

It was too late to pretend he hadn't seen her. Juliet was already squinting with recognition. For an instant she looked pleased to make out a familiar face on a crowded street. Then she realized who it was.

"Nate."

"Juliet! *Hi*. How *are* you?"

At the sound of his voice, a tight little grimace passed over Juliet's eyes and mouth. Nate smiled uneasily.

"You look terrific," he said. "How's the *Journal*?"

Juliet shut her eyes briefly. "It's fine, Nate. I'm fine, the *Journal's* fine. Everything's fine."

She crossed her arms in front of her and began gazing meditatively at a point just above and to the left of his forehead. Her dark hair was loose, and she wore a belted blue dress and a black blazer whose sleeves were bunched up near her elbows. Nate glanced from Juliet to a cluster of passersby and back to Juliet.

"Are you headed to the train?" he asked, pointing with his chin to the subway entrance on the corner.

"*Really?*" Juliet's voice became throaty and animated. "Really, Nate? That's all you have to say to me?"

“Jesus, Juliet!” Nate took a small step back. “I just thought you might be in a hurry.”

In fact, he was worried about the time. He was already late to Elisa’s dinner party. He touched a hand to his hair—it always reassured him a little, the thick abundance of his hair.

“Come on, Juliet,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Oh?” Juliet’s posture grew rigid. “How should it be, Nate?”

“Juliet—” he began. She cut him off.

“You could have at least—” She shook her head. “Oh, never mind. It’s not worth it.”

Could have at least what? Nate wanted to know. But he pictured Elisa’s wounded, withering look if he showed up so late that all her guests had to wait on him to start dinner, heard her slightly nasal voice brushing off his apology with a “whatever,” as if she had long since ceased to be surprised by any new bad thing he did.

“Look, Juliet, it was great to see you. And you do look great. But I’ve really got to go.”

Juliet’s head jerked back. She seemed almost to wince. Nate could see—it was obvious—that she took his words as a rejection. Immediately, he was sorry. He saw her suddenly not as an adversary but as a vulnerable, unhappy young—youngish—woman. He wanted to do something for her, say something earnest and truthful and kind.

“You’re an asshole,” she said before he had the chance.

She looked at him for a fraction of a second and then turned away, began walking quickly toward the river and the adjacent strip of restaurants and bars. Nate nearly called after her. He wanted to try, at least, to put things on a better footing. But what would he say? And there was no time.

Juliet’s strides, as she receded into the distance, were long and determined, but she moved stiffly, like a person determined not to let on that her shoes hurt her feet. Reluctantly, Nate started walking in the opposite direction. In the deepening twilight, the packed street no longer seemed festive but seedy and carnival-

like. He got stuck behind a trio of young women with sunglasses pushed up on their heads and purses flapping against their hips. As he maneuvered around them, the one closest twisted her wavy blonde hair around her neck and spoke to her companions in a Queen Bee-ish twang. Her glance flickered in his direction. Nate didn't know if the disdain on her face was real or imagined. He felt conspicuous, as if Juliet's insult had marked him.

After a few blocks, the sidewalks became less congested. Nate began moving faster. And he began to feel irritated with himself for being so rattled. So Juliet didn't like him. So what? It wasn't as if she were being fair.

Could have at least *what*? He had only been out with her three or four times when it happened. *It* was no one's fault. As soon as he realized the condom had broken, he'd pulled out. Not quite in time, it turned out. He knew that because he was not the kind of guy who disappeared after sleeping with a woman—and certainly not after the condom broke. On the contrary: Nathaniel Piven was a product of a postfeminist, 1980s childhood and politically correct, 1990s college education. He had learned all about male privilege. Moreover he was in possession of a functional and frankly rather clamorous conscience.

Consider, though, what it had been for *him*. (Walking briskly now, Nate imagined he was defending himself before an audience.) The party line—he told his listeners—is that she, as the woman, had the worst of it. And she did, of course. But it wasn't a cakewalk for him, either. There he was, thirty years old, his career finally taking off—an outcome that had not seemed at all inevitable, or even particularly likely, in his twenties—when suddenly there erupted the question of whether he would become a father, which would obviously change everything. Yet it *was not in his hands*. It was in the hands of a person he barely knew, a woman whom, yes, he'd slept with, but who was by no means his girlfriend. He felt like he had woken up in one of those after-school specials he watched as a kid on Thursday afternoons, whose moral

was not to have sex with a girl unless you were ready to raise a child with her. This had always seemed like bullshit. What self-respecting middle-class teenage girl—soon-to-be college student, future affluent young professional, a person who could go on to do anything at all (run a multinational corporation, win a Nobel Prize, get elected first woman president)—what such young woman would decide to have a baby and thus become, in the vacuous, public service announcement jargon of the day, “a statistic”?

When Juliet broke the news, Nate realized how much had changed in the years since he’d hashed this out. An already affluent, thirty-four-year-old professional like Juliet might view her situation differently than a teenager with nothing before her but possibility. Maybe she was no longer so optimistic about what fate held in store for her (first woman president, for example, probably seemed unlikely). Maybe she had become pessimistic about men and dating. She might view this as her last chance to become a mother.

Nate’s future hinged on Juliet’s decision, and yet not only was it not his to make, he couldn’t even seem to be unduly influencing her. Talking to Juliet, sitting on the blue-and-white-striped sofa in her living room with a cup of tea—*tea!*—in his hand, discussing the “situation,” it seemed he’d be branded a monster if he so much as implied that his preference was to abort the baby or fetus or whatever you wanted to call it. (Nate was all for a woman’s right to choose and all the lingo that went with it.) He’d sat there, and he’d said the right things—that it was her decision, that whatever she wanted he’d support, et cetera, et cetera. But who could blame him if he felt only relief when she said—in her “I’m a smart-ass, brook-no-bullshit newspaper reporter” tone of voice—that, obviously, abortion was the natural solution? Even then he didn’t allow himself to show any emotion. He spoke in a deliberate and measured tone. He said that she should think hard about it. Who could blame him for any of it?

Well, she could. Obviously, she did.

A livery cab idled past, its driver eyeing Nate to see if he was a potential fare. Nate waved the car on.

As he crossed an empty street, he began to feel certain that what Juliet actually blamed him for was that his reaction, however decent, had made abundantly clear that he didn't want to be her boyfriend, let alone the father of her child. The whole thing was so *personal*. You were deciding whether you wanted to say yes to this potential person, literally a commingling of your two selves, or stamp out all trace of its existence. Of course it made you think about how different it would be if the circumstances were different—especially, he imagined, if you were a woman and on some level you wanted a baby. Sitting in Juliet's living room, Nate had been surprised by just how awful he felt, how sad, how disgusted by the weak, wanton libidinousness (as it seemed to him then) that had brought him to this uncomfortable, dissembling place.

But did any of it make him an asshole? He had never promised her anything. He'd met her at a party, found her attractive, liked her enough to want to get to know her better. He'd been careful not to imply more than that. He'd told her that he wasn't looking for anything serious, that he was focused on his career. She'd nodded, agreed. Yet he felt sure the whole thing would have played out differently if he could have said to her, Look, Juliet, let's not have this baby, but maybe some other, at some future point . . . But while he admired Juliet's sleek, no-nonsense demeanor, that brisk, confident air, he admired it with dispassionate fascination, as a fine example of type, rather than with warmth. In truth he found her a bit dull.

