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Generation Loss

Written by Elizabeth Hand

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Generation Loss

Elizabeth Hand



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PART ONE
Burning In

1

There's always a moment where everything changes. A great photographer—someone like Diane Arbus, or me during that fraction of a second when I was great—she sees that moment coming, and presses the shutter release an instant before the change hits. If you don't see it coming, if you blink or you're drunk or just looking the other way—well, everything changes anyway, it's not like things would have been different.

But for the rest of your life you're fucked, because you blew it. Maybe no one else knows it, but you do. In my case, it was no secret. Everyone knew I'd blown it. Some people can make do in a situation like that. Me, I've never been good at making do. My life, who could pretend there wasn't a big fucking hole in it?

I grew up about sixty miles north of the city in Kamensic Village, a haunted corner of the Hudson Valley where three counties meet in a stony congeries of ancient Dutch-built houses, farmland, old-growth forest, nouveau-riche mansions. My father

was—is—the village magistrate. I was an only child, and a wild thing as the privileged children of that town were.

I had from earliest childhood a sense that there was no skin between me and the world. I saw things that other people didn't see. Hands that slipped through gaps in the air like falling leaves; a jagged outline like a branch but there was no branch and no tree. In bed at night I heard a voice repeating my name in a soft, insistent monotone. *Cass. Cass. Cass.* My father took me to a doctor, who said I'd grow out of it. I never did, really.

My mother was much younger than my father, a beautiful Radcliffe girl he met on a blind date arranged by his cousin. She died when I was four. The car she was driving, our old red Rambler station wagon, went off the road and into the woods, slamming into a tree on the outskirts of town. It was an hour before someone noticed headlights shining through the trees and called the police. When they finally arrived, they found my mother impaled on the steering column. I was faceup on the backseat, surrounded by shattered glass but unhurt.

I have no memory of the accident. The police officer told my father that I didn't cry or speak, just stared at the car's ceiling, and, as the officer carried me outside, the night sky. Nowadays there would have been a grief counselor, a child psychologist, drugs. My father's Irish Catholic sensibility, while not religious, precluded any overt emotion; there was a wake, a funeral, a week of visiting relatives and phone calls. Then my father returned to work. A housekeeper, Rosie, was hired to tend me. My father wouldn't speak of my mother unless asked, and, forty-odd years ago, one didn't ask. Her presence remained in the framed black-and-white photos my father kept of her in his bedroom. While Rosie vacuumed or made lunch I would sit on his bed and slowly

move my fingers across the glass covering the pictures, pretending the dust was face powder on my mother's cheeks.

I liked being alone. Once when I was fourteen, walking in the woods, I stepped from the trees into a field where the long grasses had been flattened by sleeping deer. I looked up into the sky and saw a mirror image of the grass, black and yellow-gray whorls making a slow clockwise rotation like a hurricane. As I stared the whorl began to move more quickly, drawing a darkness into its center until it resembled a vast striated eye that was all pupil, contracting upon itself yet never disappearing. I stared at it until a low buzzing began to sound in my ears. Then I ran.

I didn't stop until I reached my driveway. When I finally halted and looked back, the eye was still there, turning. I never mentioned it to anyone. No one else ever spoke of seeing it.

My sense of detachment grew when I started high school, but as my grades were good and my other activities furtive, my father never worried much about what I did. Our relationship was friendly if distant. It was my Aunt Brigid who worried about me on the rare occasions she paid us a visit.

Brigid was like my father, stocky and big boned and red haired. I resembled photos of my mother. Tall and angular, narrow hipped, my mother's soft features honed to a knife-edge in my own. Pointed chin, uptilted nose, dirty-blond hair and mistrustful gray eyes. If I'd been a boy I might have been beautiful. Instead I learned early on that my appearance made people uneasy. There was nothing pretty about my androgyny. I was nearly six feet tall and vaguely threatening. I wore my hair long but otherwise made no concessions to fashion, no makeup, no lipstick. I wore my father's white shirts over patched blue jeans or men's trousers I bought at the Junior League Shop. I wouldn't meet people's

eyes. I didn't like people looking at me. It made me feel sick; it reminded me of that great eye above the empty field.

