THE BLACK TIDE

By David M. Antonelli

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The Black Tide
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By David Antonelli

“Storms all that summer,  
we lived in the wind,  
out in some room in the wind…”

“There were freezing  
and always dark  
Where we were never mattered  
Your head was golden  
There was lightning in your arms  
And then the glass shattered…”

Tom Verlaine
BOOK 1

Chapter 1.1

*Everything comes down to milk and blood*, Jimmy Flannigan thought as he looked out across the glossy black sheen of Brooklyn harbour. A pair of blue-grey clouds gathered on the horizon, filtering away the last pink rays of dusk from the great bronze mantle of the Manhattan skyline. *Milk and blood*. He took a piece of broken glass from his pocket and ran its sharpest edge across his fingertip. A tugboat passed and blew its whistle as if to disrupt his ritual. He watched a few droplets emerge on the surface of his skin and then swell into a deep crimson bulb before falling back into the darkness, vanishing from even the light of the overhanging street lamps as the tugboat blew its whistle one more time. He cocked back his arm and hurled the piece of glass out into the harbour. He waited for the sound of a splash, but heard nothing, as though the glass fragment had suddenly ceased to exist and all his actions leading up to that point in time had never happened. He pulled up the collar of his coat and walked backwards and away from the dock. All that was warm and nurturing in life was milk. All that was dark and intoxicating - even deadly - was blood. Women were both. That’s why he’d never really figured them out. That’s why he felt he would always be their victim. It was that way with his first serious girlfriend Vanessa, when she left him two years earlier, and that way with every woman he had ever know – or at least been in love with. That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger? Maybe. But that which ultimately destroys us is love - and almost by necessity. There was a rustling in a bush behind him and then a third whistle from the harbour. He wiped his fingertip with a handkerchief and began the journey back through Tribeca towards SoHo and then down Canal Street to the Lower East Side. He was going to a party at his friend Robert’s house and he didn’t want to be late.

Robert lived six blocks east of Chinatown in a split level unit on the third floor of a nineteen thirties red brick apartment with deep green awnings right across the street from a local Armenian grocers that sold Russian import beers by the bottle. Jimmy walked up the cracked sidewalk and opened the pair of varnished wooden doors to the front lobby. He walked slowly up the wrought iron staircase to the third floor, his legs still sluggish from a two-hour yoga workout the day before. The loud hum of drunken conversation echoed down the stairwell. He made his way down to the end of the hallway and knocked on the heavy wooden door. There was no answer. A woman’s voice from somewhere inside shouted something about The Green Lantern having no penis and then there was a burst of laughter. After a second attempt, he opened the door and stepped into the foyer. The white plaster walls were decorated with postcards and colourful sketches and an eruption of laughter from deeper inside the apartment suggested the guests had concentrated elsewhere. He took off his shoes and made his way to the kitchen, where two red headed women were so locked in conversation they didn’t seem to notice him. He wrested a beer from a six-pack in
the fridge as he had done countless times before and carved his way through a crowd of what looked like varsity recruits to the living room. Robert was nowhere to be seen and most of the faces he didn’t recognise. They seemed like the usual assortment of lower Manhattan types, from the upwardly mobile finance students in designer polo shirts, barren as much of facial hair as wit and intrigue, to the grimly hip east villagers flaunting their dark purple eye make-up and gaudy metal jewellery.

He found a clearing by the far wall beside a scruffy young brunette seated in a wooden chair by the mantelpiece. She was wearing a dark brown suede jacket, torn at the collar and slightly ragged around the cuffs, and a pair of black tights and dark leather boots. Leagues of brown hair hung in rich profusion over her pale and childlike face. Her eyes were round and dark and her white cheeks rouged only by that from within - warmth, blood, sensuality? He watched her out of the corner of his eye. She shifted nervously in her chair, as though she felt suddenly displaced from the people around her. She looked at him for a moment and then pulled back her hair, guiding it through the fold between her neck and shoulder before letting it fall gently across her left breast. Jimmy looked down at the floor and noticed a large spot of blood on his pants that must have dribbled down from his fingertip when he was out on the pier only an hour before. She smiled and made eye contact but he turned away sharply and retreated back into the kitchen. Beauty was always like that, a beacon light stretching into a long dark chasm, illuminating as much as condemning everything that stood before it.

He opened the door to Robert’s bedroom on his way to the private master bathroom he guessed would be unoccupied to clean off the bloodstain. The bedroom was small and dimly lit, furnished with a desk, a bed, a bookshelf, and a night table. Stacks of books and records were piled high in an open closet to the left of the door and a Turkish carpet hung on the wall just above the bed. Leaning against the opposite wall and evenly spaced in seemingly chronological order across the top level of the bookshelf were displayed a number of wooden-framed portrait photos of Robert as a child and as a young adult. Jimmy examined them out of a kind of vague curiosity for nostalgia before suddenly becoming aware that if someone were watching him he might appear to be more interested than he really was and end up looking like a voyeur. So he continued on into the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror as he wiped his pants with a wet tissue he suddenly realized he looked much older than he had ever remembered. Perhaps it was just some effect caused by the fluorescent light, but there were bundles of tiny wrinkles festooning down from the outside corners of his eyes that he had never noticed before. Although his nose was smooth and bold, his cheeks had begun to sag ever so slightly, creating a set of angled furrows growing down from the edges of his lips to his jaw line. His uneasiness vanished when he recalled a well-known fashion model he once saw on television saying that it imparted dignity and thus sex appeal to a man’s appearance to have at least a few marks of age.

Finally satisfied that he had cleaned off the stain he wiped his cheeks with a damp teal towel hanging beside the shower and then went back downstairs to find the brown-haired woman whose glance, no matter how subtle, he now acknowledged was the only reason he had gone to groom himself in the first place. He approached her from behind with the furtive awe of a Japanese florist witnessing the first full flowering of some rare tropical bush. He tapped her unassumingly on her shoulder and she turned around immediately.
“Hi,” he said. “I thought I might introduce myself.”

“I’m Madelaine,” she responded effortlessly. Her voice was smooth and slightly deep, more eloquent than her ragged leather coat suggested. She stuck out her hand, seemingly pleased that he’d made the effort.

“Jimmy,” he said. She nodded her head in acknowledgement. He sensed something quivering inside her. She was a stormy hot magnet drawing him closer to its core. They looked at each other for a moment and then, as if to fill the sudden gap of silence, she suddenly sprang into conversation.

“I just saw this amazing film about the tango,” she said. Her red-brown lips moved in smooth and supple waves as she spoke. “Strictly Ballroom. It was so incredible. I mean the people. They’d put on all this make up and eye liner and go out dressed all in black. Every night, like some kind of cultish obsession.”

“Wasn’t it originally meant to be some kind of lament?” he asked.

“Yes. It was. By slaves. They’d practise at night while their masters were asleep. It was their only way of rebelling against their subjugation.

He was captivated by the hint of dark fascination that glimmered in her eyes. In the abrupt, almost nervous motion of her hands and feet while she spoke, he detected a passion for the beautiful and abstract.

“It’s so strange that something so sensual was once such a grave and serious matter.”

“Yes, but that’s precisely why it’s so sensual,” she said. “You can still see it in their faces. It gives the dance its mystique.”

Jimmy blinked his eyes. For a moment the world slipped away and he felt he was floating before the image of something so beautiful he could not bare to look at it. Suddenly the automatic CD changer clicked into motion and a procession of loud drum beats pounded through the room. Madelaine glared over at one of the speakers.

“What is this?” she asked accusingly.

“I’ll put something else on,” said Jimmy. He stood up and walked over to the stereo. After flipping through a stack of CDs on the floor, he picked out a late seventies compilation album and put it on. The first cut was Golden Brown by The Stranglers.

“No way!” Madelaine exclaimed. “I haven’t heard this since I was a teenager in Charleston.”

“Charleston? That’s quite a ways. What brought you here? Studies of some kind?”

“No, I finished my degree a few years ago.”

“On?”

“Literature.” Madelaine played with a strand of her hair, dangling it over and dipping it into her drink. “I’ve always wanted to be a writer. I’ll get around to it someday. It seems to be the thing I’m most cut out for. My mother always pushed me that way, at any rate.”

“Yes, mother always thought you were the more literary one,” uttered a soft female voice from behind. Jimmy turned around to see a tall blond woman with large blue eyes standing to the side of the couch. She was wearing a pair of loosely fitting black synthetic pants and a black and white horizontally striped tee shirt that gave the contradictory impression of French sailors and prison inmates - the perfect mixture of romance and taboo.
“Yes, but you were always the prettier one,” said Madelaine. Then she turned to Jimmy. “I’m sorry. We’re so rude. This is my sister Josephine.”

“Oh, like Napoleon’s Josephine,” Jimmy remarked.

“Napoleon was a pig,” Josephine declared in the tone of an impish defiant child.

Jimmy nodded his head and gestured for Josephine to sit down. She nudged between Jimmy and Madelaine and then started laughing in a loose, almost garrulous way that that suggested some kind of underlying nervousness or insecurity.

“You see,” said Madelaine supportively, sensing immediately that Jimmy had noticed something awkward about Josephine, “that’s why mother always thought men would go for Josephine. It’s the way she laughs.” She turned to Josephine. “You’re so lucky, you know. There’s something both tragic and rebellious about it. As if you’re striking out at the world while at the same time pouting about your inability to do anything about it. It really turns men on, you know.”

Josephine seemed completely mesmerized by what Madelaine had just said: beaming with satisfaction at the positive implications of her sister’s declarations, yet at the same time afraid to challenge her in any way. It was clear that Madelaine had always been more popular with men and she was just building up Josephine’s confidence to avoid some later conflict between them.

Madelaine grabbed Jimmy’s wrist and squeezed it. “Josephine has a lot of admirers.” Josephine blushed and curled a lock of hair around her index finger. “Yes. There’s that sweet polish man at the bakery. Every time I come over he asks if I have a boyfriend.” She smiled and looked over towards Jimmy as if to gauge his response.

“I just thought of something,” Madelaine said out of the blue. “Sorry if I’m changing the topic. I’ve been thinking all week, in fact, but it just came back to me. It’s a question...I can’t decide if when someone is unhappy with their lives it’s because they’ve been cursed to be surrounded with bad people or if it’s just something inside them that prevents them from accepting the world around them and draws bad people towards them.”

“A good person makes all the difference in your life,” said Josephine. “That’s what I think anyway.”

“Are you so sure?” Madelaine replied. There was a defeatist note in her voice.

“What if you were trapped in a small town all your life,” said Jimmy. “A place with absolutely nothing going for it. A place you hated every day and night.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” asked Madelaine.

“I’m not sure,” he said. In reality he had never figured out if he hated or just simply missed his hometown Ypsilanti in southern Michigan. It was close enough to Ann Arbor and Detroit to be cool, but wasn’t anything special in itself. “Sometimes despising something and needing it are so closely tied together that it is impossible to tell the difference.”

“I’m always sure when I hate something,” replied Madelaine. “Always.”

“I can certainly attest to that,” Josephine declared.

Jimmy laughed. “Are you saying that something couldn’t change inside you so that you would eventually like the thing you originally hated?”

“No,” said Madelaine. “All I said is I know when I hate something. It’s obvious. I burn inside. I sweat anger. But that’s not to say I’ll hate it forever.”

Josephine’s gaze drifted around the room as she played with her hair and then stopped dead on an African couple that had just stepped into the room and were whispering back and forth into each other’s ears. Madelaine followed the line of her
sister’s glance over to the couple before turning her attention back to Jimmy. “But when you come to like someone you once hated. Maybe that’s just people around you destroying your innermost self,” she said. “Twisting you into being like them.”

“If so, then we’ve all been lied to all our lives,” said Jimmy.

“How so?” asked Josephine, her attention suddenly drifting back to the conversation.

“Made to believe the individual can make a difference. Made to believe in all the heroic myths - sports, television, advertising - that tell you that you’re different and can conquer all adversity.”

“Don’t you just hate it,” said Madelaine. “Life is just one big sales pitch for something you can never afford to buy anyway.”

Josephine giggled and swept her hair back. “I know,” she added. Then she stood up suddenly. “Excuse me,” she said politely. She went over to the African couple to introduce herself. Jimmy moved over towards Madelaine. She looked directly into his eyes as though she wanted to say something important but then shifted her attention demurely to a point in the center of her lap.

“So,” Jimmy said as he tried to capture back here gaze, hoping to somehow mine the intensity he knew was stirring inside her.

“So,” Madelaine reflected back.

“You’re from the south...”

“Yes.” She seemed flattered that he’d asked and went on to tell him about her childhood. Her father was a mildly eccentric Irish immigrant that made it big in the shipping industry and her mother was a capricious woman with three bachelors degrees who worked for the local leftist newspaper and stressed the importance of art and literature over the banalities of a workaday existence.

“Mother used to patronise all these struggling artists,” she said. “She would even invite some of them from all the way across the Atlantic to stay with us. We lived in a lovely white-pillared house and I remember they used to paint in our back yard while she groomed the horses.” She stopped and looked away as if she were picturing the scene in her head. “I miss those times so much...the horses - they were so magnificent. The grass in the spring. The house all white and gabled with history. I used to walk barefoot in my favourite dress across the lawn every morning to give them each a sugar cube.” She looked across the room as if suddenly sad, and then continued in a soft, hushed tone, with more stories from her youth. She invited home her first boyfriend when she was only fourteen and rolled her eyes dolorously as she described him. “He was two years older than me, sullen to the point of menacing, and drove around in an old Saab. We spent whole nights down by the old black waters of the river, trading kisses and drinking cheap bourbon. Sometimes we would hang out in abandoned trains, ducking down and hiding whenever so much as a distant voice was heard.”

“So much as a distant voice was heard...” he repeated in his mind, savouring the awkward poetry of her words. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I went away to Paris when I was sixteen and when I came back it was never the same. Paris opened me up. Turned my irreverence away from angry teenaged boys to art and literature.”

Jimmy adjusted his collar and looked down, trying to imagine her as a teenager coming back from Paris. All those nights by the river - sexy, barefoot, and wild -
finally bursting open and flowering into something both raging and wondrous: a genuine thirst for knowledge.

“I remember when I first started reading,” Madelaine mused. “I devoured books day and night. Books like Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* and Baudelaire’s *Les Fleures du Mal*. Books like Apollinaire’s *Alcools*. The more I read the more I was convinced that literature - French literature, even Spanish - was the thing. It was an elegant rebellion. It was even a weapon, a swift thrust of a rapier at the heart of the world.”

Madelaine looked around the room and stood up abruptly. “Can I get you a drink?”

“No, that’s fine,” said Jimmy.

She came back a minute later with a glass of red wine, its stem hanging downwards like a pendulum from between the middle and index fingers of her right hand. Then she set the glass down on the coffee table and lit a cigarette. Josephine, who had been talking with the African couple across the room, made eye contact with her sister and then came back to join them. She stepped up to the couch and slotted herself between Jimmy and Madelaine.

“So,” she said with self-irony.

“I don’t like big cities,” Madelaine commented as though to some imaginary talk show host sitting beside her. She was staring at the smoke rings as they rose from the glowing orange tip of her cigarette.

“Really?” said Jimmy with surprise. Up to that point he had taken her as a woman styled in the mould of a great Hollywood actress of the thirties, as comfortable in a quaint country setting as she was in the finest cafés and restaurants of New York or Stockholm. “I love them, but sometimes I get sick of all the people. They can be so impersonal, but that same quality can be kind of inspiring. It forces you to look inside and reinvent yourself every day. All the fragmentation. It eats away and electrifies at the same time. When I first came here from Michigan I was depressed for a year or two. Just felt so alone and alienated. All I did was go out to bars and clubs all the time.”

“Jimmy,” Madelaine interrupted as though to stop him, but with the tenderness of someone who’d known him a lot longer.

Jimmy looked down at the floor for a moment, his eyes heavy with contrition. Perhaps he had revealed too much or went off on some presumptuous tangent. “Sorry to divert the conversation. Cities...”

“No need to apologize. And I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Don’t worry - you didn’t.”

Josephine stood up in apparent remonstration to the potential intimacy unfolding before her and walked back to the kitchen. “I’m going to see what’s happening out there. You two seem to be getting on well enough without me.”

“Josephine!” Madelaine protested. “Please sit down.”

Josephine turned away from them with a brisk, almost crude sense of authority, and walked to the kitchen. This was clearly a different woman than the one with the girlish giggle who constantly swept her hair back as if she was on camera.

Madelaine looked away uncomfortably and then turned back to Jimmy. “Yes,” she said with a sigh. “I never feel completely at home in a big city. I’d rather turn away from it all and live in a small town.” She set her cigarette in an ashtray and took a sip from her wine glass. “All this!” She swept her hand in a wide arc in front of her. “I’m so disappointed. When I left Charleston I had such big visions of what my
life would be like. I thought places like New York would be filled with thousands of exciting young people.”

“You just have to find them. I’ve been here for four years working in bars. It may sound like a happening sector of the subculture but it’s still tough to find people I have much in common with. But I think it’ll come. I just love the way the whole city moves like some kind of massive machine.” He widened his eyes and grinned like a mad hatter. “All the glass, the buildings, the strange characters, the subway. Just the sheer pace of it all.”

Just then a tall blonde man with a silver shirt, green plaid pants and bleached hair walked into the room and adjusted his black-framed rectangular glasses. “I’m looking for the bathroom,” he said delicately.

“Upstairs,” said Jimmy. The man thanked him and walked upstairs. Madelaine lit a cigarette and continued.

“Life is getting faster all the time,” said Madelaine, her brow wrinkled in mild vexation. “I’m sure I’m not the first to notice, either. But to what end? The faster it gets the less time people have to reflect on things. Nobody thinks anymore. Nobody reads. People are spoon-fed. I worked in a publishing house for a few years and eventually had to quit. I was so disgusted. I gave up reading modern fiction altogether. It’s all so linear, so action packed. No imagination. No reflection. And do you know why? Hollywood. Publishers want books that they can sell to movie studios and agents want books they can sell to publishers. It’s ruined everything. It’s turned into a business where the middle men and guys at the top exploit all the people that actually do the creating.”

“The music industry is the same. The people making all the money are all the bankers and insurance brokers. They have no talent other than the ability to push money around. The people that actually produce...I’m not really a Marxist, but it seems that the reason the economy is so bad is that all the money is in the hands of organisations that produce nothing. If you don’t produce anything, you have nothing to sell and everyone’s out of work.”

“Exactly,” said Madelaine, her face radiating approval. “That’s why I want to be a writer. I want to escape from it all and rage against the whole hypocrisy of everything, especially the arts industry. To me, a novel is an expression of something. It’s how it makes you feel. The memories it conjures, the scents, the colours. The channels it opens up inside you. It doesn’t have to have any action. The plot is just a kind of clothes rack that is hidden behind the beauty of the clothing it supports. The shape of the rack is irrelevant. It’s how a book sets off the internal chain of events in the reader’s mind. When I look back at all the books I’ve read I always forget the plot, but always remember how it was written. The style. The impressions. The beauty of the page.”

“It sounds like you might like Rilke,” ventured Jimmy.


“Yes,” he said with understatement. That was his book. When he had first moved to New York to study music it had meant so much to him. The romantic soul trapped in a modern and dehumanising world. An individual in constant conflict with himself, revolting against the very terms of his existence. Man was not alone in the universe, his feelings were. People were isolated from one another by emotions that were so deeply hidden they could never be fully expressed.
Jimmy looked at Madelaine, trying to keep his eyes from wandering over the soft contours of her face.

“I really don’t like all this modern stuff,” she said, gesturing over to the stereo. “It has no warmth. It does nothing for me.”

“I didn’t like it at first when I was more into classical, but I’ve come to respect it as some form of twisted romanticism…and now it’s my bread and butter!”

“Romanticism? It seems the farthest from that imaginable.”

“It’s the spirit of otherness and alienation. It’s that longing for something else...travel...adventure...basically, otherness. And that’s what I see in modern music. A sort of angry bleak anti-world hovering outside of the banalities of existence – and that is romanticism in a nutshell!”

“Maybe, but it’s still empty and emotionless. Modern life is cold enough, so why escape into something even colder?”

Perhaps its the self irony of the techno generation. Rebel against something by pushing it to a ridiculous extreme.”

“Ahh,” she said. “I see what you mean now. A kind of burlesque.”

“That’s it.”

They fell silent for a moment. Jimmy stood up and looked around. The party was almost dead. The last few stragglers made their drunken ways to the door. Even Robert, who Jimmy hadn’t noticed all night but was known for his late night drinking binges, was asleep on the couch.

Madelaine touched Jimmy’s palm, noticing the cut on his finger. “What did you do to yourself?” she asked with concern.

“Nothing,” Jimmy lied. “Just a paper cut.”

Madelaine tapped Jimmy on the leg and stood up. “Next week,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“You should come over for dinner.”

“I’d love to.” Something inside of him loosened. He felt warm all over as he stood beside her. She was a ravishing Verena Tarrant and just like Henry James’ heroine, she was vibrant, exciting, sharp, almost mystical. It was as if she’d tumbled into this world from another one altogether, one of tenebrous antiquity at once made modern by a the stark sense of displacement that came from her being stranded in a world she had no place in.

They exchanged phone numbers and he invited them to visit him at work sometime and a minute later a swarthy man of medium height and build emerged from the kitchen with Josephine and handed Madelaine a set of keys. He whispered something in Madelaine’s ear that sounded like Spanish and she stood up.

“Goodbye,” she said to Jimmy. Ramon nodded his head and stepped across the threshold. Madelaine followed.

“Goodbye,” echoed Josephine.

Jimmy stood under the doorframe and watched them as they walked down the stairs out into the cold wet night. The couple vanished in the blur of reflected lights
off the black sheen of rain on the pavement. There was a flash of light in the distance and, for a moment, Jimmy thought he could see the soft brown mantle of her hair tumbling across the white of her face.

Chapter 1.2

The morning light had already broken through the curtains by the time Jimmy woke up, its stark beams cutting through the room and glazing every object with a brilliant transcendent halo, the low pitched hum of the traffic outside seeming to unify the random sounds of the day under a single airy tone. Jimmy opened the curtains and pressed his face against the window. The glass was cold against his skin and while the sky was blue and cloudless a light frost had garnished the tips of the grass in the yard below. *It won’t be long before it’s really fucking cold,* he thought. He climbed back under his covers and quickly fell asleep.

An hour later he woke up again, but this time to the sound of a detached voice hovering through the room. At first he wasn’t sure who it was, but the lilting tone slowly crystallized into the image of a face. It was Madelaine. He jumped out of bed and bent over the answering machine to listen.

“Hi. I’m sorry I haven’t called yet. I’ve been working all week...anyway I’d like to know if...well... you want to come over for dinner tomorrow. Friday. I think, yes, it is a Friday...”

Without picking up the phone, he walked directly out of the room and into the bathroom to take a shower. It was best call her back later. Although it was a welcome surprise, he needed time to reflect on the possible motives behind her call. It was certainly a friendly invitation, but *how* friendly was the question. After their first meeting he didn’t know if he could ever regard her in a purely platonic way. But he shouldn’t be presumptuous. Perhaps she was going through bad times with her husband and just needed somebody to talk to. Or maybe Ramon was away for the week, possibly back in Spain, and she was using the opportunity to get to know Jimmy better to see if he was indeed the intriguing new man he hoped she thought he was. He savoured this notion for a long moment as he let the hot water from the adjustable showerhead gently massage his face. It was also possible that she just wanted to set him up with Josephine as some kind of sisterly favour. But if that were true, why was she so openly affectionate with him? As he shut off the water and climbed out of the shower stall, he concluded that it was most plausible that she just saw him as a friend and wanted to extend her newfound acquaintance to her husband who must, after all, be somewhat lonely outside his home country. Whatever the truth was, he thought as he walked out of the bathroom with a green towel wrapped tribally around his waste, getting any closer to her would be either very difficult, very messy, or both.

After getting dressed he left his apartment to go to work. It was late September. A slight chill hung in the air. The morning frost had disappeared and the air was thinner than usual. He stepped out into the street and made his way slowly to work. He lived above a small furniture shop on the Lower East Side hidden away at the base of a narrow cul de sac, which always seemed to be lost in the shadows of the tall
buildings that spread a few blocks outwards in either direction. He looked across the street at a row of small delicatessens and quick stop restaurants as he made his way past a Portuguese pool hall and a bank before crossing at the first light in the direction of Astor Street as a gang of skateboarders sailed irreverently by. Time almost seemed to vanish as he continued to make his way southward towards Little Italy and SoHo, past rows of street side fruit stands standing at the base of red brick apartment blocks, their zigzag fire escapes coaxing his gaze upwards to the tall quivering buildings capped in bronze and gold that loomed in the distance. He turned right on Canal Street just before Pearl’s Paints no time he was at The Swan. He walked through the hulking ornate wooden doors - carved with runes intertwining in some ancient Celtic pattern. The walls inside were decked with strange little curios from Ireland - dolls, bottles, instruments, road signs - giving the place the atmosphere of a cluttered living room of some well-travelled souvenir collector. In all its excess, somehow it eluded pretension. Perhaps it was the seemingly random placing of all the objects, but whatever it was, the atmosphere had something of a fireplace hearth you could really warm your feet around.

He sat down and looked at his watch. He only had ten minutes to gather his thoughts before the beginning of his shift.

“Cuttin’ it close, mate,” said his boss Jerry. He had just walked out from the back room behind the bar.

“Sorry, I walked.”

“A little exercise can’t hurt, can it – unless it always makes you late for work.”

“I’ll try harder to be on time next time.”

“No worries. I’m just winding you up. I’m all in favour of a good walk. I’d like to get some exercise myself, but I just never get the chance. I walk twenty blocks and I can already feel it in your knees. It’s this damn city. You get the feeling it’s all out there. All against you.”

“Just like the rest of this damn country since Bush took over.”

“Better be careful, the walls might be bugged!”

Jerry was Irish and like a lot of the staff and regulars at The Swan - mostly exiled Europeans and South Americans who, with imported cigarettes and impassioned talk of social disenchantment, gave the bar an atmosphere of creative nihilism. He was an outsider gathered together with other outsiders in solidarity against whatever manifestation they could find of the angry grey machine of the American right wing.

“Let’s have a quick Murphy’s then before they send me off to San Quentin,” said Jimmy as he snapped a tea towel at the wall.

Jerry poured Jimmy a Murphy’s and while it was settling Jimmy retreated to the back hall maze of corridors that led to the restrooms. He took out a scrap of paper from his pocket. Dinner next week was scribbled in large loopy letters beside a phone number. He inserted a quarter into the pay phone beside the men’s bathroom and started dialling. After the last beep there was suddenly a busy signal as if it was too impatient to wait for the usual gap of silence. He waited for a minute and dialled again. It was still busy, so he walked back to the front room to find a Murphy’s sitting on the bar with a note from Jerry saying he would be back in ten. He picked up the cold heavy glass. However much he wanted to savour the deep coffee and wood bark flavours of the stout he couldn’t and ended up draining the glass in three gulps. Then he marched back to the phone, took a quick look at the clock directly above it, and dialled again. This time the phone rang. After two rings Madelaine
answered. Her voice had a soft gravity about it. He wondered what was on her mind.

“Yes?”
“It’s me,” he said.
“What? Oh, Jimmy. You sound so different on the phone.”
“I got your message. I don’t have long. I’m at work.”
“Yeah, well we’re having some people over tomorrow. You should come.”
“I’m off work tomorrow so I think I can make it.”
“Do you know how to get here?”
“I haven’t been in that neighbourhood for a while, but I used to know someone nearby so I should be fine.”
“Good, we’ll expect you.”
There was suddenly a burst of laughter in the background.
“Josephine says hello,” said Madelaine.
“Hello, Josephine,” he said in the mock voice of a man calling out for someone from the other side of a glade. Jimmy pictured Josephine with her jet-blue eyes and cloudy blond hair leaning over Madelaine’s shoulder. “What time should I come?” he asked, switching his attention back to Madelaine.
“Seven or eight,” she said. There was something unusually slow about the tone of her voice. Something almost erotic. “No worries if you’re late.”
“Should I bring something?”
“If you want. Don’t feel you have to.” Her voice resumed a more formal tone.
“Well, I should go.”
He said goodbye and let the receiver drop. She certainly sounded enthusiastic enough, that was not the problem. He reviewed the conversation in his mind, playing it back frame-by-frame, world-by-word. She had said seven or eight with a distinct note of enticement in her voice as if she saw that specific time frame as some kind of magic portal lying before an evening of something more intimate. Maybe that was her way of implying the possibility of romance between them. Perhaps not now, but maybe at a later stage. With Josephine hanging over her shoulder she was hardly free to say how she really felt. And the additional threat of her husband’s possible proximity imposed an even greater need for secrecy on the conversation. That was why her voice became suddenly more formal at the end. It was a coda. It was that look of neutrality two lovers assume the moment just after their last kiss before some great imposing departure. It was the sealing of the wound after the interchange of blood. A way of saying she had shared something with him but had to go back to living the lie she shared with her husband. A bright light burned inside him as he walked back to the bar to begin his shift. He had a feeling like something special - doubtless even powerful and permanent - was about to happen to him. What it was, however, he didn’t yet know.

The next day he woke up and started working on his music. He felt inspired. His mind rushed with new thoughts and feelings. He went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, facing not the man of twenty nine rapidly approaching forty that he had witnessed the night of the party, but a man still in his early twenties eager for new adventures and experiences. How stale he had been inside over the last two years. How could I have gone on like that? he asked himself. So devoid of purpose. So dead inside. Reduced to cutting open his fingers on Brooklyn harbour to reassert his
youth and vigour. Pretending it was some kind of deep artistic gesture when it was nothing more than a sign of boredom and stagnation.

He turned on the radio and plugged in his headphones. Whenever he started a new project he felt a great exhilaration. Creative autonomy. He was free to move, free to explore. He was an untamed stallion roaming the darkest fields of his unconscious. Yet as the work moved on and narrowed down to its completion he would always start to feel trapped. He was the slave, not the master and creator. The project would start to dominate his life. And all the freedom that he felt at the beginning would turn to bland determinism. At the beginning, a piece of music was always a thousand roads, yet as he composed the final stanzas all those thousand roads were still visible, but there was only one right road, and he could never tell which one. That was the shackle. Committing to a path you were no longer sure of and you could no longer change without proving you had made a mistake and thus admitting your own ineptitude. So he would always end up abandoning a near-finished work in total frustration and set it aside for months, tinkering around with the electronics on his sampler and keyboard, until his life felt rootless and empty again. Then he’d come back to the unfinished work, or maybe even start a new piece.

He spent the next hour honing the digital cello on his latest work, a ten-minute house number, trying to balance it with the detached electric piano that hovered like a fog in the background. The vocals were only slightly decipherable, as if only half intoned from the bottom of a crevice. It was an edgy dance piece in the style of the new electronic twelve inches coming out of London or Detroit, but with a kind of harder New York twist.

That night he took much longer than usual dressing. He normally didn’t trouble himself too much with his appearance, yet somehow he felt he had to look especially good for her. He couldn’t let the spark from the party die out. He put on his black silk shirt - textured in groves like paper-thin corduroy. He rarely wore it. He bought it in a store on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles one summer. Although he was only in the store for ten minutes the woman remembered him when he visited two years later. This was enough to confer in his mind an almost sacred status on the shirt. There must have been something special about the way he looked that day when he tried it on in front of her at that Melrose boutique. He slipped on his jeans and walked out to the subway station. As he crossed the street he continued to think of the woman from the store. Why had he never bothered to ask her out? Certainly she would have accepted, having remembered him – and more importantly, letting him know she remembered him – for two years on the basis of a single impression. A woman with long braided brown hair walking a poodle brushed against him as he rounded a corner and suddenly then he thought of Madelaine. If he had slept with the woman in LA and one day he did end up with Madelaine, it would be one more affair he would have to explain to her. So perhaps it was a violation of his feelings for Madelaine to even think of another woman - even if it was one who he was sure he would never see again. As he got closer to her house he started to wonder why he had even been thinking about betraying Madelaine when he couldn’t even say that he was in love with her? Although it was clear he had experienced something strong with her, maybe it was just a fleeting passion and that very evening she would expose herself as a cheap and forceful woman, someone completely unworthy of his affections.

The apartment was located in the middle of a narrow street in Spanish Harlem lined on both sides by garbage bags. Directly across the street, standing on a small
patch of grass in front of an old brick building, a group of Latino children took turns shooting a soccer ball between two freshly transplanted trees with mounds of soil still gathered around the base of their trunks. Her building was beige brick with a tall black iron staircase spiralling up the left front. There were two doorbells, neither labelled. He pressed the upper button. He guessed it was the right one since she lived on the second floor. There was no answer. Perhaps it was broken. He opened the door and walked up the creaky wooden staircase. On the right was a door. He stood there for an instant wondering if he shouldn’t just turn around and go back. What did he have to gain by this? No doubt he’d sit uncomfortably beside her and her husband all night and watch them as they whispered sweet nothings into each other’s ears. A retreat on his part would be the only noble course of action. But as he stared at the door curiosity took over. Maybe, he thought, just maybe. Maybe what? He didn’t really know. Just maybe. Maybe fucking maybe it would lead to something.