Nevertheless, he had done everything that could have been expected of him. Even though he had less money than she did, he paid for the abortion. He went with her to the clinic and waited while it was being performed, sitting on a stain-resistant, dormitory lounge-style couch with a rotating cast of teenage girls who typed frenetically on their cell phones' tiny keyboards. When it

was over, he took her home in a taxi. They spent a pleasant, strangely companionable day together, at her place, watching movies and drinking wine. He left the apartment only to pick up her prescription and bring her a few groceries. When, finally, around nine, he got up to go home, she followed him to the door.

She looked at him intently. "Today was . . . well, it wasn't as bad as it could have been."

He, too, felt particularly tender at that moment. He brushed some hair from her cheek with his thumb and let it linger for a moment. "I'm really sorry for what you had to go through," he said.

A few days later, he called to see how she was feeling.

"A little sore, but okay," she said.

He said he was glad to hear it. There was a long pause. Nate knew he should say something chatty and diverting. He opened his mouth to speak. But a panicky premonition came over him: this phone call would lead to an endless string of others, the day at Juliet's apartment to a regular movie date, all tinged with a sense of obligation and an almost creepy quasi flirtation.

"I've got to run," he said. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Oh." Juliet drew in her breath. "Okay . . . Bye, then."

He probably should have followed up after that. As he turned the corner onto Elisa's street, Nate conceded that he should have called or e-mailed a few weeks later. But, at the time, he hadn't known if a call from him would have been welcome. It might have been a painful reminder of something she would rather put behind her. Nor did he know what he would have said. And he'd gotten distracted, caught up in other things—in life. She could have called him.

He'd done more than many guys would have. Was it his fault if he just didn't feel that way about her? *Could have at least what?*

The front door of Elisa's building was propped open with a large rock. Light from the hallway made a yellow arc on the concrete stoop. Nate paused before entering, taking a breath and running a hand through his hair. Inside, the stairs sagged and groaned

under his feet. Elisa's landing smelled of sautéed onions. After a moment, the door swung open.

"Natty!" she cried, throwing her arms around him.

Though he and Elisa had broken up more than a year ago, her apartment, on the top floor of a row house in gentrifying Greenpoint, still felt almost as familiar to Nate as his own.

Before she moved in, its brick walls had been plastered over and covered with floral wallpaper. The thick, irregular beams of the wood floor were hidden under carpet. Elisa's landlord, Joe Jr., once showed Nate and Elisa photos. After more than twenty years, its elderly Polish occupant had left to live with a daughter in New Jersey. Joe Jr. had torn up the carpet and ripped the plaster off the exterior walls. His father, who had bought the house in the 1940s and had since moved to Florida, said he was crazy. Joe Sr. thought adding a dishwasher or replacing the old bathtub would have been a better investment. "But I told him that that wasn't the way to attract high-class tenants," Joe Jr. explained to Nate and Elisa one afternoon, while he repaired some tiles in the bathroom. "I told him the kind of people who pay the big bucks go wild for claw-foot tubs. It's a matter of taste, I told him." Joe Jr. turned to face them, a jar of spackle dangling from his fleshy fingers. "And was I right or was I right?" he asked jovially, a big grin lighting up his face. Nate and Elisa, holding hands, nodded uneasily, unsure of the appropriate response to being so openly—and aptly—characterized as a certain kind of dupe.

Nate had helped Elisa paint the two nonbrick walls a beige that contrasted with the dark brick and the cream-colored rug under her couch. The dining room table they had purchased together at Ikea, but the chairs and a long cabinet by the door had belonged to her grandparents. (Or was it her great-grandparents?) Her bookcases reached nearly to the ceiling.

The apartment's familiarity now felt to him like a reproach.

Elisa had insisted on his presence tonight. "If we really are friends, why can't I have you over for dinner with a few people?" she'd asked. What could he say?

On the couch, Nate's friend Jason, a magazine editor who, to Nate's alternating irritation and amusement, had long wanted to get into Elisa's pants, leaned back regally, cradling the back of his head in his palms. Jason's knees were stretched absurdly far apart, as if he were trying to bore the largest possible impression of himself into Elisa's furniture. Next to Jason sat Aurit, another good friend of Nate's, who had recently returned from a research trip to Europe. Aurit was talking to a girl named Hannah, whom Nate had met before here and there—a thin, pert-breasted writer, pleasant-looking in spite of rather angular features. She was almost universally regarded as nice and smart, or smart and nice. Seated on the loveseat was a woman Elisa knew from college. Nate couldn't remember her name and had met her too many times to ask. He knew she was a lawyer. The weak-chinned suit with his arm draped over her shoulder was, presumably, the banker she was hot to marry.

"We've been wondering when you were going to grace us with your company," Jason said as soon as Nate had both feet in the door.

Nate set his messenger bag on the floor. "I ran into some trouble on the way."

"The G?" Aurit asked sympathetically.

There followed murmurs of agreement that the G, among all the New York subway lines, was especially unreliable.

Nate took the only available seat, next to Elisa's college friend. "It's good to see you," he said, with as much warmth as he could conjure. "It's been a while."

She looked at him levelly. "You and Elisa were still going out."

Nate thought he detected an accusation in her voice—as in "it was before you trampled all over her self-esteem and ruined her happiness."

He forced himself to hold his smile. "In any case, it's been too long."



Nate introduced himself to her banker boyfriend and tried to get the guy talking. If he'd just refer to her by name, Nate would at least be relieved of one anxiety. But the ex-frat boy mostly let her answer for him (equity research, Bank of America, former Merrill Lynch, transition stressful). His preferred means of communication appeared to be nonverbal: a fixed smile and benign, fatherly nods of his head.

Soon—though not necessarily soon enough—Elisa beckoned them to a table crowded with platters and bowls.

“Everything looks delicious,” someone said, as they circled the table, smiling beatifically at the spread and at each other. Elisa returned from the other side of the room, carrying a butter dish. Frowning, she scanned the room one last time. A self-satisfied sigh escaped her mouth as she sank gracefully into her seat, the billowy yellow fabric of her skirt fluttering on her descent.

“Go ahead and start,” she said, without making any move to start herself. “The chicken will get cold.”

While he ate his chicken cacciatore—which, as it happened, was quite good—Nate studied Elisa's heart-shaped face: those big, limpid eyes and dramatic cheekbones, the pretty, bow-shaped lips and profusion of white teeth. Each time Nate saw her, Elisa's beauty struck him anew, as if in the interval the memory of what she actually looked like had been distorted by the tortured emotions she elicited since they'd broken up: in his mind, she took on the dimensions of an abject creature. What a shock when she opened the door, bursting with vibrant, almost aggressive good health. The power of her beauty, Nate had once decided, came from its ability to constantly reconfigure itself. When he thought he'd accounted for it, filed it away as a dead fact—*pretty girl*—she turned her head or bit her lip, and like a children's toy you shake to reset, her prettiness changed shape, its coordinates altered: now it flashed from the elegant contours of her sloping brow and flaring cheekbone, now from her shyly smiling lips. “Elisa the Beautiful,” Nate had said without thinking when she

hugged him at the door. She'd beamed, breezily overlooking his lateness.