"She looks like a scarecrow, Dad," Brigid said once when I was sixteen. She and her husband were in Kamensic for a rare visit. "I mean, look at her—"

"I think she looks fine," my father said mildly. "She's just built like her mother was."

"She looks like a drug addict," Brigid snapped. She was sensitive about her weight. "We see them out where we live."

I pointed out to the bird feeder at the edge of our woods. "What, like the chickadees? We see them too," I said, and retreated to my room.

Several months later I had this dream. I was kneeling in the field where I'd seen the eye. A figure appeared in front of me: a man with green-flecked eyes, his smile mocking and oddly compassionate. As I stared up at him, he extended his hand until his finger touched the center of my forehead.

There was a blinding flash. I fell on my face, terrified, woke in bed with my ears ringing. It was the morning of my seventeenth birthday. My father gave me a camera. I sat at the breakfast table, turned it in my hands, and remembered the dream. I saw my face distorted in the round glass of the lens, like a flaw; like an eye staring back at me.

I took an introductory photography class in high school and was encouraged to take more.

I never did. I quickly learned what I needed to know. I liked a slow lens. I liked grainy black-and-white film and never worked in color. I liked the detail work of creating my own photographic

paper, of processing then developing the film myself in the school photo lab. I loved the way the paper felt, soft and wet in the trays, then the magical way it dried and turned into something else, smooth and rigid and shining, the images a mere byproduct of chemistry and timing.

I didn't care if the pictures were over- or underexposed, or even if they were in focus. I liked things that didn't move: dead trees, stones. I liked dead things: the fingerless soft hand of a pheasant's wing, mouse skulls disinterred from an owl pellet, a cicada's thorax picked clean by tiny green beetles. I liked portraits of my friends when they were sleeping. I've always watched people sleep. When I occasionally babysat, I'd go into the children's rooms after they were in bed and stand there, listening to their breathing, waiting until my eyes adjusted to the soft glow of nightlight or moonlight. I liked to watch them breathe.

When I was seventeen I fell in love with a boy from a neighboring village. He was a year younger than me, fey, red haired, with sunken, poison green eyes: a musician and a junkie. I'd hitch to his town and sit on the library steps across the street from his big Victorian house and wait there for hours, hoping to see him but also wanting to absorb his world, clock the comings and goings of his younger siblings, parents, his golden retriever, his friends. I wanted to see the world he knew from inside his junkie's skin, smell the lilacs that grew outside his window.

One day his sister came out and said, "My brother's inside. He's waiting for you to come over."

I went. No one else was home. We crawled underneath the Steinway Grand in the living room, and I sucked him off. Afterward we sat together on the front porch while he smoked cigarettes. This pattern continued until I left high school. One

night we broke into the village pharmacy and stole bottles of Tuinals and quaaludes before the alarm went off then ran laughing breathlessly back to his house, where he pretended to sleep while I hid in his closet. We weren't caught, but I was too paranoid to ever try it again.

I liked to watch him sleep; I liked to watch him nod out. I took pictures of him and got them processed over in Mount Kisco. At night in my room I'd look at those photographs—his eyes closed, cigarette burning in his hand—and masturbate. I told him I'd do anything for him. A few years later, he got caught burglarizing another drugstore up in Putnam County. His parents bailed him out and he wrote to me, desperate and lonely, while he was awaiting sentencing. I never wrote back. His family moved to the Midwest somewhere. I don't know what happened to him.

He was the only person I ever really cared about. I still have those photos somewhere.

In 1975 I graduated from high school and started at NYU. I had vague plans of studying photojournalism. That all changed the night I went over to Kenny's Castaways to hear the New York Dolls. The Dolls never showed, but someone else did, a skinny chick who screamed at the unruly audience in between chanting bursts of poetry while a tall, geeky guy flailed around with an electric guitar.

