commonplace, barely enough to jolt David off course and provoke a half turn that had him glancing back to see another man doing the same.

"Sorry," David said. He wasn't sure he'd been at fault, but he was the kind to whom apology came easily.

The other man said nothing, but continued on his way, quickly becoming lost in the crowds.

Penn Station was a total zoo, epicenter of a three-way smackdown between baffled tourists, gimlet-eyed commuters, and circling members of the feral classes that make transit depots their hunting grounds. Twenty minutes before departure Dawn elected to visit the restrooms, leaving David to hold a defensive position near a pillar. He felt exhausted, eyes owlish from unaccustomed alcohol, feet sore. He experienced the passing throng as smeared colors and echoing sounds and nothing more.

Until he saw someone looking at him.

A man wearing jeans and a crumpled white shirt. He had dark hair, strong features, and he was looking right at David.

David blinked, and the man wasn't there anymore. Or he'd moved on, presumably. He'd barely been visible for a second, but David felt he'd been watching him—and also that he'd seen the man before.

"What's up?" Dawn returned, looking mildly shaken by the restroom experience. David shook his head.

They made their way toward the platform via which they'd arrived at the station that morning. This turned out *not* to be where the train was departing from, however, and all at once they were in a hurry and lost and oh-my-god-we're-screwed. David figured out where they were supposed to be and pointed at Dawn to lead the way. She forged ahead with the boisterous élan of someone having a fine old time in the city, emboldened by a bucketful of wine, clattering down the steps to the platform and starting to trot when she saw their train in preparation for departure.

As David hurried after her, someone appeared out of the crowd and banged into him—hard, knocking David back on his feet and getting right in his face.

Untucked white shirt and hard blue eyes.

The same man again.

"Hello, David," he said. Then something else, before stepping around the corner and out of sight.

Winded and a little scared, David tried to see where the man had

gone, but Dawn was calling him urgently now, and someone blew a whistle. He hurried along to where his wife stood flushed and grinning.

"We made it," she said, as they clambered onto the train. "See? The gods are on our side now."

Dawn started to crash within fifteen minutes, head on David's shoulder, hair tickling his neck. David sat bolt upright, trying to be distracted by the view as the carriages trundled over the river and out through urban sprawl. It wasn't working.

So he'd banged into some guy.

And so that man had evidently then followed them to the train station, watched David from across the concourse, and tracked them through the crowds to bang into him again.

Why would someone do that?

Because he was crazy, that's why. New Yorkers were famous for taking a hard-line approach. Even the well adjusted and affluent appeared to conduct human interaction as a contact sport. Insane people all the more so, presumably.

That's all it was. Big deal.

And yet . . .

As Dawn slipped into a doze and the train began to pick up speed into the hour-long journey to Rockbridge and home, there was one thing that David couldn't get out of his mind. It was what the stranger had said before he melted back into the crowd. Not the fact that he'd known David's name—he'd realized the man could have overheard Dawn using it, maybe.

It was the other thing. Just two words. Words that are usually framed as a question but this time sounded like a command. Or a threat.

"Remember me," he'd said.

Chapter 2

When I stopped by the apartment to drop off the groceries, Kristina was still in bed. It had been a late night—they generally are, five nights out of seven at least—but I like to begin my days early, with a long walk. Kristina prefers to deal with them sprawled under the sheets like a pale, lanky spider that has been dropped from a very great height.

I finished wedging things into the tiny fridge (all we had room for, in a kitchen that's basically a specialized corner of the living room) and strode into the bedroom, an epic journey of three yards. The top of the window was open, proving Kristina must have groped her way out of bed at some point. It's shut at night or we'd never get to sleep on account of the racket from drunken good times in the streets below. The heater was ominously silent. The unit had been ailing for weeks, wheezing like an old smoker. Though the fall had so far been mild, finding someone to take it up a level from my own feeble attempts at repair (glaring at the machine, once in a while giving it an impotent kick) was high on my list of things to do today.

I put the massive Americano by the side of the bed. "Beverage delivery. You have to sign for it."

Her voice was muffled. "Fuck off."

"Right back atcha. It's a beautiful morning in the neighborhood, case you're interested."

"Christ."

"By the way. This woman later, Catherine. She gets that I'm just some guy, right?"

Kristina laboriously turned her head and blew long strands of black hair off her crumpled face. "Don't worry," she mumbled. "I made a

point of saying you were nothing special. Matter of fact, I went so far as to imply you were something of an asshole."

"Seriously."

She smiled, eyes still closed. "Seriously. No biggie. And thank you for doing it. And for the coffee."

"So I'll see you there. Three o'clock?"

"If I don't see you first."

I looked down at her and thought it was disquieting how much you could come to like someone in only six months. Shouldn't our hearts be more cautious? A child or puppy learns after straying too close to a candle to hold back next time. It seems that emotional calluses are not as thick or permanent as they appear, however.

I bent down and kissed Kristina on the forehead.

She opened her eyes. "What was that for?"

"Because I like you."

"You're weird."

"It's been said."

"That's okay. Weird is good." She stretched like a cat, all limbs pointed in the same direction. "And you'll think about the other thing?"

"I will."

"Good. Now scram. I need more sleep."

"It's ten thirty."

Her eyes closed. "It's always ten thirty somewhere."

"Very deep."

"Really, John, I mean it. Don't make me get up out of here and kick your ass."

I left her to it, jogged back down the five flights of stairs to street level, and stepped out into the big, strange city that lived—in all its train-wreck glory—right outside our door.