Yet only a short while later, he'd acclimated. Hannah had complimented her apartment. "I hate it," Elisa responded. "It's small, and it's laid out poorly. The fixtures are *incredibly* cheap." Then a quick smile: "Thank you, though."

The familiar hint of whine in Elisa's voice brought back to Nate an equally familiar cocktail of guilt and pity and dread. Also sheer annoyance—that spoiled, ill-tempered quality about her. Her prettiness became an irritant, a Calypso-like lure to entrap him, *again*.

Besides, as he poked at his chicken with his fork, Nate noticed the pores on Elisa's nose and a bit of acne atop her forehead, near her hairline, flaws so minor that it would be ungentlemanly to notice them on most women. But on Elisa, whose prettiness seemed to demand that she be judged on some Olympian scale of perfect beauty, these imperfections seemed, irrationally, like failures of will or judgment on her part.

"What are you working on these days?" she asked him as a bowl of potatoes was passed around for the second time.

Nate dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "Just an essay."

Elisa's round eyes and cocked head implored him to elaborate.

"It's about how one of the privileges of being elite is that we outsource the act of exploitation," he said, glancing at Jason, seated diagonally from him.

The idea for this essay was a bit hazy, and Nate dreaded sounding naive, like the person he'd been in his early twenties, before he'd learned that writing ambitiously, about big or serious subjects, was a privilege magazines granted only to people who'd already made it. But he had recently written a book. He had received a significant advance for it, and even though publication was still many months away, the book had already generated quite a bit of publicity. If he hadn't yet made it, he was getting closer.

"We get other people to do things that we're too morally thin-

skinned to do ourselves,” he said with more conviction. “Conscience is the ultimate luxury.”

“You mean that it’s almost entirely working-class people who join the army and that sort of thing?” Jason said loudly enough that all other conversation ceased. He reached for a slice of baguette from a butcher block. “Can you pass the butter?” he asked Hannah, before turning back to Nate expectantly.

Jason’s curls were tamped down with a glistening ointment. He had the aspect of a diabolical cherub.

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind,” Nate said. “I mean—”

“I think you’re absolutely right, Nate,” Aurit broke in, wielding her fork like a pointer. “I think Americans in general are too removed from all the ugliness that goes into safeguarding so-called normal life.”

“That’s the Israeli perspective, of course—” Jason began.

“That’s offensive, Jason,” Aurit said. “It’s not only reductive but racist—”

“It *is* offensive,” Nate agreed. “But I’m actually not so much interested in security issues as day-to-day life, the ways we protect ourselves from feeling complicit in the economic exploitation that goes on all around us. Take Whole Foods. Half of what you pay for when you shop there is the privilege of feeling ethically pure.” He set his wine glass on the table and began gesturing with his arms. “Or consider the Mexican guy the landlord pays to put the trash in front of our buildings twice a week. We wouldn’t exploit him ourselves, but on some level we know the guy is an illegal immigrant who doesn’t even get minimum wage.”

“Joe Jr. does the trash himself,” Elisa said. “But he’s really cheap.”

“Is there a difference between being ‘racist’ and ‘racist?’” Elisa’s college friend asked.

“Same with the guys who deliver our pizza and make our sandwiches,” Nate continued. He knew that he was violating an implicit rule of dinner party etiquette. Conversation was supposed to be ornamental, aimed to amuse. One wasn’t supposed to be invested

in the content of what was said, only the tone. But for the moment he didn't care. "We don't exploit them ourselves," he said. "No, we hire someone, a middleman, usually a small business owner, to do it, so we don't have to feel bad. But we still take advantage of their cheap labor, even as we prattle on about our liberalism—how great the New Deal was, the eight-hour workday, the minimum wage. Our only complaint—in theory—is that it didn't go far enough."

"Excuse me, Nate." Aurit held up an empty wine bottle. "Should we open another?"

"Joe does hire Mexicans to renovate," Elisa said in a tipsily thoughtful voice as she walked to the cabinet by the door. Atop it stood several wine bottles whose necks poked out of colorful plastic bags. They had of course been brought by the other guests. Nate recognized the lime-green packaging of the Tangled Vine, his own neighborhood wine store. This seemed to make his failure worse. He had meant to pick up a bottle on the way over.

Elisa selected a red and returned to her seat. "Can someone open it?" she asked before turning to Nate. "Sorry, Nate. Go on."

Nate had lost the thread of his argument.

Hannah took the bottle from Elisa. "You were saying that we benefit from exploitation but pretend our hands are clean," she said helpfully as Elisa handed her a tarnished copper corkscrew that looked old enough to have accompanied Lewis and Clark on their westward journey. One of Elisa's "heirlooms," no doubt. "I think—" Hannah started to say.

"Right," Nate said. "*Right.*"

His argument came back to him at once. "You know how you read a Dickens novel where these eight-year-old boys work in factories or beg on the streets? And you wonder why didn't anyone give a fuck? Well, we aren't so different. We've just gotten better at hiding it—from ourselves most of all. People back then at least justified their behavior by admitting to their contempt for the poor."

Jason addressed the banker. "If you haven't already noticed,

young Nate here suffers from a particularly acute case of liberal guilt.”

Jason was currently working on an article about the obesity epidemic, to be called “Don’t Let Them Eat Cake.”

Before Nate could respond, Hannah turned to him. She was cradling the wine bottle in one arm and gingerly twisting the ludicrous corkscrew with the other. “When people voluntarily pay more to shop at Whole Foods, aren’t they, by your logic, trying to be responsible?” she asked. “Aren’t they paying more so as *not* to take advantage of cheap labor?”

“Absolutely,” Nate said appreciatively. (Someone, it seemed, was actually listening.) “But do those marked-up prices really benefit anyone other than Whole Foods shareholders? All they have to do is put some picture of an earnest lesbian couple on a cereal box and we just assume it comes from some free-love workers’ paradise. It’s in our self-interest to think so because it allows us to buy good conscience, just like we buy everything else.” He paused before concluding. “It’s basically a Marxian argument, about the inexorability of exploitation under capitalism.”

Aurit frowned. “Who’s this essay for, Nate?”

“I don’t know yet,” Nate said. “I want to write it before I start worrying about whether it will advance my career.”

Aurit scrutinized him the way a doctor studies a protuberance he suspects is malignant. “Also, don’t people shop at Whole Foods because the food is healthier?”

The wine bottle whooshed as Hannah removed the cork.

“I think your idea sounds interesting,” Elisa said.

Elisa, Nate thought, was being extremely, even uncharacteristically, nice to him. Maybe they really were, as she had said, turning a corner?

“I think it sounds interesting as well,” said the guy half of the couple, whose name, Kevin or Devon, Nate had by now also forgotten but who had, Nate noticed, found his voice as the wine began

flowing more freely. "I haven't heard anyone call an idea Marxist and mean it as a good thing in a long time," he said as Elisa "refreshed" his glass. "Not since college."