After that I quit going to classes. I took up with a girl named Jeannie who waitressed at Max's Kansas City. For a few months she supported me, and we lived in a horrible fourth-floor walkup on Hudson Street. The toilet hung over a hole in the floor; the

clawfoot tub was in the kitchen. We put a sheet of plywood over the tub and on top of that a mattress we scrounged from the street. I didn't tell my father I'd been suspended from NYU. I used the checks he sent to buy film and speed, black beauties, crystal meth. There was a light that fell on the streets in those days, a light like broken glass, so bright and jagged it made my eyes ache, my skin. I'd go down to see Jeannie when she got off work at Max's and take pictures of the people hanging out back. Some of those people you'd still recognize today. Most you wouldn't, though back then they were briefly famous, just as I was to be. Most of them are dead now.

Some of them were dead then. I shot an entire roll of film of a kid who'd OD'd in the alley early one morning. No one wanted to call the ambulance—he was already dead, why bring the cops down? So I stood out there, shit-colored light filtering from the streetlamp, and photographed him in closeup. I was nervous about bringing the film to the place I usually went to. I had a friend at the university process the film there for me.

"This is sick stuff, Cass," he said when I went to pick it up. He handed me the manila envelope with my contact sheets and prints. He wouldn't meet my eyes. "You're sick."

I thought they were beautiful. Slow exposure and low light made the boy's skin look like soft white paper, like newsprint before it's inked. His head was slightly upturned, his eyes half-open, glazed. You couldn't tell if he'd just woken up or if he was already dead. One hand was pressed upon his breast, fingers splayed. A series of black starbursts marred the crook of his bare arm; a white thread extended from his upper lip to the point of one exposed eyetooth. I titled the photo "Psychopomp." I decided it was strong enough that I should start assembling a portfolio,

and so I did, the pictures that would eventually become part of my book *Dead Girls*.

People used to ask me what it was like to take those photographs.

"'How do you think it feels?'" I shot back at the guy from *Interview*. "'How do you think it feels? And when do you think it stops?'"

He didn't get it. No one does. I can smell damage; it radiates from some people like a pheromone. Those are the ones I photograph. I can tell where they've been, what's destroyed them, even after they're dead. It's like sweat or semen or ash, and it's not just a taste or scent. It shows up in pictures, if you know how to catch the light. It shows up in faces, the way you can tell what a sleeping person's dreaming, if they're happy or frightened or aroused. I don't know why it draws me; maybe because I dream of leaving this body the way other people dream of flying. Not flying to a sunny beach or a hotel room, but true escape, leaving one body and entering another, like one of those wasps that lays its eggs inside a beetle so a wasp larva grows inside it, eating the beetle until the new wasp emerges.

It sounds creepy, but I always liked the idea of disappearing then becoming something new. That of course was before I disappeared.

But taking a picture feels like that sometimes. When I'm getting it right, it's like I'm no longer standing there with my camera, with my eye behind the lens, looking at someone. It's like it's me lying there and I'm seeping into that other skin like rain into dry sand.

Sometimes it happens with sex. Once I brought a sixteen-year-old boy back to the apartment. I'd picked him up at a club,

dark eyes, curly dark hair, a crooked front tooth, tiny scabs on the inside of his arm where he'd been popping heroin, still too scared to mainline.

The tooth is what got me. I'm still sorry I didn't shoot him. He was beautiful, one of those Pasolini kids who absorbs light then shines it back into your eyes and blinds you. But I left my camera on the floor, and instead I just fucked him, more than once. Then I lay awake and watched him sleep. When he woke in the morning he looked at me, and I saw what had happened to him: his mother's death, the small apartment in Queens where he lived with his father and sister, the after-school job at a pet shop. Cleaning fish tanks, measuring out birdseed. He told me all this, but I already knew; I could see the light leaking from his eyes. I wanted to photograph him, but suddenly I felt real panic. I gave him coffee and money for a cab and literally pushed him out of the door. The look he gave me then was crushed and confused, but that I could live with. What I couldn't deal with was the knowledge that he was so close to dead already. The only thing that had made him feel alive was fucking me.

I tried to explain this to Jeannie. She looked at me like I'd spit in her face.

"You're crazy, Cass. You're, like, a nihilist. You're in love with annihilation."

"Yeah? So is that a bad thing?"