The rest of the morning was spent covering Paulo's shift at the restaurant's sidewalk window, hawking pizza and bottles of Poland Spring to passersby. This task is usually reserved for someone barely able to stand unassisted on their hind legs (currently Paulo, fresh-off-the-boat nephew of someone or other and an earthling so basic it's a miracle he can work out which way to face the street), but I didn't mind. Paulo's a sweet kid, eager to please, and was off trying to find

somewhere to improve his English. Also, I kind of enjoy the job. There are only two styles of slice available—plain or pepperoni—and one drink. Each costs a dollar. It's hard to screw that up, and it's pleasant to lean on the counter exchanging banter with locals and making strangers' days better in straightforward ways. When your life has been overly complicated, simplicity can taste like a mouthful of clear, cool water. Available, this lunch hour, from me, near the corner of Second Avenue and 4th. Price—one dollar.

When my stint was over, I chatted with the owner, Mario, and his sister Maria—evidently the children of parents with either a sense of humor or a dearth of imagination—over a coffee at one of the sidewalk tables. The Adriatico has been holding down its patch—snug between a venerable Jewish bakery and a thrift store with pretensions of funkiness, a few minutes' walk from the dives of St. Mark's Place and side street legends like McSorley's—for forty years, largely due to the family's willingness to embrace change, however bad-temperedly. In the time Kristina and I had been on staff (me waiting tables, Kristina running the popular late-night basement bar), the owners had replaced the awning, repainted the picket fence around the sidewalk tables a (much) brighter color, and tried adding the word "organic" to everything on the menu: briefly offering an organic ragu with organic pasta and organic béchamel, oven-baked in the traditional organic manner—aka lasagna. I'd eventually convinced Mario not to pursue this (it made announcing the specials tiresome, and was moreover absolutely untrue), but I had to admire the ambition. It was certainly easier to understand why this restaurant was still in business than the last place I'd worked, on the other side of the country, on the Oregon coast.

I left with the customary mild buzz. The Adriatico's coffee is celebrated for its strength, to the point where there's a water-damaged poster in the restrooms (badly) hand-drawn by some long-ago college wit, suggesting it should be cited in strategic-arms-limitation treaties. Nobody can remember why the standard cup has three shots in it, but I'd come to learn that's how New York works. Someone does something one day for reasons outside their control and beyond anyone's recollection—and then winds up doing it for the next fifty years. The tangle of these traditions floats through the streets like mist and hangs like cobwebs among the trees and fire escapes. Tourist or resident—

and it wasn't yet clear which I was—you're forever in the presence of these local heroes and ghosts.

I did my errands, including visiting the heater place. They promised they'd get to ours real soon. As both engineers were regulars at the bar I had reason to believe it.

With an hour still to kill, I took a long stroll down through the Village. There's always something to see in our part of town, and I liked watching it and walking it, and for the first time in some years I liked my life, too. It was simple, contained, and easy.

But I got the sense that was about to change.

What Kristina wanted me to consider was the idea of a new apartment. There was much about the East Village that we enjoyed. The remnants of the old immigrant population, their pockets of otherness. The leafy side streets and crumbling prewar walkups, the area's determination to resist gentrification and order, forever tending toward chaos like some huge silverware drawer. The fact that if you came shambling out of a bar late at night waving your iPhone around then you were likely to only get robbed, with brisk efficiency, rather than killed.

At times, though—with roving hordes from NYU and Cooper Union, plus all the young tourists who wanted to show how cool and not just about Banana Republic and the Apple Store they were—it could feel like being shacked up in the low-rent end of a college town. There had been a spate of odd muggings recently, too—people having their bank cards stolen and their accounts immediately emptied at ATMs with mysterious ease.

I never got a chance to do the student thing—having spent those years and more in the army—and I was open to a second adolescence. Kristina was wearying of the locale, however, perhaps because she spent her evenings at the sharper end of the Asshole Service Industry. I'm thirty-seven, old enough for sketchy to have a retro charm. She's twenty-nine, sufficiently young for the idea of being a grown-up to remain appealing. She'd started talking about moving to SoHo or the West Village, for the love of God. I kept reminding her that she ran bar and I served circular food in a fiercely down-market restaurant. She'd counter with the observation that I had money from the sale of my house in Washington State after the split from my ex-wife. Feeling

old and dull, I'd observe that we weren't bringing in much *new* money, and nobody tied themselves to loft rentals under those circumstances, though I'd be willing to consider subletting somewhere tiny, as an experiment, if we committed to not eating for the foreseeable future—and anyway, it took less than half an hour to walk from our front door to the streets she was talking about, so what was the big deal?

And so on and so forth. The subject would eventually fade into abeyance, like a car drifting out of range of a local evangelical radio station, and I'd be left feeling like the patriarch who'd decreed that instead of eating in the lovely seafood restaurant with an ocean view, the family was going to make do with sandwiches in the parking lot. Again.

An hour later it would be like it never happened, however. Kristina did not study on things. She hit you between the eyes with the full payload, all at once. When that was spent, the storm was over—at least for now.

Two days ago she'd asked if I'd do her a favor, though, and I'd agreed because I felt I was letting her down in other ways. That meant a change was coming. If you're with a strong woman (and they're *all* strong, whatever they may have been told to the contrary; women have backbone men can only dream of), then once you've given ground you'll never be off the back foot again.

I was on the way to do that favor now.