He knocked. After a long silence there was the sound of creaking floorboards. Then the door opened. Madelaine stepped out. She was exactly as he remembered her, only dressed more casually in a baggy sweater and black pants. Her hair hung in thin brown tresses over her eyes, giving the impression she was someone watching the world from the outside, a child looking on some barbaric religious ritual from behind a veil of reeds. A killer, he thought, a real Stradivarius.

“Hey,” she said. “You’re early. I was just getting guacamole ready.” She shook her head in gentle reproach. “Josephine’s at the store. She should be back soon.”

She showed him into the kitchen. Some Latin music - possibly Portuguese Fado - was playing. Ramon was sitting on a small chair beside the fifties-style metal and linoleum kitchen table in a black sweater with ripped jeans. He was staring into a candle flame as if lost in contemplation over something too precious to let go of for the sake of mere company. Madelaine nudged him and he snapped out of it.

The kitchen was decorated like an intricate nativity scene with candles burning on every table top, some jammed in the tops of wine bottles, frozen wax waterfalls reaching down the sides, others fixed in hardened wax puddles on tiny plates or ash trays. The walls and fridge were speckled with postcards, drawings, and tiny hanging objects - ceramic, glass, fabric. Each stood out like a tiny icon, radiating its own unique splendour and beauty into the dimly lit room.

Madelaine showed him around the apartment. The rooms were small. There was a bedroom and a bathroom with a shabby shower curtain and a broken window. There were big rips in the kitchen linoleum but the hard wood floors in the bedrooms looked as if they had just been refinished. They seemed to live in a state of exalted poverty, floating above the world of employment and commerce without a worry. The warm yellow light of the candles and the soft melodies of the Latin music was all they really needed. They walked into the living room. The bookshelves bulged with hundreds of foreign language texts.

“I used to read a lot,” she said. “I think I watch too much TV now. I know I shouldn’t. I’m just too tired after work to do anything else.”

Jimmy picked up a book from the shelf beside him.

“Lorca. Garcia Lorca,” said Madelaine. “He was killed during the Spanish Civil War. Executed with bayonets. Makes you wonder what sort of world we’re living in.”

“The Disasters of War,” Jimmy muttered.
She nodded knowingly as though to signal that she picked up his reference to Goya. “When I was in Spain we got to go to Goya’s old mansion. They call it something like The House of the Deaf Lunatic, in Spanish of course. Weird place. All these violent paintings hanging in the dining room.”

The door knocked and a couple walked in. Madelaine took their coats and made the introductions. “Jorge and Iara,” she said with her arms outstretched. “Please come in.” She turned to Jimmy. “They just moved here from Brazil.”

“We just came by to pick up our umbrella,” said Jorge. “You never know when you might need one in this city.”

“Oh, yes,” said Madelaine. She opened the front closet and pulled out a black umbrella. She handed it to Iara and then turned around and walked into the kitchen.

Jorge was short and slim with a short mound of black curly hair on his head. Iara was taller and more plump and had bright red-brown hair – no doubt dyed. Jimmy stood in the front hall talking as Madelaine worked in the kitchen. They immigrated to New York only two months earlier and were still looking for work. Iara came from an affluent Catholic background but couldn’t stand the hypocrisy and destitution running rampant through their country. Jorge was a carpenter and was once a promising soccer player in Brazilian youth leagues until his ankle gave in on him. He met Iara when he was twenty-one and they’d been together ever since. She had no particular interest in a career but didn’t mind taking odd jobs as they came along and when they were necessary.

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” Madelaine asked from the kitchen. “It’s almost ready.”

“Thank you very much,” said Iara. “But we should really go. Jorge...”

“Yes,” said Jorge. “I have to meet some people in less than an hour.”

Madelaine and Ramon walked the couple downstairs and out to the porch. Jimmy played anxiously with a subway token as he waited for them to come back, rolling it back and forth between his fingers as he tried not to drop it on the table. After what seemed like an eternity the front door finally opened and Madelaine and Ramon walked back in.

“Sorry,” said Madelaine. “Those two can really talk sometimes.”

As Madelaine made the final preparations for dinner, Ramon and Jimmy took their places around the dinner table. The kitchen walls were rippling with tiny flays of golden light that streamed from the candles. Moments latter the door swung open and Josephine walked in with a grocery bag. Her cheeks were either rouged or just red from the cold - Jimmy couldn’t tell - and she was wearing a full-length wool coat. She looked at Jimmy and simpered.

“So,” she said. “I hope you like Vanilla. It’s all they had. Our neighbourhood is so deprived.” She set the bag on the kitchen table.

“Josephine,” said Madelaine as she washed a few shreds of carrot off her hands, “why don’t you show Jimmy the book we’re working on?”


“Josephine is such a great illustrator,” Madelaine announced with great excitement. Jimmy smiled uncomfortably. Was Madelaine merely building up her sister as a way of sparking something off between him and Josephine? If so, it meant she had only invited him over as a means of setting him up with her sister. “I’d love to see it,” he said politely while avoiding eye contact.
“I’ll show him another time,” said Josephine. “I don’t think it’s ready yet.”

As the evening passed Jimmy felt more and more comfortable with the surroundings. At first he found it difficult not to stare over at Madelaine as she repeatedly ran her slender fingers through her hair, but Ramon was so quiet and unthreatening it seemed he wouldn’t have cared if he caught Jimmy doing so.

“We met in Barcelona one summer,” said Madelaine, again nudging Ramon into an expression. “I was over as a part of my degree program. The next summer he came over to America and visited. After a few weeks he decided he wanted to stay and we got married just a few months after that.”

Madelaine smiled warmly and continued with her story. She and Ramon moved to New York a year later. Ramon got a job at a picture framing shop and she found work as a waitress.

“Getting married. It seemed like the best thing,” Madelaine said. “I was only twenty three, but it couldn’t have been any different.” She looked suddenly reflective as though trying to summon back a thought that had just slipped away. “People all seem to put off marriage these days. They treat it like the purchase of a house. I just go at life. I just let it happen. I guess it was a little rough at the time - by that I mean the first few years of our marriage - but I’m glad I didn’t plan it all out.” It was the romantic conjugality in her that really moved Jimmy. In a modern world where casual sex and relationships had seemed to replace all true romance, she wasn’t afraid to be in love.

“Planning’s so boring,” said Ramon.

“Yes,” Josephine agreed. “It certainly is.”

“People hide from life,” added Jimmy. “Hide behind their plans.”

Madelaine turned to Jimmy, setting her wine glass on the table. “Have you ever seen Dishonoured?” she asked him, her eyes a pool of glossy wet shadows.

“What, you mean with Marlene Dietrich?” She nodded eagerly as she let Jimmy continue. “I had a chance once, but it was too cold and I didn’t have a car at the time.”

“There’s a great sequence where a military official asks a crowd of people if anyone wants to be a spy to defend their country,” Madelaine explained as Josephine cast a helpless look in Jimmy’s direction as if to signal her disgruntled surrender to her older sister’s domination. “Marlene Dietrich comes forward and volunteers. The official laughs and asks her if she’s afraid of death. She looks all serious and says I think life is much more frightening.”

Jimmy paused. In the warm haze of candlelight Madelaine’s eyes seemed almost to transform into balls of luminous fluid hovering alone in space and then into radiant words hurrying off into the darkness, words of some poem that had yet to be heard or even written. Death, thought Jimmy. In every love was a tiny death, a total denial of the self in the presence of the other. If death could always be so dark and beautiful, then perhaps Marlene Dietrich was right and life really was more frightening.

“I was always the innocent one,” Josephine blurted out. “Mother always liked Madelaine more. She was a rebel herself and adored all those same qualities in Madelaine.”

“That’s not true, Josephine. And you know it. Mother was always at my throat. We were always fighting. If anything, Father liked you more. I know that much. The way he always used to read to you at night. As far as he was concerned I was a lost cause.”
“Yes. But the black sheep is always the secret favourite. I was always the conformist. The one who was expected to just go along being sweet while you got all the attention.”

“Please,” said Ramon. “I have to hear this same argument every night. Why don’t you just forget your parents like I had to? Are you going to go through the rest of your life arguing about the first fifteen years of your existence?”

Josephine walked resignedly over to the cassette deck in the corner of the kitchen and put on a tape. The opening piano notes of a soft jazz piece filled the room.

“Good choice,” said Madelaine. Ramon shook his head in facile acknowledgement.

“You know, Chet Baker fucked women with his trumpet,” said Josephine. Jimmy raised his eyebrows. Perhaps she wasn’t as innocent as she claimed. Josephine took the ice cream out of the bag that was still sitting on the counter. “That’s why they knocked his teeth out when he cheated on his girl friend.” With a clumsy tug, she opened the ice cream bucket. “Oh, no. I think it went soft.”

“That’s OK,” said Jimmy. “It’ll be easier to serve.”

“I’ll get some bowls,” said Madelaine.

Josephine proceeded to fill four bowls with vanilla ice cream, laughing at her own ineptitude as she spilled a few spoonfuls on the table.

“There!” she finally said. She handed the bowls out one by one.

Several times as they were eating their ice cream Josephine said something - just a whisper, a sarcastic look, or self-conscious chuckle completely inaudible to the others - and then Madelaine’s face would go tight and angry. Very angry. She would clenched her teeth together and her eyes would go a few shades darker.

“I hate my job,” she finally said as she let her fork drop to the table, a thin scowl sewn across her face. “It’s not that I don’t like waitressing. It’s the customers. Some of them are just so damn rude. Yuppie protégés expecting the world to bow down before them because they’ve just got out of business school.”

Jimmy took a slow lingering sip of his wine and leaned back in his chair. Some women lost all their beauty in moments of anger. They became cheap and tawdry like old lampshades when they let all their frustrations fly out. But with Madelaine everything was different. Her anger drew him further in. He wanted to reach into its depths and marvel at its warm intrigue. He wanted to be angry with her. He wanted to be on her side no matter what she said. As she continued, Jimmy sat silently and watched the vaporous tongues of candlelight lick the surface of her rosy face, following her every gesture and expression. She could be sweet, almost motherly, or distant and reflective, and then suddenly angry, and to watch her next to Josephine only added further layers of complexity to the moods she radiated, which almost seemed to gain in intensity as they reflected off her younger sister’s facial expressions and reverberated with secondary and tertiary nuances as they cascaded outwards into the orange glow of the room.

When dinner ended Ramon stretched out his hands and yawned.

“Let’s go to The Tree,” Madelaine said.

Ramon just shook his head. “I think I have some work to catch up on.

“Well, I’m going anyway,” she said. “Are you coming, Josephine?”

Josephine shrugged her shoulders and retreated to her bedroom, closing the door loudly behind her.

“Come on, Josephine,” Madelaine urged her from the front hall.
“Not tonight,” Josephine yelled through her door. “I’m too tired.”

“If you say so,” Madelaine replied with a quiet sigh of resignation. She turned to Jimmy. “You’ll have to excuse my sister. She has her moods.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” said Jimmy politely. In actuality he wondered if he’d done something to offend her. Perhaps the whole dinner was a means to further introduce him to Josephine and he hadn’t responded in the correct way to her subtle overtures. Or maybe she was upset with Madelaine for suggesting they all go out together to a pub when the official plan was for Josephine to go out alone with him after dinner. Whatever the truth was, for the time being it would be presumptuous to assume Josephine had any feelings for him unless she explicitly said so.

“Let’s go,” said Madelaine. She appeared unruffled by her sister’s behaviour as she grabbed her coat and threw it around her shoulders. “At least we can have fun.” They put their coats on and left.

*The Tree* was an Irish pub around the corner, very much in the style of *The Swan*, with a little bit more of the American Irish passion for college football in full display on the walls.

Just as they walked in Madelaine smiled and made a sudden jack knife turn out the door. A moment later she rushed back in, kicking the door open as if to make a dramatic stage entrance. She threw her arms up in the air.

“What are you drinking?” she asked, her arms still in the air.

“Jesus fuck!” he said with a grin. “I’ll get it. You’ve been slaving away all night.”

“Jimmy,” she said, tugging at his coat sleeve.

“Yeah?”

“I hate crowds.”

“Yeah. Kill ‘m.”

“Yeah!” she said with an exaggerated nod of approval.

“What are you having?”

“Guinness.” She tugged at his coat again. “Jimmy.”

“What?”

She turned her head aside for an instant as if gathering her thoughts. She swept her hand through her hair and stared into his eyes.

“You know,” she said with candour. “I’m really glad we met. I really like you. I’m not just saying this, but you’re the nicest person I met since we’ve moved here. I’ve been so lonely since we moved to New York.”

Jimmy began twisting a plastic straw in his fingers. He looked out the window. A delivery van with Japanese characters painted on the side drove by.

“So are you,” he replied, still staring out the window. “It’s been so long since I’ve met anyone I really like. I’ve felt like such a nomad for the last ten years, wandering around from one apartment to the next, never really settling into anything.”

He listened to himself as the words came out. They seemed dull and witless - even trivial - and certainly not worthy of her presence. What could she possibly see in him? He was just another guy from a small town trying to make it big in the New York music scene. He felt insignificant beside her. Sure, he had been reasonably successful with women in the past, but Madelaine was of another calibre altogether. Yet hadn’t she just admitted to her affections? Didn’t the fact that she was sitting directly across from him at that particular moment prove that there was something between them?
She lit a cigarette and snuffed out the match flame with her thumb and index finger. A configuration of smoke rose from the tip of the narrow cardboard strip, disappearing as it expanded into the room. She looked at Jimmy for an instant before turning her head away to watch the flow of late night traffic. He watched the motion of her eyes. Even in moments of silence she radiated a sense of warmth and enthusiasm. Without thinking he touched her wrist with the tip of his index finger. She turned around as if startled, her hair sweeping like a waterfall across the sandy contours of her face.

Chapter 1.3

Jimmy wiped off the last drops of water from a whiskey glass and turned up the stereo behind the bar. It was near closing time. It was during these moments - bordering on the early hours of the morning - that he felt the most alive, the closest to being somebody. He had never been a day person. For him the day was something bland and unenjoyable, a lifeless block of time he had no choice but to live through and endure in order to earn a living and make it through to the evening. He turned the lights down and let the music govern his mood. Pere Ubu’s Modern Dance - 1970s industrial punk landscapes from Cleveland. After cleaning up the back room he came back and looked around the bar. A few customers still remained.

The door opened. A tall bald African American man with designer sunglasses and a huge orange parka hanging from his shoulders walked up to the bar. “Hey, Jimmy, what’s up man?”

“Good to see ya, Markus.” Jimmy turned to the wall of spirits behind him. “What are you drinking?”

“Just give me the usual.”

Jimmy took a small shot glass he’d just washed and filled it to the top with Jack Daniels. Markus pulled out his wallet.

“Don’t bother,” said Jimmy.

“That’s my man!”

Markus was Jimmy’s music agent. He did bookings around the New York club scene for fledgling music acts and obscure international DJs. He was well connected to dozens of small labels across the US and Europe and was in the process of marketing a few of Jimmy’s recordings to a few outfits in Chicago and Germany.

“What’s new?” asked Jimmy.

“What isn’t?” Markus tilted his head in aggravation. “Three of these London chicks showed up at my door last night claiming I’d screwed them on a booking. I’d never seen them before in my life. Who the fuck are you, I said. Then they pulled out some blow and I said no way, I ain’t into that crap anymore. Then they started crying and I felt sorry for them. They had no place to go. So I let them sleep on my couch. Then - wouldn’t you know it - the next morning Nicole comes up the stairs and sees them all walking out the door with their hair all messed up like they’d been up all night in some kind of Ozzfest foursome. Man, did I have some explaining to do. I was jumping like shrimp in a frying pan. Holy shit. Spent the whole day under a
fucking interrogation lamp. She’s normally so cool and understanding. But this time she just lost it.”

Jimmy shook his head in amusement. “No rest for the wicked,” he said.

“Whatever.” He took a deep breath and looked around the room. “And you know what?” he said in a low, almost secretive whisper. “I got some other news for you. It looks like things are gonna change back at the old homestead.”

“The homestead?” Jimmy looked perplexed.

“Nicole, man.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know she’s been wanting one for a while. Yesterday her test finally came back positive.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened with surprise. “Congratulations,” he exclaimed. He extended his hand. Markus slapped it and rolled his eyes in a casual and off-hand way that suggested that nothing terribly important had just transpired in his life. To Markus things just happened: they sailed along without any real trajectory towards some euphoric grand epiphany that would only come to light after the fact to give seemingly random events more weight and meaning.

“So, what’s with you?” Markus asked.

“Well...”

“Come on, nobody fools old Markus. I know you way better than that. You got that look like you got someone on your mind. Someone big.”

“Yeah. I guess. I met this girl.”

“This girl?”

“I’m not really sure how much it matters, though.”

“Don’t bullshit me, man.” He took a big gulp of his whiskey. “Every girl matters.”

“It’s just that she’s married,” he said.

Markus spit his whiskey out of his mouth and onto the bar. “Evil stuff. Stay away. You’d be better off shooting pure fucking heroin into your eyeballs. Back off, brother, back off. You’ll end up with half the town chasing you down the street trying to cut your dick off.”

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah...” he said. “I’d better just lay low and see what happens,” although this was not what he felt or even suspected what would happen.

“Christ. Married though,” Markus continued. “That’s rough. I once got wrapped up with this woman a few years back. Said she was divorced. Like fucking Christ she was. No ring. Boy was I stupid. Didn’t take long before her old sugar daddy was back in the picture with his designer shirts and Mercedes circling around the block all night honking his horn until she kicked me out of her house. Happened five times before I wizened up and gave her the golden handshake.”

“Only five?”

Just then the door opened and Madelaine walked into the room. Her cheeks were a deep rose color and she was carrying an old leather-bound book under her arm. Markus took some coloured pencils and a pad of paper out of his pocket and went to a table to sit down.

“Jimmy,” she said. She tapped him on the elbow affectionately.

“We’re closed,” Jimmy said flatly. Perhaps if he were sarcastic it might mask any of his feelings for her that she might already have noticed. Women always liked men
who held back their emotions and acted as though they couldn’t care less how they responded to their attentions. That’s what Vanessa had always told him at any rate. *Cultivate mystery,* she would say. *Don’t be too familiar.*

Madelaine’s mouth dropped. “Come on, I was just...”

Jimmy started laughing. “Christ, come on in,” he said. “I’m just joking. What do you want?”

“Thanks, but I should really go,” she said as if to mirror his sarcasm. “I just came by to invite you over for Halloween. We’re having a séance.” She widened her eyes dramatically like a person reading a ghost story to a group of children.

“A séance?”

“I’ve been getting sick of going out to Halloween parties and I wanted to do something different this year.”

“Hmmm...OK. Sounds like it could be fun. I don’t think I have any other plans.”


She rushed out the door. Jimmy turned the lights on and gave the last few customers a stern *clear out* look. A few minutes later the bar was empty except for Jimmy and Markus, who was sitting in the corner drawing. After Jimmy finished washing the last of the beer glasses, Markus walked up to the bar and set a few sheets of paper down in front of him. It was a full colour cartoon depicting Madelaine as some sort of post-apocalyptic avenger.

“You just drew this? Holy shit.”

*Jet Girl,* proclaimed Markus. “You ever read the *Tank Girl* comic strip?”

“A long time ago.”

“That chick of yours looks exactly like Jet Girl. That’s cool in my books. Tank Girl’s a bit butch, but Jet Girl’s got that cool sophistication thing happening. She’s pretty hot. Your lady, I mean. I actually recognise her. I met her a few weeks ago - just briefly, though - at a singles bar. I don’t think she remembered me.”

“A singles bar?” Jimmy looked startled. He felt a sharp pain at the thought of Madelaine cruising through one of those low-end Williamsburg hovels that get written up in the *Village Voice* as cool because people hook up in the bathrooms after talking for less than half an hour. Maybe she *was* looking for a new man after all.

“I guess she didn’t recognise me. She was with her sister at the time. I think she’s even cuter. Those huge glassy blue eyes. And she’s *so* sweet.” Markus looked up at the clock. “Listen. I’ll have to see you later. When those London guys at *Mirage* get back to me I’ll give you a ring.”

*Mirage?* Jimmy tilted his head as if to query him.

“They’re a new label in Britain that deals almost exclusively with electronica and hip hop. They seemed interested in what you’re doing right now, so I’d keep my fingers crossed and see what happens.”

“Hmmm. Interesting.” Jimmy was sceptical. He’d had far too many deals fall through at the last minute to get overly excited at what looked like it could be yet another near miss at a recording contract.

“I’ll get back to you,” said Markus. He turned and walked out into the street.

Jimmy looked at the cartoon more closely. Frame by frame in brilliant colour it showed Madelaine with her dark brown suede jacket and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth taking on a gang of armed convicts who’d just taken a small boy hostage in a desert hideout. The style was a stunning mixture between modern Japanese anime
strips, with their bleak erotic futurism, and Raymond Pettibon, only with more emotion and sincerity.

The first frame showed Madelaine in quarter profile, head hung in brooding contemplation with her hair falling in thick strands over her face. Her eyes, large and glassy, almost wet, looked down to the ground. She was alone in the desert beside a small blue jet. In the second frame she was in front of a door staring straight ahead with derelict intensity as she machine-gunned the lock open. In the third she kicked the door down to find a child sitting alone tied up in the corner. The child was white and trembling with soppy heavy lidded eyes - the very image of wounded innocence. In the fourth she held the child to her chest, caressing its head in long rich strokes. Her head was again hung low in quarter profile, and her eyes still wet and alive - small meniscal contours burning with a hot profusion of anger and love. The fifth frame was the same as the fourth, but a tall shadow was looming over from behind her back. In the sixth the child was screaming as a metal pipe, grey and angular, came crashing down from above, guided by a thick hairy forearm. In the seventh she had turned, shielding the child with one arm and deflecting the blow with the other, while delivering a solid swivel kick with her left leg. In the next she was shown straddled on top of a brutal skinhead assailant, driving her fist - a white streak of furry - over and over into his pleading face while she hid the child’s eyes in the breast of her coat. In the penultimate frame she was standing, holding the child as she flicked her cigarette down on the man’s bleeding, disfigured body in a gesture of merciless contempt. In the last frame she was back in her jet with only the torturous blue sky in front of her. The child was braced in her lap by a pair of crisscrossing seatbelts. Her face betrayed not a feeling of triumph or exaltation, but one of angry pathos. A large tear, as big and shiny as a droplet of mercury, fell from the bottom of her right cheek, all the world’s love and anguish seeming to pour from behind those big wet eyes.

Jimmy took a glass and filled it up with water. He took a sip and let the head settle. He stuck in a tape of traditional Irish music and softened the lights. It was those eyes. They were her eyes. Exaggerated perhaps to fit the Astro Boy style of the artwork, but still unmistakably hers. They said it all to him. And ever so strongly.

He locked the door and walked out into the street. The first hint of dawn was visible as the morning light reflected off the brass tips of the city’s tallest buildings, colouring them with a distinctly pinkish glaze. He walked along the Hudson River watching a few boats pass slowly through by, barely making an impression on the water’s black tarry surface and the words of Sonic Youth’s Hey Joni swirled through his mind: “It’s nineteen sixty four, its nineteen fifty seven, its nineteen sixty two, put it all behind you, now its all behind you...” It was a song from Daydream Nation, an album he had been listening to over and over again recently in an attempt to learn how they managed to balance the angular attack of the guitars with a more dreamy spirit of reflection. He always thought was about making an apology to a close friend left behind somewhere in the past, but he had also read it was about teenagers drinking tiny airplane bottles of vodka in back alleys, an interpretation that wasn’t obvious but could also be possible. Whatever the case, the whole world seemed to inhale and exhale the lyrics as he meandered through a series of old abandoned warehouses east of Chinatown unearthing memories from his past. For the last two years he was sure there would never be anyone like Vanessa and that he would never meet anyone like her again. She left him three years earlier, her only explanation being that she no longer felt a spark and that he was the perfect man, just for someone else. He never
figured out what she meant and after six long months he stopped trying to find out. It wasn’t, ironically, that he didn’t care, but more that it was safer not to care. That was the good thing about life - or maybe the worst thing - that it eventually freed you from the enslavement of your feelings and let you move on to some new situation, one which, in the beginning at least, seemed charged with the potential of taking you somewhere new and joyously transformative that could never possibly end up as badly as the last. And even if it did, there was always a period where you were sure it wouldn’t, maybe just a few short months of optimism. That, alone, was enough.

Jimmy walked onwards through the hazy night and the only thing he could hear as he approached his apartment was the soft hiss of tires on wet pavement.

Chapter 1.4

A deep red haze had settled over the grey horizon of the Autumn sky and the streets were filled with anxious leering faces, too lost in thought to pay attention to anything around them. It was only October and winter was already approaching. A man walked up the sidewalk carrying a colourful shopping bag. On the side was a glossy print of a landscape or garden, giving the impression the bag contained a gift for a potential lover and that the man was on his way to meet this woman and make some grand romantic overture he had been planning for months. Jimmy picked up his coat and stepped out the door. As he walked down the stairs to the ground floor he wondered if he should take a hint from the anonymous man and bring Madelaine a small gift, maybe a bouquet of flowers, something small and casual that would let her know that she meant something to him without being too obvious or threatening. But if he did there was always too strong a chance that it would backfire and Ramon would suspect that there was something between them. Then he would take out his anger on his wife for flirting outside the marriage.

He took the subway into Spanish Harlem and waited in an unassuming coffee shop that sold stale donuts reading the newspaper. He didn’t want to be too early and he also needed some time to settle his nerves and compose himself. In the past he’d always viewed men who got involved with married women with contempt. But maybe this was just one more example of life throwing things back at you by casting you in the very same role of someone you once viewed with scorn. If a man lived to a thousand, he’d probably never have the basis to judge anyone with a clear conscience, having himself committed every possible sin to every possible person walking the face of the earth.

At nine Jimmy left the coffee shop and made his way to the house. When he got to the front porch he noticed that the lights were out in the stairwell. He opened the front door and groped his way through the darkness to the top of the stairs. He knocked on the second door and in a matter of seconds it creaked open to an even deeper darkness inside. He felt his way around the doorframe, squinting his eyes in a crude attempt at vision.

“Whooa!” Came a shriek. Then something grabbed his wrist and he jumped back against the wall. The lights turned on. Madelaine stood in front of him laughing. She was wearing an oversized burgundy velvet shirt and black tights. Her
chin-length bangs were braided and tied back around her head. She had an amulet around her neck and held an unlit candle in a brass tray just above her waist. She loosened her grip on his wrist and let his hand fall away just as Ramon emerged from the darkness with Jorge and Iara.

“Just in time,” said Madelaine. “Let me take your coat. Oh. I meant to call you. Josephine’s gone to visit mother for the weekend. She says she’s really sorry she couldn’t come but would like to see you again.”

As Jimmy extended his regards and took off his shoes he wondered what was the real reason for Josephine’s absence. There was something in the tone of Madelaine’s voice, something almost artificial, which he had never noticed before. The explanation was just too pat, especially given Josephine’s refusal to go out with them to *The Tree* the other night. Jimmy and Madelaine moved to the kitchen where it looked like everyone had just finished eating. Three grotesquely carved pumpkins were arranged in a triangle on the table. Each had a candle burning inside. Ramon poured Jimmy a glass of wine and handed it to him. Jimmy took it and thanked him.

“Come here. Look what I’ve got,” said Madelaine. She ushered Jimmy into the living room and gestured towards five sets of strings on the coffee table, each with a paper clip tied to the end. “Aren’t they wonderful?”

“What are they?”

“For the séance. They’re used to focus your mind on the after world.” She said *after world* with a mock Boris Karloff voice as she giggled deep in the back of her throat.

The others walked into the living room, while Madelaine went to the kitchen. Jimmy, Ramon and the Brazilians prattled on about the week’s happenings. Ten minutes later Madelaine came back with a book and a tall, slender candle, which she lit and set in the middle of the floor.

“Come on,” she said. “You have to sit around in a circle.”

Jimmy stared into the candle’s dull flicker. His mind wandered away for a moment. He thought of Markus and what he had said about *Mirage*. When was he going to make it - if ever - in the music business? Even more importantly, would Madelaine ever have continued interest in him if he was ever exposed as a failure?

“You need to hold the top in your fingers,” Madelaine instructed them as she distributed the strings, giving one to each person in the circle.

“So, what do we do with these?” asked Ramon.

Madelaine sat down and pulled out five sheets of paper from her shirt pocket and passed them around. On each was drawn a spiral and a series of narrowly spaced ten-inch lines. “Now, hold the string as steady as you can over the paper, trying to make sure the tips of your fingers and the centre of the spiral are lined up. And be very still.”

Within seconds the paper clips were swinging in a circular motion about the axis defined by the centre of the spiral. Then she asked everyone to hold the string over the series of lines. This time the paper clip swung in a perfect pendulum motion as if guided by a magnet beneath the lines.

“The windows to the after world are opening,” she said.

Ramon coughed loudly.

“Shhh. This is my first time. We have to be careful not to offend the Halloween spirits.”
The Brazilians sat in quiet wonder, occasionally looking over at each other and blinking uncomfortably as if the faint light was straining to their eyes.

“Now,” said Madelaine. “You all have to help me.” Her expression was grave and her voice became deep, unearthly, almost sad. “What I’m about to tell you may seem shocking, but you have to stay calm. Twenty years ago in this very house on this very floor a teenaged girl - Rhiannon - was murdered by her jealous lover Dominic. Most say he used poison, but other reports claim it was the blunt tip of a candlestick that delivered the final blow. After the murder he felt so guilty that he drowned himself in the bathtub. Some even say he filled it part way with her blood so he could let her inside him one last time before he passed on into the nether regions. Those anointed with the knowledge of such realms know that a spirit cannot live in peace when it passes so brutally through the portal of death. She has been wandering in limbo, lost to both the world of men and spirit, while sad Dominic is condemned for eternity to walk the darkest realms of Hades for taking two lives from the face of this bountiful earth.”

The house creaked and a sudden wind blew across the room, disturbing the upward flow of the candle flame towards the flickering spires and ringlets it projected on the ceiling.

“We have to save her from this cruelty,” declared Madelaine. Her face was suddenly angry. “It is our solemn duty to summon her back for just one brief instant, so we may let her pass once again, yet this time more gracefully, back into death’s warm arms.”

The others were quiet. No one dared even blink, she was so convincing in her role. The candle blew out and the room was suddenly alive with the twisted figures of imagination and darkness, bitter castaways from the deepest cellars of the collective unconscious.

“Join hands,” she said. Jimmy reached out for the adjacent hands of Madelaine and Jorge. When the circle was complete, Madelaine continued.

“Concentrate. Think of the spiral and the pendulum. Let it draw you into your soul and open the gates of consciousness so we may speak to her. Listen to the darkness within. Listen to her whispers as they echo through your heart. She is both inside you and around you. Concentrate. Let her spirit flow upwards through your heart and into full view of the mind’s eye. Think of the bathtub, red with blood. Think of the two figures lying drenched on the steps of death. Think. The nether regions are now inside you. She is near us. She is near us. I can hear her footsteps. Sweet, sweet Rhiannon. I can hear her. She is near. SHE IS NEAR!” Her voice broke into a scream like shattered glass as she violently tugged her hands away from the circle. Then a sound like a body falling on the ground. Then another. The room was suddenly a throttle of shrieks and flailing arms.

Jimmy imagined a torch flame smeared across the pool of darkness in front of him. It flickered for a moment and then spread through the room like a blanket of fire before vanishing completely. Then he shivered. It was as if he’d suddenly been transported to the furthest reaches of some dark parallel, to a place whose name was as forbidden and unutterable as its nature was infinitely evil and unknowable. He jumped to his feet and backwards against the wall. The voices in the room became indistinguishable.

“My God.”

“No.”
“Let her go.”
“Dominic!”
“Kill her.”
“Dominic!”
“My sweet!”
“How I’ve missed you.”
“No!”

The room erupted in one great scream. Jimmy felt a warm shoulder beside him and grabbed on in wild desperation. Then he felt a hand reach for his in turn. In seconds he was lying on the floor in a heap of tangled bodies.

A light flicked on. Madelaine was at the other side of the room smiling like a child on a garden swing holding her favourite doll. Her braids were untied and her hair was messed all over her head.

“She’s free,” she proclaimed triumphantly. “We have saved her.”

As if under a hypnotic spell, Jimmy and the Brazilian’s suddenly shifted their gaze in unison to the candle, which lay broken in three pieces on the floor in a pool of hardened wax. Madelaine left the room and everyone stood up and followed her to the kitchen. But after only one quick drink Jorge and Iara grabbed their coats and walked to the door. Just like the first night, it seemed like they were in a hurry to leave.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay a little longer?” Madelaine invited them. “It’s Halloween and it isn’t even midnight.”

“We should really go,” said Iara apologetically.

“Yes,” said Jorge, mirroring his wife’s expression.

They did up their coats and left with a quick smile and nod.

Jimmy drained the last drops from his wine glass.

“So,” said Madelaine. “Shall we?” She leaned against the wall and touched her toes to the floor like a ballet dancer, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

“The Tree?” queried Jimmy, instantly divining what she meant.

Madelaine turned to Ramon, who was rolling up the sleeves of his sweater.

“Ramon?” she said.

“No. I really think I should stay in. I have to call home.”

“OK. Say hello for me,” she said.

By the time they got to The Tree it was virtually empty apart from a few isolated couples. They ordered drinks and took a seat at a table beside a large woman with smoothed rouged cheeks clothed in a long white dress. Madelaine stared into her glass and closed her eyes.