She didn't think that was funny. She left me soon after and got a job at a massage parlor. I didn't care. I stayed in the apartment. By then I'd gotten messed up with a rich girl from Sarah Lawrence who liked slumming with me. She split when the school year ended, by which time my father had figured out what was going on—that I'd been kicked out of school and was no

doubt spending the checks he sent on drugs. He was surprisingly calm. He made sure I knew he wouldn't give me another dollar until I straightened out and earned enough to put myself back through school, but he also let me know I was always welcome back home. I thanked him and kept in touch intermittently, usually by postcard.

I bought a tripod and began doing a series of pictures, black-and-white photographs of me dressed and posed like women in famous paintings. I called the series "Dead Girls." There was me as Ophelia, wearing a thrift-shop bridal gown and ribbons, floating in a tenement bathtub filled with black-streaked water—dye bled from the ribbons so that it looked as though blood flowed from my dress. There was me topless, sprawled in a Bowery alley on my back as Waterhouse's dead "St. Eulalia." For Munch's "The Next Day" I lay on top of my plywood bed with empty wine bottles scattered around me. I used a similar setup for Walter Sickert's "The Camden Town Murder."

It took me five months. I got a job at a wino's liquor store on the Bowery to get by. There were twenty-three photos when I was done, enough for a show.

My central image derived from a lithograph from Redon's "La Tentation de Saint-Antoine": a life-sized human skeleton, a plastic model I had a friend borrow for me from the NYU art department. I draped it with a white sheet and posed beside it, naked, my hand clutching its bony plastic fingers. I set the shutter so that the image was so underexposed as to be almost indiscernible, deliberately out of focus. All you saw was the skeleton, seeming to fall forward through the frame, and floating beside it a face suggestive of a skull: mine. I translated the drawing's original caption into English.

Death: I am the one who will make a serious woman of you; come, let us embrace.

I added these to my portfolio, and a few portraits I'd done of Jeannie and her friends hanging out in the apartment and the back room at Max's. The pictures were harsh and overlit, but they had a scary energy, most of it supplied by Jeannie herself in torn fishnets and smeared eye makeup, her works on the floor beside her, the glare of a naked hundred-watt bulb making Gillette blades glow like they were radioactive.

It didn't hurt that some of the figures lurking in the background were starting to get written about. Back in January I'd begun seeing flyers stapled to telephone poles around town: PUNK IS COMING. I bought the first copy of the magazine for fifty cents at Bleecker Bob's not long after. A month later, the first copy of *New York Rocker* came out, and I bought that too. When I got off my night shift at the liquor store I'd walk over to CBGB's and get trashed and dance. I'd take my camera and shoot whatever was going on, speed, smack, sex, broken teeth, broken bottles, zip knives. People laughing while blood ran down their face, or someone else's. Some people didn't like getting their picture taken while having sex or shooting up. I got good at throwing a punch then running. I started wearing these pointy-toed black cowboy boots that weren't good for dancing, but I could kick the shit out of someone if he lunged for me and be gone before his knees hit the floor. I loved the rush of adrenaline and rage. It was as good as sex for me.

"Scary Neary!" Jeannie shouted when she saw me coming. By then people were getting used to me. And other people were starting to take pictures too. *Punk* and *New York Rocker* didn't

create the scene, but they gave it a name, and we all knew where it lived.

By now I'd made some contacts in the city's photography scene. I brought my photos to the director of the Lumen Gallery, and he agreed to give me a small show in the back room. Three years earlier, Robert Mapplethorpe had begun to win a following among Warhol acolytes and some prescient artworld types. The same thing was happening now with the downtown scene. I sent out a hundred xeroxed invitations to everyone I vaguely knew and scattered another hundred at the clubs where I hung out. I made sure all the musicians knew they were featured in the photos. Then I bought myself a bottle of Taittinger Brut, got smashed, and went to my opening.

It was the right place at the right time. "Dead Girls" bridged the gap between two camps, photography and punk, my staged self-portraits and documentary images of the downtown scene. The dreamy kitsch of photos like "St. Eulalia" melded into the shock of seeing Jeannie nod out while the lead singer of Anubis Uprising masturbated onto her face. I could hear the buzz as I stumbled into the back room at Lumen.