Nate nudged his own glass into Elisa's line of sight.

While she poured, chair legs scraped the floorboards, ice cubes cracked between molars, and silverware clattered against plates. Nate scanned the books on Elisa's shelf. Her collection was impressive, suggestive of seriousness and good taste. The chick lit and the women's magazines, she kept in the bedroom.

"So, what is the difference between racialism and racism?" Kevin/Devon's girlfriend finally asked.

"Racialism," Aurit began enthusiastically, "is not so much dislike or prejudice against a group but the—"

"Hey, guess who I heard got a four-hundred-thousand-dollar book advance?" Jason interrupted. Out of courtesy to Aurit, no one responded.

"—attribution of personal qualities or"—Aurit looked pointedly at Jason—"beliefs to a person's membership in—"

"Greer Cohen," Jason finished.

"—a racial group." Aurit's words were orphans. She grimaced when she heard Greer's name. Even Hannah, who had indeed struck Nate this evening as nice as well as smart, raised her eyebrows.

"Good for Greer," Elisa said, like some kind of Stepford hostess whose good manners extend even to those who aren't present.

"Who's Greer Cohen?"

"A writer. Of sorts," Aurit said to Kevin/Devon and his lawyer girlfriend.

Nate's friends then began offering up various, mostly uncharitable assessments of Greer's talent and speculating about whom she'd slept with and whom she'd merely flirted with.

"I do think she's a good writer," Hannah conceded.

"It's not so much her writing I object to," Aurit said. "It's her willingness to trade on her sexuality and call it feminism."

Nate leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs under the

table. He felt no inclination to join in. He, too, had recently received a sizable book advance (though nowhere near four hundred thousand dollars). He could afford to be magnanimous.

His glass was empty again. The open wine bottle was on the far side of a vast, primitive-looking wooden salad bowl. He pivoted to reach for it, and as he turned, his torso momentarily blocked out everyone but him and Elisa. She met his eye and gave him one of her sultry looks, tilting her face bashfully downward and smiling a little lopsided smile that was peculiarly suggestive, the shy but flirtatious look a woman might wear when she confessed to some slightly offbeat sexual fantasy.

Nate's body tensed. He became panicky and hyperalert. He felt, he imagined, like a soldier who had been having a rollicking time on guard duty until he heard the crackle of approaching gunfire. Previous reports of improving conditions had proved false. Situation on the front was actually bad, very bad.

The wine made glugging sounds as it hurried out of the bottle and splashed against the fishbowl contours of his glass.

"Careful, buddy," Jason said and laughed. Nate ignored him. He needed fortification for later, when, he was now certain, Elisa would keep him back after the others left, insisting they needed to "talk." Ill-conceived advances would lead to a reprise of old accusations. The night would end as their nights so often had, in tears.

He exhaled loudly. An ex-girlfriend—not Elisa—once told him he was a histrionic breather.

When he looked toward the cabinet near the door to make sure there was another bottle of wine on reserve, he thought he felt something brush his leg, near his kneecap. He made the mistake of turning to investigate.

Elisa coyly withdrew her fingertips.

Nate bolted out of his chair and, as if overcome by a sudden and maniacal desire to study its contents more minutely, made for the bookcase. Borges, Boswell, Bulgakov. He ran a finger along their

spines, most marked with yellow “used” stickers from the Brown bookstore.

When he dared to look up, careful to avoid the part of the room containing Elisa, he saw Hannah silhouetted in the kitchen doorway. She was wearing a blue top and narrow skirt. She really did have a nice, slim figure. She was carrying a stack of dishes and had turned partly back to respond to something someone said. She laughed, a real laugh, hearty and open-mouthed.

As it subsided, Hannah’s eyes met his. She smiled. It was a friendly smile, a sane smile, perhaps the last he’d see tonight. He wondered if she was dating anyone.



Nate had not always been the kind of guy women call an asshole. Only recently had he been popular enough to inspire such ill will.

Growing up, he had been considered “nice.” He was also a wonderkind of Advanced Placement classes, star debater, and fledgling songwriter whose extracredit homage to Madonna for Math Appreciation Week—“Like a Cosine (Solved for the Very First Time)”—had, unfortunately, been broadcast to the entire upper school. Despite playing on the varsity soccer and baseball teams since tenth grade (granted, his was a Jewish day school), he never quite achieved the reputation of an athlete. He didn’t repel girls, exactly. They sought him out for help with bio or calculus, even for advice about their personal problems. They flirted with him when they wanted an ego boost and then they told him about their crushes on Todd or Mike or Scott.

He wasn’t much to look at back then. Dark-haired and skinny, he had a pale, sunken chest that he felt made him look cowardly, as if he were perpetually shrinking back. Though he wasn’t painfully short, he wasn’t tall either. His hands, eyebrows, nose, and Adam’s apple appeared to have been intended for a much larger person. This caused him to hold out hope, even as high school progressed, that he might spring up another couple inches, into

the five-foot double digits. In the meantime these attributes didn't add much to his existing stock of personal charms.

Todd and Mike and Scott were his soccer and baseball teammates. Scott was the most popular guy in their class. He was tall and broad-shouldered and had that combination of crudeness and confidence that rendered intelligence not only irrelevant but slightly ridiculous, a peculiar if not entirely unamusing talent, like the ability to ride a unicycle. Todd and Mike and Scott were not exactly Nate's friends—at least not on terms of equality—but they thought he was funny. They also relied on him for help with calculus. (Todd and Mike did anyway; Scott never made it past trigonometry.) Nate went to their parties. Nate got drunk. Jokes were made about how funny it was that Nate, bard of the math department, with the 4.0 GPA, was drunk.

Nate pined for girls like Amy Perelman, the stacked blonde siren of their class, whose bashfully averted eyes and modest smile were nicely offset by her clingy sweaters and ass-hugging jeans. Naturally, Amy went out with Scott, although one day she confided to Nate that she was worried about their future: "I mean, what will become of him? Like, if his dad's stores"—liquidated designer goods—"don't keep doing well? My dad says that they are, like, overleveraged. But Scott can barely read—I mean, he can read. Just not, like, whole books. But I can't see him doing well in college and getting a regular job. It just wouldn't be him, you know?"

In retrospect, it wasn't surprising that Amy Perelman, who was not actually stupid but only affected stupidity in her speech because that was the fashion, eventually ditched Scott and got an MBA from Wharton. At the time, however, Nate had, somewhat to his surprise, come to Scott's defense.

"He's a good guy, though. And he really likes you."

Amy looked thoughtful but not quite convinced. "I guess."