“I always liked this Victorian thing,” she said. “I guess it was my mother reading me all those books. It took a while to sink in, but it finally did...especially the fascination with the occult and ghosts. All that Blavatsky stuff. Annie Besant. Theosophy. Under all that English formality they were really always trying to escape from the narrow boundaries of the society they created. You can see it in the elaborate furniture and ornate architecture. The obsession with the orient. But the ghost stories. They were always the best.”

“Turn of the Screw,” offered Jimmy. “I love the way it’s written. So oblique. The sentences are so long and indirect it’s almost indecipherable”

“Yeah. It’s so weird. The sort of nervous clutter of the language gives you the feeling the poor governess is about ready to crack. You have to feel sorry for her,
though. The kids liked the ghosts more than the governess - or at least they want to give her that impression - but you can’t really be completely sure because it’s all in her head. It’s their little war against adulthood told from her self-doubting and insecure standpoint. They know the ghosts are forbidden and they know the governess is weak, so they take that as even more reason to keep their company.”

“One thing I find about James, though – let’s see if you agree with me - his female characters are always more interesting than the male ones. I think he liked women more than men. And not just in a sexual way. I think he also found them more complex.”

“Yes, and especially single women trying to express their independence outside of societies expectations of them. He’s so much better at portraying women than any other male writers of his time. Even Madame Bovary’s quest for freedom is really only the freedom to choose other men. You get the feeling that Isabella Archer…”

“Sorry?”

“From Portrait of a Lady.”

“Oh, right,” he said with mild embarrassment. “His novels are so huge you can never remember all the character’s names.”

“Well she is the main character of his most famous novel!” Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. He had always avoided it because it was the one James novel everyone was supposed to read. “Anyway, she tries to put off marriage in favour of leading a more unique existence, something that’s all her own. Ironically, though, she ends up no better than anyone else because she marries the wrong man! She thought she was making her own choice but ends up with some jerky Peter Pan who only wants her as a sort of prize. It’s quite sad, but she at least tries to find her freedom and individuality outside of men. Bovary just has affairs.”

“But you know what is strange? I’m always surprised I’m not bored with James.”

“Bored?” Madelaine said in a tone of remonstration.

“No. Maybe I’m not saying this well. I meant it as a kind of compliment. The characters are always high society types with pretty controlled lives. Not very exciting. I like the writing style and characters but nothing really happens. That’s what I mean.”

“But it’s the psychological intricacy that makes it so fascinating.”

“That’s why I said I was surprised that I wasn’t bored. His characters are always a bit…well…upper class. Almost too well spoken, educated, and articulate. Not like Keruoac – he could make any average labourer seem like the most interesting man on earth!”

“OK. I see what you mean. But not Verena Tarrant. She wasn’t even slightly upper class!”

“It’s funny you should mention that,” said Jimmy in a whisper. “When I first met you I thought of Verena Tarrant. It was something about the way you were so sharp and literate while being almost…well…I mean this in the best way, but rustic.”

Madelaine reached into her purse and pulled out a cigarette. The lights dimmed as Jimmy watched her reflection in the mirror on the wall. There was a sad look in her eyes as if she was thinking about a lost friend she would never see again. Once again Jimmy thought of Hey Joni, only this time imagining it was about Madelaine: “Tell me Joni am I the one to see you through? In this broken town can you still jack
in and know what to do? I remember our youth, our high ideals. I remember you were so uptight. That time in the trees we broke that vice..."

“There was a kid’s book I used to read,” she said. “I can’t remember what it was called, but it was about little Persian girl and her friendship with a ghost. I used to read it over and over again before going to bed. I used to fall asleep wishing that a little ghost friend would come into my room and play with me. It was so lonely being an only child.”

“Did you have any magical places that you used to go to?”

“Magical? In what way?”

“Places that were special. Places in which you always felt you had some hidden company of some kind. Where you never felt alone.”

“There was a swing in the garden by our gazebo that I used to spend hours on. I’d imagine that my ghost friend was with me. I’d invent all sorts of scenarios and adventures while I sat swinging back and forth. Sometimes I’d bring my stuffed animals along, too.”

“What about Josephine?”

“She had her own set of friends, her own little world.” She let the word world drop slowly from her lips as if it were the name of a deceased lover. Jimmy felt suddenly uncomfortable. Perhaps he had awoken a painful memory inside her.

“There was a spot on a hill out behind an abandoned factory outside of Detroit I used to go to a lot,” he said, filling the silence. “Both my parents worked shifts on the auto line so I was home alone a lot looking for things to kill the time. There were old pieces of rusted junk all over. It’s funny because the spot wasn’t really all that special now that I think of it. I mean, there were places beside old refrigerators, a shed beside the factory that other kids used to use as a secret fort. But for some reason I liked this one spot. It was on the side of a gentle slope about forty feet from a tree and right beside a patch of grass that had been burned out or rubbed away. There wasn’t anything glamorous about it by any stretch of the imagination, but I just felt comfortable there. That’s where I’d go if I were feeling lonely.”

“Have you ever been back?”

“Once. It seemed so small and insignificant in retrospect. When I stood there I remembered all the things it used to mean to me, but they were only memories. The place had ceased to be anything more. But, going back sort of freed me. Sometimes I wonder what happened to all the times I spent alone on that slope. I felt I had to go back just once to make sense out of my life. Reawaken the memories and see what they still might mean to me years later, how they’d helped shape me.”

“It’s always that way, though. I remember a summer when I was sixteen or seventeen. I thought I was so beautiful. So grown up. So dazzling. I’d look at myself in the mirror all the time admiring the image of the young woman that stood there before me. But a year ago I saw a picture of myself from that summer. It was so disappointing. I looked awkward, callow, even silly.”

“The past.” Jimmy shook his head and laughed. “I seem to spend half my time thinking about how my current life was somehow robbing me of what I once was. I sometimes feel like I’m in a constant state of deterioration from some idyllic state, that probably never really was to begin with.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Madelaine asked, taking on a sudden air of polite formality.
“Yeah,” said Jimmy irreverently. “We don’t talk much. He’s got a bit of a stiff upper lip. Lives in Santa Monica. He’s some sort of fashion designer. He used to work in a late night hair salon and get some kind of cheap thrill from giving drunken UCLA students outrageous haircuts he knew they’d regret in the morning. We’re totally the opposite in everything.”

“But brothers should talk” she said. “And you seem to be quite a reasonable and friendly person.”

“He’s a bit of a sadist. Used to carry this cane around and wallop me with it all the time. Once when we were kids he even tied me to a bed and scratched my back with these fingernails of his he’d been growing for weeks. But at the same time he used to pretend he was the more mature of the two of us. He was always reading these ten-volume science fantasy novels while I was either playing hockey with my friends or going to raves and warehouse parties.”

“Raves?” Madelaine looked perplexed.

“That was the thing to do then,” he explained. People would come from places as far as St. Louis to dance and sweat all night to DJs like Jeff Mills and Derek May. It was like Detroit had become a kind of new Berlin with all its underground art and music scenes. It didn’t matter if you were an artist, a musician, or auto worker - it was all coming from the same history: Motown, The Stooges, MC5, the film and art scene in Ann Arbor with guys like Mike Kelley moving on to make it big in LA...so much to reach out to and make you forget about all the burned out factories and urban decay. So I avoided books until I was almost twenty. And all really because of him. Or, my reaction against him, at any rate. He’d always correct my English, but only when other people were around so he could make me look bad. Maybe he was just rebelling against our working class parents but he used to walk around in these smoking jackets when he was ten and when we started sneaking up to the garage attic to smoke he’d always bring a golden cigarette case and a monocle. And the cigarettes he smoked. Always these port-dipped things with extra-long filters. Sometimes he’d even bring up a pipe.”

“Sounds exactly like my father. He used to run around with these dogs of his, bringing them into our house with his pipe and plaid shawl so he could sit in the living room and act antiquated or something. Then he’d read me Sherlock Holmes and try to scare me before I went to bed by saying that Professor Moriarty was outside my window. Sometimes he’d loosen up and we’d have these pillow fights that would spread out into the main stable and then my mother would come out hollering for us to stop for fear we’d drive the horses into a minor stampede.”

Jimmy laughed and glanced at his watch. It was almost one. He looked up at Madelaine. She showed no sign of wanting to leave.

“I was such a terror when I was a teenager,” she continued. “I really gave my mom a hard time. Poor woman. My first boyfriend and I used to light small fires in her stables when she was asleep. We’d stay up until dawn drinking whatever he could get from the bootlegger. I’m surprised the whole place didn’t go up in flames.”

“I was too bent on love and destruction to treat anybody with any degree of respect. I know it sounds really cloak and dagger, but it’s true. It took me years to burn away all that anger.”

“You seem sort of a loner. Most guys I meet in their thirties seem to have houses and wives - the whole lot.”
“I guess I’d like to eventually find someone. But it’s just so hard. The older I get the more easy it seems just to write someone off for some small personality quirk that you think would drive you crazy two years down the road if you ever got involved with them.”

“Bars aren’t the best place to meet women you know!”

Jimmy tilted his head back and gazed into her eyes. He wanted to tell her something. He wanted to reveal all his feelings. He wanted to grab her wrist and tell her everything from how beautiful she was to how ashamed he was for being so attracted to a married woman. She would understand. He knew it.

Madelaine took a languorous sip of her beer and then broke the silence. “You’re handsome, you know,” she said, as if she had somehow opened a window into his thoughts. “Almost beautiful. No, definitely so. And I don’t mean it in some flaky sixties sense either. A lot of women would like to go out with you. You’re sort of quiet on the surface but I can tell you’re not timid. If you know what I mean. There’s something raging behind the calm of your eyes. Some kind of inner fire that can never be quenched.”

The word beautiful floated inside him like a petal on the surface of a clear blue pond. He reached over and touched her leg. Then he cupped his hand over her kneecap. She smiled uncomfortably as if she were taken by complete surprise by this sudden advance. He pulled his hand back and straightened up into a more formal position.

“I had a good time tonight,” he said with a degree of uncertainty. “The séance...”

“I got the idea from a book I read. You guys were so freaked. I never dreamed it would be so easy to scare a room full of adults.”

“When you broke out of the circle I didn’t know what the hell was going on.”

“The virtues of rehearsal.”

Jimmy pulled her head close to his. “Hey, you know what?”

“What?”

“This place is kind of annoying. It’s the bartender.”

“Yeah, I know!” she whispered. “He just sits there staring at us.”

The bartender turned his head sharply, his bald spot gleaming in the beam of an overhanging ceiling light. He had a thin horse-like face with cheeks drawn in against the bone structure of his jaw. He eyed Jimmy as he dried a glass with a small towel.

“Yeah. Who does he think he is?”

“Fuck him.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah. Screw him.”

They walked along the rim of Central Park until they found an all night sushi bar. Madelaine had seemed to settle into a distinctly darker mood. In the fluorescent light beaming from the brushed aluminium kitchen he thought he could see deep furrows of anxiety spreading across her face. She grabbed him by the sleeve of his coat so brusquely he was sure she was angry with him.

“Don’t look so innocent,” she said. “No one is.”

“Why are you...”

“I’m sorry Jimmy. I’ve been troubled lately.”

“Troubled?”

“Troubled by everything around me.”
Their gaze met and he tilted his head in blind adoration. There was nothing more attractive to him than a woman in a state of some sort of abstract, metaphysical turmoil.

“Yes,” he said.

“I’m not so sure you understand. It’s all this.” She gestured to the window as an elderly couple walked by. “Life irrevocable drains you of everything that was once precious to you. We are born into a world of imagination, our souls on fire with the magic of the world. But as we grow older we see is less and less of this magic and the memories of it just get further and further away - disintegrating into the mists of time.”

Jimmy nodded his head slowly as he listened. There was something almost theatrical in her manner of discourse, something that was awkward and out of place, yet strangely refreshing and comforting in its purity of intention. “Yes,” he said again.

“Yes? Yes, what? I guess what I really want to ask is whether you think that we can eventually become all this?” An angry scowl swept across her face. “Nothing more than a sum of everything around us?”

“I don’t know,” said Jimmy. There was suddenly something hard in her expression that said she might pick apart anything he said.

“I’d better go,” she said suddenly, throwing her hair back over her shoulders with a backwards thrust of her head. “I’m not making sense.”

“No. No,” said Jimmy. “I understand,” he said. Really, he was unsure. They locked eyes and then he looked out into the street.

“I really have to go,” she said.

Jimmy walked her to her house and then called a taxi. As the cab whistled through the nearly empty streets he watched the raindrops stretch out into tiny rivers on the across glistening windows, the traffic lights of Broadway colouring each droplet in deep shades of amber, green, and red. Maybe she was right and we were nothing but the sum of everything around us - like stock derivatives, a thousand things of no value pooled together to somehow amount to something of value. Madelaine’s voice echoed through his head for the next hour, weaving through the soft hissing sound of rain on the pavement as the words of *Hey Joni* continued to linger on in the darkness: “She’s a beautiful mental jukebox, a sailboat explosion, a snap of electric whip crack. She’s thinking long and hard about that high wild sound and wondering will it last? There’s something turning, Joni, turning right to you. My head burns but I know you’ll speak the truth. Put it all behind you, now it’s all behind you...”

Chapter 1.5

Jimmy parted the curtains in his bedroom and looked out into the street below. Rain, like a thousand pieces of shattered glass, cut through the wasted fabric of the night. A drunk kicked over a trashcan and muttered some inaudible curse before shouting out at the top of his lungs as though he had just witnessed the execution of
his own son. An elderly woman - Jimmy recognised her from the local grocery store - jabbed her fist out into space. Nerves unwound and wrongly wound up again in endless cycles from years of alcohol and disappointment. She once told Jimmy she had a child somewhere, showing him a picture of a little girl that she kept in the back pocket of her torn overalls. Then there were the others: unrecognisable faces no less desperate than the first two, but far more generic. They could have been anybody. A tall man walked by with a thick wooden cane. Five slouching figures shuffled past the man and leaned up against the side of a garbage dumpster for shelter from the rain. These were people from every extreme, filling the streets and alleyways like the background elements of a landscape painting, important yet anonymous, ever forgotten in their details yet always remembered for the whole they represented.

He let the curtains drop and walked over to the phone. A sense of dread welled up inside him as he dialled the first few digits of Madelaine’s number before hanging up and then picking up the receiver to dial again.

“Hello,” answered a voice. It was Ramon. The sound of his breathing hovered alone in space. Jimmy hesitated before letting the receiver drop back in its cradle. An hour later he called again. This time Josephine answered.

“Hello,” she said. She seemed pleasantly surprised to hear from him.

“Hi,” he said. “I heard you went away.”

“Yes.” There was a certain languor in her voice as if she was still savouring the last memories of wherever she had just been. “I went to see my mother.”

“When did you get back?”

“Just a few days ago. I’ve been sick in bed since, though.” She sniffled.

“How’s Madelaine?”

“She’s OK.” She seemed suddenly uncomfortable. There was a long pause. Jimmy wondered if it had been right to ask after her sister.

“I see,” said Jimmy, not knowing what to say.

“I’m not sure I should be telling you this, but Madelaine isn’t well.” Josephine broke out in a kind of piteous laughter that suggested she almost took pleasure in her sister’s misfortunes.

“She has a cold, too?” Jimmy played dumb.

“No. It’s not a cold. What I meant to say is that she is sort of like my mother. She has moments of...depression...anger.”

“Most people do,” he said cautiously. He didn’t want to sound too concerned, even though he was.

“It’s more than that. She just gets up every morning and drags herself across the kitchen to make tea. Then she sits there for hours staring off into space. If I try to talk to her she just lights a cigarette and walks away. Sometimes she just tells me to get lost. Last week she even threw a pan at me. My grandfather always said I should watch out for her...” Her voice lowered to a malicious whisper. “She has tantrums.”

“What does Ramon think of all this?” he asked. It seemed like the right thing to say, something that would express his concern for Madelaine and her overall wellbeing without revealing a hint of the intimacy that was clearly developing between them.

“He doesn’t care. He’s fed up. He thinks we both think too much about life. He says all we do is analyse everything.”

“I see.” Again, he wasn’t sure what to say. It seemed she was suddenly defending Madelaine, while just a moment ago she was berating her.
“Yes,” said Josephine. “We’re such a sad lot. My mother thinks Madelaine has inherited her depression. That’s why she likes her more. She was built in my mother’s image.”

“I’m sure...that...” Jimmy paused, trying to think of something he could say that wasn’t a platitude but would make Josephine feel better. “I’m sure your mother loves both of you the same,” he said.

“I’m not so sure. Whenever Madelaine goes crazy and starts throwing things at the wall my mother just tells me it’s my duty as the younger sister to put up with it. She defends her for attacking me. That’s because she sees herself in Madelaine. Do you know how much I’ve had to put up with?”

“I can only imagine,” he said. Something inside him suddenly became more sympathetic to Josephine and for the first time he saw how difficult it must have been for her to grow up under the shadow of such a strong and magnetic personality as Madelaine.

“I’m glad you understand. I don’t think anyone in my family really does.”

“Listen,” he said after a long pause. “I don’t mean to change the topic, but it might be better to talk about all this face to face.”

“OK,” she said happily. “Do you want to go out for a drink?”

“Sure,” he said.

“What about late next week?”

“That sounds good. I’ll call you to double check,” he said.

“I’ll see if Madelaine wants to come. I’ve been trying to get her to come out more.”

“Sure,” said Jimmy.

There was a long sigh at the other end and he couldn’t help but feel that he had made a new ally, a new connection in life. He said goodbye and hung up. As he walked back into his bedroom he struggled to make sense out of what had just transpired. Why would Josephine ask Madelaine to come along if Josephine was interested in him? Wouldn’t she rather want to see him alone? Maybe he had been presumptuous all along to assume that Madelaine was trying to set him up with her sister and it was all just some concoction of his imagination. Yet even so, he would have to be careful. There was always the danger that he inadvertently pays more attention to Madelaine and ends up exposing his intentions and hurting Josephine’s feelings. The least he owed Josephine was the distinction of being regarded as a being completely free of her older sister’s domination.

The next day Jimmy was working at *The Swan* when Madelaine walked in, a crown of snow half melted on her head. It was just early November and it was already starting to snow, the last few clusters of dead leaves still clinging stubbornly to the soon-to-be-dormant trees. She sat at the bar across from him.

“I’m not sure what to do,” she said as she undid her coat and dropped her purse on the floor in a gesture of surrender. “This place is really getting me down.”

He poured her a glass of whiskey and went to sit beside her at the bar.

“I feel so confused,” she continued. She looked like she was going to cry. “All week I’ve just felt so awful.”

“Madelaine.” Jimmy said with concern. He’d never seen her so down. Perhaps what Josephine had said was true and not anywhere near as exaggerated as he had initially suspected.
“I don’t know. It’s just there. I wake up every morning and stare out the window. The first thing I feel is a kind of emptiness like I’m floating pointlessly through everything. I make myself tea hoping it will perk me up but all it does is make me anxious and angry.”

“Angry?”

“Maybe it’s my job. I don’t know. That’s just the thing. I don’t really know. I just feel so powerless like I can’t do what I want and even if I could I wouldn’t know what it was that I wanted to do. I’ve tried to explain it to Josephine, but she’s too young and naive to understand. She’s never had a serious lover and has never really experienced loss.”

Jimmy set an avuncular hand on her shoulder, allowing himself to feel the bone structure beneath her coat and skin before letting his arm drop to his waist. “I remember feeling just terrible about ten years ago. I couldn’t make up my mind about anything. I’d reached a total impasse and felt I couldn’t move forward at all. Whatever road I thought I might want to go down seemed to lead to some place I didn’t want to be. My parents had always cast me in the mould of an auto worker or foreman and when I started to feel like I might want to write or do music they just laughed as if I was crazy. There was no way I wanted to work for Ford or Chrysler. The thought itself was repugnant. With all the criticism from my parents I started to doubt myself and my prospects of doing anything outside of what they thought I was meant for. I guess when you’re young, no matter how rebellious you are you’re always afraid in the back of your mind that everyone else is right and you’re just crazy. You’re parents seem so strong and confident and they go around acting like they know you better than you do yourself. And sometimes you let yourself believe it.”

“I don’t even know if it’s that.”

As if guided by something beyond his control, Jimmy moved closer to her until their bodies were touching. He gazed into the soft rain of her eyes. “You really are special,” he said under his breath with a tone so low that its intent couldn’t possibly be misunderstood. For an instant it was as if Josephine and Ramon had never existed at all and he and Madelaine were living a completely different life, free of any inhibitions that might stand in the way of the consummation of their love.

“I’ll do fine,” she said calmly, distantly. Her face stiffened slightly, as if she was trying to hold back her feelings. It seemed whatever it was that was hurting her was suddenly buried under the perceived threat of his intimacy.

He pulled away. There was something of a rebuke in her voice. She didn’t want his comfort. Or at least that was the way it looked under the dim yellow light of the overhanging chandelier. Perhaps she was embarrassed to have put herself in the position of the weak one in need of support and, in realising this, suddenly pulled away. She was a proud person and took advice from no one. Yet she may have also taken it as the advance he had intended it to be. Yet was it really his advance? Wasn’t it more that he was caught in the ebb of a force so powerful that it was completely out of his control?

“Listen,” she said, breaking the silence. “I should hail a cab.” She stood up and grabbed her shoulder bag. “Call me,” she said. Jimmy just nodded his head and watched her as she left. In less than a minute a taxi pulled up and when the driver opened the door she stepped in.
Jimmy woke up the next morning, a cloud of rejection hanging over his head. He looked about his bedroom, all marble and glass with posters and beautiful drawings on the wall. It was a miniature palace. Lining the lower half of all four walls was his precious collection of sound equipment, built up from years of rummaging through used instrument stores and cash on anything of value establishments. This was his life, or at least in so far as he was a self-contained entity. But to what degree could he claim such an exalted state of detachment now that Madelaine was in his life? His room was invaded by her very existence. It could no longer go on being the same place it always had been. He looked at every piece of equipment, every plug, poster, and drawing in the room with new eyes, wondering what she would think of each object and how the underlying psychological fabric of the room would change if she there standing on the floor beside him.

He slid out of bed and the grim realisation that she was married entered his head, stopping him dead in his tracks. He was held prisoner in an icy fortress, his feelings for her patrolling the walls like ghosts of long-dead gendarmes: ominous, powerful, almost deadly forces much greater than anything his eyes could grasp, yet still lacking form and substance, not yet fully materialised in this world.

“Tell me Joni am I right by you?” he mumbled to himself as he took a small sip of water. It all went back to that first night at the party. That was the source. The source of this great beacon of emptiness that now guided his every thought and feeling.

He turned on the CD player and skipped ahead to the third track before realizing he had already become sick of listening to *Daydream Nation*. So he started searching through his CDs until he pulled out the Tindersticks’ self titled second album. The patchwork romantic ballads and antiquated hush of Stuart Staples’ vocals seemed far more appropriate. By the time he had laid down on his bed the room was already filled with the sound of soft slow bells like intermission music at a movie theatre. Then a voice, dropping deep into mumble and sadness, began to float through the room.

“You remember my sister,
How many mistakes did she make
with those never blinking eyes?
I couldn’t work it out.
I swear she could read your mind
your life the depths of your soul
with one glance.
Maybe she was stripping herself away
saying here I am, this is me
I am yours and everything about me,
everything you see if only you look
hard enough...”

This was Madelaine. He imagined her face hovering inside him, pasted on the billboards of his heart. Love was an awakening. A vision. A clearing in the soul. *Everything you see if only you look hard enough.* She made him see. All those years before he met her were just an insidious slumber passing itself off as life. How could he have walked the streets of New York for so long in such blindness, such utter
darkness? He thought of her standing in a snowy street with her dark brown suede jacket, her white cheeks flushed red like blood in snow.

The song meandered onwards, almost seeming to guide him down the muddy rivers of her past. The flat wet banks slippery with red clay and reeds. The great magnolias in the back of the old white house. He wanted to be there with her. He imagined her as a girl. The bare feet caked with dry mud running up her leg in whitened trickles - an aftermath of a splash. The bluebottles happy and buoyant in the humid air. Madelaine smiling, deviant in her innocence, a reckless bright light shining through a dense black forest. All those nights spent dreaming of the boy ghost by the back yard swing. His thin soft hands. His hair, bundled and messy - blond. Saying so much with those thin blue eyes. The child’s secret in the hidden garden. The swing - white paint and wicker - moulded into the curves of a lover’s body. Her imaginary white dress wrinkled at the waist and frayed at the edges, and her even more imaginary shoes. The kind she saw in movies. She wanted to kick them off and have him catch them by the sculpture garden behind the old shuttered house. And all those hot nights outside the swamps with the screech the great black rail and the burning locomotive. Walls of hot steal and visions of travel amongst parting sobs and angry jets of steam. Heavy immutable arms pushing even heavier wheels. Santa Fe and Pensacola. Albuquerque and Baton Rouge. All those places she only thought about. Colourful little corners in the pastel book of her mind. Tracks spreading like spider webs from the centre of her room and outwards to the trembling black cities of the east and the great white expanse of the west.

Then as a teenager. Drunken and warm with bottles of sour mash in the back of a rusted caboose. The river stretching out, a black smudge against yet blacker backgrounds. Even above the onslaught of crickets and bullfrogs he could hear the old river hissing through the grass and reeds. He could even hear it in the clouds, barely visible from the moonlight. And the trees. Willows looming in the shadow of all the crumbling fences of her love. Mangroves, further south and red around the roots with their own blood and the blood of those dead from escape or suicide. Here, the forest had its own dominion. The blunt folly of teenage sex a mere whisper in its clouds of swarming beasts and shadows. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to pull her down by the banks of that rusted sleepy river and watch the mud squirt through her toes. He wanted to kneel down in that self-same mud and pull her towards him, the sound of cicadas vibrating in the night air. He wanted to watch her chin and the hair falling down to touch it as he pulled her even closer. The scent of tea on her dress and the taste of skin beneath it. The weight of her body and its full warmth in the curl and undertow of the shallow black water with all its madness of smooth dark fish and eels. The thrash of hands and again her hair tumbling in rich fathoms over her shoulders and further to his mouth. Lips on her knees and hands on the lower ridges of her back he’d whisper into the sweat and breeze all those things he always wanted to say to her.

Then they would go to the rail yard with all its history of cold white steel, bald and flattened by years of alloyed wheels and the frigid might of sledgehammers. The old caboose with all its cracked paint and grease - thickened and hard from years of dust - would tower beside them. He’d rest her head in his lap. The voices of centuries leaking through the quick blind rush of the reeds. He’d run his fingers through the soft brown fibres of her hair and further down her shoulders and to her hips. Button by small white button he’d undo the white muslin shirt only half
concealed by the crimson velvets of her shawl and vest. They’d lie beneath the vast architecture of stars and the horizon of trees holding it up from below. The world would spread out before them. A great map of pain and loss cast infinitely in all directions. He’d rub her hair and bone and softness beneath the bone, kissing her gently as he listened to her breathing.

Later, clothes torn wet and muddy, hair tangled and heavy with sweat and blades of broken grass, they’d walk alone inside her house. Adorned and fantastic, like beings extracted from a pure realm of paint and light, they’d lie together in her bedroom. The emblems of her past laid out like an extension of her body he’d run his lips over the pale glory of her skin, still dirty with mud and train grease. Her old toy box - wood worn with time and regret - would sit purring in the corner of the room. He’d sink into her eyes. A wren amongst mere pigeons. Feelings a torrent of wind in a locked cellar yearning to break free. Two locked cellars separated by a wall. Alone. Oceans left in peace testing the rushing of their own tide. Crossing and twining his hair with the hair of her sex she’d whisper as she stared at the white hollow of the ceiling. Why am I so alone? she would ask. Is there never an end? Drunk from the soft hush of her voice, he’d make patterns with her hair against the white cotton background of her pillow. Some involving the curvature of her face. Some involving her shoulders, the walls, and the shadows of the chair across the room rippling on the heavy oak headboard.

Then he’d smooth her hair back around her head and kiss it until he was cloaked with the gentle robes of her nakedness and leaning back against the inside of a caboose with only the whisperings of her voice and the thoughts of unseen mangrove trees distracting him from the beauty of her form. He wanted to run his hands down her thighs and press his mouth against her warm hot belly. He wanted to hear her scream as he licked the rays of hair that fell from her beautiful head. He wanted to take her from the cold seat of that self-same train and walk her through the gardens of her heart.

As if following a hidden cue the music stopped and Jimmy looked around the room. The light was dim and he could hear someone shouting in the distance. He opened the curtains and looked outside. There was nothing that could keep him from loving her. Not her husband. Not Josephine. Nobody.

Chapter 1.6

The next day Jimmy woke up on the floor of his bedroom with a wine glass beside his hand. At first he didn’t know where he was. The furniture in the room had an air of unfamiliarity. It was almost as though he had been lifted out of time altogether only to be thrown back into a completely new existence without any of memory of the person he had been before. Not until the phone started ringing a few seconds later did everything begin to fall back in place. His name was Jimmy. He was a musician. He’d drunk too much wine the night before and fell asleep listening to the stereo. He clenched his teeth and walked across the room, letting the phone ring a few more times as he slowly regained consciousness. He picked up the receiver and heard the sound of a man clearing his throat on the other end. It was Markus.
“Hey Jimmy, I didn’t get you up, did I?”
“It’s all right. I think I just had a bit too much to drink last night.”
“I’ve got some great news.” There was a dramatic pause before he continued.
“Those dudes at Mirage really dig your stuff. I just talked to them yesterday. They especially liked the darker, vibier tunes. What was that first one called?”
“Hidden Agenda?”
“Yeah. I think that’s the one. That’s one crazy ass bad tune.”
“So they actually liked it?” he said with stunned disbelief. He had gotten so used to rejections from record companies - even the smallest independent labels - that he had almost convinced himself that nothing was ever going to happen.
“No. They loved it.”
“And?”
“They want to record.”
“Seriously?”
“I’ll come over and we can sort the details. Like I said earlier, they’re heavy into techno and hip hop now but they want to branch out into newer scenes. If the deal goes through, you’ll be working with this dude named Venables. I’ve dealt with him a lot over the phone, but I’ve only met him once. He’s got a bit of that stiff upper lip thing happening, but he’s not that bad.”
“What about creative control? I mean, how much are they going to try and change things?”
“They’re pretty good about that, from what I understand. But I’ve heard through certain circles that they like to push the product out as quickly as they can. So if you want to piss around in the studio too long they might start charging you for it, but whatever happens you’ll need to get a work visa and plan on staying there for at least a six months. That’s about the bare minimum you’ll need to get anything done. After that they will probably want you to promote your shit on the European club circuit and maybe they can even set you up with a residency at some groovy London joint.”
“Sounds amazing,” Jimmy said cautiously, his mind still in a haze from the night before. He couldn’t deny that even with a scant amount of creative control, the offer was almost too good to be true.
“Don’t get me wrong, man. It’s not perfect, but it’s still a great offer. You won’t find a better one. But just remember that it’s your music not theirs.”
“Oh, for sure. It’s better than spinning in some dingy basement club off Avenue A for fifty bucks and free drinks.”
“Listen. I’m going away for a few weeks, but when I get back I’ll have the contract from Mirage ready. Then you can get in touch with Venables if you have any questions.”
“OK.”
“I’ll see you when I get back,” said Markus. He hung up.
Outside the rain had slowed and turned to wet snow. A yellow cab screeched around the corner, knocking over a garbage can. A gaunt and crooked man shouted out some vague profanity as the cab roared away. Jimmy turned away from the window and dropped the receiver back into place.
After breakfast he called Josephine. He promised her that he’d call and it had been almost a week already. On top of that he had heard nothing from Madelaine, so any contact, no matter how small, would at least keep them from drifting out of his life altogether. He picked up the phone and dialled. When Josephine answered he felt
a surprising sense of relief. If Madelaine had answered there would have been no way he could have asked for Josephine without having Madelaine think he was pursuing her younger sister instead. Then he would have had to make up some awkward and far-fetched excuse for calling in the first place, an obvious step backwards.

“Jimmy,” said Josephine with mild surprise. “How are you?” There was no hint in her voice that she had missed him. It was a good sign. A sign that he had nothing to prove to her. She was the kind of girl he could relax and let down his hair with.

“I’ve been a bit busy...”

“Better than being bored.”

“You’re telling me,” said Jimmy. There was something comforting about talking to her. He didn’t feel the same kind of pressure he felt when he was around Madelaine - the kind of pressure created by always feeling he was being compared to a romantic rival, in this case Ramon, even if it was all in his imagination.

After telling Josephine about his recording offer and the possibility that he would be going to England, the thought entered his mind that it would be fun to spend some time alone with her without her older sister hovering over her shoulder and making her feel insecure. As long as it was clear that they were just friends, he didn’t see how it could hurt his chances with Madelaine, and perhaps it might even help him as the news of his record deal would get back to her indirectly without him having to tell her face to face and seeming boastful.

“Shall we go out?” he asked. He was surprised how effortlessly the words came out of his mouth.

“Sure,” she replied without hesitation.