I was a hit, and I wasn't yet twenty years old.

WHO ARE THE MYSTERY GIRLS? ran the *Voice* headline a week after my show opened. CASSANDRA NEARY'S PUNK PROVOCATIONS. They used a detail of "St. Eulalia," cropped so you could see my bare foot and the Canal Street sign. It looked like a crime-scene photo. This wasn't a bad take, since I was being castigated in the press for everything from pornography to drug dealing.

I didn't care. I was safe behind my camera at CBGB's. I loved the rituals of processing film. I had an instinctive feel for it, how long it would take for an image to bleed from the neg onto

emulsion paper. I loved playing with the negs, manipulating light and shadow and time until the world looked just right, until everything in front of me was just the way I wanted it to be.

But best of all I loved being alone in the dark with the infrared bulb, that incandescent flare when I switched the lights back on and there it was: a black-and-white print: a body, an eye, a tongue, a cunt, a prick, a hand, a tree; drunk kids racing through a side street with their eyes white like they'd seen a ghost with a gun.

This is what I lived for, me alone with these things. Not just knowing I'd seen them and taken the picture but feeling like I'd made them, like they'd never have existed without me. Nothing is like that: not sex, not drugs, not booze or sunrise off the most beautiful place you can imagine. Nothing is like knowing you can make something like that real. I felt like I was fucking God.

You read a lot of crap about photographic craftsmanship in those days, and technique; but you didn't hear shit about vision. I knew that I had an eye, a gift for seeing where the ripped edges of the world begin to peel away and something else shows through. What that whole downtown scene was about, at least for a little while, was people grabbing at that frayed seam and just yanking to see what was behind it; to see what was left when everything else was torn away.

My story was picked up by the *Daily News*. Then the *Sunday Times Magazine* interviewed me for a very brief piece. And there were the "Dead Girls" photos, and there was me, smoking a Kent and wearing beat-up black jeans and red Keds and a MC5 T-shirt filigreed with cigarette burns, my hair a dirty blond halo around a pale face with no makeup. I looked like what your

mother dreams about in the middle of the night when you don't come home.

I was actually a little worried about what my father would think. He finally called me after the *Times Magazine* story ran. He made it clear that he had no interest in seeing the show—a relief to both of us—but he also wanted to make sure I wasn't in any legal trouble.

"Anything comes up, call Ken Wilburn over in Queens," he said and gave me the number. "He represents some guys, they'll help you out if you get into trouble. I don't know how the hell you can make money out of this stuff, Cass, but I hope to God you do. Especially if you need Wilburn."

I never did need to call Wilburn. But I didn't make much money, either. The *Times* article did its business, and all the photos sold; but I had only set the price at seventy-five bucks a pop. Jeannie bought most of them—God knows where she found the money—but about six months later they were destroyed when her apartment flooded. The girlfriend of Anubis Rising's lead singer bought the picture of him with Jeannie then proceeded to set it on fire with her Bic lighter in the gallery, screaming "Fucking cunt!" until someone threw her out. John Holstrom bought a picture that had Johnny Thunders in the corner.

And the last photo went to Sam Wagstaff, which is how I got a book deal. I'd met a literary agent at my opening, a petite red-haired woman in a red latex miniskirt named Linda Kalman.

"This is very interesting," she said, peering at "Psychopomp." She was older than most of the people at the show, in her mid-thirties, and wore expensive gold jewelry and stiletto-heeled boots. I pegged her for a socialite slumming among the barbarians. She glanced at the crowd drinking white wine in plastic cups, Jeannie

and her friends hooting raucously as a reporter took notes. "Do you know which one's the artist?"

I dropped my cigarette and stubbed it out with my sneaker. "That would be me."

"Really." Her eyes narrowed. She gave me a small smile then extended her hand. "Linda Kalman. I'm working on a book right now with Chris Makos. Do you know him?"

"Yeah," I lied and shook her hand. "Cass Neary."