In those years, nice-guy Nate, friend to girls in need, devoted copious intellectual resources to such questions as the verisimilitude of various household items to female genitalia. After school,

while his parents were still at work, he roamed the eerily quiet ranch house in search of erotic inspiration, leaving the lights off as darkness began to swirl through its corridors. Slinking like a burglar from room to room, he sized up fleece-lined mittens, condiments, even his mother's pantyhose for possible requisition. One day, in his parents' bedroom, he discovered a surprisingly racy book by a woman named Nancy Friday, and for a time, his equipage also included a "scrunchy" that Amy Perelman had used for her ponytail and which she had left behind in physics lab one day. During lonely afternoons of television and self-ministration, Nate, buoyed by Friday's assurances that women too have dirty thoughts, sniffed the yellow-and-white cloth until the smell of Amy's blonde waves had finally been depleted. Whether he'd literally inhaled it all or whether overexposure had desensitized him, he didn't know. Hoping a hiatus from daily use would restore the hair band to its former glory, he hid it in the back of his bottom desk drawer, behind an old graphing calculator and some tins of colorful, animal-shaped erasers he'd collected in elementary school. Before the experiment could be concluded, he'd forgotten about it—baseball practice had begun, cutting into his autoerotic afternoons. Still, he must have reeked of self-love because around that time Scott branded him "Learned Hand" (a surprising indication that Scott had paid attention in social studies class at least once).

Years later, when Nate and his college girlfriend Kristen had come to Maryland to pack up his old bedroom before his parents sold the house, she'd come across Amy Perelman's scrunchy.

She held it up. "Why do you have this?"

A few blonde hairs, which Nate had once been ever so careful not to displace, still clung to the fabric.

As soon as he realized what it was, Nate snatched the scrunchy from her hand, horrified, afraid that she'd catch something from it, a debilitating skin disease or a whiff of his former self.

"It must be my mom's," he mumbled.

Nate did have one admirer during high school: frizzy-haired

Michelle Goldstein. It wasn't that Michelle wasn't pretty—he'd been interested in girls who looked worse—but there was something painfully self-conscious about her. While it should have been refreshing to see *someone* at their school engrossed in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Michelle's embrace of culture seemed affected. She had an inexplicable fondness for the phrase *pas de deux*, which Nate had once, frighteningly enough, overheard her use in reference to her "relationship" with him.

Still, at moments, he felt real affection for Michelle. One spring night—it must have been after a school play or concert—they sat together for hours on a bench outside the upper school, gazing down a grassy hill toward the dark expanse of the athletic fields. Michelle spoke, intelligently, touchingly, about the music she liked (moody female singer-songwriters with socially progressive lyrics) and of her intention to live in New York one day, to go often to the Strand—"a huge used bookstore downtown."

Nate wasn't sure if he'd even been to a used bookstore. There weren't any in their suburb, he didn't think.

"You should go to New York sometime," Michelle said.

"I've been. We didn't go anyplace like that."

From his family's weekend in New York, Nate had photos, taken by his dad, of him and his mother huddled together on the Observation Deck of the Empire State Building. They wore newly purchased ponchos and smiled wanly while a cold drizzle fell on their heads.

Michelle smiled sympathetically.

In the light that spilled over from the parking lot, Nate thought Michelle's freckles and straw-colored hair were cute. He nearly reached out across the bench and touched her—her hand or her thigh.

It wasn't even about sex. Nate's life had been somewhat short on friendship, real friendship, distinct from the sort of conditional alliance he had with Scott and company. There had been Howard

from summer camp and Jenny, a tomboyish girl on his street who moved to Michigan when he was in sixth grade and from whom Nate had received the occasional letter for several years after, and Ali, also from his neighborhood, who went to public school. He and Nate had drifted apart after junior high. Sitting on the bench with Michelle, Nate felt as if the two of them shared something, some nebulous, slightly melancholic sensitivity that made them different from their classmates.

But at school on Monday, Michelle seemed to have reverted back to her other self.

"I can't believe you got an A on that test," she said after calculus. "What a coup d'état." She gave a little wave as she walked away. "Ciao, chéri."

"Coup," he wanted to shout. "You mean just plain coup."

Yet he and Michelle were constantly lumped together and treated as a couple. Scott repeatedly asked him if her cooter smelled like mothballs because of all the vintage clothes she wore. Michelle's ambiguous social status, neither cool nor uncool, apparently made her his female equivalent. They even went to senior prom together. Nate had been working up the nerve to ask a pretty sophomore, and he felt both resentment and relief when Michelle's asking him foreclosed that possibility. On prom night, he thought Michelle might have been willing to have sex, but he didn't really try, although they made out—more than made out, actually: he had a brief opportunity to assess Scott's hypothesis vis-à-vis the bouquet of her female parts (the word he'd use was *musky*). Nate didn't push because at that particular moment in his life, he didn't want to get entangled with a girl who was slightly repulsive to him. Nor could he imagine sleeping with Michelle and then blowing her off, the way that Todd or Mike might have (although not Scott, who for all his crudity was sensitive and unwavering in his devotion to Amy). There was something that rubbed Nate wrong about Todd and Mike's attitude toward girls—their implicit belief that whatever befell a foolish or unattractive

one was her just deserts. Empathy, they reserved for the best-looking girls. (Amy's most minor setbacks, a B-plus or mild cold, elicited coos of grave concern.)

Besides, by prom, Nate had largely begun to pin his erotic hopes on college, where, he imagined, even girls who looked like Amy Perelman would be smart and, more important, *mature*, a word he had lately begun to interpret as "willing to have sex with him." If he were to list the biggest disappointments of his life, freshman year of college would be near the top, right behind the realization, much later, that even something as seemingly sublime as a blow job—his penis in a woman's mouth! *his penis in a woman's mouth!*—could be boring, even slightly unpleasant, under the wrong circumstances or performed inexpertly.

Had he been an urchin rescued from the back alley where he'd foraged for food in dumpsters and solved millennia-old math problems on the inside of torn cereal boxes, he couldn't have been more naive, more uneducated in the social mores of a place like Harvard. And if he'd been a homeless autodidact, he would at least have reaped the social benefit of being exotic. What had seemed normal back home screamed Mall of America, middle management, and mediocrity on a campus where the tone had been set long ago by Puritans with names like Lowell, Dunster, and Cabot. Todd and Mike and Scott, with their gelled hair fanning up from their foreheads and with their polo shirts and BMWs, shrank in size. The kids who seemed to belong at Harvard—the ones who seemed at ease, chatting breezily in the Yard, greeting old friends and throwing their heads back in laughter—drove beat-up Volkos, ordered clothing from catalogs (an activity Nate had previously associated with isolated prairie farms and early Montgomery Ward circulars), and, in a flat English shorn of all regional accent, reeled off the names of places he had never heard of: "Yeah, I've been to Islesboro!" "My uncle has a house there!" "We go to Blue Hill every summer."

Before arriving in Cambridge, Nate had mentally prepared for

Park Avenue, for country clubs, yachts, caviar, for the heedless extravagance of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, but Maine, *Maine* caught him by surprise. Nate was used to summer locales that advertised themselves as such in their names: *Long Beach Island*, *Ocean City*. His new classmates were not playboys or debutantes. They didn't wear blazers; the girls weren't named Muffy or Binky. A fair number had gone to public schools (albeit largely a specific breed of elite public school). They were thin, ponytailed girls who wore no makeup and slouching guys in T-shirts and khaki shorts. They spoke of kayaking and hiking as the ne plus ultra amusements of their young lives. Nate, who had done those things at summer camp, hadn't accorded them any special significance beyond that of the other required activities, such as singing around the campfire and making finger puppets from strips of felt.