They spoke for another ten minutes, agreeing to meet at a small bar on the Lower East Side at ten. Jimmy showed up early and took a seat at a raised table surrounded by four stools by the far wall. He sat watching the soft glow of candlelight ripple over the table’s lacquered wooden surface. Josephine arrived twenty minutes later. Her lack of punctuality was another comforting sign of the casual nature of their rendezvous, although to even call it a rendezvous would be to couch their meeting in more mystery and romance than was really there. A rendezvous was the sort of thing that took place under a bridge in Paris with the scent of flowers wafting through in the midnight air, and what he shared with Josephine was really no different than two friends meeting for a quick chat in a local pub before a football game.

Josephine stood in the doorframe and looked around. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold. The long black mantle of her wool coat rustled in the draft that blew in from the street outside. When he looked up she ran over with such alacrity that he thought she had something urgent to tell him.

“Jimmy,” she said. She took off her coat and put it on the stool in front of her.

“You look so happy,” he said. He thought it odd that there was nothing about her facial features that suggested she was related to Madelaine. Her eyes were wide and blue, radiating their own light rather than drawing it in. She walked in gentle and delicate steps as though avoiding the shattered fragments of a broken vase. She sat down.

“So!” she said as she started to laugh in the same self-deprecating manner that he remembered from the party.

“Yes?”

“Madelaine says hello. She and Ramon weren’t feeling well.”
“Are they sick?” he asked in a kindly way he hoped would express genuine concern without revealing anything further.

“No. It’s a bit more than that. She’s not well. You know...”

“Why don’t we order something,” said Jimmy, trying to change the topic. It was best to avoid any detailed discussions about Madelaine. As he watched Josephine go through her coat pockets for a piece of tissue he felt suddenly guilty. In hiding his feelings from Josephine wasn’t he really a liar?

“It’s so nice to be with you without Madelaine,” she said. “I always feel she is ushering me in one way or another, playing big sister knows best. She still thinks I’m that little sister of hers that didn’t learn how to read until she was fifteen.”

He wondered if what she had said was true and if it was would it be right to probe more deeply into something that could end with embarrassment for both of them. “A lot of great men don’t learn to read until their teens,” he finally said, as though there was nothing strange about what she had just revealed.

“That’s very kind of you to say that. I only wish it were true. Madelaine was always good in school. I just was more interested in what was going on in my head. All my teachers thought I was stupid. I was never good in athletics. I never had a date until university. Madelaine was always ahead of me. But look at her now. She’s mired in a bad marriage. She used to go out to rock concerts and clubs but she’s given up. I’m more lively and rebellious now than she ever was, but she still won’t admit it. I got fired from my job at a clothing store a month ago. The boss said I was too much of a communist. When I told Madelaine, she laughed and said I didn’t even know what communism was. Then she said that I was only fired for my clumsiness. Can you believe it?”

Jimmy allowed his gaze to linger on the details of her face. Underneath her pusillanimous exterior were the seeds of an irreverent nature struggling for growth and expression.

“So, you’re a communist, are you?”

“At heart, but not in practise. It’s hard to be a communist these days and keep a straight face. Marx had all the right ideas for the wrong world.”

“I’ve always stayed away from politics.”

“Really? Don’t you think it’s you’re duty to help the world. If as many people with your ability cared maybe it would be a better place. I know, you’re thinking it sounds like such a cliché, but in the new Millennium everything is a cliché. Fin de siècle. That’s why it’s important to care.”

“But are all those radical leftists doing anything more than merely propagating the lie of their own rebellion?” Her expression sharpened to a point. “Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “I’m not a conservative either.”

“Oh, so you’re an artist, too precious and refined to sully himself with the folly of human existence?”

“No. Come on. I’m as down to earth as you are. I mean, I’m from Michigan for God’s sake. You can’t help but be down to earth when you’re from Michigan. Flint with all those boarded up shops and trailer parks...”

“That’s just a convenient excuse. A disguise. I think...well...no, this is what I want to say. When I first saw you at the party I saw a certain disdain in your eyes. A kind of intelligent, gentle disdain. And it wasn’t a pompous disdain either. There was something sharp, vibrant and cunning about it. I thought I would love to meet him, but he probably would find me dull.”
“Dull? You’re not dull. Not in the least.” He wanted to reciprocate with some first impression of her at the party, one that might be at least slightly flattering — indeed, she seemed to be fishing for it — but for some reason his mind went blank.

“This may sound silly, but it means a lot,” she said. “Growing up in our family the first thing you learn is that you can never be as interesting and wonderful as Madelaine.”

A tall waiter with bulging almost feminine lips and long dark hair greased back from the temple approached them and prompted Jimmy to order with a bold inflection of his eyebrow.

“Josephine?” Jimmy beckoned her.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic.”

“Vodka and orange,” said Jimmy. The waiter nodded his head in satisfaction and strode back to the bar. “It’s not that I’m a pacifist,” he said. “It’s that I have a different way of approaching the whole moral problem of how to better the world. I try to do it from the inside.”

“How is it even possible?”

“I don’t know. I think we can run around forever trying to make everyone just like us, but ultimately we just become sort of motional Fascists. Even if we campaign against something like prejudice, we’re ultimately waging a holy war - and you know how bloody and ignoble the crusade was.”

“But what else is there?” She objected. “Do you think that by dropping acid and staring at the ceiling that the world will just become a better place by osmosis?”

“You’re not getting me at all. I’m talking about demanding the best from our minds and hearts. The beauty of the action and the thought. Life as art. Yet another cliché, I know. But, that doesn’t stop me from believing it. I was out at the docks the night I met you and I was so taken by the sound of the ocean and the colour of the sky that I took a piece of glass from the ground and cut my finger. It was sort of a ritual. And I feel ashamed to tell you because I think that you might take me for some sort of poet flake or new age spiritualist - which I’m not.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to imply...”

“You didn’t.”

The bar lights changed from pale orange to a deep seductive blue as the waiter set the drinks on the table.

“Can we just start a tab?” asked Jimmy.

The waiter nodded in acknowledgement. Josephine looked around the bar. “There’s so many beautiful people in this city,” she said. “It almost makes you sick.”

“Tell me about it.” Jimmy felt suddenly more at ease. It seemed in her presence he felt he could say anything he wanted no matter how controversial. Her mind was wide and contoured like the mouth of a French horn.

“Oh, do you know what?” Josephine’s face lit up. “That reminds me. Maryanne Faithful came into my store the other day. She’s such an elegant woman. She was all done up with this long black coat and a wide-rimmed hat. She almost looked Parisian. It was so inspiring. I get so sick of America sometimes. Europeans still know how to dress better!”

“I like Nico,” said Jimmy. “Now, there’s a woman.”

“Liked, you mean.”

“Yes, but she even died with style. The idea of leaving the world behind while riding a bicycle through the French countryside...”
“I thought it was Ibiza.”
“Well…whatever. Same difference.”
“All a part of being pure inside, no doubt.”
“Well, the way I see it you only die once, so why not make something of it. Look at Yeats and his spires, or Mishima and the Seas of Fertility tetralogy leading up to his suicide. Even cockroaches are theatrical in their death. They always waddle out into the middle of the floor and roll over before they die, as if to make the point that even though you just poisoned them with bug powder you still have to wipe up their disgusting little bodies.”

Josephine narrowed her eyes until they were little more than a pair of deep blue lines etched into the creamy-white roll of her eyelids. “You really are odd, you know. I knew I’d like you when we first met. But something tells me you take life too seriously. I think that you’re probably too hard on yourself. You beat yourself to death with your emotions and you’re convinced that you’re worthless unless you succeed in life.”
“What makes you say that?”
“It’s the way you fiddle with your fork and look off into space. I can tell you’re thinking about things you should be doing but haven’t. I can also sense that you’re the sort of person who depletes things.”
“Depletes?”
“You focus in on one thing so intensely and for so long that it eventually dries you up and kills you. Romance, art…anything.”
“But isn’t each man supposed to kill the things he loves?”
“Oscar Wilde. Very good. I’m impressed. Initially I took you for the type that would go for something more outrageous and modern.”
“No. At heart I’m just as much of a reactionary as you are. As for you, though, I’d say you were the type of person who hides from life, adorning your little palace of imagination with whatever conceptual curios are currently out of fashion. That’s why you always seem so carefree. The moment doesn’t concern you at all.”
“Whether you’re anxious or relaxed, the result will always be the same. But, there are some things in life - most things I’m convinced! - that are beyond our power. So it’s not worth worrying about them. Once something has happened it should have no influence over you. It’s only when they are happening that you have to be careful. That’s why I like the past. It is comforting and harmless. As for you, I think you demand too much in life.”
“No. It’s life that demands too much of me.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Every little thing I see makes a deep impression on me. I feel forced into responding. All these things that are beyond my control are still there, still demanding something of me.”
“That’s just what I was talking about. I’ve learnt to ignore them. Call it survival.”
“Or escapism.”

There was something in her languid cynicism that he found both attractive and reassuring. As the evening drifted further into the predawn hours, he felt more and more comfortable with her. How could he ever have been threatened by such a harmless and intelligent person? Certainly she was beautiful, but in more of a disarming than aggressive way. He followed the smooth curves of her face under the
bluish light of the bar without even once thinking of whether or not she had designs on him. Even though she seemed to have an uncanny sense of his true character - as though she was manning some kind of emotional periscope focussed on the deepest recesses of his heart - he found it more gratifying than invasive, simply because she seemed so interested in the person he really was and not just the man on the surface.

“Just a second,” she said. She stood up.

Jimmy raised his drink and watched Josephine walk to the bathroom through the foamy and distorted lens of his glass. Through a glass darkly, he thought. Yes, she was certainly special. She was a rare example of a woman he could care deeply for without being in love. His feelings for Madelaine would always prevent it. But that was precisely why Josephine was so special. The bond that they could share with one another would be completely spiritual, unshullied by the base complexities of sex and romantic relationships.

When she came back she let her arm slide suggestively over Jimmy’s shoulder as she passed. “I’m back,” she announced, ironically stating the obvious.

Jimmy smiled reservedly and took a sip from his drink. Josephine swept her hair back and blinked her eyes. The gesture was so close in rhythm and execution to something he’d seen Madelaine do it was almost startling.

Josephine rolled back her sleeves and called the waiter over. “Two more drinks,” she called out. The blue lights dimmed to near-darkness and the soft vibrato of a female Latin voice filled the room. She leaned backwards on her stool and stared at a ceiling fan above them. Its blades chopped in effortless circles through the columns of dense smoke rising from her still-burning cigarette.

Chapter 1.7

Jimmy sat alone in his living room listening to a new twelve-inch Aphex Twin single he had just picked up at the local record store, its strangely comforting mixture of ambient childlike voices and hard electronic percussion conjuring the sense he was witnessing something rare and astonishing, like a momentary lapse in space time. A ceramic table lamp cast a votive halo across the ceiling, laying bare the sparse geometries of his apartment, the furniture pushed rudely against the walls and the space in the middle of the floor filled with stacks of amplifiers and electronic equipment. He had a few days in a row off of work, a perfect opportunity to put the finishing touches on some of the compositions he’d been working on for the last few months. Markus would be back in a week and Jimmy wanted to have more polished versions of all his tracks ready before getting in touch with Mirage.

He picked up the phone and dialled Madelaine’s number. The next day was Thanksgiving and he wanted to see if she and Josephine had any plans. The line was busy, so he hung up and booted up his laptop. But no matter how hard he tried to concentrate on work he couldn’t stop thinking about her. He imagined her chestnut hair tumbling down to cover his shoulders and chest as memories of her sitting in the living room at the party the first night they met filled his head. He concocted fantastical conversations in which she revealed to him the source of her melancholy as she pledged her love to him. It was something perennial, dark, and completely
unknowable that came back from her troubled past to haunt her. Maybe New York - the great black machine - was grinding away at her soul. Maybe it was her husband. Such distance had grown between them that her heart had become hard and heavy. She wasn’t happy with her job and didn’t know which way her life was going. She’d come to a fork in her life and couldn’t decide which path to follow. Jimmy wanted to touch her. Inside. He wanted to lift her up. Turn her upside down.

He reclined on his sofa and looked up at the stuccoed ceiling, a stark white mirror to his soul. Maybe Markus was right. Why did he want to get involved with a married woman anyway? Even if she did like him and he wasn’t going away to England, there was still Ramon to worry about. You just couldn’t sweep somebody’s husband aside. Even if they got divorced there’d still be repercussions. Madelaine was a beautiful person and the consummation of his love for her depended solely on the destruction of her first marriage. The only noble thing he could do was to try and be her friend and let things go their natural way. If he revealed his love too soon she might push him away, taking him as a threat to her marriage. But if he didn’t say anything, he’d never know how she really felt. Perhaps that was precisely the source of her apparent depression. She had feelings for Jimmy and was questioning her love for Ramon. Yet how could he ever know for sure? So they split up and she makes it with me, Jimmy thought as he hovered impatiently over the phone almost willing it to ring so he could pick it up and hear Madelaine’s soft voice telling him how much she loved him and how she could no longer bear keeping it a secret from him. But then his conscience spoke: it would never last because she’d always associate me with the death of her marriage. Once the dust had settled she’d go on to some one else. No, he didn’t want to get involved with her unless she was already single and free. Of course, he could always be totally predatory and try to get her into bed. Go for whirlwind heat and flash followed by guilt and irreconcilable hatred. He’d been there before, but never with a married woman. This was the most destructive of all possibilities. He couldn’t even think of doing it. Not to her. If he really did love her, he’d bury his feelings and offer only his friendship. Yet if he didn’t try something he’d always hate himself for being too cowardly to test the waters.

An hour later he tried calling her again. After three rings she answered.
“Just calling about tomorrow,” he said.
“Glad you called. Jorge and Iara want to drive down to Atlantic City during the day. I was just going to get up and cook in the morning.”
“Man. I haven’t been out of town for at least six months. I think I forgot what the rest of the world looks like.”
“There’s supposed to be nice beaches on the way.”
“Great,” said Jimmy. “Have you heard the news?”
“What news?”
“I’m going to England.” He listened carefully to the sound of her breathing on the other end of the line, hoping to gauge her feelings for him by the way she reacted to his announcement.
“Really,” she said with enthusiasm. Then there was an uncomfortable pause and he wished he had never brought it up. “For a trip?” she finally asked. She obviously hadn’t heard.
“Just to record. But who knows what might happen. I finally got a recording deal. Didn’t Josephine tell you?”
“My goodness, Jimmy...no, she didn’t but...”
“Yeah. I’m happy,” he said, concealing his disappointment. It seemed strange that Josephine hadn’t told her. If he had meant anything to either of them, she most certainly would have said something about it to Madelaine. “The only thing is that I have to leave soon.”

“When will you be back?”

“I’m not sure. It depends on how things go. It could take months.”

“Wow. Make sure I get one of the first copies.”

“Sure,” he said. “So what time should I come over?”

“We’ll pick you up at eleven.”

The roads to Atlantic City were virtually empty, the traffic from the Thanksgiving rush dying down to little more than a trickle. The trees were hung in brilliant shades of red and orange - like pagan scarecrows. Jorge and Iara sat in the front with Jorge driving. Madelaine and Josephine were huddled quietly beside Jimmy in the back. Madelaine was silent, staring blankly out the window, occasionally touching her fingertips to the glass to make subtle prints and designs in the condensation. Josephine sat between the two, breaking into exaggerated laughter at even the slightest hint of humour, an entirely different person than the mature insightful woman he got to know the night they went out. Her constant laughter was no longer refreshing, but a source of interference, obscuring Jimmy’s chances of involving Madelaine – or anyone for that matter - in meaningful conversation.

Once they turned off the main highway they drove slowly down a side road with the window halfway open. It was uncommonly warm for late November. Wet, decaying leaves filled the gutters and the air had a sweet hay-like smell. They passed the open mouth of sandy sea front recreation area. Hulking grey rocks jutted out of the water and jagged whitecaps crashed on the beach, smooth and wet with winter foam.

“This looks like fun,” said Jorge. “Let’s stop here.” Iara pulled a backpack out from beside her feet and opened it. Inside was a keg of wine in a cardboard box. “The cheapest of the cheap,” Jorge exclaimed proudly. They pulled into a parking lot by a small cove and walked in silent single file to the beach. Jorge carried the keg. The wind tossed up their hair and blew open their jackets. When they reached the edge of the water the five sat down and Jorge opened the wine.

“Let’s get rid of this cardboard shit,” he said.

Iara held half of the keg while Jorge tore open the box, pulling out the bulging silvery pouch of wine from the inside. Jorge took the first swig and then passed it to the others. After a full round Madelaine stood up and walked off alone along the beach. Jimmy’s first impulse was to follow her, but his will froze and he ended up sitting with the Brazilians instead. It looked like something was on her mind and she wanted to be alone.

“Hey look at that,” said Jimmy, pointing to a huge boulder about fifty feet back of the ocean.

“So,” said Jorge.

“It’s got a natural throne.”

“So?”

“You guys are no fun.”

Jimmy stood up and ran over to the rock. He could see Madelaine sitting alone cross-legged in front of the water. He climbed the rock until he reached the deep indent at the top of the great rock. He reclined into it. It was perfectly contoured for
the shape of his body. He could even see the beach set out before him like a vast and limitless stage. Madelaine sat alone to the far left. She was letting the edge of the tide reach up to touch her toes as she stared out into the water. To the far right, the Brazilians were now playing volleyball with Josephine over an imaginary net, using the wine skin as a ball. As he sat there watching the scene in front of him he was suddenly overcome with the thought that everyone there was about to leave his life, possibly forever. In the short time he had known Madelaine, starting from that first magical evening at his party, he never quite appreciated the full gravity of the situation. Sitting in the comfort of his granite pulpit, he felt momentarily lifted above his life as though to observe it from a different point of view. The scene was laid out before him like a strategic map drawn up with black Xs and red arrows. A married woman sitting alone. Him alone. But wasn’t love always alone? All those nights he’d spent dreaming of her tight against his body. Could it have been any different if she’d actually been with him? There would still be the reality of his going to England, and who knows for how long. Even more there would always be those moments - and he’d felt them with other women - where he’d look into her eyes and see nothing more than a person who didn’t understand him. She would never truly know the way he felt and vice versa. Even in the throes of passion they would still be alone. Distant.

“Hey! Come on you guys.” Shouted Jorge who had taken off his shirt and was playing hacky sack with the silver pouch. Jimmy stood up and climbed down the rock.

“Any wine left in that thing?”

“No. We had to blow it up. I wouldn’t kick any amount of wine around no matter how cheap.”

Jimmy broke into a run. By this time Madelaine had stood up and was walking over towards them.

“That’s my man,” said Iara to Jorge. She rubbed his thigh and kissed him on the cheek. “As long as there’s wine and football, he’s happy.”

“Look what I found.” Madelaine threw a sand dollar at them as if it were a deadly Ninja weapon. Jorge ducked. “Oops. Sorry. I didn’t think it would fly that far.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Jimmy. “I know you.” By this time Madelaine was standing next to them.

“That’s right,” she said proudly. “With me, the anger’s better than the kiss.”

After kicking the wine skin back and forth until it burst from a quick bicycle strike delivered by Jorge, they got back into the car and drove down to Atlantic City. The streets were virtually deserted except for a few hawkers and street side kiosks selling corn on the cob and saltwater taffy. It had the look of a wasted and dying holiday resort where men long past their prime would come to lavish in their worst vices as though it was their last chance at self-indulgence before old age and senility. A few rolled up napkins blew down the road by the main casino.

“Why did we come here?” asked Madelaine.

“It was your idea,” said Jimmy.

“No it wasn’t,” she said. “It was his.” She pointed at Jorge in mock accusation.

“It truly is as bad as I’d heard. Rio is much better.”

“Come on,” said Jimmy. “That’s like comparing the banjo to a harp.”

“You’ve obviously never been to Copacabana.”
The five walked in complete silence through the desolate wasteland of empty streets littered with carnival style wrappings and broken pinwheels. Cardboard French fry buckets with garish red stripes and stylised gold clowns printed on the side. Cotton candy sticks covered with hardened layers of dirt with just a few pink hairs remaining. Cigarette butts. Gallon sized wax-coated coke cups, straws sticking out from the centre of their plastic lids.

“Let’s go,” said Josephine. “I’m cold.”

By the time they got back to Madelaine’s apartment the gloom that had dominated the afternoon had lifted. Madelaine set out some corn chips and opened a bottle of wine before going back into the kitchen to put the finishing touches on a dinner she must have started cooking before they left. Jimmy and Jorge set the table while Iara and Josephine prepared a large fish salad from a grocery bag of speciality ingredients Iara had brought over the night before. Just as Madelaine was taking the turkey out of the oven to make gravy, she dropped a spoon into the hot grease in the pan and it splattered onto the glowing element, catching fire immediately. Smoke flooded into the room.

“The Spanish Harlem Incident,” said Jimmy, laughing. It was a reference to a Bob Dylan song he hoped she would pick up.

“You really want to eat Swanson Dinner tonight, don’t you?” Madelaine retorted.

She dimmed the lights and lit as many candles as she could find. Dinner was served under the undulating rims of candlelight cast across the walls like phantom messengers from a world devoid of pain. After salad, Jorge slipped a tape into the ghetto blaster.

“I think it’s time for some jazz,” he said. “The perfect dinner music.”

Half an hour later, as the last celestial horns of A Love Supreme filled the room, they moved to the living room and sat on a few floor pillows, Madelaine and Jimmy at opposite ends of the room. In the soft mesmeric candlelight Madelaine’s face was barely visible on the far edges of the light of the lone candle in the centre of the room. He watched the gentle motions of her lips as she spoke and laughed. It was so good to see her happy again. She was one of those rare people who experienced life at a deeper level than most, he reasoned, her heart picking up every last impression like some kind of high-resolution spectrometer of the soul.

When they finished coffee they all left the house and took the subway downtown to a French wine bar in Tribeca. The waiters were dressed in black suits and bow ties, belying the seemingly obvious attempts to make the place seem casual - the soft pink lighting, the large voluptuous armchairs, and the pictures of French rock stars on the wall.

“Yes,” said one of the waiters in a gloomy meditative tone.

“Let’s go,” said Jimmy. “Ordering a drink in this bar is like selecting a tombstone in a funeral parlour.”

“Yeah, I’m a bit tired anyway,” said Josephine as she reached into her pocket for a handkerchief.

“We have Curacao back at our place,” said Jorge. Iara arched her eyebrow in a furtive reproach and tugged on his arm. “I guess we don’t,” he said, ironically shifting his eyes in Iara’s direction. She kicked him lightly on the foot as if to prompt him to retract the invitation. “Actually, I think we should just go.”
After the Brazilians left Jimmy walked Madelaine and Josephine home in the cold yet shimmering darkness of the city.

“You know what? I want a horse,” Madelaine said out of the blue. “I miss those days out at home when I could go out and groom her stables in the morning.”

“It was so lovely,” Josephine reflected winsomely.

“Are the horses actually yours?” asked Jimmy.

“Sort of. But that’s different. They’re not really mine. Well...they are, but aren’t if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy.

“If only I had my own land,” Madelaine went on. “With horses everywhere. A few days ago I was looking through a book about Gericault and Delacroix. Those guys knew horses. The way they drew the bodies rearing upwards on their hind legs was so accurate. I’ve seen those poses so many times in real life. They caught it all. Motion. Energy. Passion.”

Josephine slowed her pace, letting herself drop a few yards behind her sister.

“I think I know what you mean. I’ve seen a few of their paintings,” he said.

As if following the same invisible cue, a hushed silence fell between the three. He walked them to their door and then tapped them both on the shoulder at the same time.

“Call me soon,” Josephine said.

“I will,” Jimmy replied. Madelaine disappeared into the house without a word, as if nothing Jimmy had said to her that day had made even the slightest impression on her.

“I’ll look forward to it,” said Josephine. She smiled warmly and shut the door.

Jimmy turned away and walked home. It was clear the closer he got to Josephine the further he’d get from Madelaine. Even if Josephine was just a friend, the bond between them - however weak or strong - would be more than enough to drive Madelaine away for good.

As he walked home the streets were filled with the beauty and colour of a carnival at night. Red banners hung across Spring Street. The shop windows were dancing with heart-warming children’s displays. Tin soldiers, hand-woven ballerinas and mechanical drummer boys stood beside elaborate train sets with moulded plastic backdrops surrounding tiny wooden villages. The upscale boutiques in SoHo displayed lavish perfumes and jewellery with smooth erotic images in blurred black and white showing half naked models wrapped around each other in a shadowy rage of carnal passion.

Chapter 1.8

The sun had sunk to a point so low it was just barely visible over the roof of a brick warehouse on the southwest corner of the island. Jimmy stepped off the curb and wove his way through a crowd of pedestrians towards Markus and Nicole, who were waiting on the other side of the street holding hands. The sky suddenly became dark and the wind blew a few drops of rain into Jimmy’s face. Markus looked over at him and flicked a cigarette but out at a passing cab.
“Markus,” Nicole scolded him as she shook her head in mock disgust. “You should be kept in a cage.” Jimmy hadn’t seen her for over two months. Her hair was shorter than before, bleached white and knitted into tiny squares on her head. Her simple rounded face was made more striking by her deep green eyes and laser-sharp eyebrows trimmed in long dark arches angled up to her crown.

“Come on, it was just a cigarette butt,” Markus bandied back in the exaggerated tone of a man pleading to a police officer. He unzipped his bright orange parka down to the waist, exposing heavy gold chain necklace resting on his chest. Nicole grabbed his hand and stuffed it into the pocket of her black leather maxi coat.

“It’s so damn cold,” said Markus. “You must be freezing.”

“I left my coat at work,” said Jimmy. He looked at his watch. “We have to get going,” he said. “I only have an hour before my next shift.”

“It’s too cold to walk,” said Markus. “Let’s take a cab.”

“I hope we can at least get a table,” said Nicole. “You never know at that place.”

Jimmy stepped up to the curb and hailed a cab. Markus pulled open the door and stepped into the back seat. Nicole followed, guided by an air of graceful distinction that reminded Jimmy of the wealthy African American women he used to see driving Cadillacs around Detroit, and shut the door. She worked with troubled youths on the Upper West Side and met Markus three years before at a Jamaican café in London while she was on vacation and Markus was on a business trip. A few weeks later they hooked up in New York and a year later they moved in together. The three had gone out together several times in the past year and always managed to navigate around any possible social pitfalls, there never being any indication that Jimmy had unwittingly tread on any sacred premarital ground or that Nicole was an unwanted accessory to a “boys night out”. On the surface she appeared to accept whatever happened in life without complaint or criticism, but underneath this gentle buoyant exterior Jimmy always sensed there lay hidden a more severe and moralistic person. It was this side of herself he guessed she only gave hints of to those very close to her, and even then never more than a glimmer. It was as though she was too prudent to pass judgement on anyone unless she was absolutely sure she understood his or her every last thought and motive.

They stepped out of the cab and walked across Union Square. The rain had turned to snow and a gust of wind cut through the streets like a gleaming white sabre. In the fading light of dusk the automobile headlights were just becoming visible, creating blurry magenta halos that floated in front of the cars like warning lights on an airport runway. They crossed the street to The Coffee Shop, a nineteen-fifties style café with a Latin American twist, and walked in. It was half full. A twiggy blonde waitress with brilliant red lipstick that almost seemed to leap off her face seated them in a booth beside a group of young women dressed in shiny satin dresses. Jimmy took the rucksack off his back and set it down on the floor.

“Two Caipirinhas,” Markus whispered flirtatiously to the waitress as he put up a peace sign with his fingers. She was a simpering Cuban with a tight fitting black vest and huge wet lips. He put his hand on Nicole’s thigh and turned to Jimmy, who had just set a few records on the table. Photek. Source Direct. Decoder. Markus picked up one of the albums and studied the cover. It showed an elongated pyramid-like structure with a roman pillar superimposed on top of it.

“Anything we should know about?” asked Nicole with curiosity.
“Just some new UK stuff I’ve been listening to. *Drum and Base. Breakbeat.* Whatever you want to call it. They take some old snare drum samples and twist them out of time. It creates this whole new sonic landscape. Like African Jazz or Funk meets techno, but totally different than anything I have ever heard. I’ve been thinking of blending some of its influences into my music.”

“That’s some pretty bad ass shit,” said Markus. “So I can’t wait to hear what you come up with. Speaking of which... *Mirage* want you there by the end of February at the latest. Before you book your ticket get in touch with Venables. Here’s the address.” Markus pulled out a business card and handed it to him. “He says they’ll take care of accommodation for you once you get there. Save all the travel receipts and they’ll reimburse you later. They’ve apparently got a block of cheap flats in east London that they use for visiting studio musicians and guys on recording contracts. So you’re set as far as that goes.”

“Good.”

“One last thing.” Markus handed him a five-page contract. “Sign this and get it back to me as soon as possible.”

Jimmy looked at it briefly before shrugging his shoulders ironically. “Silly me - I forgot my brief case!”

“Oh, sorry bro.” Markus pulled out a large beige envelope and handed it to Jimmy. Jimmy slipped the contract inside and put it into his backpack.

Nicole looked over at Markus and implored him with her eyes. Then she unbuttoned her cardigan and patted her stomach with her left hand. “Guess what, Jimmy...”

“Markus already told me,” Jimmy said. “That’s fantastic,” he said as he nodded his head.

“Just like him to spoil the surprise.” She looked over at Markus and rolled her eyes in playful disapproval.

“No way,” said Markus. “Kids or no kids, I still need my freedom.”

“Give me a break, Markus,” said Nicole. “You can’t even make a peanut butter sandwich without me. The real reason,” she turned to Jimmy and whispered in his ear, “is that I need *my* freedom.”

Markus rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. “What do you care, anyway?” he said to Jimmy. “From the way you’ve been screwing around with those two sisters I wouldn’t say that you had any respect for marriage and family values anyway.”

“Sorry?” Jimmy retorted in disbelief.

“What’s this? I’ll *definitely* have to hear more about this when I get back.” Nicole stood up. “But for now I have to go to the bathroom.”

Markus nodded his head in acknowledgement. Then he looked back at Jimmy. “Sorry to be so blunt, but come on, man. You know how she feels about you.”

“Who?”

“Josephine. Who else?”

“Wait a minute,” Jimmy protested, but he struggled to come up with some shred of evidence that proved Markus wrong. “I don’t think...”

“Give me a break.”
Jimmy leaned back and sighed. “She’s a really nice person,” he said with equanimity. “But she’s not really my type. She seems a bit young and awkward. Besides, with Madelaine...”

“Madelaine is married, in case you haven’t heard. And the way she tries to push Josephine on everyone, playing big sister and matchmaker is a bit much.”

“Matchmaker?”

“It’s so obvious. I’m sorry to pop your bubble bro, but hasn’t it occurred to you that the only reason she’s cultivated anything with you is to help Josephine to get to know you? She sees herself as Josephine’s bridge to the outside world. That’s what I don’t like about her. Every time I see the two of them together Madelaine dominates the conversation, puts words in her mouth, tells her who she should see and who she shouldn’t. I was sitting beside them three weeks ago in a bar and I couldn’t help but overhear her lecturing Josephine on what she should do to attract men. Josephine just sat there like a little girl lapping it all up. And the thing is that she’s perfectly capable of conducting her own love affairs. Madelaine is just too bossy and protective. She seems to have this attitude that she knows better than Josephine what’s best for her.”

“Well, I’m not too sure about that,” Jimmy snapped. It was just the sort of thing he didn’t want to hear, a piece of damning evidence that reduced everything that happened between him and Madelaine to little more than a flicker of his imagination. He was silent for a moment, marshalling all his forces together to construct a perfect defence. “If Josephine doesn’t like her sister hectoring over her all the time, then why doesn’t she stand up to her? In some ways you’re no better than Madelaine. Everyone seems to want to fight Josephine’s battles for her. Don’t tell me you’re the next one in the ring.”

“I don’t want to get involved. I’m just trying to look out for you. Josephine is any man’s dream. And look at Madelaine. She’s so fucked up. All of her antics in the bar. The way she flirts with you in front of her husband.”

“See. You admit it. She flirts with me. It’s not all just some plot to get me going with Josephine.”

“Come on, Jimmy. Just think what it would be like with her. She’s a walking powder keg waiting to go off. Once the dust settled you’d just argue with her all the time.”

“But don’t you see? That’s why she’s so attractive. When I first met her I thought she was the most amazing woman I’d met in years. Visions of Johanna, Sarah, Tangled up in Blue, all that gritty Bob Dylan romantic stuff in glorious triplicate! Sure, I’ve seen darker sides of her personality that sometimes make me wonder, but they make her more mysterious and besides, Josephine is just too passive and insecure for me. All we can be is just good friends.”

“Open your eyes, Jimmy. They’re cut from the same block and both have similar things to offer. The only thing is that Josephine likes you and Madelaine is married. On top of that, while she may be a bit green, so to speak, Josephine is probably the more stable of the two.”

“Sure. I agree with everything you say. But the bottom line is that I feel it with Madelaine and I don’t with Josephine.”

“You’re just going on a first impression, man. Everything you’ve seen since has told you to stay away. She’s trying to set you up with her sister. She’s depressive. And her sister - and even you admit it - is perfectly nice. Why lose the shirt off your
back chasing a woman who’s ultimately unattainable when her equally attractive sister is just waiting for you to give the word?"

“But you’re leaving out some key facts. Like for one, Madelaine doesn’t get on very well with Ramon. He treats her like dirt. Can’t you see that? He didn’t even show up for Thanksgiving. It was appalling. Madelaine is in trouble. She’s in a bad marriage and I have to help her. Josephine can marry anyone. She has a lot going for her. But she doesn’t need me like Madelaine does.”