"Cass. Are you with a gallery?"

"No."

"Mmmm." She looked at me sideways, opened a little red clutch purse. "Well. Here. Take my card. Call me. Let me know who buys your pictures. And good luck."

As it turned out, she got in touch with me when she read the piece in *New York Rocker*.

"So." I could hear her drag deeply on a cigarette on the other end of the line. "Have you sold any photographs yet? Do you know who bought them?"

When I named Wagstaff, she sucked her breath in sharply. "Sam Wagstaff?"

"Yeah."

"You know who he is, right?"

"Yeah." A collector and curator with deep pockets; Mapplethorpe's lover, though I'd heard they were on the outs.

"Well, Cass. Are you interested in putting a book together? Because I have an editor who's very interested in what's happening downtown. She can get someone to write an introductory essay, I think she said Macey Claire-Marsden from the Eastman Foundation might do it. It's not huge money, but it would be good exposure for you."

She hesitated. "I think you should do it. Not just for me. This kind of opportunity doesn't come that often, Cass. Not for someone as young as you. You don't want to blow it."

"Let me think about it." I didn't say anything, didn't hang up. I counted to five then said, "Yeah, okay. Sure. I'll do it."

But you know what?

I blew it anyway.

2

A year later *Dead Girls* came out and got good press. Good reviews, good coverage, and the first printing sold through, which for a fifty-dollar coffee-table book by an unknown twenty-one-year-old photographer was pretty decent. This was back when you'd see books by Helmut Newton and David Hamilton in the front windows of Brentano's and Rizzoli Books.

Now you started seeing *Dead Girls* too. I was written up in *Interview* and *WWW*. Word got out that I was funny: I got on the radio and even had a fleeting appearance on the Merv Griffin Show.

But I was fucking up big time. I showed up at interviews drunk. I insulted people. I came on to the women hired to talk to me, which pissed them off, and pissed off the guys too. A reporter referred to me as a lesbian photographer, and I reamed him out about it when I saw him a few nights later. I wasn't a lesbian; I wasn't straight. When it comes to relationships, I'm an equal

opportunity destroyer. I fucked whoever I wanted to. Women just seemed able to put up with me better than men did. For a little while, anyway. The *Soho Weekly News* did a story on what a mess I was, quoting liberally from the interview I'd given them. I thought I was a fucking rock star, I thought I was Iggy fucking Pop; but no one was paying to watch me fall off the stage.

Dead Girls never went into a second printing. Punk had crested; the violence of the scene made industry people nervous about even using the word "punk." They started slapping stickers on new EPs and 45s that said THIS IS POWER POP MUSIC! Farfisa organs began to dull the edge of guitars. Kids wearing skinny ties and wraparound shades were everywhere now. The scene got bigger, hipper, imploded then exploded. There were celebrities and celebrity suicides, and celebrity photographers to cover them. When I saw a seventy-five-dollar ripped T-shirt in a Fiorucci boutique with a brace of black-leather-collared miniature poodles tied to a meter outside, I knew that was it.

Punk's ugly little glittering perfect moment had ended. And so had mine.

I knocked around the city, at loose ends. People saw me, they recognized me, the skinny girl with ragged blond hair and chewed-up nails, striped boatneck shirt and shaky hands. But no one wanted to be reminded who I was, and after a few years nobody remembered.

I still had the apartment on Hudson Street. I got a job working in the stockroom at the Strand Bookstore. This signaled to everyone that I was truly finished.

One other thing happened back then. On my twenty-third birthday I was down on the Bowery, leaving CBGB's, late, as usual. I was drunk, as usual. I was barefoot—I'd been dancing

and left my shoes inside, even though it was late October and the streets were cold. I was alone, until a car pulled up alongside a broken streetlamp. Someone was repeating my name, a low, insistent voice. Piecing it together later, I think he must have said "Miss, miss."

I heard *Cass. Cass.*

I stopped and turned. The car door was already open. There was a knife. It happened fast.

I don't remember much. Or no, I remember a lot, but it's all scattered, like those discarded photos you find strewn outside an Instant Photo booth.