When Amy Perelman's family had gone to Vail for spring break, everyone at school knew they stayed at a ski lodge that sounded like some kind of alpine palace staffed by a regiment of liveried bellhops. People at Harvard, on the other hand, referred to their family's "places" in Vermont or New Hampshire as if these were cabins that their parents or grandparents had personally built, log by log, and they seemed almost to compete about whose had the fewest amenities. ("We never have enough hot water because we rely on our own solar generator, totally off the grid.") Amy spoke of the five-star steakhouse her family ate at after a long day on the trails; Harvard people talked of standing out in zero-degree weather waiting for their charcoal grills to heat up, as if their families had never bought into the whole indoor-stove fad. Nate, too, had been skiing. With a group of kids from his synagogue, he spent a weekend on a barren mountain in Pennsylvania that was also home to an abandoned mine. The trip was called a *Shabbaton*. They stayed at a Holiday Inn and ate at the Denny's across the parking lot.

Nate had never thought of himself as disadvantaged. His parents were immigrants, but the kind with good jobs. They worked for defense contractors. He grew up in a detached house with a lawn

and a metal swing-set in the back. He attended a private, albeit religious school, where he got an excellent education. His parents had graduate degrees (masters in engineering from Polytechnic University of Bucharest, rather than, say, PhDs in art history from Yale). Growing up, Nate discussed current events at the dinner table; as a family, they watched *60 Minutes* and *Jeopardy!* Apparently, though, some parents read the *New York Review of Books* and drank martinis. In time, Nate would learn to make finer distinctions between the homes of his most sophisticated classmates—the old-school WASPs versus the academic intellectuals (Jew or gentile)—but in the first weeks of college it seemed to him that all of them, from the children of well-known leftist firebrands to the spawn of union-busting industrial titans, spoke the same language. It seemed that way because they did. (Many of them had gone to the same prep schools.) When it came right down to it, these groups were like the Capulets and the Montagues. Whatever their differences, they were both wealthy Veronese families. Nate's family was from Romania.

Before he arrived at Harvard, Nate had read *War and Peace* and *Ulysses* for his own edification, but more important he had shown up without ever having heard of J. Press—so he couldn't mock it. (Eventually, he gleaned that it was a clothing store.) He had only a distant familiarity with the *New Yorker* and no idea how easily an apple could be converted into a device for smoking pot. Nate had been captain of his high school trivia team. He knew many things—for example, the capital of every African country as well as each nation's colonial name, which he could reel off alphabetically—but he did not know the kinds of things that made a person knowing at Harvard in the fall of 1995.

He was, as a result, more than happy to be led about by his suitemate Will McDormand. Will's great-grandfather had been a railroad executive prominent enough to have been personally despised by Eugene Debs. After long days straining to make conversation at orientation activities, Nate gaped at the parade of



“dudes” who came to drink with Will. Even chugging cans of Miller Lite and ribbing one another about the pimply girl who had been free with her favors at boarding school, they were clearly the kind of young men who shook hands firmly, made old ladies blush and giggle, and uttered the appropriate condolences at funerals (before escaping to the deserted part of the cemetery to smoke a little weed). They wore expressions of light irony, and their conversation dexterously dodged all serious, intellectual, or sentimental subject matter. When Nate brought up a course he was looking forward to, an embarrassed silence fell over the room.

Nate believed passionately in the equality of man, disdained inherited privilege, and bemoaned on ideological grounds the failures of the French and Russian Revolutions; just the same, during those first few days at Harvard, every time there was a knock at the door, he popped up from the sofa with eager anticipation. He was trying to make out which new arrival was a nephew of a cabinet member and which was a grandson of the Nobel Prize-winning economist, details Will tossed off with a nonchalance that Nate tried to mimic in his replies. (The ransom a kidnapper could have collected if he'd snagged the roomful of guys watching the Red Sox with the sound turned off while the Smashing Pumpkins played on Will's stereo!) Will singled Nate out from their other two suitemates—Sanjay (“Jay”) Bannerjee, an affable but slightly stiff kid from Kansas City, who tried and failed to conceal nervousness about the beer drinking, and Justin Castlemeyer, a Young Republican from a small town in North Carolina—both of whom Will treated with a noblesse oblige that, as the semester progressed, grew increasingly smirking. But Will thought Nate was “hysterical.” He liked when Nate said “smart things” while pounding shots of vodka, tequila, Jägermeister, peach schnapps, or whatever happened to be on hand. Will particularly liked hearing Nate recite the African countries' colonial names. “You're like a wind-up toy!” he cried. “Again! Again!”

It took Nate a long time to realize that “thank you” was not the

only possible response to Will's offer of friendship. For most of his freshman year, he found himself among Will's friends, lusting after surprisingly vacuous girls, who, though they had energy sufficient for sailing expeditions and weekends in the country and though they *got into Harvard*, shrank not only from abstract conversation but from any form of culture unrelated to drinking or the outdoors (including movies with subtitles and anything that fell under the umbrella of "performance"). Every once in a while, in private, to Nate only, one of these tanned, healthy girls made whispery reference to a middlebrow novel that she had once read at her summer house after a wayward guest left it behind. So clearly they *could* read. Nate was aware that there were other kinds of girls on campus, but these girls, the ones Will hung around with, many of them boarding school classmates or daughters of family friends or girls whose families had summered near his for so long that they were "like cousins"—these girls seemed like "the best," the ones who really belonged here.

Other classmates were ruined for Nate after Will made fun of them. Girls who liked theater were "thesbos," activists were "lack-tits," and would-be campus journalists were "muffrakers." When Nate spent time with other people, Will seemed threatened. At least that's how pop psychology taught Nate to interpret it. (Years later, Nate would conclude that Will was simply a dick.) "Doing the ugly people thing tonight?" he would ask. "If that's what floats your boat, fine, but if you get tired of limpydick and the barking dogs, come to Molly's suite. We'll be playing quarters—or else tackling the mind-body problem." As if Nate had come to Harvard to play quarters! Yet, inevitably, he'd wind up slinking out of the dorm room where a group would be watching *Mystery Science Theatre 3,000* or a Godard film and head over to Molly's. Where he would play quarters with drunk girls who called him "cute" and asked, in giggly, slurring voices, whether Will was seeing anyone and if he was really as big a player as they'd heard. (Nate couldn't tell if the answer they hoped to hear was yes or no.)

It wasn't until midway through his sophomore year that Nate grew thoroughly tired of Will's world. It was too late. He didn't have much in the way of other friends. He sometimes hung out with his former roommate Jay, but for the most part he'd alienated all the nice, thoughtful people he'd tentatively, kind of, maybe liked freshman year by constantly dropping them for Will. When, through one or another extracurricular activity, he did hang out with other people, other types of people, he couldn't stop thinking in Will's terms. Every time he saw a girl in colored tights, no matter how cute or how into poetry, he thought "thesbo" and heard a howling sound in the background. And the nice kids' outings, to the movies or a lecture on campus and then to a coffee-house or diner, were depressingly tame, alcohol-free affairs. Many of these fiery debaters and ardent newspaper editors drank a lot of coffee and, in voices that grew squeaky at moments of high tension, discussed the allegorical implications of *Seinfeld*.