“All right, it’s your life. If you want to ruin yourself on this love conquers all myth, then go ahead. I just care about you because I’m your friend.”

Jimmy leaned back and sighed, shaking his head in a gesture of defeat. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m going to England and I’d never do a thing unless she divorced Ramon.”

“She never will. She just wants to complain about everything. I see her as the type of person who would always find fault in her life but would rather indulge in her negativity than do anything about it.”

“But perhaps if I were there with her, sharing in her depression if you will, leaning into her shadow, it would make life that much better for her. Ramon will never understand her. She is just starting to realize this and that’s why she is so down.”

“Okay, whatever you say,” said Markus in friendly resignation. “I hope things work out between you, I really do. As for me, I just tend to wonder. After all these years it just seems that love is just a myth anyway, some sort of tropism.”

“A tropism?”

“Yeah. Like an automatic response to chemical messengers. Pheromones. You know.”

“I don’t think you really believe that. I just think you like to take up absurd positions to be different.”

Just then Jimmy noticed Nicole looming over the table. He wondered what she had heard and how long they hadn’t noticed her or if she had just been standing there idle for only a second to make it seem she might have been there longer listening to them all along. She sat down beside Markus and set her purse gently on the floor. “So, are you guys done, yet?”

“He says there’s no such thing as love,” said Jimmy with comic accusation.

Nicole glowered at Markus. “You know who’s sleeping on the couch tonight...” Then she laughed and Markus pushed his chest forward. He leaned towards Nicole. “This may sound bleak, but there’s nothing out there to contradict it.” He put his fist up in the air as though to make the final comment of some inspirational political speech. “As far as I’m concerned, the world is all action and protection. Revolt and destruction. Growth and decay. Love is just a biological reaction against all the bullshit. A way of protecting oneself against all the crap out there. A way of strengthening one’s position. It just comes down to survival. Nothing more.”

Jimmy shook his head in protest. “So, love is just genetic expression a few chemical reactions in the brain? It’s just too simplistic.”

“Why is it then that there’s drugs that can make us happy or sad? Or what about E? The love drug. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and when you eat Es you’re just a pudding full of love. Case in point.”

“Yes, but what if I kissed Nicole right now?” said Jimmy. Nicole widened her eyes with staged enticement. “You’d obviously be pissed off. But where’s the
chemical reaction? Are you saying that if I kissed her a chemical would be exuded from my skin to make you angry?"


“What about unrequited love, then?” Nicole queried him. “How can that be a Pavlovian response or way of protecting oneself?”

“It’s just temporary madness. Emotional confusion. It’s like when you’re high and you get a weird idea and later you realise how fucked up it all is.”

“Come on,” Jimmy remonstrated. “When I walk down Park Avenue, look up at Chrysler Tower and then look down and see all the hoards or people streaming past me, I get this tingling feeling...”

“What, and this is how Madelaine makes you feel?”

“She makes me think about all these things I never thought about before. It’s sort of an awakening.” He leaned back languorously and took a deep breath before continuing. “An exploration.”

“An exploration, he says,” said Markus. “So, you’re like some kind of arctic explorer dude. All you want to do is pitch your flag in her territory.” He burst out laughing.

“Grow up, Markus,” Nicole rebuked him. Then she let a spoon that had been dangling between her fingers drop to the table as a kind of dramatic coda. “I can’t believe you some times. You’re sitting here basically saying that you don’t really love me and it all just happened out of genetic convenience.”

“Calm down, Nicole,” Markus urged her softly. Then he turned to Jimmy. “What are you going to do about it? I mean you’re leaving. She’s married. I can respect that you like her...”

“I think you should just tell her,” Nicole interrupted. “I only know from what I have heard just now, but take it as a woman’s advice.”

“I can’t. I don’t think it’s time. I think I’ll just go and do my recording. Try to keep in touch occasionally. See what happens. I don’t want to fuck up her marriage unless I’m really sure it’s right and it’s not just some infatuation.”

“See,” said Markus victoriously. “You’re already admitting it could be some sort of temporary fever that eventually passes.”

“I don’t disagree that exists, but all...”

“Conquest. The spirit of the enlightenment. Pitching the proverbial flag. That’s what it is.”

“Hey, Markus,” said Jimmy angrily. “Where do you get off...”

“I’m sorry, my man...Jimmy!” Markus slapped Jimmy on the shoulder. “I was just winding you up. It’s not that I’m unromantic, it’s just that you gotta let what happens happen. You can’t force things that aren’t going to be. That’s reality. Romance is just a state of mind. When I met Nicole it was perfect. We’d only chatted in a restaurant in London for a few minutes when I found out she had a friend who lived just around the corner from me in New York. You could say it was fate, but what made things work out was the fact that everything was set up for it. All the ingredients were there. If I met her and it turned out that she lived in some place like Baghdad, then it probably would have been different.”

Jimmy looked out the wide picture window that formed a natural backdrop to Markus’ speech. The waitress walked up to the table carrying a bottle of beer on a
platter. She poured the beer into a tall glass and set it down in front of Jimmy. He watched the reflection of the lights from the passing traffic through the amber-coloured prism before him. It was early dusk. Winter dusk. A feeling like a fork twisting in his stomach took over. He took a sip of the light brown fluid and stared down at the table. A cold wind blew a few paper cups along the sidewalk outside. Markus and Nicole fell silent.

Chapter 1.9

A blinding white light reflected off the roof of a parked car and then through Jimmy’s window, casting an oval-shaped pattern just below the last picture left hanging in his room. Half-filled boxes stacked against the walls, wire coat hangers strewn chaotically across the floor, and garbage bags filled with all those nameless things whose existence consisted of being used but once before being stored away in some drawer for some future use that never comes: this was all that remained of his life in New York. Over the last two weeks he had either sold or put into storage virtually everything he owned except for a few bare essentials he planned to pack in his suitcase. A paper rose lay on the floor beside a wooden crate. Jimmy picked it up and twisted its wire stem in his fingers. “Praise emptiness, her rose coloured dress,” he mumbled to himself, the words from a Television song burning through his soul, a brilliant orange flame at the base of a long dark chamber. He closed the curtains as though to shelter himself from the unwanted incursions of the city, its brash white lights and endless mayhem of traffic sounds having threatened all day to drive him to the brink of despair. He squinted for an instant before turning back to look around his room. The empty white walls stood before him like an all-knowing mirror showing him up for everything he was and ever would be.

He picked up a white envelope from the table and opened it. Inside was his travel itinerary. He would leave New York from JFK in six days. On a separate piece of paper were instructions e-mailed to him from Mirage. He was to go directly into London as soon as he got off the plane and meet a representative in a Hounslow pub called The Blue Star that same evening. He had forwarded the contract to Markus as instructed and the day before he’d called Venables to make final working and living arrangements. He would get ten thousand pounds in advance with the rest as royalties from sales and distribution in addition to whatever he made promoting the album on the club circuit. Although he didn’t understand all of the nuances of the contract, he trusted Markus and there were no clauses that raised any red flags or looked even remotely suspicious. He looked once more at the itinerary. Printed out in cold times roman on a stark white page it seemed so simple in its presentation, so factual, so unimpeachable, giving no indication of the culture shock and complete upheaval of his life that he knew he was about to experience. With every inch further across the Atlantic the jet would travel he’d be pushed at least that far away from Madelaine and whatever emotional cord that tied them together, no matter how tenuous or imaginary, would be stretched that much further apart, until its very dimensions bordered on oblivion. Yet perhaps it was all for the better. Yes, he reasoned as he set the itinerary down on top of a box in the center of the room, when
he eventually returned to New York the timing would be better. Perhaps it would be less than a year. Perhaps longer. But it didn’t really matter as any attempt to move forward in the here and now would be a mistake. For the time being he’d have to make due without her. He had made a good showing, planted an arable seed, and now all he had to do was wait. Besides, wasn’t love always alone? Even in the dizzying heights of passion it was still always alone.

On his last night in New York he went to Madelaine’s house for dinner. She greeted him at the door dressed in a long black sweater extending down to her hips. In her eyes was a bland and complacent expression that he’d never seen from her before. She looked like a person content with her destiny, no matter how pointless and mediocre, completely without goals or ambitions, rolling thoughtlessly through life without any complaint or query, no matter how big or small. For a brief moment he wondered how well he really knew her.

“Come in,” she invited him. Jimmy stepped across the threshold and nestled the bottle of red wine he’d bought into the cradle of her folded arms. “We have hors d’oeuvres,” she said sedately.


“She’s just getting ready in her room,” answered Madelaine.

“So, this is the last we’ll see of you for quite a while,” said the Spaniard. There was an air of objective distance in his tone that suggested neither regret nor satisfaction at Jimmy’s departure.

“Yes. I’m not sure when I’ll be back,” said Jimmy. “Anything can happen.”

“I heard about your contract. Congratulations.” He stood up and shook Jimmy’s hand. Their eyes met solidly and for the first time since they met Jimmy felt resentment towards him. It wasn’t quite that he was married to the woman he desired, but more that he would deign to drag her down into the numbed and passive state Jimmy had just found her in. In Ramon’s hands, the shimmering Verena Tarrant had been reduced to little more than an arid housewife dreaming of one day having enough money not to worry about Labour Day sales and coupon collecting.

“Do we choose our lives?” Jimmy asked suddenly and without motive, the words tapering off into silence as the realisation that he was thinking out loud quickly took hold.

“Sorry?” asked Ramon.

“Oh. Nothing,” said Jimmy. “I was just mumbling.”

Josephine walked in and offered Jimmy a chair. He greeted her with a light hug and then sat down. Her loose black satin pants and open blouse gave the impression of a confidante of some debauched nineteen-seventies rock icon. He noticed that the candles in the room weren’t lit as they always were in the past. In the light of the sixty-watt bulb overhead, that cast pale shadows around the room while also exposing in stark contrast the stains and discolorations on the white ceiling, the kitchen and dining room had lost all the charm it once possessed.

“Jimmy,” said Madelaine. There was something austere about the way she spoke, like someone having just emerged from an hour-long board meeting. “This may sound strange, but are you a fast reader?”

“What do you mean?”
“Well, it just occurred to me the other day that although I normally read very slowly and carefully retain everything, sometimes I let myself slip into the beauty of the language.”

“The beauty?”

Josephine seemed annoyed and walked out of the kitchen. Jimmy watched her vanish into the darkness of the hallway before the sound of running water filled the house, suggesting she was now in the bathroom. He turned back to Madelaine who seemed oblivious to her sister’s sudden exit.

“Well, what I mean is that I can read sometimes for hours on end without ever retaining or even trying to retain a thing. I slip into a mode in which I let the words pass through me like warm waves or beautiful birds in a garden. To try to make any sense of their meaning would be a crime. And to be honest, in such a state I can enjoy reading more than when I’m actually trying to understand what I read.”

“Of course. I’m the fucking worst reader in the world. I read like that half the time anyway, whether I want to or not. I like to just before I get ready to do something creative. Letting the words run through me opens me up.”

“Yes. It can be so satisfying to be in their presence.”

“Your little pets.”

She laughed and continued. “Do you think...this may seem like a weird question...but do you think that you can go through life like that?”

“Letting life pass through you without ever assimilating anything?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Ramon says I interpret things too much. I try to make things too complicated. I don’t just let things happen.”

“It’s true,” said Ramon. “We have to learn to live for the beauty of life without questioning anything.”

“But we can’t avoid questioning things. It’s in our nature, if you’re going to take a Primitivist standpoint.”

“Primitivist?” Ramon seemed puzzled.

“Like...”

“I understand what you meant, it just seems odd to place such a label onto something that should have no label. People have to quantify everything.”

“I wasn’t quantifying.”

“Our past. It captures us,” Madelaine effused. “It grows through us like vines around a column. I’ve spent my whole life both cherishing and trying to escape from the little gardens and enclaves of my past. But they’re still there. Inside me.”

Jimmy watched her mouth as she spoke. The soft pink of her lips against the background of her light-coloured cheeks was like blood on the coat of a fawn.

She continued. “I can feel the vibrations inside me. Sometimes when I’m walking alone down the street I’ll start thinking about someone I haven’t seen in years. Someone who was once very close or someone who once insulted me or hurt my feelings. In any event, just someone who had an emotional effect on me. I can still feel the impressions they made. Last week I was walking down Amsterdam at about ninetieth past a bunch of fruit stands. The streets were so crowded I thought I was going to suffocate. I started thinking about an old boyfriend and an argument we once had. He always used to say I couldn’t make up my mind and I had to centre myself. But in him I saw a person who was so driven towards a single goal that he
was blind to the world around him. The only reason I couldn’t make up my mind was because there was so much in life that was streaming by me and through me that I couldn’t really focus on anything. It always used to get me so angry that we convinced that he was right. He always told me that I was the sort of person who’d just float through life with no goals…”

“You hardly seem that,” Jimmy interrupted.

“I’m not doing much now, but I do have goals. Thank you for noticing,” she said. “But he used to say that I would always try to make him feel guilty for wanting to achieve something. I just think he was guilty for being so closed off and was projecting it on me. Anyway as I was crossing the street I suddenly said fuck you, you never listen to me. Whatever I say you’re always so deaf to it. I was so caught up thinking about him, so tuned into this imaginary argument in my head that I must have actually yelled it out because a few people turned around and looked at me like I was crazy. It was sort of, well…”

The doorbell rang. Jimmy could hear Josephine in the background running to answer it. Then Jorge and Iara emerged from the darkness and stepped into the kitchen. Josephine followed behind them, a look of forced conviviality on her face.

“You won’t believe this,” said Jorge, “but we just came from visiting a guy who was playing with his dog’s genitals.”

“What?” Madelaine was shocked.

“You must mean Raymond,” added Ramon. “It’s all for fun. The dog seems to like it anyway, so I don’t see what the problem is.”

“Oh, come on,” Jimmy protested. “I’ve seen some pretty weird shit in my day but this takes the cake. I mean, why? Who cares if the dog likes it or not? What kind of pervert would get off playing with a dog’s dick?”

“Yeah,” said Madelaine remonstratively.

“This is disgusting,” said Josephine. “I don’t even know why we have to talk about it.”

“If he likes it and the dog likes it then what is the problem?” argued Ramon. “People ask too many questions, make too many judgements. They should just let life happen.”

Jimmy and Madelaine looked at each other, widening their eyes in joint disgust. By the time dinner was served the conversation had turned to the benefits and disadvantages of living in Europe. Josephine was silent and kept twisting the handle of her fork between her fingers, but every time Jimmy let his gaze linger on Josephine for long enough to start thinking that Markus was right and maybe he had been selling her short all along, the irresistible flux of Madelaine’s charm would seize hold of his every thought and pull him right back to her. He was trapped.

After desert Jimmy stood up and shook everyone’s hand. He was feeling tired and wanted to get to bed early to catch his flight the next morning. Madelaine, in what seemed like her biggest show of emotion since they met, wrapped her arms around Jimmy and pulled him up close to her.

“We can write,” she said.

Jimmy kissed her on the cheek.

“Sure,” he said plainly. With so much to say, he chose instead to say nothing.

Madelaine paused briefly and kissed him back. Jimmy looked one last time into the deep brown circles of her eyes and then turned away.
He shook hands with Ramon, Jorge and Iara before turning last to Josephine. Her eyes narrowed with a cold note of expectation that bordered on demand as though to suggest that Jimmy owed her something more than what he had just given Madelaine. He leaned into her and kissed her demonstratively on the cheek before turning to walk down the stairs for the last time. As he backed away from the house he remembered the first time he knocked on the very same door that had just closed behind him, its paint still chipped with a wobbly brass knob that had not yet been repaired. He continued down the street as a cold wet wind pushed into his face, driving a tear from his left eye.

He approached the subway station. A man with a tanned wrinkled face stopped and looked at him. Jimmy turned his head without stopping, but then looked back for a moment. Their eyes met. Jimmy stopped for a moment, thinking that the man wanted to ask him something, but the man looked suddenly confused and turned his head away. Jimmy stepped back and put his hands in his pocket and is if in response the man shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Jimmy descended into the subway station, dropping his last brass token into the slot before proceeding through the turnstiles. The train came almost immediately. He boarded and sat beside a middle-aged woman carrying a violin case. Jimmy studied her eyes as the train rumbled through the city’s dark causeways. There was a look of both curiosity and pain in her expression as if something in her immediate environment had opened her up to something that should never have been opened in the first place.

When Jimmy got home he poured himself the last remnants of a bottle of rum that he had left in the refrigerator. He went upstairs and opened the curtains in his room. He wanted to get one last look at the street below him before he left. Although it was dark, the streetlights cast a smooth yellow glow across the pavement, intensified by the reflections off the snow and wet granite walls of the old library directly across the street from the Polish bakery around the corner. Apart from a well-dressed couple that looked like they had just come from an opera, the streets were empty. There was nothing to cheer him up or inspire him. He closed the curtains and went to sit down on his bed. Tomorrow, Madelaine would be gone from his life. He thought of her long dark hair, the colour of vanilla root. He thought of his hand smoothing over her cheeks and the glossy brown pools of her eyes. Vanilla root was also brown but its products were always white - like the porcelain of her skin. She was a glazed Limoges vase standing in the centre of a deep oak cabinet, luxuriant and calm in its blue-white glow. In the music of her being she was now a coda, an ending. He thought of the first moment he saw her. He thought of all the missed possibilities and unsaid words. He thought of everything she was to him and could possibly be one day. “She’s thinking long and hard about that high wild sound and wondering will it last. Hey Joni put it all behind you. Hey Joni now I’ve put it all behind me too...” He thought of it all and he really let go. For the first time since he met her he really let go.
BOOK 2

Chapter 2.1

...
cantina while others were decorated with gothic metal castings with twisted candlesticks jutting out of the walls. After a light lunch in an overpriced sandwich bar in Leicester Square, he went to a record store and flipped through a few music magazines to kill the time. By late afternoon he stopped at the closest pub to have a beer and look over the instructions from Mirage. The representative would be meeting him in at The Blue Star, a few blocks from the Hammersmith tube station. If there were any problems there was a phone number he could call. After a quick pint of Guinness he went to Piccadilly Circus and took the first train to Hammersmith. When he got to The Blue Star the representative was waiting at the back holding a sign with Jimmy’s full name written in black marker. He was a tall chunky man with a small receding jaw and bulging blue eyes.

“How long you here for, then?” was the first thing he asked. It seemed like a strange question, since he was only in London on their invitation. For a moment Jimmy felt he had been tricked and they had no plans at all to put him up or even record with him.

“Don’t know. I guess until I finish recording. After that who knows?”

“It’s all drifting.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing. Born and bred in Manchester but spent a few years out in LA and then in New York before coming back to merry old,” he laughed ironically. “That’s what I like about the business.”

After a quick beer, they walked out to his car. “I guess I should take you to your new flat. It’s near the City over by Old Street. I’m a bit over the limit, but I should be all right,” he said. Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. The flat was located on the third floor of an old warehouse, a worn out sign still hanging over the entrance on the ground floor.

“This is the luxury suite, mate. We give it to most people coming over to record. It’s company policy to put people up. Of course it’ll come out of your advance, but that’s not too bad.”

“How much?”

“Three hundred quid a month. Didn’t they tell you? With running water and a hot shower down the hall consider yourself lucky.”

The man opened the door. The inside smelled of wet carpeting and dust. There were two dark brown armchairs in the living room, both with cigarette burns on the upholstery, and a small oval coffee table. Directly opposite a large bay window overlooking the street outside stood a fireplace with a mirror mounted just above the mantelpiece. Beside the mirror hung a faded oil painting depicting a sailboat in a storm. Apart from a small kitchenette fitted with a knee-high refrigerator, the only other room was the bedroom, which appeared to be the source of the wet carpet smell.

“Well, you must be tired. Get a good night’s sleep. Jack wants to see you tomorrow morning before lunch. Venables, that is. Here’s his card.”

The man handed Jimmy a business card and left. The next morning Jimmy called Venables and arranged to meet him. The Mirage studios were located in Acton Town at the far end of the Piccadilly line. Venables was a thin man with grey hair trimmed down to stubble on his head. In his black leather pants and red velour shirt he had the appearance of an ageing pop star refusing to give up his youthful image while unwittingly succumbing to the more languorous pursuits of middle age.
“I’ve been listening a lot to your tape,” Venables said. “Interesting stuff. I like the way you maintain the hard edge over the ambient background.”

“Thanks.” He was hoping for something more penetrating, but for a first introduction any compliment would do.

“How are you settling in?”

“I’m still a bit jet lagged. My limbs feel a bit bloated and stiff.”

“You must be eager to start recording.”

“Yes. I guess that was my first question.”

“Well, you can start recording as soon as possible. Even next week if you’re ready. The studio is pretty much empty now.”

“Good,” Jimmy said professionally, hiding his mixture of excitement and trepidation at starting the whole process. He looked away from Venables and tilted his head in contemplation. Then he opened up. “I just had an idea the other night. I was listening to *Hidden Agenda* and it suddenly seemed like the blueprint for an even better piece. It had so many possibilities. So much plasticity.”

“Plasticity?” Venables looked slightly confused.

“Yes.”

“You mean the way it moves so effortlessly despite the heavy bass?”

“No. More like I can bend it into something else. I could make it even heavier without losing the flow.”

“The version I gave you was quite old.” Jimmy stood up and tucked in his shirt. “I recorded that in my bedroom a year ago. I don’t want my first real recording to be an anachronism.”

“That’s certainly understandable, but we’d rather you stick to what you sent us - with a few tweaks here and there to make it more marketable.” There was a note of condescension in his voice as though music was just another product on his shelf and at the end of the day the sales figures were the only thing that mattered.

“So, I get creative control but I don’t,” Jimmy stated irately as a question.

“There’s no reason to get negative. If you experiment and find something we like, perhaps we’ll record it after all. I just think you should be conservative and stick to what got you the contract in the first place.”

“So what about next week?”

“We’ve got some space booked for you from Monday onwards ‘till the end of next month. That should get you started.”

“What if it takes longer than expected?”

“We rarely pull the plug on our artists, if that’s what you mean. If you’re in the studio for over six months and you haven’t come up with the final product, then we’ll start thinking about renegotiating. Maybe you could release a single first and promote it on the club circuit while you finish the rest. Consider yourself lucky. Most first-time artists have to go into debt with the recording company to release anything.”

He showed Jimmy around the studio and introduced him to the production staff. “This is Ainsley,” he said, introducing him to a woman who was standing in the coffee room.

“Hi,” she said, looking up from the magazine she was reading.

Ainsley had a small impish figure with tight water-green eyes, slanted to an almost Asian extreme, and a small mouth, which seemed to stretch out to twice its size when she smiled. Sprigs of short red hair sprung up from her head in tiny knots.
and she rarely blinked when she looked at Jimmy, giving the impression of rapt wonder.

“She’ll help you get settled in,” said Venables. Then he beamed like an exotic bird collector showing off one of his prize possessions. “Get to know her. She’s one of the most helpful people around. She’s even recorded some of her own tapes and DJs regularly at a few local clubs.”

“We’re going out clubbing tonight if you want to come,” she said disarmingly to Jimmy.

“Thanks for the invite. I’m still jet lagged, but I’d be into going on the weekend if that’s a possibility.”

“Take him to The Blue Note,” said Venables. “That should get his creative juices flowing.”

“Are you into Drum and Bass?” she asked Jimmy.

“Actually, yes. I haven’t heard much of it, but what I have I really liked. It hasn’t really hit in North America, so I’d be interested in seeing what the scene is like over here.”

“The Blue Note it is, then,” she said. “Sunday night.”

“Sound’s good. So where are you from?”

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” said Venables as he walked out of the room. “I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

“Coventry,” she said. “Sort of a bombed out nowhere two hours north. London’s a lot more exciting, but I miss the spirit up there. It’ll good to have an American around. We seem to get more Swedish and Italian tourists these days.”

She smiled and shuffled her feet nervously. There was something both pleasant and ironic about they way she spoke as if she was gently chiding herself for being out of touch with the world around her.

Jimmy nodded his head. “I’ll have to go some time. Coventry, that is.”

“Yes,” she said with a buoyant smile. “You really should.”

That night, while he was alone in his apartment, he was overcome with the urge to call Madelaine and tell her of his new experiences in London. Perhaps something had happened between her and Ramon since he’d left. Maybe in his short absence she had already realised how much she loved him and was thinking about coming to visit. Being away had its advantages. She would see him clearly without any distractions or barriers that may have prevented her feelings from coming through while he was still there. He dialled her number and waited for the cloud of satellite hiss to clear and the ringing to start. By his calculation she should be at home getting ready for dinner. Josephine answered on the fourth ring. She seemed so glad to here from him, he was ashamed to ask for Madelaine.

“I just called to say hello. I was feeling kind of lonely.”

“Madelaine and I have been jogging together,” she announced proudly. “It’s part of a new commitment to health. She’s not getting on well with Ramon, so I feel it’s my duty to spend more time with her.”

“That’s good of you,” he said with encouragement, although he wanted to hear more about Madelaine and Ramon. Were they getting divorced? Was it just a bad patch? Whatever the truth, he didn’t dare ask.

“I’m just getting used to things. London is a pretty busy place. I haven’t had time to go out yet, but I’m supposed to go out clubbing on the weekend.”
“That’s nice,” she said. “So...” she let the word hang expectantly as if waiting for some grand proclamation from him that would reveal the underlying reason behind his phone call.

“So London is actually pretty cool,” he said to diffuse whatever seriousness might be looming in the background searching for expression.

They spoke for another ten minutes before Jimmy decided to end the conversation. The phone call had been long enough and he didn’t want to give out any mixed signals.

“Sorry...it’s just that I have to go,” he said abruptly just as she had begun elaborating on about a blue dress she had just bought from a used clothes boutique in the East Village.

“Oh, just a second,” she said, seemingly unruffled by his miniature rebuff. He could hear the receiver fall from her mouth. He heard a second female voice in the background. Then he heard Josephine clearing her throat. “Madelaine says hello. She says she misses you.”

“Say hello for me,” he said. He felt suddenly at ease. So, Madelaine did mean something when she hugged him that night after the going away dinner. It was obviously her message that she needed him. And now she was reminding him that there was still something there, something that she had been afraid to express openly because of her husband and perhaps even because Josephine had feelings for him.

He said goodbye and wished them both well. As he let the receiver drop he felt a great sense of exhilaration as if his life was about to take off in a new and uncontrollable direction and he would never have to look back.

The next day he went with Ainsley to The Blue Note. It was located a few blocks from Jimmy’s flat in Hoxton Square, a remote enclave in an even more remote part of east London, trapped in a void somewhere between the financial district and Kings Cross, hardly even places themselves. They waited in line while a stubby black man wearing a leather jacket searched people at the door.

“They always do this here. Just a formality because I’ve never seen any violence inside.”

“Maybe this is why, though,” he said, turning his eyes to the security guard.

The man asked Jimmy to pull out all his pockets and take off his jacket. After a thorough examination with a metal detector he was allowed inside. The doorman seemed to know her, but subjected her to the same ritual anyway. The club seemed unpretentious if not completely unspectacular. There were two floors. The walls were painted a dirty pinkish-yellow and the ceilings were low. The top floor had a canteen style Caribbean take out and a bar. The downstairs was totally empty except for a second bar and some enormous loudspeakers. A video of some black youths break dancing was screening on one of the walls.

“We’re early,” said Ainsley.

“It’s smaller than I thought,” said Jimmy apprehensively.

“You won’t be disappointed if that’s what you mean.”

The place gradually filled up. By nine two women, one dark skinned with tightly wound blonde dreadlocks and a striped shirt, the other white with short black hair and a serious but kind face, walked with slow confidence behind the speaker system to the turntable deck.

After a rough sound check the music started. The first track began with a descending three-note synthesiser line from the lowest register of the keyboard. Then
a voice came in, whispering like a paranoiac warning a stranger of impending doom. *We have to see. We have to know.* Then there was a gap of silence before an assault of what sounded like an electronic snapshot of tribal war drums echoing down a long dark passageway. By this time the video projections on the wall had morphed from the break dancing clips to a series of flowing interlocking images based on a stylised skull motif wearing headphones; the menacing shape flew in squadrons with multiple identical copies or expanded into one large version and turned in perpetual circles, revealing that it was flat on both sides and extruded from two dimensions as if pressed from a cookie cutter. The background changed from scenes of urban decay to grainy black and white images of people walking through what looked like the streets of New York while the skull kept rotating and reappearing in a multitude of variations. A grim marauder flying through to a space station that nothing but a larger version of itself. A metal ring on the finger of a skeleton. A jittery child’s drawing surrounded by clouds of colour and light.

The next track was more jazz influenced. Jimmy listened closely as he watched the action around him. As the set progressed the room filled with more and more unusually attractive people, most of whom appeared African in origin. The music became louder and more chaotic, yet somehow smooth with snowdrops of sound filling the empty spaces between the aggressive architecture of deep, almost inaudible bass. By the end of the set a tall bald black man wearing dark sunglasses came up to the microphone next to the turntables and started humming along with the music. Then a second black man with a goatee walked up from behind Jimmy and headed towards the turntables. He was rigged up in gold jewellery with a black nylon windbreaker, and *Nike* trainers. The first man pressed the microphone to his mouth and started singing:

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“Metalheadz are touching down  
to the beats and breaks  
the sounds and rhythms  
of the London Underground.  
Get ready for the sounds  
of the DJ Fabio...the DJ Fabio”
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The tall black man with the goatee - Fabio, he guessed from the introduction, a DJ he remembered having read about in connection with Grooverider and the late eighties rave scene in the UK - stepped behind the turntables. He flipped a record on and set the needle at the beginning. The room filled up with a sound like a glass tower shattering in an echo chamber. There was a gap of silence before a jet of smoke garlanded in bright pink light filled the dance floor and a deep bass line began to thrust through the room. The music was even louder, but more stark than the last set, blending influences from rap and hard core techno into the break-beat framework without the feeling of perpetual motion through a great dark void that had dominated the music up to that point. Angry distorted voices that sounded as if they were coming from a broken Walkie Talkie rumbled in the background. The DJ’s facial expressions moved seamlessly from what looked like drug induced glee to introverted anger and sheer contempt as he spun through record after record, a pair of headphones hanging nonchalantly around his neck.
An hour later the lights went on, a message for the patrons to go home. Ainsley was drenched in sweat and exhausted from two hours of dancing. They collected their coats and walked out into the cold night air. On the way home they stopped off in a Kebab joint with red and white chequered tiles decorating the wall. A few youths sat in the corner playing video games.

“Fuck. Whoever said McDonalds was tacky? Let’s get out of here,” said Jimmy. They walked out into the street, ears still ringing from the music. Jimmy could feel the cold wet air pressing through every last leak in his clothing. A small cluster of what looked like unlicensed cabs had gathered at a roundabout about a half a block away. He looked at Ainsley and touched her shoulder lightly as if to thank her for the evening, but she immediately pulled away and broke into a run. I’ve gotta catch one of these, she said. I’ll see you tomorrow.

“Goodbye,” he shouted. He watched her slim wiry figure vanish into the night. Something about her made him feel new inside. It wasn’t that he was taken by her, but more that she made him feel more positive about himself and the future. Like a child who has grown up in a closet and suddenly walks out into the open daylight, he felt he had just been ushered into a new world he had never known existed. He enjoyed the bright alacrity of her presence: she was positive-minded, energetic, and thoughtful. There didn’t seem to be the pressure he felt around most women, the intimation that that spending time together necessarily meant that a serious relationship was developing or expected. She seemed like the kind of woman with whom he could fully share the London experience, from late-night tours of the underground club scene and Sunday afternoons in art and culture museums to sumptuous evenings in the myriad of exotic restaurants hidden away in the most intimate pockets of the west end. He turned the corner to walk back to his apartment. Half an hour later he was back in his flat. It was already dawn. A dense fog had fallen over the streets. The sun was just barely visible, hovering above the eastern horizon like a distant searchlight shining through a smoked glass panel.

Chapter 2.2

Jimmy spent the next day unpacking and decorating his apartment. Anything to make it look more lived-in would do. Just as he was putting his shoes on to go out and buy a can of paint to help touch up the kitchen the phone rang. It was Ainsley.

“Hi. It’s just me. Just thought I’d call to see how are you doing and if you need anything.”

“I’m a bit tired. I haven’t been out that late in quite a while.”

“You’d better get used to it! That’s what life is like around here.”

“I’ll do my best,” he jokingly obeyed.

There was a pause and then Ainsley continued.

“I thought you might want to go out for a bite to eat tonight so I can show you the neighbourhood.”

“Sure,” he said. “It looks like there’s quite a few interesting restaurants around here.” It seemed like a good idea and perhaps he would meet some more of her
friends, people who might help fill out his social life and buffer the loneliness of his existence while he was recording.

They met later at a Japanese restaurant where all tables were shared and the waiters punched the orders into a cordless telephone and sent them to the main kitchen on the next floor.

“This place is so unusual,” she said, squinting her bright green eyes. “It’s almost, well, sexy,” she said reluctantly. “What do you think?”

“Unusual, for sure, but I’m not sure I’d call it sexy...”

A waiter came up to their table and took their order. The food appeared a few minutes later in one of the three dumb waiters on the far wall.

“Sexy,” she repeated. “That’s what I say. Most people think we’re cold and prudish, but they just haven’t given us a chance. We have a corner on style.”