This is what I see: a burned-out vacant lot. Me on my knees. A cut on my bare heel where I stepped on broken glass. Blood above my pubis. Blood and semen on my thigh. Me running across chewed-up asphalt. A man's head protruding from a car window. Me screaming in the middle of the street. A police car.

I see these things, but I don't really remember them. I remember floating above the vacant lot and looking down on two shadows, one moving, the other still. I remember a car. There was a knife.

They asked me, did I fight?

I didn't fight. I couldn't describe him, or the car. My mind had been wiped clean. I don't talk about it much. It happened; I'm not in denial. I'm not ashamed.

But I know what that other set of photos would look like. The drunk young woman, the leather miniskirt, tight T-shirt, no bra, no shoes. That street, four AM, late October. A bisexual punk who took pictures of dead boys. I didn't fight. My whole life since then, the only thing that matters to me is those three words.

I didn't fight.

You'll wonder what it's like to live with this. I'll tell you.

It's like having a razor blade clamped between your teeth: you move your mouth too much, your tongue, you smile or talk or kiss someone, you cut yourself open. You could drown if you swallowed that much blood. You could fucking bleed to death.

3

I shut down after that. I didn't clean up my act, just went through the motions of behaving like a normal person, punched the clock, blew my paycheck at clubs and bars and bookstores. My dealings with most people had always been so ephemeral that no one took much notice when I stopped making even cursory efforts at emotional connection. I made no attempt to get a better job and little attempt to be civil to the Strand's customers. I had no interest even in getting promoted to stockroom manager. I went to work and opened packages and sorted books. I stole books as well, until store security got too tight. After a few years I got a tattoo incorporating the scrawl of scar tissue above my pubic bone into a frayed red banner with the words TOO TOUGH TO DIE emblazoned on it. I still took pictures, going to downtown gigs and occasionally selling my stuff to the *Soho Weekly News*. When no one else would buy them, I gave my pictures to a D.C. fanzine called *Vintage Violence* in exchange for copies that I sold for a dollar a pop.

I continued to photograph things that moved me, which were mostly things that did not move. Pigeons flattened upon the curb; a corpse washed up on the shore of the East River, flesh like soft gray flannel folded into the mud; a stripper at a Broadway club sleeping between acts, her exposed breast like a red balloon where the silicone had leaked beneath the skin. I liked to think of my talent as something I'd honed to a point, a spike I could drive right into the eye of the viewer. You'd think that the 1980s vogue for decadence, for breaking taboos, would have created an audience for these pictures, but time and again they were dismissed. Too grisly, then too evocative of others' work—Mapplethorpe, Weegee, Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*—then ultimately not evocative enough.

"It's too raw," Linda told me when, after six years, I had finally put together another portfolio, enough pictures for another book. "It's too much like being right inside someone's head."

I stared at her, the late afternoon sun in her uptown office, her gold jewelry and Armani jacket. "It *is* inside someone's head, Linda. It's the inside of my head."

She pushed the portfolio across her desk back toward me. "I know," she said. "Maybe you should show them to someone else, Cass."

I left. No one else wanted me.

Twenty years passed. I participated in a few group shows at hole-in-the-wall galleries. Now and then someone would buy one of my photos, and there was the occasional mention of *Dead Girls*, usually as a footnote to work by Cindy Sherman. When the time came, I didn't switch to digital. It wouldn't have been hard. Light

is light, you just have to know how to find it, where to look for that slant of shadow, that moment when someone's eyes first open and you can't be certain if they're dead or asleep. I could have ditched my old Konica, just like I could have gotten another job or bought better clothes or gotten involved with someone.

This is what you have to understand about me: I could have changed. I didn't want to. I fucked people I'd meet at clubs: men, women. Nothing ever lasted long. Ravaged as I was, I was still good-looking enough. But I was a bad drunk. Eventually I could walk into most cafes in the East Village and watch every person hide behind a newspaper or laptop.