It was then that Nate began, really, to read. It seemed to him as if all the reading he had done back in high school had been tainted. Some part of him had been aiming to impress, reaching for a sophistication he had thought would serve him—socially—in college. (Ha.) The spring of his sophomore year, he began to read from feverish loneliness, a loneliness he began to fear would be permanent. After all, if he, if someone like *him*, wasn't happy in college, where and when would he be happy? His disappointment and isolation made him bitter, and he judged the world around him harshly, with the too-broad strokes of a crank. Except for people like Will, who already had enough privilege that they could afford to take it for granted, his classmates were blindly striving to climb up the meritocratic ladder, as if their lives were nothing more than preparation for business or law school—or, if they were "creative," Hollywood writing jobs. Only when Nate read, and occasionally in class discussions or during professors' office hours, did he feel any fluttering of hope. Perhaps his personality wasn't so ill formed if at least he found kinship somewhere, even if it was among

the words of men who were long dead. Or in class, which everyone knew was the least important part of college.

In the middle of junior year, he met Kristen. They were in a political science seminar together. From her comments in class, Nate could tell that she was very smart. She was good-looking, too, with the healthy, athletic look common to Will's gal pals. She had the kind of quiet confidence that comes from faith in her own sturdy self-discipline and quick good sense. She and Nate often found themselves on the same side in discussions. Soon they exchanged smiles whenever a particularly fatuous classmate spoke. They began to walk from class together and discovered that their upbringings were similarly modest. New England-bred Kristen seemed intrigued by his immigrant parents. She laughed at his jokes. Still, when he finally mustered the courage to ask her out, Nate fully expected that she'd turn him down—whip out the boyfriend in Hanover or Williamstown or her latent lesbianism or a chastity vow effective until the implementation of universal health care. But . . . Kristen said yes. She'd recently broken up with her boyfriend (Providence).

Kristen was premed, bighearted, the kind of girl who spent winter break doing Habitat for Humanity projects in the Honduran jungle, but she was also hardheaded and acerbic, prone to a withering disdain for foolishness or absurdity that was both winning and slightly intimidating. People instinctively wanted her approval. Between this authoritative air and her sunny good looks, Kristen was, in the world's crude judgment, a catch for Nate, several notches above him in the college social hierarchy. Nate wholeheartedly concurred with the world: he felt himself to be extremely lucky. If Kristen didn't share his love for literature—well, that seemed beside the point, like insisting your girlfriend share your preference for Pepsi over Coke. It wasn't as if she were willing to date only biology majors.

Around the same time that he met Kristen, Nate met Jason, in a literary theory class, and through Jason, he met Peter. In some

ways it was sensitive, thoughtful Peter with whom Nate felt a strong connection. But three worked better than two. There was something too breathily eager about two guys drinking whiskey and talking endlessly into the night about books and the corporate-financed rightward shift of the nation and whether it was fair to say that Marxism had been tested or not because Soviet-style communism was such a perversion. Jason as a third leavened the dynamic. His cheerful bluster dispelled Nate's and Peter's bashfulness and gave their outings the social imprimatur of a guys' night out.

Senior year of college, alternating his time between Jason-and-Peter and Kristen, Nate was happy. For many years afterward, he wondered if he was happier then than he'd ever be again. It was so new—the girl and the friends. And he'd waited so long for both. After graduation, he followed Kristen to Philadelphia, where she started med school and he wrote freelance pieces for a left-of-center magazine in D.C. He missed Jason, who worked at a glossy magazine in New York, and Peter, who was getting a PhD in American Studies at Yale. Home by himself—freelancing—Nate felt isolated. Perhaps he expected too much of Kristen. She had a different type of mind, and besides she was busy and tired. Medical school fulfilled her, mentally and socially.

Over time, Nate began to grow frustrated by her lack of literary sensibility, the sheer practicality of her intelligence, as well as a certain rectitude or squareness on her part—in other words, by her essential Kristen-ness, which he had once revered. He visited Jason in New York more and more frequently. He started to notice there were women who dressed differently, who wore neat-looking glasses and sexy high-heeled boots and had cool hair that made Kristen's ponytail seem uninspired. Many of these women seemed to be reading Svevo or Bernhard on the subway. At home, he'd read Kristen bits from Proust, and she'd get this pinched look on her face, as if the sheer extravagance of Proust's prose was morally objectionable, as if there were children in Africa who could

have better used those excess words. Kristen also seemed to disapprove of Nate's homebound lifestyle on a visceral, almost Calvinistic level that she couldn't justify according to any of her core principles. (In theory she was devoted to the poor and idle.)

But the animosity accumulated so slowly that for a long time Nate hardly noticed it. He was genuinely shocked when Jason floated the notion that the relationship might be less than perfectly happy: "I don't know," he said, "it's just the way you sound when you talk about her—it's like 'Kristen, sigh, this' 'Kristen, sigh, that.'" Nate had gotten so angry that it was all he could do not to walk out of the bar. Never mind that in the past twenty-four hours he'd silently accused Kristen of being prudish and narrow-minded a dozen times. Never mind that only seconds before Jason had spoken, he had been imagining their Goth-looking waitress going down on him.

That spring, Kristen signed the two of them up to serve as guides for the blind in a 5K at Fairmount Park. The morning of the race Nate wanted to stay in bed and read, and then maybe, *maybe*, have a Bloody Mary or two a little later, as he read some more at a sports bar with a game on.

"Why does everything always have to be so goddamn wholesome and sunny and do-gooder-y?" he said.

He wasn't shouting, but he was close.

Kristen was sitting on their desk chair, bent at the waist as she pulled on her sneakers. She glanced at Nate, not with concern but with surprise that curdled quickly into annoyance. Then she returned to the business of her shoes. This angered him even more.

"I'm not fucking Jimmy Stewart," he said, mixing up *Pollyanna* and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

A spasm of irritation—out-and-out contempt, really—flickered across Kristen's face.

"If you want to sit around in your underwear all day, go right ahead," she said. "I'll go get you a beer from the fridge if that's what you want."

Nate had brought his laptop into bed. Now he closed it and looked at the wall beyond Kristen's head. "That's not what I meant."

Kristen began pulling her hair into a ponytail. "I'm going to go to the race now," she said in the doctor's voice she'd been cultivating: neutral and distancing and only dispassionately empathetic. "I think you should, too, because you said you would, and they're counting on you, but it's your decision."

Of course Nate apologized. Of course he began getting ready. But the truth was he still wished he didn't have to go. He felt he was right somehow, even though he was clearly wrong because he had promised and because it would suck to be blind and he was fortunate to be blessed with the gift of sight.