“A corner? I didn’t take you for a stock exchange type,” Jimmy said facetiously, winding a string of noodles around his fork.

“Only if it has something to do with sex,” she replied. “Black leather and plastic, that’s what I’d invest in if I had the cash.”

Jimmy laughed and turned his head to shield his eyes from the blinding glare of a traffic light from outside.

On the way home they took a circuitous rout through Hampstead, admiring the rustic beauty of the Tudor and Victorian mansions as the rain fell in a light intermittent drizzle. Some had thatched roofs and white plaster gables striped with heavy oak panels, while others had spacious brick terraces and angled barn-like roofs. There was even one that featured an American-style widow’s walk that looked like it had been added as an extension by second or third generation owners.

“You know what? I like you,” she said confidently while savouring the taste of a Japanese fruit drink.

He didn’t know quite what to say. It was the first time either of them had made any attempt to define their fledgling relationship. While the fact that she had called him back the morning after they went out to a club suggested she might like him more than just her professional duties would require, it almost seemed inappropriate, out of bounds, and strictly against the rules to voice her feelings towards him so soon after they had met.

“You have an interesting combination of quiet intensity and humour,” she went on. “You also seem more driven and determined than most British men to do something with yourself. Around here everyone seems caught up in some lethargic fog. It’s a small wonder the English get anything done, let alone remain a world force.”

“You seem the same,” he said. “I mean, a bit more happy and motivated than most of the people I’ve met so far.”

Their eyes met for a moment and then he looked away quickly. He sensed they had just touched on a deeper level, but perhaps it was only an emotional eddy, something to be paddled through briefly before returning to the greater flow of his life. Jimmy kept his eyes focussed on the pavement as the two walked on in contemplative silence. It was as though they both realised a line had been crossed that shouldn’t have and then mutually decided to retreat into safer territories.

The next morning he went in to the recording studio to get things started with his music. He spent the morning with a sound engineer making sure all the wires were properly connected in order to get the perfect sound for every track and channel. The
bass had to be deep, echoed to the limit, but still sharp and warm, but not as pedantic and controlled as the sewing machine staccato of Jeff Mills circa the iconic Live at the Liquid Room. The treble and midrange needed more flexibility. Hidden Agenda used a strange bare tremolo that sounded like a finger being rubbed around the rim of a wine glass. To achieve this he spent almost a week back in New York wiring and rewiring the circuits on the samplers and keyboard. Older electronics and tubes gave softer, blurrier sounds while the newest solid-state components had a footprint that was so exact and definite it was almost cold. It was blending them properly that was the real art. He needed the coldness to help define the shape and structure and give the music a certain sense of urgency that mirrored urban life and he needed the warmth and tonal colour to make it breathe. Electronic music was now mature and no longer had to sound dry and robotic as it did in its infancy, Kraftwerk, Brian Eno and Wire spin off bands like Dome having already etched out its foundations; since it was already typical to sample vocals from Motown tracks and frame them in a completely different sonic context, Jimmy was eager to stretch the boundaries even further and experiment with vocal polyphony, a concept he was familiar with from his studies of the twelve tone compositions of Arnold Schöenberg and the early eighties No Wave guitar symphonies of Glen Branca, although what he hoped to explore was something more akin to an electronic imprint of the orgiastic ballads of Jefferson Airplane: Paul Kantner, Grace Slick and Marty Balin’s vocal lines working to create an eerie off key counterpoint to the snaking distorted bass that was to become the signature of their sound. While it was obvious that Rock music was dying, with only the ambling guitar graffiti of Pavement or Radiohead’s angst of Pink Floyd holding his attention on the current independent charts, there was no reason he couldn’t use it in his music to flesh it out and create a new sound that distanced him from the original Detroit techno pioneers or its increasingly popular second generation practitioners such as Ritchie Hawtin (a.k.a. Plastikman). With all this to focus his efforts on, it was obvious Jimmy was brimming with a plethora of new ideas, but for the time being he decided it was best to keep it simple and follow Venables advice. He could always worry about the new stuff later, when he had more leverage.

When he was finished in the studio it was already past last orders in the pubs, so he went out to a club near Liverpool Street. He was too exhausted to continue working and didn’t feel like going to bed. He walked up to the bar to order, taking immediate notice of a Swedish bar maid as he stood in line waiting. She had smooth body motions and bright blond hair the color of the moon and treated the pouring of drinks like a sacred Japanese ritual. She’d stare carefully at the rim of the glass as she watched it fill. She had an especially unusual way of dispensing of excess foam in the pint glasses, which involved pouring the overflow into a second glass and carefully monitoring the meniscus by kneeling down so that the glass was at eye level as she continued to pour. When she wasn’t serving drinks she’d stand quietly looking out at the dance floor while she moved a shining metal object around in her mouth that Jimmy initially assumed was a coin.

She approached him one night while taking a break. “You’re American, yeah?” she asked, yelling into his ear over the loud music. There was a small silvery bolt stuck through her tongue.

“Yeah. And you?”

“Can’t you tell?” her voice changed. While she was able to talk with a perfect southern English accent she let it slip into something very Scandinavian.
“I’m glad you came over to introduce yourself,” he said.
She seemed uncomfortable for a second and then she smiled as if extremely flattered.
“Hey,” she said. “I’m going to Australia in a few weeks, but we can go out some time. Here’s my number.”
Beside the number on the small piece of paper she wrote the name Malin and underlined it. He was immediately taken by the graceful forwardness of her manner. It contrasted so strongly to the reserved and timid demeanour he detected in most British women. She was someone who he could take a risk with and not be held accountable if things didn’t work out. While he still missed Madelaine and hoped things would work out with her, for the time being it was best to keep himself in circulation to stave off whatever feelings of isolation and depression he feared the next few months might hold for him. So, the next day he phoned her and made arrangements to meet in a bar that evening. She showed up wearing a heavy sweater with torn jeans. Her face looked much older in the stark light of the early evening.
“Sorry, I got so pissed last night. And then I did some ecstasy with a mate.” Her eyes darted about the room as if she was expecting to meet someone more engaging and interesting - altogether more cool - than himself. “He’s got the best E.”
He imagined this mate of hers to be a casual lover or perhaps he was a steady boyfriend and she was just trying something different on the side for variety. Or maybe she was everybody’s jewel and entertained strings of men, never becoming attached to any one in particular.
They talked about travel and which nightclubs were the best to go to on which nights - things that he had already heard from Ainsley with more intelligence and refinement.
“Last week I was out on the piss with a few mates,” she said as she set her pint glass down on the table. “We drank so much I ended up on a train between London and Heathrow the next morning. Don’t even know how I got there.”
Jimmy shook his head and did his best to laugh in a way that didn’t sound uncomfortable. She obviously wasn’t for him. It became all too clear as they left the bar to go to the club they met in the night before. There was something dreary about her and she lacked a sense of curiosity for things outside her tiny world of nightclubs and alcohol. She talked about her friends and their drinking escapades as if he was supposed to be dazzled by her presence and lucky to be in the company of such a sought-after woman. But if anything, he was bored by it all. How could she possibly think he would be attracted to a woman who got so drunk she passed out on a train? But it didn’t matter. He was so starved for physical affection that he felt the urge to try and have fun with her anyway. Yet maybe she sensed that, and was just trying to get rid of him, seeing how far she could push things before he really wasn’t interested in her.
Although he had to force himself out of what he thought was some kind of duty to politeness, he kissed her on the lips as soon as they got inside the club, feeling the tingling cold of the metal against his tongue under the rainbow flash of lights and smoke from the dance floor.
“I had a dream,” she hollered over the din of loud music into his ear. “That I was standing on a pier in Johannesburg and I’d found everything I was looking for in life. When I woke up I decided that if it was the last thing I’d do, I’d go to South Africa after I leave Australia.”
She turned around and disappeared into the crowd. He waited in the same spot for her to come back but quickly got impatient and decided to go look for her. She was nowhere in sight. Maybe she had gone home, he thought at first. She had taken ill and tried to find him but couldn’t remember where he was standing. Then a more insidious thought entered his mind. She had met her friend - the one with the ecstasy - and they were on her bed right that very moment having hot and wild sex. As the strobe lights blinked he became aware of all the people around him having fun. Swept away by the festive ambience of his surroundings, it became increasingly obvious that such a dark and jealous thought could only have arisen from the mind of an intoxicated or paranoid individual, and that the first possibility - that she had taken ill - was far more likely.

He left the club and walked home alone, expecting maybe a message on his machine from her apologising for her sudden disappearance. There was none. No doubt, he thought, it was too late and out of her Swedish sense of propriety she thought it better to call in the morning. However, as he slept that night every time he emerged into wakefulness, he was plagued by the thought that he would never see her again. When he got up in the morning he reflected on what happened with a much clearer mind and concluded it was best to back off for a while and give her a chance to pop up again by her own volition. So, he waited a full week before trying calling her. When he finally did, a strange male voice answered and claimed to have no knowledge of anyone named Malin. He felt embarrassed and hung up. Immediately, he grabbed his coat and wandered around London for a few hours - hurt and somewhat dazed - before convincing himself that she obviously was no good anyway. It was best to forget about her. And besides, he thought, he really had no choice. She had no doubt forgotten about him or despised him so much that it was best not to see her again anyway.

The next day he woke up late and decided to take the day off. There was no point in going into the studio to record. His creative energy was already spent and he was only a fraction of the way through the project. To make matters worse, whatever he recorded sounded insipid, derivative, and confused when he played it back. It was too soft and dreamy. It was too hard and predictable. It lacked substance. It was too commonplace. It was pretentious. Even if it wasn’t, nobody would care about it anyway. He could spend a lifetime perfecting his work and the average man wouldn’t even give a damn. Just look at all the music out there. A new fucking album everyday. Where will it all end up a thousand years from now? Fused plastic lumps in a scrap heap. After downing a quick coffee at a local café he decided to walk up to Alexandra Palace. A middle-aged woman he met in a laundry mat had told him it was the highest point in London, a place where all Londoners should go to avoid the smog and enjoy the view. Perhaps it would give him some much-needed inspiration. When he got there, he gazed down upon the endless strings of banal brick architecture flooding outwards from Crouch End as they spilled into the Thames Valley. Why did I even come here, he wondered. Whatever initial excitement he felt over being abroad had already dissipated and everything had quickly come to assume an air of bland normality. It was as though his experience with Malin had deflated his initial enthusiasm that had kept him going like an amphetamine binge since he had come to England and since she vanished he had crashed down to the grim reality of everything his life had come to represent. The old brick row houses with their steepled roofs and beautiful backyard gardens looked shabby and cramped. Along with Malin, they
became emblematic of the entire nation and how it was leaching away at his soul. London women with their keen fashion sense, fearlessly showing off their figures in tight black satin pants and silver tops unbuttoned to a point two thirds of the way up their chest, were underneath it all boring and conventional - just beans on toast when you added everything up and came out with the final tally. Although there were exceptions - Ainsley perhaps, who he had not heard from since the night in the Japanese restaurant – the women here seemed for the most part afraid to express their deepest inner feelings. They were guarded, always going out in packs of friends, never able to talk about anything more challenging than the superficial differences between America and the UK. Sure they seemed more articulate and eloquent than the average American woman, but it was clear that society told them from day one that they were to be seen and not heard, so it really didn’t matter how clever or literary they were anyway. After work they would just go home and fuck their half-drunk skinhead husbands before frying up some sausages and peas for dinner. As he walked through the Alexandra Palace grounds he began to crave the comfort of a sound intelligent woman completely unattached to the whole mess of streets and smog he saw sprawling out in front of him. He needed someone to help him forget about Madelaine and there were obvious professional boundaries and at the end of the day just not enough of a spark with Ainsley to push their relationship up to a higher plateau. He wanted something stronger and deeper. The loving eyes and soft laughter. The warmth of a body held tightly against his own.

When he got home that night he found a letter stuffed in the mail chute along with a few flyers and pamphlets. The envelope was red and the address hand written. His heart leapt. It was his first piece of personal mail since he came to England. He picked it up and looked at the return address. It was from Josephine. Although he would have certainly preferred a communication from Madelaine, in his current state of mind he was happy to hear from anyone back home.

_Dear Jimmy,_

_I just thought I’d let you know I’m coming through the UK in six weeks. I’ll be visiting friends in Ireland for a week but would love to get together in London. Although it’s been a few months, it seems like only yesterday that you left. Madelaine and Ramon are as miserable as ever. He just sits there looking deep - but we all know how bland he really is - and she paces back and forth every day holding that trembling tea cup in her hand. I’ve done my best to cheer her up, but nothing seems to work. But now they are talking about buying a house (with what money?) and maybe even having kids as if that will somehow change things. I’ve seen a few rock concerts and have otherwise been a bore staying at home reading. How is your recording going? I’m not sure what your phone number is, but I’ll send you a note when I get the number of my Irish friends so you can call me. See you soon._

_Josephine_

He set the letter down glumly and poured himself a glass of water. His chances with Madelaine were now smaller than ever with talk of kids and buying a house. But at least it was contact with home, he tried to convince himself as he read the letter over and over again, and maybe it would be fun to spend time with Josephine in
London and rehash what already seemed like old times. He wondered what it would be like between them when she came. Since she didn’t sign the letter Love, Josephine, it seemed her intentions were innocent enough and he could look forward to a pleasant and uncomplicated visit from someone with whom he’d shared many memorable and perhaps even touching moments.

A week later he received a short note from her with her travel itinerary and the contact number she promised. According to the dates she’d written down she had already been in Ireland for four days. He picked up the phone and dialled. A man answered and Jimmy asked for Josephine. The man said she wasn’t there, so he left a message. An hour later she called back.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi!” said Jimmy. Her voice was familiar and comforting.

“So...”

“When are you coming?”

“I’m looking into bed and breakfast places right now. I should be down in a few days. What are your plans?”

“I’m free. Nothing happening here.”

“Really,” she said despondently. She seemed disappointed that he didn’t have something more positive to report from his life in England.

“Come down whenever. Just give me a call when you get in. We can go out for a drink.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she said.

He said goodbye and hung up. He bit his lip in anticipation. Although he had only been in England for a few months it seemed so long since he’d spent an evening with a North American woman that he had almost forgotten what they were like. Would she seem refined or clumsy? How would the change of cultural backdrop affect their friendship? In only a few months he felt he had become a totally different person and wondered if they still had common ground. Whatever the case, he was happy she was coming. It would at least be a chance to rediscover an old friendship.

He opened his curtains and stared out into the street. Brilliant rays of red light spread like flaming lances from a neon sign blinking aimlessly above a restaurant across the road. For the first time since coming to England he felt happy to be there.

Chapter 2.3

Jimmy met Josephine in a small café on Shaftsbury Avenue. Her hair was longer than before and her cheeks glowed petal white in the late afternoon sun. She looked happy and strong under the umbrella of her Panama hat as she smiled and offered her hand to greet him. “Nice to see you,” she said.

He took hold of her palm and pulled her towards him for a friendly hug. She resisted for a moment, but then gave in. There was something in her austere body language that suggested she was now over him if she was ever seriously interested in him at all.

“So...” she said. “This is London. It’s certainly a lot more posh than the place I stayed at in Ireland.”
“I’ve never been to Ireland...”
“You really ought to go sometime. It’s shabby but a lot more down to earth than England. The people are a bit more homey and natural.”

They ordered a quick coffee before going down the street to a small Thai restaurant with lacquered wooden tables and paper lanterns. They sat down in the back and looked at the menu.
“What are you having?” she asked.
“I’m not sure,” he said.

There was a long silence. He wondered if he should ask about Madelaine, but decided it would be better to wait and let her bring it up. After all, this visit was really about him and Josephine and had nothing really to do with Madelaine at all. It seemed to him, at least in so far as she was standing there before him that very moment in the dense crowds of downtown London, that the two women were completely unrelated and that his relationship to each was separate and unique with no points of overlap that could possibly confuse or muddy the situation.

The waiter came up to their table and they ordered. Jimmy looked out the window and tapped his spoon on the table before turning back to her.
“Well,” she said numbly. “I just had a major falling out with a friend. She met this new Italian guy in Dublin and ran off to Rome together. I was so pissed off. We were supposed to travel together. I don’t know what she was thinking. I mean, if you make plans to come to Europe with someone you just don’t get up and run off with the first guy you meet.”

“That’s awful,” said Jimmy. “The worst I heard was from a friend of a friend whose wife went away to San Francisco for a weekend and came back to announce her engagement to a new man. She even tried to get pregnant!”

“My God,” she said in disbelief.

“It gets worse. Even though he was really in love with her, he felt she had gone so far that he couldn’t bring himself to beg. So, he locked her out and refused to talk to her. She went back to San Francisco and started sending him letters about how she was still in love with him and would break off the engagement if he would just give the word. He refused to give in. Six weeks later they got married and he got a letter saying it was all his fault that he allowed her to go through with the wedding to an obviously inferior man and that she would blame it on him for life if it never worked out!”

“People can be so rotten,” she bemoaned. Her face had dropped as if she was deeply affected by his story and it had shaken her already tenuous faith in mankind in general. In the greenish light cast by the cheap paper lanterns Jimmy noticed how wet her eyes looked, as though she had just been crying and was struggling to hold back some hidden emotion.

After dinner they went to a pub near Jimmy’s place. They sat in a comfortable corner beside an Edwardian wrought iron lamp.

“This is what I miss about England,” she said. “All the bars back in America are so tacky. There’s just no atmosphere.”

“The Tree wasn’t so bad. But I know what you mean. Most of the places in this neighbourhood have some degree of character. Even the most run-down dives have something charming about them.”

Before he knew it they each had four pints of Guinness. His legs felt heavy and warm and a warm sallow light illuminated her face.
“What are you thinking?” she asked in a whisper. By the look in her eyes he felt she knew the answer already.

“Nothing,” he said. He looked into her eyes for a moment and then blinked. There was something in her expression that said she was disappointed in his answer.

“Does sex change things?” she asked boldly. He was almost shocked by the sudden change in her personality. Then she leaned towards him, the soft globes of her breasts touching lightly against the table.

Jimmy looked down at the table and remained silent. Maybe he had been wrong all those years - too idealistic about love and relationships - and Markus was right. Things just did happen. For better or for worse they happened no matter what other plans you might have had to the contrary. He looked up at her and noticed for the first time how attractive - how seductive, even - she was. He went to grab her hand but then stopped. “Let’s go back to my place,” he said. “I have some wine back there.”

“How will I get back to the bed and breakfast?” she said naively. When her lips quivered he knew what she wanted him to say.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You can stay at my place. I have a sofa in the living room.”

They both stood up and she let her head drop into his chest. He put his arm cautiously around her and walked her slowly out the door. The streets were dark and a soft rain had started to fall. A dark blue BMW whizzed past them, covering their ankles in a light mist of water.

“There’s so much affluence here,” she said. “People have nothing better to do than collect luxury items. I hope I don’t end up like that.”

“What’s left in life once you’ve made it?”

“Then I pray to God I never make it.”

They went up the stairs to his flat. Once inside, he took her coat and invited her into the living room. He poured them both a finger of whiskey and turned on the television. A soft blue glow filled the room. The words Mystic Fire appeared on the screen. It was Kenneth Anger’s Rabbits Moon, a short film he had seen once at a retrospective in Ann Arbor.

“One thing I really like about Britain is that the television is a lot more interesting,” said Jimmy.

“I guess it has to be,” she replied. “If you only have three channels you don’t have much choice.”

He moved beside her on the sofa. The opening frames flickered in blue sepia tone across the television screen. A huge white moon vanished behind a layer of clouds and then reappeared. A bizarre clownish figure - male or female, Jimmy wasn’t clear which - jumped out of the forest into a circular clearing. As if controlled by the rays of the moon, the figure danced wildly in the centre. The moon vanished behind the clouds and the figure slumped to the ground. When it reappeared the figure stood up again as if lifted by puppet strings. A dazzling female fairy appeared from behind the trees followed by a menacing jester who began to taunt and torment the clownish figure.

Jimmy glanced over at Josephine to gauge her response, but she seemed too mesmerized by the film to notice. All that existed in the universe were he, Josephine, and the blue-white glow of the screen. The film ended and a slender young Indian man seated in an armchair said a few things in the way of commentary before
introducing the next one. The words passed through Jimmy’s consciousness as if transmitted by some kind of invisible radiation. In the next film an exotic female figure walked around a palace of fountains and light while gargoyles and masks of classical deities spouted glittering water from their mouths in a symphony of light.

“It’s all about light, isn’t it,” said Josephine thoughtfully. “The moon, the reflections off the fountains.”

Josephine’s beauty flared up inside him like the showers of light on the screen. The images were so austere in their taut control of form and composition they were almost sexual. He put his hand on her leg. His relationship with her was open and pure, one in which sensuality and conversation stood on equal footing.

She smiled and touched his hand and a dark blue pool opened up inside him. Perhaps Markus was now right on two counts and Josephine was the real crown jewel of the family. He’d been a fool all along to love a woman he couldn’t have. Hoping Madelaine would drop Ramon and come to him was like asking the laws of physics to change on a whim. He was already feeling lonely and depressed in England - without a single utterance from her and no one else on the horizon - and was longing for human contact. However much he wished it were not true, it seemed she was drifting away from him and whatever they had shared was moving forever more distantly into the past. In a world in which everything suddenly seemed allowable without any barter or consequence he swooned towards Josephine and moved his hand up her shirt to touch her breast. She fell backwards on the couch.

“Why has it taken so long?” she asked softly, but in a way that suggested he somehow owed her an explanation for not recognizing the inevitability of their union sooner.

Her words slid through Jimmy’s ears and then through his entire being. He unbuttoned her shirt and let his head drop into her chest. He looked for a moment at the television screen where Anger’s *Lucifer Rising* was now playing. A sea of lava was moving slowly down a mountain like a hand of liquid fire, rolling over trees and rocks emitting its unearthly orange glow. The image of a lizard breaking out of an egg appeared followed by that of an alligator darting violently at its prey. The uncontrollable upheaval of *everything*.

He undid her pants and pulled off her underwear revealing the plumy white of her hips. Her sex was larger than he’d imagined. Almost an orchard of soft yellow hairs, belying the gentle austerity of the creature from which they grew. He let his tongue move in seductive arcs the full length of her body before undressing and pressing her naked flesh firmly against her. *Why not?* he thought in delayed response to her lingering question. *Why have I waited?* Madelaine was probably in bed that very instant gleefully making love to Ramon in celebration of their plans for their new house and family. He felt angry at the thought and in a vain effort to banish it from his mind pushed his tongue even deeper into the soft recesses of Josephine’s mouth. For a moment the sisters ceased to be consubstantial. They parted in flesh and spirit, parted in *milk and blood*. Josephine was a young dynamic woman all her own, far more than *just* little sister of Madelaine. Images from the television depicting lavish Egyptian deities, almost evil in their lush extravagance, rushed by like fragments of a dream. Josephine buckled, arching herself backwards as he climaxed. They fell silent. Jimmy rolled off her and put his arm around her. Overcome with drunkenness he closed his eyes and fell asleep.
As the night passed he woke up several times and looked over at her. He felt like he knew her no more or less than he ever had before. Sleeping with her was as innocent and pure an act as cupping water in your hands from a river in a moment of thirst. He watched her for a minute. She tossed and turned nervously without saying a word. He wondered what she was thinking. Her eyelids trembled and she whispered his name in her sleep. Suddenly something dawned on him. Something frightening. Something he didn’t want to concede had the right to any level of reality. An unwelcome question arose in his mind. Was she truly in love with him? Was this for her the consummation of something great and pure, or did she understand that a true love between them was something that never could be? He felt hollow inside as the gravity of what might have just happened slowly dawned on him. He did his best to shut it out and after several hours eventually fell asleep.

Josephine woke up at six and dressed.

“I have to go,” she said. Jimmy put his pants on.

“When will we see each other again?”

“My plane leaves in two days. Here’s the number for the bed and breakfast where I’m staying.”

She threw a card on the bed and walked awkwardly out the door. He walked her to the underground station. He was almost relieved to see her go. He kissed her goodbye and promised to write as they stood beneath the cold metallic arches looming over the Old Street roundabout. She forced her way through the turnstiles and disappeared down an escalator. As he looked at the blank white expanse of the ceiling he wondered when he would see her again. Then when he looked down at the floor it dawned on him that she was gone and it was presumptuous of him to think he would ever see her again at all. He closed his eyes for a long moment before opening them and then continuing down Old Street towards his apartment.

Chapter 2.4

Jimmy stepped towards the kitchen window and knelt down to adjust the radiator. The water in his flat had been unusually cold all day and he was anxious to take a hot shower. A bright shaft of light passed through the space between the half closed curtains and fell on his forehead, a hint of the summer that had not yet arrived. A blanket of cold air had descended over Islington for the last four days and it felt more like February than May. He set his hand on the cold white ribs of the radiator and turned the temperature control dial. Nothing happened. A minute later the metal was still cold. He banged on it with his fist and finally stood up. Fucking piece of British trash, he muttered to himself. Parted the curtains and looked out the window at the warehouse across the street. He felt empty inside. London. A city of cold black rain and endless wrought iron. A million cold wet nowheres thrown thoughtlessly together was somehow supposed to make it a somewhere. He rolled through the radio stations on his portable until he found a soft Jazz station playing something that sounded like Charlie Parker. It brought his mind back to a theory he was developing that John Coltrane invented House music with My Favorite Things, but he’d already had enough of modern dance music for the month, his recording
session all but finished after a fury of inspirational but ultimately soul draining overnighters in the studio, and finally felt like relaxing.

He poured himself some cheap scotch and picked up the phone. A voice appeared at the other end as if suddenly materialised out of a void without any source or context.

“Yes,” said Venables.

“I’m almost done,” he said, although this was far from the truth.

Since Josephine’s visit a month ago he had tried to keep his mind off what happened between them, struggling through creative exasperation to lay down a dozen tracks from the death driven radio dirge of Nemesis to the soft introspection of Quiet, a bittersweet hymn to an old and nameless girlfriend now lost in the shadows of the past. All he had to do was adjust the treble levels on a few of the tracks and add an overdub to another and he’d be done.

“Good. It’s been lagging. You’re already a month overdue.”

“Just a few filters and I’ll be ready to call it quits. I’m so sick of it but it’s best to be perfect.”

“We can’t always afford perfection. Approximate perfection is usually a cheaper alternative.”

Jimmy said goodbye and hung up. He was fed up with Venables and all his financial restrictions and deadlines. The more his recording sessions had progressed the more Venables had exposed himself as the kind of exploitive and penurious record producer that always seemed to show up in the biographies of great, now dead musicians. What good was being a musician if you never got to do what you wanted and follow your muse?

The next day Jimmy woke up early and went downtown. The cold weather had passed and suddenly it seemed like summer. Tourists seemingly from every corner of the earth filled the streets of Soho. The air was thick with humidity, exhaust fumes, and the smell of rotting meat. The warm weather and sense of unrestricted freedom that such weather always brought only increased Jimmy’s aggravation. For some reason being close to finishing his first album should have felt better. It wasn’t that he was unhappy with it – far from it, as in his mind it had all the hallmarks of a timeless classic – it was more that he felt utterly vague and purposeless now that the project was coming to a close. In the midst of all his frustration what happened between he and Josephine had vanished from his mind like a pool of gasoline on a hot stretch of pavement. But when he got home their was a card waiting for him in his mail chute, as though responding to an invisible cue created by his very sense of anguish.

Dear Jimmy,

I just wanted you to know I had a great time with you in England and hope I can see you again. Things here are as bad as ever. It looks like Ramon and Madelaine have finally had it. I can’t stand the man. He’s started to beat her. I came over the other day just in time to catch him throwing a plate at her. I’m trying to convince her to get a divorce. The way things are going, that’s probably what will happen. Please write.

Love, Josephine
He set the latter down and clutched his stomach. Thoughts of Madelaine swelled inside him like a fresh morning tide. Although he felt guilty for not thinking more about Josephine and what had happened between them, his love of Madelaine came back with such renewed force and energy it wrenched him out of his late spring depression and carried him through the rest of the day. He wondered how he could have ever let her leave his mind. He had to protect her. He had to save her from Ramon. How could the imbecile be so callous as to hit such a warm and lovely creature? Why didn’t Jimmy tell her he loved her before he left? How could he have been so weak as to let such a beautiful and intelligent woman drift out of his life the way he had? It was nothing more than a direct result of his weakness and cowardice that she was still suffering through such an abusive marriage. He had to write her and finally tell her how he felt. If he didn’t she’d be stuck with Ramon forever.

That night he stayed at home playing The Tindersticks until the first light of dawn broke through his window, imagining scenes in which he was kneeling down, his head in her lap and fingers coiled through her hair, whispering to her how he felt about her. *You know I’m a kisser, I wanted you for that mouth, you know I’m a listener, I loved you for what came out. It’s your mind and your body that makes me feel so good...* the flamenco electric guitar stylings whirling through the Hammond organ background like the red dress of some Spanish Esmerelda tangoeing through a crowded bar in Buenos Aires. With her snow white cheeks blushed in clouds of pink and half hidden by the chestnut waves of hair that fell from her head, she was the image of everything he’d always craved for in a woman.

He walked over to the window and looked out into the street. In the bleached light of morning his love for her suddenly seemed ridiculous and impossible. What about Ramon? What if he did write her and she became angry and defensive? Abused children often defended their parents. If he told her his feelings it would ruin everything and he would risk losing her friendship for good. And then there was always the Josephine factor. He struggled to form an image of her in his mind, but the more clear and visceral his mental picture became, the guiltier he felt. From the light tone of her letter it seemed clear that she knew what happened between them was only an affair and would never lead to anything more serious. But maybe it wasn’t so clear, he thought, and she was expecting something more of him, something burning, pure and transcendent that he could never offer her. As he let the curtains drop the thought crossed his mind that she had engineered the whole thing. She had suspected he had feelings for Madelaine and seduced him in the midst of his loneliness as a means of guaranteeing that nothing could ever happen between him and her older sister. If this was true it showed without bias that Josephine was really a calculated and heartless woman who played innocent and naive in order to lure mean into her trap. So why, then, did he feel so guilty? This, he didn’t know, and years later, when the images of him sitting right in that very spot wondering what to do and how he should feel played on in his head like the theme from a tired radio jingle, he still didn’t know.

He went into the kitchen and pounded his fist on the counter in frustration. What was he doing over in England anyway? Why was he here when she was over there? He couldn’t stand it anymore. He had to tell her if it was the last thing he’d do in his life. He picked up a shot glass and filled it with whiskey. As soon as he gulped it down he threw the glass at the wall. Instead of shattering it broke into three equally sized pieces that landed in a perfect triangle on the floor in front of him. He watched
the whiskey trickle down the wall until it reached the baseboards and then disappeared. It was now six in the morning. He heard sound of a radio playing from in adjacent suite and seemed like a cue for him to collapse on the couch and cover his head with a throw pillow until he fell asleep.

He woke up the next day at one and called Ainsley, thinking maybe she could offer him some advice on what to do about Josephine and Madelaine.

“I’ve got a problem,” he said from beneath the shadow of his embarrassment.

“What?”

“Well...” He went on to explain what had happened between he and Josephine and how he had really liked Madelaine all along. “What would you do? Is it wrong to cross two sisters?”

“I wouldn’t be upset if my old boyfriend went after my sister, as long as there wasn’t anything between us anymore. But that’s me. Maybe these two are different. From what you say they are quite a rivalrous pair. On the other hand, it’s obvious you love her. If you don’t tell her you’ll never know. The worst that could happen is that she says no. Just make sure you’ve broken things off with Josephine first. You can’t be sure what she’s feeling.”

“I feel I have to go with my heart. It’s the only noble thing I can do. I have to save her from Ramon. And I think Josephine will be fine without me. She’s so attractive and intelligent. Everyone adores her when they first meet her.”

He thanked her for listening and let the receiver drop neatly back into place. He walked over to his desk and took out a pen and some paper. He scribbled little graffiti men all over the corners, joining them up hand by hand until they covered the whole page like an East Village wallpaper pattern. He started by writing to Josephine. He told her how much he cared for her and how wonderful a person she was, explaining how he felt she must already know that there would never be anything between them but how he really valued her friendship and the time they spent together. Then he went on to say that he had always had a burning love for Madelaine but was afraid to admit it. When he finished he signed it “Forever your friend.” He read the letter over and decided it was frank, gentle and on the whole adequate. On top of that, women were said to value honesty in men above all else. He would send it the next morning and then write a letter to Madelaine, which he would send two weeks later. That would make sure that he was abiding by Ainsley’s advice to finalise things with Josephine before telling Madelaine. He owed Josephine that much and was sure she would understand.

Next he took a clear white piece of paper, set it on the table in front of him, and stared at it for a few minutes wondering what to say. Dear Madelaine, he finally wrote. I don’t know what to say. Then he stopped and reread it. It was clumsy and embarrassing. That was no way to begin such a heartfelt and cathartic letter. He couldn’t just throw such a profound declaration in her lap. It needed more finesse, more of a lead up. He had to start casually. After all it had been months since he’d last seen her. After a few more false starts and wadded up paper balls he finally caught stride. He began with an apology for not writing sooner. Then he led into a description of his day-to-day life, complete with his impressions of London and how his recording sessions were going. Finally, on the second page, he broke out.