Despite that, in 1998 I got involved with a married woman named Christine Conti, a professor who specialized in the French Nouvelle Vague. She was thin, dark, chic, emotionally intense, a recovering alcoholic with issues. We were a good match sexually, but we argued a lot. After a while we argued constantly. I drank too much. Eventually Christine left her husband and got her own place, down near Battery Park, but it still didn't work out between us, not really. She said I wasn't a fully integrated person. I refused to quit drinking. I refused to go to an AA meeting. She refused to leave me.

Then I hit her. She called the police but then said she wouldn't press charges if I promised to get help. I suggested maybe she was the one who needed help, for staying with me, but I went. We saw a counselor. I sat there while Christine threw out words like *predatory, detached, obsessive*. The counselor came back with *dissociative amnesia, depersonalization, affective disorder*. The counselor recommended a psychiatrist, who put me on a regimen of lithium and antidepressants.

I took the medications for a week. They made me feel as

though my brain had been shot full of strychnine. I refused to ever take them again. The doctor suggested other drugs, but I never went back to her.

"This is as integrated as my personality gets," I told Christine. "So get used to it or get out of here."

Christine, for whatever reason, continued to see me.

We didn't fight as much, but I still drank. My few other friends lived lives less marginal than my own. I think they kept me around as an eidolon of the sort of bleak bohemianism they'd lost—still listening to the same old music, still going to work with a hangover, still sleeping in my ratty rent-controlled apartment on a piece of plywood with a foam mattress on top.

Finally even Christine had enough. Gradually, I stopped seeing even my few remaining friends. I stopped going to clubs to hear live music. I shot fewer and fewer rolls of film and lost the few contacts I'd kept in the dwindling rock press. When I didn't have enough money to buy the photography books I wanted, I'd steal them.

Then Christine died. She'd called really early that morning and left a message: she was meeting someone for lunch at Windows on the World. Would I meet her for coffee first? We could talk things over. It might be better. It had been a long time. Maybe she was starting to get over some things. Maybe I had changed.

I hadn't changed. Not enough, anyway. I erased the message and didn't call her back. A few hours later the sirens started, the smoke. The sky was ice-blue. The phone rang, Phil Cohen screaming into my ear from Hoboken.

"Do you see it, Cass, do you see it?"

I looked out the window.

"Oh fuck," I yelled and dropped the phone.

When I stuck my head out, eddies of ash and paper were showering onto Hudson Street, the stink of jet fuel. People stared up with mouths open like they were catching snowflakes on their tongues. Shouting.

It was like being inside a breaking glass. Christine was already dead, though I didn't know that yet, didn't know she had gone down there anyway, early, thinking I might show up. Thinking I might have changed. You never know.

I lifted my face to where a single white contrail blurred into the rain of black grit and glass and ember. A charred fragment of paper fell onto the back of my hand and stuck there, damp, warm. I peeled it from my skin and read it.

For when first we

I smoothed the scrap against my palm then placed it upon my tongue. It tasted of petroleum, scorched metal. I swallowed it: a moment later began to vomit uncontrollably.

No one ever contacted me about a memorial service for her. I wouldn't have gone, anyway.

The wars began. I drank even more. For a while I saw flyers downtown with her face on them—her ex-husband and parents put them up. Every time I saw one I wanted to scream. I wanted to kill someone. Finally I began ripping them down, ignoring the angry looks I got from people on the street. Sometimes, alone in my apartment, I did scream. She was gone, it was all gone, there was nothing I could have done, nothing anyone could ever have done about anything. Why the fuck was I the only one who understood that?

That dead light that comes in late afternoon in winter, that

light that makes everything look like it was cut from black ice—I could feel that light on me in the middle of summer; in the middle of the night. For a few months I got headaches, a blinding pain in my right eye, as though a spark had burned my retina. The ophthalmologist found nothing, but I could feel it, the hole left by a molten wire, a bit of ash or ember. I stared at my eye in the mirror, looking for a scar or scratched cornea, but there was nothing. It got so I had to drink three shots of bourbon just to get the nerve to pick up my camera.

I tried to forget I had ever been involved with Christine, or anyone else. Like the song goes, you can't put your arms around a memory. I was forty-eight, and my life had been over for decades. That was when Phil Cohen called me about Aphrodite Kamestos.