After that, their squabbles began to feel more like sublimated judgments of the other's entire person. For a while, each fight was followed—on Nate's end, anyway—by a strong internal counter-reaction. He felt uneasy about the precipice to which his resentful thoughts seemed to lead. He wanted to take back, retract, even in his mind, his criticisms of Kristen and restore the mental status quo (Kristen was the greatest, he adored her) that had served him so well, for so long. But as the fights persisted, his subsequent urge to backtrack began to diminish. Meanwhile, Kristen became increasingly interested in spending time with her classmates. Nate found he was relieved to be left to himself. Soon, they acknowledged that they'd "drifted apart."

Their breakup was very amicable—it was as if simply by agreeing to part, their frustrations with each other shrank to manageable dimensions—and although Nate was a little surprised by how quickly afterward she got together with one of her medical school classmates, there was, to this day, nobody he respected more than Kristen in that good, sturdy, upright citizen way.

Nate moved to New York. He had high expectations, both professionally and romantically. The growth spurt he'd longed for had never come to pass, but he had filled out. His proportions had

harmonized. He also felt as if he'd been vetted and Kristen's seal of approval would, through some new air of self-confidence, be transmitted to all other pretty girls. After all, when he had still been going out with Kristen and he had, say, exchanged a look with a girl across a subway car, it had felt as if, surely, were it not for the existence of Kristen, he and the attractive stranger would have gotten off the train together and headed to a dive bar for a drink and smart, fizzy conversation. Once single, however, Nate quickly became aware of the vastly complicated chain of events that had to take place before a look translated into a conversation and a phone number, let alone drinks. It turned out that many of these good-looking girls who gleamed so promiscuously on the subway had boyfriends waiting for them aboveground. Or so they claimed.

When he did manage to get a date with a girl he picked up in public, he was usually in for a series of surprises. Yes, those girls with the boxy glasses reading Svevo or Bernhard or, more commonly, Dave Eggers (Nate had to admit that Svevo and Bernhard had always been much rarer sights, even on the F train), were, as a general category, very attractive. And when the sum total of Nate's knowledge of such a woman had been what he gleaned from her clothing, posture, reading material, and facial expression, he had effortlessly filled in the blanks. She would be nonvegan, catless (or at least only one-catted), left-leaning, sane, and critical of the inadequacies of the American educational system without embodying them personally. He had been extremely naive.

It was around this time that he began to understand what was meant by the phrase *low self-esteem*, something he used to think he identified with intuitively. But what he had himself experienced was nothing like the total habituation to being treated badly that he encountered in some of the girls he met his first year in New York. He went out with a girl named Justine, a Pratt student who lived in a tiny studio in Bed-Stuy with a poodle named Pierre and a cat called Debbie Gibson. Several nights after Nate



had gently suggested they might not have a future, she called him on his cell.

"I thought maybe you'd want to come over," she said.

It was 2:00 a.m. Nate said he probably shouldn't. "I think—well, I'm not sure I'm over my ex."

Although Kristen had just told him that her new boyfriend was moving into the apartment they had shared, and although he had been, uhm, *surprised* by the dispatch with which this had transpired, what he told Justine was not, strictly speaking, true—he wasn't pining for Kristen. But it was the best he could come up with on the spot.

Justine started to cry. "I guess Noah was right."

Noah was *her* ex. Apparently, he had told her she needed to get breast implants if any guy was going to want her. Obligated to disprove this prince, Nate said he'd be there in twenty minutes.

The next day he felt ashamed. What did boxy glasses and edgy tattoos matter if you were talking about a girl who suggested, in a heartbreakingly resigned monotone, that he might like to do her with porn on "because that's how Noah liked it"? (Nate wondered how Noah felt about Pierre-the-poodle's wiry-haired silhouette flitting across scenes of spanking and anal penetration as the ill-natured canine chased Debbie Gibson around the room.) Nate felt bad for Justine—because she'd grown up in an infinitely bleaker suburbia than the one he had known; because her mother had repeatedly chosen "the asshole" (her stepfather) over her; because, art school notwithstanding, she grimly expected to be a waitress or secretary all her life ("I don't know the right people"); and because guys like Noah and Nate himself took advantage of her. But pity couldn't be transmuted into romantic feeling, and Nate knew the best thing he could do for Justine was to stop seeing her.

Besides, he had problems of his own. Unhappy with the way one of his articles had been edited, he had—in a moment of pique or high principle, depending on how you looked at it—vowed never again to write for the left-wing magazine that had been his

main source of income as well as credibility. This decision had disastrous consequences for his career and his finances.

When he first moved to New York, he'd had some notion that he'd paid his dues during his years in Philly. This turned out to be false, risibly so. Even with Jason's connections at up-market men's magazines, Nate had trouble getting assignments in New York. He took a temp job that became a full-time, indefinitely termed job in the library of a private equity firm, with the intention of writing at night. The job was so demoralizing that he wound up mostly drinking during his off-hours. It was a bad year (closer to two, actually). His industrious parents, who for his sake had emigrated to an unfamiliar land and whose uncreative and not particularly fulfilling labors had funded his lavish education, were, understandably, displeased. They wanted him to get a real job or go to graduate school. Nate was, however, determined to make a living writing.

Looking back, he was proud that he'd "persevered," by which he meant that he hadn't gone to law school. He'd moved to a cheaper apartment, which allowed him to quit the private equity job in favor of shorter bouts of temp work and freelance proof-reading for a law firm. He worked on fiction and pitched articles and book reviews, getting assignments here and there. His critical voice improved. He began to get more assignments. Toward the end of his twenties, it became evident that he'd managed to cobble together an actual career as a freelance writer. The achievement was capped off when a major online magazine offered him a position as its regular book reviewer.

By then, he'd mostly stopped picking up girls at bars (let alone on the subway), having learned that he had a better chance of meeting someone he could have a conversation with if he dated women he met at publishing parties—editorial assistants and assistant editors, publicists, even interns. They weren't all brilliant, but chances were slim that they had an ex-boyfriend named Noah who told them to get breast implants. They'd never met anyone

like Noah, not in a romantic context anyway, not at Wesleyan or Oberlin or Barnard. And if they hadn't read Svevo or Bernhard—and let's face it, most hadn't—at least they knew who they were. (“*Zeno's Conscience*, right? Doesn't James Wood, like, love that book?”)

Conveniently, such women tended increasingly to like him. The well-groomed, stylishly clad, expensively educated women of publishing found him appealing. The more his byline appeared, the more appealing they found him. It wasn't that they were outright social climbers so much as they began to see him in a flattering light, the light in which he was beginning to see himself. He was not underemployed and chronically low on cash—he wasn't only those things, anyway. He was also a young, up-and-coming literary intellectual.

Nate felt not only glad but vindicated, as if a long-running argument had finally been settled in his favor. His unpopularity, though persistent, had never seemed quite right. He was not and had never been a nervous, nebbishy sort; his interest in science fiction, never very intense, had peaked at age thirteen. He had always been a rather well-disposed and agreeable sort of person, if he said so himself.

He knew he'd truly arrived when he began dating Elisa the Beautiful. Not long after, he began making rapid progress on the book that had gone on to win him a six-figure advance from a major publishing house, further enhancing both his professional reputation and personal popularity. Water, as they say, eventually finds its level.