There’s something more important and pressing that I want to talk about. It may come as a complete shock to you and you may also wonder why I’ve waited so
long to say it. When I first met you at my party last year I was overcome by something so strong I could hardly begin to describe it. I was almost afraid to come and talk to you, I found you so astonishing that beautiful would only be a tired adjective next to the truth. There was something in your dark eyes and hair, the deep brown tresses falling over your face, that set off something uncontrollable inside of me. You made me think of a dreamy child staring at her dolls through a rosebush. Do you remember the first night we met when we talked about Gericault’s horses, Rilke, and the history of the Tango? At first I thought it was only an infatuation. It would have been so much simpler if it was. But as I got to know you I only found you more beautiful inside than I could ever have imagined. You seemed to know and cherish so many of the same precious things that I’ve always held inside me like secret icons. When I found out you were married I could hardly believe it. It was like life was playing some malicious joke. I tried to bury my feelings and forget about you. But as we spent more and more time together I let my romantic feelings go and I began to see you more as a friend. And this is what further complicates things. I knew we could always be friends if I never turned to you to tell you how I felt, yet I also knew that if I did that I was running the risk of losing you altogether. I have no idea what sort of relationship you have with Ramon (sp?) and I’m in no way implying that I thought you were looking for an out of your marriage. I hardly know him and have no reason to dislike him. These feelings have just burned inside me for so long that I was starting to feel like a coward and liar for not telling you sooner. It is so very rare that someone like you walks through a person’s life. I’ve had lovers, perhaps even too many, and what seems like virtually every possible permutation of romance cross my path, but I’ve never felt so strongly for someone as I do now.

Out of fear that my feelings might be ephemeral I held back from telling you all these months. I didn’t want to create a situation. I’ve written Josephine a letter telling her how I feel and I’m hopeful that she will understand. Although some people suggested she had feelings for me, I never got the impression that they were more than just a schoolgirl crush or passing curiosity. I hope you are not angry with me for saying this.

I don’t know what you think of all this. I’m still in England indefinitely although I can leave whenever I want. I just had to tell you. I wish I didn’t have to do it by mail. Like the old argument that says that God must exist because he is that which nothing greater can be thought and for him not to exist would only be an imperfection violating his greatness, I feel my love for you would only be a meaningless absurdity if it were never expressed to you. I want to lie with you like two deer prints in snow. I want to hold you up against me and whisper into your ear all night. Yet on top of this I want you to know that I value your friendship and don’t want you to walk away if you aren’t able to return my love. If you don’t feel this way for me I’d like to still keep in touch. My life can only be less without you.

Love, Jimmy

He reread it and posted it immediately, rummaging through his kitchen cabinet for fifteen minutes to find a stamp and running out to the nearest mailbox. He felt
light-headed as he stared at the moving patterns cast on the wall by the headlights of the occasional passing car. A great weight had been lifted off his chest. Whatever the future held, he reassured himself, would be for the better. There was no way he could have gone on living the lie that he loved Josephine and not Madelaine. It was pure and noble of him to finally express his truest feelings. At worst, he thought, the sisters would understand and the three of them could all still be friends. Nothing would be lost and he would have the peace of mind knowing that at least he tried to love her. Only cowards hid their truest feelings. He fell asleep to the sound of the first sign of early morning traffic trickling out into the street, the image of her in the same red shirt she wore on Halloween pressed tightly up against his chest hovering quietly in the back of his mind.

Chapter 2.5

Not expecting to hear from Madelaine for several weeks, Jimmy concentrated with renewed enthusiasm on finishing his recording. He went into the studio every morning at eight and worked straight through to last orders. In an absolute whirlwind the album was finished in less than two weeks. As a final measure he took a copy home and listened to it over and over until the first rays of dawn penetrated through his curtains. When he was finally convinced he could do no better, he left a CD of the finished product in Venables’ mail slot. Two days later he called Jimmy into his office.

“I like it,” Venables said with some reserve.
“Is that all you have to say?”
“It reminds me of Aphex Twin.”
“I did my best,” said Jimmy, making little effort to conceal his aggravation. It sounded nothing like Aphex Twin and anybody with just a layman’s knowledge of music would agree.

“Anyway,” said Venables, leaning back in his chair. “Now that you’re finished you should drop off the studio keys as soon as possible and start looking for a new flat. We don’t mean to force you out - you can stay for a month or two longer while we start the promotional phase of your work with us - it’s just that we have limited space and need to accommodate the new artists as they come. I’m sure Ainsley can help you find something.”

“Sure,” replied Jimmy curtly. “I didn’t like it much anyway.”
“Well then it will work out for all parties concerned.”
They exchanged a few strained platitudes and Jimmy left.

The days passed more and more slowly. Why hadn’t Madelaine replied? Maybe she just hadn’t received the letter yet. Perhaps he had accidentally used the wrong postcode and it had been re-routed. Or maybe Ramon had intercepted it and read it. If that was the case, he may have just have thrown it away before letting Madelaine see it. Yet wouldn’t it be more in the Spaniard’s character to use it as ammunition in their ongoing arguments and present it to her as incontrovertible evidence that she had tried to strike something up with Jimmy? With the uncertainties mounting like
sand dunes in a desert, he began to wonder if he should have sent anything to her at all.

After a week of doubt and increasing anxiety he broke down and called Ainsley. Perhaps she could tell him something, some magic word or phrase, or some nugget of wisdom that might restore his confidence and convince him that sending the letter was the right course of action after all.

“Just look at it this way,” she said. “Why would she not like you? I already know a lot of women who do.”

“You never know. I don’t go through life assuming everyone is in love with me.”

“If you shared some close experiences and things aren’t so good with her husband, you never know. I can’t see her being mad if you’re honest about it.” There was a tone of reservation in her voice that he didn’t quite understand. Maybe it meant she was just telling him what she thought he wanted to hear. Or perhaps there was something deeper going on that he could just barely catch a glimpse of. He imagined a scenario in which Ainsley - or more likely from her words “a lot of women” one of her many friends he had met on their nights out - was secretly in love with him and she was annoyed that he hadn’t yet picked this up and instead was asking her for advice about another woman. Then he quickly dismissed the idea. It was the sort of arrogance he would find presumptuous and even repulsive if he ever saw it on display in another man.

“I guess,” he said. He wanted to ask her if she had really meant what she had just said, but decided against it. What if she said no? Then he’d have to face the humiliation of thinking that Madelaine hated him and would never want to speak to him again - or at least until she responded to his letter. The truth was potentially too dangerous and it was safer to assume Ainsley was telling him what she really thought and not what she thought he wanted to hear.

Two weeks later a letter from Madelaine finally arrived. It immediately peaked his curiosity that the return address was in Spain. The envelope was light blue with a red-flecked wren on the stamp. It looked like every love letter should. Not wanting to open the letter but opening it anyway, he sliced the top ridge with a knife and pulled out the single piece of white paper inside. It was type written on both sides.

Dear Jimmy,

Please excuse the typed presentation of this letter. I’m at work now and want to give the impression I’m busy with office-related tasks lest my boss catches me and thinks I’m slacking off. I read your letter two weeks ago and have been at a loss as to what to do. I could never consider you a fool for wanting to express your feelings and can see your need to tell me. It must have been difficult holding it in all that time. As for the letter you sent Josephine, I intercepted it and read it. I thought you would have at least been kind enough to let her down gently. She was in love with you, Jimmy. Why did you think it would do any good to tell her that it was me that you loved all along? I feel tainted by this knowledge. After speaking with my mother, I decided it was best to burn the letter. Do you know what it would have done to her if she had found out?

Jimmy stopped and put the letter down. He couldn’t believe what he was reading. It didn’t even sound like the same person he had shared so many intimate
moments with. The words were cold and the sentences sharp and exact. Where was the woman that had once called him beautiful? Or the woman who told him he was the nicest man she’d met in years? He picked up the letter and read on.

To be honest, I’m shocked. I never once suspected you felt this way about me. Your letter was just so out of the blue. I only liked you as a friend. After all, you slept with my sister. You used her for sex, Jimmy. For that I can never forgive you. And now you have to tell me this sordid secret that I’ll have to carry around for the rest of my life. And for your information, I’m also very happy with Ramon. What would make you think that I would leave my husband for someone I’d just met and spent a few evenings with? Jesus Christ, Jimmy. You’re in England for God’s sake. What also amazes me is that you seem to pose yourself as some kind of victim. Did you ever stop to think of the consequences of sending those letters? What if Ramon found it and got angry with me? Now I have to go through life feeling guilty for Ramon’s sake. I feel like I’ve cheated on him in just reading your letter. I’ve been so upset the last few days. I wanted to come to Spain and enjoy myself. Relax with Ramon and now I feel like my life is in upheaval. I think in all fairness it is wrong of me to blame you for how you feel and I respect you for having the courage to tell me. Yet another side of me wishes I never knew. We could have gone on being friends and now I think that the only possibility is a memory of a friendship. I can’t see any other solution that wouldn’t threaten my marriage and sister. Please, don’t try to write any more letters. I will only view you with contempt if you do. And if you have any compassion you will write Josephine a friendly letter explaining that you have found someone else and that you always cared for her. I enjoyed your friendship. You are an interesting man and rare company. But I’m sorry to say it has to end.

He set the letter down on the table and collapsed on the couch. Even in his worst nightmares he could never have imagined she would react so harshly. He reread the letter one more time, hoping that it wasn’t as bad as it originally sounded. It was worse. It couldn’t have been colder if she’d chiselled it in block of ice and left it outside his door. He always knew she was moody, yet had never been on the wrong side of her scorn. How could she have burned his letter to Josephine? Was it really that vile and destructive? He tried to console himself. It was a natural reaction. She was protecting her sister and defending her husband. She was playing hard to get to test his feelings to see how true they were. She would only leave her husband for someone who truly loved her and proved it by gracefully withstanding her attack by countering it with renewed affection and understanding. Yet, somehow the pieces didn’t add up. Perhaps it was a fantasy to think she would leave her husband for him, but still there was no way she could be as angry with him as she sounded. It just wasn’t like her. She liked him and said as much. There had to be something more to it.

As the night wore on his sadness turned to a bizarre form of optimism. If she had no real feelings for him then she wouldn’t have expressed such shock and defensiveness at his letter. If she really didn’t love him her letter would be more kindly dismissive than outright angry. In life it is love, not hate, that is our worst potential enemy. She had deep feelings for him and was just guarding herself from the chaos she feared would happen if she ever expressed them. She was hiding from the
turmoil his love might bring her. It would shake the very foundations of her life. That had to be the answer.

He grabbed a pen in desperation and began to write her a reply.

Dear Madelaine,

The anger of your letter came as a complete surprise to me. Although I wasn’t sure how you’d react to my revelations, I never imagined that you would be so angry towards me for expressing my feelings. I feel horrible about what I did to Josephine and never really felt she was in love with me. She had never said so. I wish I could turn the clock back and take the letter away from your eyes. I wish you never saw it. In expressing the gentlest feelings for you I’ve ended up losing everything. Isn’t there a way we can still be friends? Isn’t there a way we can reverse the damage that was done? I’m so very sorry for what I did. I feel like I’ve dishonoured you.

He went on for another four pages explaining how he’d sought the advice of Ainsley and hadn’t just rampaged blindly into her life. He told her that he’d accept her friendship as a compromise and never utter a word of the affair again. Just as he was about to finish, the phone rang. Jimmy was in the bathtub but jumped out to answer it, still naked and dripping.

“Hi. It’s Madelaine,” she said. She sounded different than he remembered. For the first time he noticed her accent was distinctly American. Although she was calm and polite, there was a disturbing note of seriousness in her voice.

“I’m glad you called. I got your letter.”

“I feel bad,” she said. “I didn’t mean to sound so malicious.”

“I never thought you’d react this way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m dripping wet. Can I get a towel?”

“Sure.”

Jimmy ran back to the bathroom and grabbed a towel.

“This thing is so weird. I never imagined...”

“You must have sensed.”

“It’s so out of the blue. I mean, I just don’t understand you. What do you want from me?”

“You said some things. The first time we met I was so blown away.”

“I only thought of you as a friend, Jimmy.”

“You said some things,” he repeated, only realizing after the words had come out that he might have come off sounding pushy. “You told me in your own words that I was beautiful and the nicest person you’d met since you’d moved to New York.”

“I only meant them as a friend.”

“It didn’t seem that way at the time.”

“I’m married to the man I love.”

“I’m sorry. I never realised.”

“I’m just so disappointed in you. Can’t you see anything but your self?”

“I was just trying to be honest.”

“I just feel so strange. I mean really. I’m at Ramon’s parent’s house. He’s sitting in the other room even as we speak talking to them. He knows everything. I couldn’t help but tell him.”
“Look. I’m really sorry. I just felt so strongly for you. I waited so long. I knew there’d be risks. That’s why I waited so long. I tried to hold back. I didn’t want to tell you unless I was sure. I asked so many people for advice.”

“I don’t know what sort of people you hang around with.”

“I can’t believe you said that. You know what sort of people I hang around with. Last year you treated me like we had always known each other and now it’s like I’m some kind of panhandler you just met outside a bar.”

“Why did you have to tell me? That’s what I don’t understand. I had only the fondest memories of you.”

“Can’t we just forget this all? Pretend it never happened?”

“I don’t see how.”

“Oh, come on. I’m old enough to know it takes two people to love and even then the situation has to be right and even then it may not work. I just don’t understand your anger.”

“I’m sorry. I just see no other possibility than to break off all contact. You should have thought about the consequences.”

“I did.”

“How do you think Ramon feels?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Is that all?”

“Whatever you say,” Jimmy said, trying to maintain an artificial sense of levity. “I guess I can’t change the way you feel.”

“Listen. I’ve got to go,” she said as if suddenly distracted by some chaotic event in another part of the house. “Can’t we talk more? I’ll call back and pay.”

“No. Ramon’s waiting for me.”

“I’ll be back in New York in a month. Maybe we can get together then. If you never want to see me again, I’d like to see you just once more.”

“I can’t commit myself to something like that,” she said as though he was proposing a partnership in some kind of two-bit Ponzi scheme. “It depends on how I feel.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m so angry with you.”

“Like I said...”

“I have to go. Good luck on whatever you do.”

She hung up.

Jimmy walked slowly back to the bathtub. The water had gone cold and there was a ring of rust around the drain. He undid his pants and let them drop to the floor. How could the warmth and beauty of their first conversations lead to such a cold and pitiless end? How could she suddenly turn so cruel after all they had experienced together? The letter couldn’t have disrupted her life that much. If anything it should have flattered her. Yet in the mere act of thinking this, wasn’t he just being the typical male chauvinist that women complained about? On the other hand, maybe he was in the right after all and her harsh reaction was nothing more than concrete proof that she was mentally ill, as Josephine had always implied. He’d certainly noticed more than once her sudden flashes of moods, but had always taken it as a sign of depth or an unhappy marriage as opposed to a personality flaw. The way she used to sit and stare off in space last fall in New York was a clear example of this. Yet it was
more likely he was the crazy one. He never said a word to her when he had the chance and then six months later came waltzing back into her life like some kind of low end Casanova replete with plastic roses and a clunky old Wurlitzer churning out the kind of brass band love songs they played in those Greek men’s clubs in the Bronx he always used to make fun of.

The more he looked at it, the more he realized how futile it was to try and rationalize what had happened. The biggest question was not the past. It was the future. What could he do to save the situation? Even the slightest false move and he would ruin everything. If he just sat there doing nothing he’d be no more than a pathetic Hamlet spiralling downwards into the web of his undoing. But if he begged for her forgiveness he would be accused of trying to destroy her marriage and family.

Suddenly the phone rang. He ran across the room to pick it up, certain it was Madelaine calling him to apologise for being so hard on him. An older woman’s voice greeted him at the other end.

“Hello. This is Josephine’s mother.” At first he thought something horrible had happened. Maybe Josephine had killed herself because of his selfish declarations. The thought hung darkly in his mind like smoke from a grease fire in a bad Chinese restaurant.

There was a long pause.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Jimmy finally said. “Your daughters are wonderful. I...” He struggled to come up with an excuse for what had happened.

“I’m just calling to ask you to write a kind letter to Josephine,” the woman said. Jimmy took a deep breath and then relaxed. “She’s always been the sweet, innocent one. She’s always lived under Madelaine’s shadow. It would kill her to know that the love of her life really loved her sister. You were the love of her life. A lot of men like her but you were the first one she really fell for.”

“It just happened...I’m so sorry to have insulted the dignity of your daughters. I feel so low. She’s such a precious woman. I haven’t met anyone like her in years. And now Madelaine hates me.”

“Madelaine doesn’t hate you,” she said. “She’s just shocked. And we understand that sometimes these things happen. I just want you to send Josephine a kind letter and vow never to mention what happened. It would destroy our family.”

Her voice was warm and reassuring, its tone suggesting that if he did what she said, everything would be fine. There was a suddenly a glimmer of hope that he could rescue something. “Whatever you think is best,” he said obsequiously.

They exchanged platitudes for another five minutes, Jimmy complimenting Josephine and Madelaine as much as he could. When the conversation ended, Jimmy pulled out a note pad and started a letter to Josephine. If he wrote something friendly and beautiful Madelaine and her mother would forgive him and finally see the nobility behind his actions. He started by telling her what he had been doing in England since she had visited. How his recording was going. His impressions of the English. Then he led into how much he had adored her and how much the night they had spent together had meant to him. He told her how beautiful she was, calling her a fairy goddess and listing her numerous virtues. Then his tone became more serious and he said that he had no idea when - if ever - he would return to North America and that he had actually found someone else. He felt low and cheap in lying to her, so he launched into a noble discussion of relationships and how time and distance were the ultimate enemies of all true love.
He finished the letter and reread it. It sounded tender and honest without being fake or melodramatic - even though it really might be. He genuinely felt badly for Josephine. What did she do to deserve to fall in love with a man who could never return her affections? In a strangely ironic way it was like him falling in love with Madelaine, only because he was a man he was supposed to take all the blame while Josephine garnered all the sympathy. He imagined Josephine sitting down alone on a couch in New York crying. The letter would certainly lift her spirits and maybe one day even heal all of the wounds he had so obviously inflicted on everyone. He sealed it in an envelope and put it on his desk to send it the next day.

He poured himself a glass of water and lay down on his bed. He thought of Josephine in all her purity. How could have been so thoughtless as to sleep with her and then pledge his love for her sister? It sounded like something a womanizing sociopath or pimp might do. He felt awful inside and wondered if even deserved the sympathy of their mother. What ever made him think that sleeping with Josephine wouldn’t change things? Sex wasn’t just some physical event that could happen and unhappen - a knot that could be tied and untied a million times without hurting or altering the string itself. Maybe Markus was wrong after all and he had only succumbed to his friend and manager’s shallow views of life in a moment of weakness and confusion. You couldn’t just let things happen. It was a mistake to have slept with Josephine. It destroyed their friendship and created an even bigger barrier between he and Madelaine than did her marriage.

Jimmy leaned back and closed his eyes. The door clicked shut like some great electronic vault. The last brick was set, walling him up like a helpless Fortunato, still hoping for a taste of the legendary Amontillado. When he opened his eyes again he was overcome by the strange and delusional feeling that he was standing in a completely different world than before, a new dimension in which the letter and phone call were all just a part of some convoluted nightmare. With this thought seeming to numb his entire body and mind he shut his eyes and fell asleep.

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Chapter 2.6

The blackness. A long narrow barge cut a thousand icy furrows through the green November waters of the Thames. Jimmy leaned over the Tower Bridge railing as he stared idly over the cold rippling waters in the direction of the eastern industrial wastelands of London. Isle of Dogs. Limehouse. Mudchute. In the distance loomed rows of housing projects, far bleaker in their cardboard cut out simplicity than anything the Lower East Side had to offer. The landscape could have been shot in black and white and looked none the less colourful and there wasn’t even the slightest trace of graffiti to lend evidence that people actually lived there. Years ago he would have found such a backdrop appealing, the setting for some neo-romantic diatribe equating spiritual transcendence with inner city squalor and the fragmentation of modern life. Now it was hardly that. Not even a metaphor for his current state of destitution. He picked away at a piece of gum that was stuck to his shoe, and then gave up in frustration.
It had been two weeks since Madelaine’s phone call and his feelings for her burned inside him with even greater intensity than before. Sleeping with Josephine was without a doubt the biggest mistake of his life. Not only was it wrong - as he preferred Madelaine from the start and it was only a moment of loneliness and misguided lust that clouded his judgement and weakened his resolve just enough for him to give in and finally yield to Josephine’s advances - but it was also thoughtless and self-destructive, if not completely masochistic. He imagined scenarios in which he approached Madelaine in a lavish garden at some random moment so far off into the future it might just as well be another life inhabited by completely different people. Things would be different then. It was only the cruel indifferent touch of time that was keeping them apart. All that needed to happen was for their lives to somehow change and then he would be free to love her forever. If only there was a drug that could make them all forget what happened, or better yet some magic set of words that could lift them out of their current lives and transplant them into a completely new reality in which he had never slept with Josephine and Ramon had never existed.

_Love is not of this world_, he thought. That was why love was always alone. The beautiful force of spirit and soul that flowed between two people was in the end subject to the same physical laws as were rocks and water. It was time and space that were the true enemies of love. If Ramon and Josephine could somehow be whisked away into a fresh existence in some part of the world or different juncture of time everything would be fine with Madelaine. Yet to even think of such a thing happening was foolish if not completely insane. He had to forget about her and move on. That was his only choice. But if he started to see other women wouldn’t he be lying to both them and himself? What would happen the next time he met with Madelaine – if, indeed, he ever saw her again at all? Would she turn away from him in harsh indifference? And if she did, how would he react? Would he be honest and gentle and express how much he missed her and regretted his mistakes? Or would he be bold and composed, casually listing his sexual and music chart conquests while pretending to be over her? But she was the furthest thing from a materialist – a closet hippie at heart - and would permanently begrudge him for even thinking she would care.

He turned away from the river and walked towards Embankment where he caught the next tube home. When he got to his apartment a letter from Josephine was waiting in the mail chute. He trembled as he opened it. Inside was a card showing a black and white picture of a woman riding a bicycle.

_Dear Jimmy,_

_You know how I fell about you and that we will always be friends. I am naturally disappointed that you have someone new. You are a very dear person to me and I need you in my life on some level. I hope you keep in touch._

_Love, Josephine_

He walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa. Perhaps Josephine really was the better woman after all. For all his love and feelings for Madelaine, he had ended up with nothing. She had turned out to be little more than a fair-weather friend in the end. As soon as she found out he loved her she slammed the door in his face. But in spite of his callous rejection Josephine still cared for him. Josephine still
needed him. He glanced across the room at the radiator and a new feeling rustled inside him, a feeling of nostalgia for the time he spent with the two sisters in New York - a time that had now vanished forever because of his thoughtless indiscretions. All that was left of that time was Josephine’s promise of a friendship. And what good was that when he wondered if he could ever face up to her again when he knew deep inside that he desperately wished Madelaine would have a change of heart. He would be little more than an impostor in Josephine’s life, forever pretending that nothing had happened and forever hiding the hideous letter-burning incident and humiliating conversations with Madelaine and her mother.

He opened up a can of beer and sat down on the couch. By the time he was halfway through he had already fallen asleep. An hour later he woke up to the sound of the telephone. He cleared his throat and answered on the fourth ring.

“Hello, my man,” a deep male voice boomed on the other end of the line. “I’m in town on last minute business. Down at the train station. Victoria…I’m sure you’ve heard of it by now. Why don’t you come meet your old buddy for a drink?”

“Markus,” Jimmy exclaimed with delight. “I didn’t recognise your voice at first. It’s been a while.”

“Don’t forget where you’re from,” he replied. “You move away for a few months and you already...just kidding.” He laughed in a reassuring way that gave Jimmy comfort and made him feel that there might be some hope yet for his situation.

“I’ll be there in half an hour,” Jimmy said with alacrity. He let the phone drop and grabbed his coat. A few drinks with Markus was just what he needed to snap himself out of this funk. Markus would certainly have some piece of advice, some glittering diamond of truth or wisdom that would set his life back in order and put him on track to winning back Madelaine’s respect.

When he got to Victoria he bought a cappuccino and waited beside a small kiosk, peering around periodically to see if he could spot Markus wandering through the crowds. Five minutes later Markus stepped around the corner in a deliberately baggy yellow raincoat hanging half way down his legs.

“It’s great to see you,” he enthused. He hugged Jimmy so hard that two older British Rail officials standing beside them turned their heads and stared.

“You must be jet-lagged.”

“Not really. I was in Paris for a few days. I didn’t think I’d make it over here, but something came up.”

“How was it?” Jimmy asked, trying to sound happier than he really was.

“How was Paris? he asks. Terrible, man. Those French girls and all that great food. Just terrible. I’m really hurtin’ bad.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Don’t get any ideas. You ain’t gonna trick me into eating any of that fried crust shit they call food over here.”

They took the underground back to Old Street and found the nearest pub. Jimmy ordered two pints of Guinness and they sat down. Before they even started drinking Markus pulled out a photo of a baby wearing a pink bonnet. “What do you think?”

Jimmy’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well...” he said, not sure what to say.

“Three months old.”

“What’s her name?”

“Ella. After Ella Fitzgerald. And believe me, she’s been entertaining us all night long with her sweet soprano. Ella senior would be proud. I haven’t slept in weeks.
The whole thing’s been such a strain on Nicole she’s been sleeping twelve hours a day.”

Jimmy took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair, focusing his gaze on a rotating ceiling fan overhead. “Like me,” he said.

“Like you? What do you mean?”

Jimmy shook his head and breathed deeply. “I can’t even talk to her.”

“Oh?”

“Madelaine,” Jimmy said.

Markus tilted his head in a gesture of seriousness. “What happened?”

“I know you probably won’t be too sympathetic but Josephine came to visit a while ago and...”

“Let me guess...you slept with her,” his final words dropping out like an accusation.

Jimmy nodded his head slowly as he watched a look of disapproval emerge on his friend’s face.

“I know it sounds bad...” Jimmy said sheepishly. He struggled to think of something that might free him from blame. “It just happened,” he finally stated. “If anyone would have understood I thought you would.”

“It just happened? You fuck the love of your life’s sister and then you expect me to care? You were sitting there at The Coffee Shop telling me how noble and pure you were for going with your feelings instead of just taking whoever was available. Then you turn around and screw her sister...” He shook his head in scorn. “She’s is such a nice girl, too. I’d take her any day over Madelaine.” He set his glass firmly on the table. “I think she’s cool and I can’t help but feel like a big brother. Her sister treats her like a little plaything.”

“That’s because she lets her treat her like a plaything. That’s why I like Madelaine. She’s stronger. I’ve never fallen for frail, innocent woman.”

“Oh, you just fall on them. But only when you’re drunk.”

“Look. It was one night. She came over. We got drunk. Madelaine seemed so far away at the time. So unattainable. Then it just happened. She didn’t ask for any pledges. She didn’t express her deepest love for me. She seemed totally willing to just...”

“Just what? I can understand falling into bed with a woman when your drunk, but Josephine of all people? You must have known she liked you. It was so obvious and you just didn’t want to admit it to yourself because you knew it was just another barrier between you and Madelaine.”

“You’re right. But I said from the outset that I didn’t expect your sympathy.”

“So what else happened?”

“As soon as I woke up I realised how big a mistake it was. Then a few weeks later I got a letter from Josephine saying Ramon and Madelaine were getting a divorce. I suddenly felt I had to be honest and let everything out. I had been living a cowardly lie all along and I thought there might be a chance. I held it in for so long I had to say something. It was too strong to just let go. I just got carried away.”

Markus lifted his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. “I guess you must have thought you were doing the right thing.”

“The situation is so screwed up.” Jimmy went on to tell him the whole story about what she had said including the letter burning and the phone call.
“Look at it this way. You’re probably better off without her. Try to think what it would have been like to actually be with her. It’s just not normal to go around burning people’s letters. If you hit it off with her who knows what might have happened years down the road. Maybe she isn’t depressed because of Ramon. Have you ever thought of that? Maybe she’s just really screwed up and Ramon has done everything he can to try and help her.”

Jimmy looked up again at the rotating fan and continued as if he hadn’t heard Markus at all. “She must like me...somehow, somewhere, though, or she wouldn’t have bothered to call. She would have just left it with the nasty letter.”

“She probably did.” A more forgiving look blossomed on his face. “She probably likes you and is just afraid of how her own feelings might threaten her marriage and relationship with her sister. I mean, when I’m with Nicole for too long I start feeling really shabby, like I’m losing my edge. Sometimes I have to step out and recharge my batteries. Chat up some hot ladies and then I feel good again. Then I can go back to Nicole feeling like I’m somebody beyond her, if you get my drift. I feel like that now. Like I was saying, since Ella’s been born, Nicole and I...well it hasn’t been the same. Postpartum blues or whatever. She spends so much time with Ella and she doesn’t seem to be sexual anymore.”

Markus cleared his throat and looked around the pub. “But I just can’t get over the extremity of Madelaine’s reaction,” Jimmy lamented.

“Cruelty,” said Markus. “We’ve got muscles and brawn but they have the mind, the sweetly wicked mind. The weird thing is, they’ve got the advantage. I’d be in jail if I so much as touched Nicole, but you’d never see me calling the cops to have her arrested for all the psychological torture she puts me through – and that’s on top of her slapping me and scratching me when she’s jealous – I can put up with that physical shit, it’s the mind games that get me down.” He cupped his hands over his mouth and went on in a high-pitched Bill Cosby voice: “Hey police officer O’Leary, you gotta come over here quick, my old lady’s making me feel guilty again about something I didn’t do.” His tone deepened. “We’ll send a car over immediately. Just stay put and try to remain calm.”

“We can’t use our physical strength so we have to find some other means of gaining a foothold in a relationship.”

“Yeah. But you’re beyond that. You bled it out. You had the romantic thing happening. I know I’ve been down on romance, but you did what you had to do. If she doesn’t call you back and at least wanna be your friend then she’s just being small.”

“No. It’s not about being bigger or smaller than her. That would make it a game to see who comes out on top.”

“I guess that puts you on top for being the most gracious and accepting between the two of you. Isn’t coming out clean what it’s all about?”

“I’m sure she doesn’t enjoy being mean. She’s just protecting the things closest to her.”

“Don’t be too sure, man.”

“Anyway,” Jimmy said. “Let’s go back to my place and drink some more beer. I have a feeling I’m going to need quite a few tonight.”

They took a cab back to Jimmy’s and bought a flat of lager from the grocery store around the corner.
“How much longer are you staying here, anyway?” Markus asked.
“I don’t know. Depends on what the club circuit holds. I’ve got enough money to stay in England at least another six months. I’ve been playing around with some ideas, though.” Jimmy rummaged through a box of tapes and put one into his ghetto blaster. The opening raga beat of Joy Division’s *She’s Lost Control* punctured through the room. “Listen to the background stuff. It moves with the beat changes.”
“It’s so cold, though. Depressing British shit. No soul.”
“That’s the point though. It doesn’t revel in its own coldness, it deplores it. It’s an outcry for help.”

When they finished the beer they passed out on the couch in sitting positions with the empty cans still in their hands. An hour later Jimmy woke up. He looked at the clock. It was one in the morning. Markus was still fast asleep. Jimmy walked over to the ghetto blaster and put the Joy Division tape back on. The opening notes of *Atmosphere* filled the room. The lonely drumbeats cold and broken - almost a slowed down break beat ten years ahead of its time - like the empty desolation of life in the inner city.

“Don’t turn away in silence
your confusion my illusion
like a mask of self hate confronts
and then dies
don’t walk away.”

*No, Madelaine, don’t walk away*, he thought. He looked out the window. London. All the chaos of tangled streets and the silence of raindrops forming a blackened sheen over the crumbling pavement. People passing at night without ever saying a word. The scaffolding and empty warehouses. The stiff hardened faces. *Atmosphere* was a desperate plea, a final effort to hold on before there was nothing but distance between Ian Curtis and his beloved. Nothing but irrevocable, insurmountable silence. The fresh beauty of love condemned to dwell in the desolate plains of memory until it becomes no more than a flattened image of some random event that means so little to you in retrospect that it may just as well have never happened: a child walking across the street into a candy store, a man selling magazines on the corner, a television program playing in the window of an electronics shop during rush hour.

He turned up the volume and made a steeple with his fingers beneath his chin. A warm surge passed through his body. His fingers tingled with energy. Lightning. He paced back and forth through the room, his mind suddenly on fire. He felt a new strength burning inside him. He couldn’t let it pass without something more. The letters, the phone conversation, the last month of romantic anguish: it couldn’t end in such a way. Those first moments when they met were too beautiful to just let go on such a bitter sterile note. The tape rolled on to *Colony* and *Heart and Soul*. Each track was structured around an icy gauntlet of rhythm that almost seemed to stifle and mock the emotions that were struggling to break through. With a little sampling and fragmentation he could restructure the beats and weave them into the background track of *Nemesis*. 
Jimmy grabbed his keys and dialled for a cab. In minutes the doorbell rang and Jimmy grabbed his coat. The cab driver said nothing as he escorted Jimmy to his car and set the vehicle in motion. In minutes they were passing through central London with its gloomy excess of ice fog and wrought iron. The grey stone monuments, once signifying something higher than themselves, now only meaningless shapes cast in concrete casting shadows on the moist and glistening pavement. Ten minutes later they were at *Mirage*. Jimmy handed the driver a twenty-pound note and jumped out. He searched his pockets for his keys. In a moment he was inside the building.

The corridors were dark, illuminated only by the deep red glow of the emergency exits. He walked as quietly as possible down the main hall. In all the times he’d worked in the building after hours he’d never run into a security guard. But there was always a first time. He took out his keys - remembering just then that he was supposed to have returned them when his recording was finished - and opened up the door to his studio. He stepped inside and turned on just one of the four fluorescent lights on the ceiling. He unlocked the cabinet where the tapes were normally kept. As if abiding to some preordained script, his master tapes were sitting at the top of a stack, seemingly untouched, perhaps not even listened to at all. He pulled them out, one by one, and set them neatly on the ground. After closing the cabinet he flicked the power switch for the small recording suite in the far corner of the room. Although it hadn’t the scope and capacity of the main system down the hall, it would have to do, especially without the aid of engineers to help him hone the perfect sound. He slipped the Joy Division tape into the deck and routed it to the sampler. All he’d need was a few beats to get started. The difficult and unusual thing about Joy Division was the mixture of a standard march with a kind of raga beat. The two rhythms had to be separated before they could be cleanly restructured. You have to take a puzzle apart before you can put it back together again. It was just a matter of separating the two overlapping sequences by frequency range. He opened the file for the bass line and carefully started cutting and pasting, stretching out and maximizing one range while eliminating the other completely. Fifteen minutes later he’d already constructed an entirely new rhythm pattern. He listened to it several times. It retained the cold analytical desperation of the original but was otherwise twisted into something completely unrecognisable. He repeated the procedure with the drum track. Then he looped them together twenty times, each time changing the sequence slightly for variation to give the sensation of progression towards greater emotion and complexity.

When he was finished, he took out the master tape and fed in the background track for *Nemesis*, denuded of all percussion and bass. He listened to it carefully, trying to imagine how the new drum and bass track from *Colony* would sound when played in tandem. The opening voice, haunting and obscure, filled his ears. Then the guitar track kicked in with its atonal descent into a pool of shattered glass. The beat was a simple four-four but after a little variation it was more complex and less predictable. It had the same vertical sense of perpetual motion as Source Direct’s *Snake Style*, a new Drum and Bass EP he had already listened to several times, yet also the same soul searching sound as *Black Rose*, an EP Source Direct recorded under the moniker Hokusai in which a detached voice suddenly remarks in the unsettling tone of a hiccup “Oh, beautiful” in the midst of a marauding assault of intertwined snare beats and synthesizer sounds. He rewound the tape and overlaid the new *Colony* break beats, starting after the opening vocals and continuing through the
entire piece. Then he listened to it again. The cool electric piano lines vanished and reappeared like shadows in a forest of subterranean bass, all wound around the main rhythm like vines scaling a stone column. The composition seemed to move both downwards and upwards at the same time. It ended in the same haunting sequence it started with as though to say through all the chaos and progression of sound, nothing had changed. But just like *Black Rose*, it needed a sparse but repeating vocal theme. In a moment of inspiration he sampled Ian Curtis singing “*Don’t walk away*” and then he put it through a voice simulation program to create a feminine counterpart and then layered this feminine counterpart over the original but out of phase by a fifth of a second and also slightly off key. It was just the polyphony he was searching for, having its ultimate roots in the sound of Jefferson Airplane circa *Crown of Creation* but sounding nothing like them and created an otherworldly sense of votive detachment that was neither warm nor cold, seeming to draw the listener deeper and deeper into the space of the composition with every repetition, five times to be exact, the pitch and timing being varied with each new iteration.

He grabbed a beer from the communal refrigerator and snapped it open. *Nemesis, The Jet Girl Mix*, he proclaimed out loud. All his feelings for Madelaine had just been condensed - like pure energy into matter - in its broken yet sacred rhythms.

He looked up at the clock. It was already seven thirty. The staff would be in soon. Even in the music world people sometimes got up earlier than expected. He made three copies on floppies and slipped them into his shirt pocket. He sucked down the beer in one go and sat down for a moment of contemplation on the nearest couch. He had to get out before anyone found him.

An hour later Venables shook him awake.

“What on earth? Look at this mess. I thought you were finished? You just can’t walk in and tear the place apart.”

Jimmy opened his eyes and looked around the room. The floor was covered in scattered cassettes, CDs, and tape cans.

“What time is it?”

“I’ve had it with you. I don’t think your stuff will sell anyway. The clubs want something different than they did six months ago. We have to talk.”

“I want you to listen to something first,” he responded as though he hadn’t heard a single word Venables had just said. Jimmy then produced the floppy from his pocket and threw it at Venables. Then he walked calmly out of the building and caught the first tube back to Old Street.

When he got back to his apartment Markus had already left. He wrapped up one of the floppies for Madelaine and sent it off immediately. It was sure to change everything. She’d see him in his true light and start to crave for his presence. Then she would leave Ramon and they could finally be together. Josephine would eventually find out the truth and after some difficult moments come to accept the situation, happy that Madelaine had finally found a man that truly loved her and treated her well. That night he fell asleep on the living room floor, his head filled with images of Madelaine sitting in a large Victorian armchair listening to the tape. It would make her realise how much he meant to her. She would come rushing into his arms and forgive him and then they would be together as they were always meant to be.
It was Bonfire Night, the fifth of November. The streets of Lewes were jammed with throngs of costumed tourists merrily anticipating the burning barrel that was scheduled to come rolling down the cobbledstone streets in any minute to commemorate Guy Fawkes’ attempt to blow up Parliament centuries before. Jimmy reached out to grab Ainsley’s hand, a gesture she allowed for just a short moment before pulling away. There was something both irresistibly peaceful and sexy about her: the slanted green eyes, always alive, glittering like two jewels resting on the tips of her smile. It had already been two years since he received a scathing letter from Josephine explaining how she found out everything, including the letter burning incident and the meddling phone call from their mother, after the entire truth erupted forth one night during a dramatic argument between Ramon and Madelaine. Because of this the family had become irreparably divided and Josephine swore she could never trust Jimmy again. She went on to explain how deeply hurt and humiliated she was when she found out that even his last and apparently most heartfelt letter to her had been cruelly orchestrated behind the scenes by Madelaine and their mother. Since then he had heard nothing from either of them, not even a short note from Madelaine acknowledging the receipt of Jimmy’s tape, and as a result she and Josephine had gradually drifted away from his mind until he could barely remember what they looked like. Madelaine had become a shadowy figure - only half real - with big brown eyes and long brown hair, lacking any detailed facial features. All they had left was *Nemesis, The Jet Girl Mix*. In its mesmerizing rhythms and detached polyphony the music press saw not only the marriage of Detroit Techno with drum and bass and the Manchester roots of the British dance underground, but something higher and more elevated. Something bordering on the best of jazz and classical music. While most drum and bass had already faded into either chaotic melting pots of electronic tribal beats with no clear direction or influence, and its universally acknowledged figurehead Goldie now recording softer more introspective Jazz influenced pieces like *Beachdrifta* under the alias Rufige Kru - in the past only reserved for his hardest edged compositions, hence signalling a change of course for the whole movement - *Nemesis* rose above and beyond to grasp the frontiers of a new form altogether. Yet when he heard it playing in a club he could hardly believe he’d created it on a drunken destitute all-nighter for someone who was now so distant from his day-to-day life he wondered if she had ever even been a part of his life at all.

A group of blunt looking, churlish men wearing army boots and satin bomber jackets - the war paint of the European skinhead fascist - marched past them holding up a ten-foot cross with a burning effigy of the Pope hanging on it.

“Trick or treat,” Jimmy uttered mockingly under his breath.

“Shhhl!” Ainsley pulled his head down to her lips and whispered in his ear. “Do you want to get us beaten up?”
“I’m sure they didn’t hear.”
“Let’s hurry up. We have to make it to the park. I don’t want to miss the bonfire.”
“You know, this place looks like it could be somewhere in France. It’s the stone buildings and narrow streets.”
A streamer of light ripped through the air followed by a white flash and an ear-splitting bang.
“Bloody Hell!” shouted a loutish voice from behind. Jimmy turned to see a short teenager carrying a skateboard. A barrage of fireworks went up all at once. It was said to be the biggest bonfire in Europe. The sky was suddenly a cartwheel of light and sound.
“Don’t I recognise you?” asked the teenager.
“Maybe,” said Jimmy.
“I know. You’re the guy on the cover of *Wax Trax*."
The issue had already been out for a week. The cover showed his head tilted back with a blur of light obscuring the subtleties of his facial features. The background was a deep blue black. He was alone, hovering like a dark angel through space. *Total Recall* read the headlines in reference to one of the tracks on the *Nemesis* album.

The crowd gathered in the central park in Lewes for the bonfire. A stack of wood almost thirty feet high in the shape of a tee pee sat like a monolith in the middle of a large ring of jeering people. A few minutes later a man holding a flamethrower walked out and asked everyone to step back. When all was clear he also stepped back and fired a long jet of fire at the woodpile. It burst into flames sending plumes of black smoke and long ribbons of orange and yellow fire upwards into the cold black sky. The crowd hollered in appreciation.

Jimmy and Ainsley stayed for fifteen minutes longer, deciding it was best to leave early in order to avoid the traffic out of Lewes. When they got back to Jimmy’s apartment, Ainsley opened a bottle of cheap Rioja and sat down beside Jimmy with two wine glasses.

“I think we should call it *Inner City Eye Records*,” Jimmy enthused as he described his plans for his own record label to Ainsley. He had composed six new cuts and made demo versions on his small sampler at home. *Protocol, The White Room Mix*, was the strongest of the lot. It crept up, starting as if from the bottom of a crevice in the ocean, slowly rising from the depths towards the finale, a cathartic crescendo of interlocking bass and high-pitched synthesiser like the end of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*.

“Yeah,” said Ainsley. “Then you can have a picture of the Empire State Building in a fog with an eye on top of it.”
“And the eye can have headphones.”
“And it can cast a light through the fog outwards to the world.”
“That’s dead on.”

A week later Jimmy and Ainsley went to Berlin on a last minute club booking by *Mirage* as part of an on going promotion for *Nemesis* and a complete album that was scheduled to come out a few months later. The venue was called *Tresor* and it was already a legend in dance circuits because of its connection with Michigan’s Underground Resistance, a musical movement started back in the eighties when Jeff Mills was just starting out and called himself the Wizard, broadcasting from his own
Detroit-based radio show of which Jimmy had once been a big fan. Jimmy approached her from behind just as her set was about to end. For some reason he felt closer to her than before. He pulled the right headphone off her ear.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said. The words came out slowly and deliberately as if drawn out of the depths of his soul by an invisible crane.

“Really?” she said as she turned around, curling her eyebrow in surprise.

“Yes, really.”

For a moment he felt he had hit on some great, but ultimately disappointing secret of life. True happiness, it suddenly seemed, was a bland compromise between the deliberate and the unintentional. What separated the type of men women referred to as a jerks - something he had always feared he might one day become - from what they called decent guys, was no more than the ability to sense when it was right to act or just step aside and let things run their course. It was no more complicated than a kind of I Ching of knowing when you were supposed to move forward and when you were supposed to remain stationary. Maybe that was his mistake with Vanessa. He had neglected to do something - something he had no idea he should have done – just when she had expected him to do it. His failure to realise that he was supposed to do this unknown thing was a serious flaw in her eyes - something she wasn’t prepared to accept or live with. But with Madelaine and Josephine it was different as there was no question in his mind that the two sisters now regarded him as a jerk. There was no reason why they shouldn’t, even though his intentions seemed noble at the time. He moved forward when he should have stayed put. But was being a jerk and merely being perceived as a jerk the same thing? He really wasn’t sure.

Ainsley took off her headphones and looked him squarely in the eye. She seemed puzzled.

“I never considered myself very beautiful,” she said. “I was just the little girl from around the corner in Coventry. I never thought I could be one of those women who dress to the nines with rouge and makeup that go flouncing around town in sports cars. I see them every night and hate them all.”

“Not all men go for those types. Look at me. I don’t.”

“What about that girl from New York you liked? I always imagined her to be one of those perfect women that all men chase after.”

“She was beautiful, but in a more natural way. She never dressed to kill. She didn’t have to. I’d never put her in the same category as the women you just described. It was the combination of natural beauty and a sort of...well...I’d say a kind of mysterious eraticism that bordered on genius.”

“That’s funny because I always thought you were the type of guy who only liked perfect women.”

“She was perfect, but just in her own way. It depends how you define perfect, but I know what you mean. Those women you just described scare me. I get the feeling that there’s something consciously manipulative about the way they dress. It’s a power game.”

“But it’s sort of sad because those women are only asserting their power by attracting men. In a way its still saying men are the rulers, the ones who are meant to be pleased.”

“It’s so strange that women seem to know how to attract men, but I don’t know many guys who really know of any set formula for attracting women. I haven’t
figured it out myself. When I look at myself in the mirror I can’t see why anyone would be interested in me.”

“Really? I never would have guessed that about you. You seem very confident.”

Jimmy put his arm around her shoulders. There was something both alluring and even sexual about her that he had never noticed before. Perhaps he had been so caught up with Madelaine when they first met and never really had the chance to open his eyes to how beautiful Ainsley really was.

He gazed into the great wild of her deep green eyes. She was a woman completely without guiles, sexy in her sprightly charm, radiant in the depth and sparkle of her intelligence. He pulled her closer their gazes seemed to blend like two bodies of vapour, slowly and with little resistance.

“I always thought you weren’t interested in men,” said Jimmy. “The way you used to go everywhere unescorted.”

Ainsley pulled back slightly and they looked into each other’s eyes with guarded intensity before she blinked and turned away. Then she looked back at him, but this time he turned away.

“You know what?” he said.

“What?”

“It’s really been nice. Having you around, I mean.”

Their eyes met once again. This time he kissed her. The kiss was longer and more sensual than he had expected. He let her head drop away from him.

“I never knew you felt that way about me.”

“I was too wrapped up in other things to see,” he said. “And besides, the culture was getting me down. The rules are all so different over here.”

“Different?”

“I just don’t know how to approach English women. You all just seem to chum around with your friends until someone gets drunk enough to fall in bed with someone else. I’m more used to asking women out to dinner or a drink. Getting to know them one on one. Seeing what they’re all about.”

“Yeah. If you would have asked me out on a date I would have been flattered, but also somewhat afraid - freaked out even. We’re more suspicious of strangers over here.”

“But strangeness - mystery, even - is at the heart of all love.”

“Is it?” Ainsley asked. There were shades of remorse in her voice that suggested some past romantic failure. As though to steer the conversation away, she put her hands on Jimmy’s ears and they kissed again.

After the club shut down, they walked through the dank labyrinthine streets of Berlin, deliberately taking a detour past the now iconic auto garage above which Iggy Pop and David Bowie had once lived together while recording their Heroes and Lust for Life albums in the seventies, and back to their hotel room. They sat down on the bed and Jimmy turned on the television, flicking nervously through the channels until he finally flicked it off again. He kissed her one last time before pushing her down on the bed. Without so much as a word he began undoing the buttons of her shirt. They had been friends for so long, it would have been so much easier if he’d just met her that night in the club. A bed of clouds hung over the city, swallowing the moonlight and the nearby Alexanderplatz television tower with it. With only the nuclear glow of the streetlights outside to reflect off her skin, her soft warm figure – now jaundiced by the light - seemed almost to hover above the bed as he knelt down on top of her and
let his pants drop to his knees. He stood up, letting them fall to his feet, before kissing her breast. The blurred image of Madelaine’s face appeared in his mind as he shut his eyes, letting his body crumple into Ainsley’s. He pulled her towards him and in a single motion ran his hand up her inner thigh. Her eyes had the misty sparkle of an actress in a silent film. He kept his gaze trained on the still white urn in the corner of the room as he began to undress her, trying to find the buttons on her shirt with only his fingertips to guide him.

“You know what, Jimmy?” she said. She had a frustrated look on her face that seemed somehow rude and incongruous given he was already well into the process of removing her bra and was now caressing her breasts for the very first time, running his fingers in small dreamy arcs over the hard points of her erect nipples. But her tone softened as she continued, signalling she wanted him to continue with the seduction. “This may sound trivial, but the music business is really starting to bore me. All those late night Hampstead parties with people you’re supposed to be impressed with. Those people are really no more interesting than anyone else. They’re even less interesting, in fact, because they let down your elevated expectations. I’d take a plumber that reads the newspaper any day over some rock star with pornography in his basement - and there are a lot of them, believe me.”

“I know what you mean,” said Jimmy as he undid the final clasp of her bra and tossed it irreverently to the floor. “And to be honest, I don’t even like hanging around in nightclubs any more. Spinning is one thing – that’s work – but just hanging around waiting for something “cool” to happen? No way. I don’t mind sharing the odd bottle of wine over dinner or going out for a pint every now and then, but I can’t believe I once made a lifestyle out of it.”

He turned to her and kissed her, watching her eyebrows move ever so slightly as she blinked her eyes. She was so different from Madelaine, he thought as he ran his tongue over the warm swell of her belly. Madelaine had always moved her arms with a certain urgent abruptness, always seeming to be thinking and analysing everything. She would demand your attention by grabbing your sleeve and then while you were listening would suddenly flip away into introspection. Sometimes brimming with enthusiasm, sometimes quiet and brooding, she was a shimmering paroxysm of forked light against the grey and brilliant pink landscape of an evening thunderstorm. As he let Ainsley’s head drop from his hands so she could now undress him in turn, he wondered what would happen if he ever saw Madelaine again. Perhaps she’d still be angry with him. Yet maybe she would claim to have missed him all those years and would greet him with open arms. It wasn’t that he wanted to see her, or really thought about her that much, but more that seeing her was always a possibility, a pathway he could take if he really wanted to, but knew he never would. The neon light from the hotel sign humming outside the window cascaded off Ainsley’s naked silvery thighs and suddenly it was clear that his life had moved forward and there was no way he could ever go back.

Chapter 3.2
A few months later Jimmy was walking through Holland Park on his way back from the local Sainsbury’s to his new apartment, a small first-floor flat in a modified Victorian tenement in Hammersmith he moved into with Ainsley as soon as they got back from Berlin. He was holding a newspaper under one arm as he precariously cradled a fresh bottle of milk in the other. The sky was streaked with grey clouds and a brisk wind rustled through the leaves of the swaying poplar trees. When he got home Ainsley was wearing the same glittering turquoise shirt and black jeans she had the night before when she was DJing in Camden Town under her new moniker *Chime*, a name he liked because it summed up the essence of who she was in a single airy syllable: an enchanting and delicate presence fashioned from something hard and permanent like brass or ivory. She greeted him with a light stunted kiss and without saying a thing walked back into the kitchen. He took off his shoes and followed her in.

“What’s with the icy greeting?” he asked in protest.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just too much work today.”

Since the last booking in Berlin she had started working as a freelance photographer in a west London studio to supplement her income, making enough from the commercial work - septic photos of electronic objects, fruit or bottles of liquor for product related ads - to devote half her time to her music and other individual projects. She had already had a group show on the south bank alongside some other young artists.

He rounded the corner into the kitchen. There, to his surprise, was Markus. He was standing next to Ainsley with his head craned over a newspaper that was sitting on the counter. Jimmy had forgotten how tall his old friend really was. Beside him Ainsley looked like a porcelain decorative piece, her slender form highlighted by the light gold wallpaper behind her. In the glare of sunlight from the window, Jimmy could not yet see see the look of destitution on his face.

Markus lifted his wine glass to eye level and stared into the opaque mass of blood-red liquid. “I’m sorry to surprise you,” he said. His voice was deep and troubled.

“I’ll leave you two to catch up,” said Ainsley. She walked towards Jimmy and lightly tapped him on the shoulder as though pressing an open button on an elevator. Jimmy stepped aside to let her through the doorway.

“How long have you been in town?” asked Jimmy.

“I just flew in yesterday. Last minute business with *Moving Shadow*. I’m only in town for a few days. I’m hoping to link them up with a new techno artist I just picked up from Chicago.”

“You seem distraught.”

“There’s so much to tell you, man. So I’ll start at the top and move downwards in order of increasing pain and humiliation.”

“Can I get you more wine?” Jimmy opened the window facing the baby willow tree Ainsley had just planted in the small quadrangle of their half-paved back yard.

Markus dangerously clunked his wine glass on the table and took a deep breath. Jimmy stepped away from the window and pulled an orange out from a brown paper bag on the counter. He started to peel it as Markus hooked his right index finger around the gold chain hanging from his neck and continued. “I don’t know where to begin. Everything is going so badly lately. Since Ella’s come along my life has taken a constant slide downwards. Not only has the music world suddenly gotten all fucked
up - I mean everyone’s a DJ these days so any Donald fucking Duck can drop his shit on the internet and start spinning in any old backyard pond - but Techo is dying a fast death with guys like Jeff Mills running around in black turtlenecks recording with the Paris Symphony Orchestra. I mean, like really...with all due respect to high art, that’s about as bad as my grandma’s lingerie collection! And now you have Hip Hop dudes like Naz and Eminem ruling the airwaves and I can’t get any of them to sign with me. People want hard ass reality these days not the escapism of Techno and raves. It’s like I’m suddenly some kind of plodding old reptile and it all started when Ella was born - almost to the day. It’s like she was some kind of Voodoo bullshit bad luck charm. I really can’t explain it because I love her and Nicole more than anything. How could such wonder and beauty be so damn destructive? That’s what I don’t get, man.”

“Destructive?”

“It’s not their fault, Jimmy. Nicole sank into a sort of long-term depression once Ella was born. I thought she’d come out of it, but she never really did because the longer it went on the worse the booking scene and our finances started going. Or maybe she already has and she just came out as a different person.”

“How so?”

“Her whole life revolves around Ella. She takes her everywhere. I can’t get a moment alone with either of them. It’s like I’m on the outside trying to reach both of them. Whenever I imply that there’s something wrong she gets all funny and cold and won’t talk to me. She doesn’t even want to sleep with me anymore. She keeps Ella between us at night. It started when she’d wake us up crying. Nicole would go get her from her room and let her sleep with us. Now it’s become a habit. It’s just assumed that we all sleep together. Whenever I suggest we make love she looks shocked as if I just asked to take her parents along to a strip show.”

“Maybe she just needs some space.”

“Space is a four letter word, man. And a bad cliché. We started talking about getting a new place about six months ago. I suggested that maybe a change of scene might help smooth things over. Our apartment was way too small for the three of us and maybe buying a house would chill things out a bit. A house with a big back yard and lots of rooms so Nicole could have more privacy. So I put a down payment on an old brick place in a spiffy neighbourhood in Brooklyn and we moved in immediately.”

“And?”

“Whatever stress the extra space relieved, the act of moving must have replaced. It didn’t change a thing. In fact it worsened everything. Before there was always the hope that having a bigger house would save things, but after we moved there was nothing. We had all these empty rooms and we rarely even saw each other. If I was on one side of the house she was on the other. And when we crossed paths she just turned her head away.”

“Christ.”

“And to make matters worse, just after I moved in I lost a few key acts to some new Hip Hop promoter and before I knew it we couldn’t keep up with the house payments. Just like that. So we were forced to move back into a smaller place than the one we originally had and now we hardly have a single red cent to our names.”

“I wish I could help out...”
“No way. It’s not your fault, man. Since we lost the house Nicole’s been keeping Ella away from me. It’s so strange. She was always so mellow and understanding before the birth and now it’s like some sort of hormonal trigger’s gone off. I’ll come home and see Ella scribbling on the fridge with some crayons and I’ll pull her away and she’ll start crying. Then Nicole will rush in and grab her away from me and say something like daddy’s bad and storm out of the room. Then I’ll come running after her to try and see what the problem is and she’ll slam the bedroom door in my face.”

“What does she say when you try to talk to her about it?”

“She claims there’s either no problem or I’m the problem for not sensing her true feelings. I’m too much of a typical male. I drink too much. She can’t stand my music friends. She thinks I should get a normal job.”

“Is she still working?”

“No. She quit when Ella was born.”

“Maybe that’s it. Maybe she just feels trapped and is blaming it on you.”

“It ain’t my fault, though. I think it’s down to the money. If only those clients didn’t leave.”

“Who were they anyway?”

“Three House acts out of Minneapolis I was representing who all seemed to gang up and leave at once because they thought they weren’t selling enough albums. The bottom line was that they were just average - good enough to make a little money, but no better. They seemed to think that just because they had a record out that the skies were supposed to open up and all these babes with bags of money and cocaine would descend naked from the heavens and land square on the tips of their pricks.”

“Artist’s ego.”

“Tell me about it. That’s one thing I always liked about you. There’s no attitude. All these assholes in gold chains wearing floppy toques and dark sunglasses regardless of the time of day or year keep showing up at my office slamming their trashy demos on my desk like they’re the biggest thing since Run DMC. And the number of bands I’ve seen break up over some guy who thinks he’s better than all the rest. Tragic. Truly tragic.”

“To be honest I’m getting sick of it all, too. I’d rather just get away and have a normal life outside of the spotlight. Not like I’m all that popular, but I do get recognised sometimes when I go out to clubs. It’s starting to bother me.”

“Speaking of which, I feel like going out tonight. Maybe it’ll cheer me up. Send some of that Jimmy magic my way.” His mood seemed to lighten, if only for an instant.

Jimmy unpacked his bags and took a shower while Ainsley and Markus sat in the garden talking about interior decorating while drinking tea and eating Jaffa Cakes. An hour later Jimmy and Markus grabbed their coats and put on their shoes. Jimmy kissed Ainsley on the doorstep as he tried to think of an excuse to go out without her.

“I’ll see you later tonight. It’s just...”

“Don’t worry. He told me. I’ve got a photo shoot to get ready for tomorrow anyway.”

They walked to the nearest tube station and caught a train to Covent Garden. Spring was in full bloom and people were already wearing shorts and tee shirts. They stopped into a pub across from Leicester Square station and took a seat in varnished wooden booth in the back corner. Black and white photos of Oscar Wilde and other
famous Irish writers hung on the walls beside football banners and what looked like portraits of what Jimmy guessed was the owner’s family.

“You’re looking pretty settled in,” said Markus. “With Ainsley, I mean. She seems like a cool chick.”

“Yeah, she’s great. It’s strange, though. There was never anything with her like there was with Vanessa or Madelaine. Never a big moment. No revelations. No love letters. We just sort of ended up together. We never fight. I can come and go as I please. I never would have guessed when I met her. I thought she was attractive, but I rarely thought of her when she wasn’t around.”

“What ever happened with her?”

“Madelaine?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. I never talked to her after that phone call. Sometimes when I am drunk or in the middle of the night I get some wild urge to call her, but I can never bring myself to do it. And then when I’ve come to my senses I realize what a stupid idea it would be to even try. After all I have a good thing going with Ainsley.”

“Josephine was always the better woman.”

“You always remind me of that,” Jimmy said with ironic understatement before falling silent. In some ways he felt he would never know how to gauge the two sisters, and perhaps it was this very mystery that comprised the basis of whatever distant attraction he had left for them. Was Josephine really pure and innocent or was she merely manipulative, sensing his attraction for Madelaine and then doing her best to undermine whatever chance they had to be together?

“Timing, man,” Markus went on more delicately. “Just like I said. If it happens it happens, if it doesn’t it doesn’t. If you force something it all falls apart.”

“I always used to think that there had to be some big revelation for love to happen. Some epiphany. I could never be interested in a woman if the first time I met her I wasn’t totally blown away.”

“But now you’ve seen the light.”

“If you could put it that way…”

They finished their drinks and took a taxi to The Leisure Lounge, a club on the western edge of the banking district in the basement of a modernised six-story building that looked like the home of some multinational insurance company. Across the street in both directions stood similar-looking buildings, giving the impression of a military installation. They walked through the dark labyrinthine streets and alleys that formed a natural barrier between Soho and the banking district. It was eleven PM when they got there. A small line of about thirty had gathered in front of the club. A doorman at the front admitted the people - most of whom looked like teenagers from a Top of the Pops show with their short bowl haircuts, piped blazers, and plaid shirts - one by one, checking each through with a metal detector as they passed through the small entrance and descended into the faintly lit basement. A rotating spotlight cast a twenty-foot wide metallic skull on the building across the street.

“Commissioner Gordon is calling out for Batman,” Markus joked. “But seriously, that Metalheadz logo is just so bad. Drum and bass still hasn’t made it in the US. I think it’s too dark and spacey. The average American can’t cope with anything that doesn’t promise a brilliant future with two cars and a beautiful subservient wife. That’s why punk never really made it outside of New York and LA.”
Jimmy glanced back at the growing line up, which had already doubled in size since they arrived only five minutes before. “So, this is who listens to my music,” he said. Then he leaned into Markus’ ear and lowered his voice to a whisper. “They hardly look old enough to watch Sesame Street.”

“Vicious, man. Just remember, when you first moved to New York you thought you had it all figured out.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. When I was in high school I used to run around skipping school to spend afternoons in record shops or at a friend’s house getting stoned.”

“Yeah. Me too. I was the graffiti king of our neighbourhood. Nobody could stop me. Five minutes with a few spray cans and you had the Harlem instalment of the Sistine Chapel on some subway wall.”

The line inched forward until eventually they were searched by a tall bald man. With rings all up the side of his ears it looked like he had some sort of rare conch affixed to the side of his head. They walked down the sheet metal stairs towards a pulsing and diffuse pink light that emanated from the inner recesses of the club and paid a woman behind a set of chrome bars just before the coat check.

“Twenty quid? Fuck, that’s thirty five bucks,” said Markus.

“They should let us in for free,” said Jimmy.

The woman behind the bars seemed to hear them and made some worried gesture with her fingers to one of the security guards standing a few feet away from the base of the stairs.

“Come on mate,” said the guard in a heavy Cockney accent “Just pay and move on.”

Markus heaved a sigh of recrimination and proceeded forward under a heavy wooden archway. Jimmy followed. The interior was decorated like an airport. The sound of heavy base pulsed through the floors. The ceilings were low and the rooms long and cavernous. There were signs everywhere. The long chrome plated bar was designated the Baggage Claim. A room to the left of the bar was called the Flight Lounge and was furnished with five rows of modern aeroplane seats, half of which were occupied by teenagers smoking and drinking from cans of cheap lager. On the walls were hung four-foot moulded replicas of the same Metalheadz skull logo that was cast on the side of the building, spaced about five feet apart.

They walked through the Flight Lounge to the main dance floor. It was long and narrow like three bowling lanes arranged in parallel. The Metalheadz logo was everywhere from a giant plate looming over the top of the DJ’s roost to the brilliantly coloured flowing visuals cast on the wall by a video projector hanging from the centre of the ceiling.

“This place is like some kind of dark satanic mill,” Markus exclaimed. “You’d half expect them to throw in a few torture devices for effect.”

Jimmy tapped a girl on the shoulder who was dressed in a black velvet jacket with glowing grapefruit lipstick. “Who’s playing?” He pointed over to one of the speakers in the corner.

“Doc Scott,” she said before darting away dismissively.

Jimmy and Markus then went and sat down on the rim of the dance floor beside a red-haired girl with a silver loop through her lip and a tight-fitting purple velvet top. Her eyes were locked on the visuals flickering on the opposite wall. Not seeming to
notice that anyone had sat down beside her, she continued to stare blankly ahead as if she were sole occupant of the universe floating alone through a limitless void.

As the night wore on Jimmy went back and forth between dancing for ten or fifteen minutes and resting in one of the aeroplane seats. At midnight the music became so loud that it was impossible to talk to anyone. He stood on the edge of the dance floor beside Markus watching the flood of images across the wall. By this time the novelty of the imagery had worn off and instead of propelling him into some elevated state of consciousness, the stylized visuals only made him feel detached from the crowd and empty inside. What were all the people getting out of this experience anyway? They suddenly seemed drunk and imbecilic, like figures from some old Dutch painting. It somehow didn’t fit. Electronic music was supposed to be a higher form of art vaulting urban street music into the twenty first century. It was supposed to be intellectual. Spiritual. Like the best Jazz only several decades ahead.

Jimmy went over to the corner where Markus had taken a seat. His eyes were closed and Jimmy couldn’t tell if he was asleep. He kicked his arm lightly.

“Markus,” he shouted above the din of the music. Markus opened his eyes and looked at him without the slightest sign of recognition and then he shut them again.

“Whatever,” said Jimmy as he shook his head in disbelief. He walked to the opposite side of the floor and took a spot beside a woman with short blue hair who was leaning against a railing for support as though she was about to collapse on the floor at any moment.

The music got progressively darker. Eventually a second DJ took over. Jimmy didn’t recognise the tall black man as he took his place behind the two turntables on the other side of the room. The DJ opened with a track with a deep heavy bass line and some sounds in the background like hideous dwarves mumbling over the sound of some gigantic sewing machine. The next track was Nemesis. The opening sequence had become so much a part of Jimmy, an extension of his mind and spirit even, that it took him a few seconds to realise it was playing. He stood against a wall and watched the teenagers dancing to its fragmented beat pattern. Somehow it seemed like a violation. The same piece of music had exalted his love of Madelaine into a state of higher permanence, was now just some random death mantra to a bunch of desolate inner city teenagers. He kept his glance trained on the face of a girl with a black tee shirt and skin-tight exploded plaid pants as the song approached its climax. Her eyes exuded a mixture of boredom and anguish, accentuated even further by the razor blades hanging from a string or yarn around her neck, her overall countenance bordering on the realm of despair. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. How could something so beautiful as his desire to transform his love for Madelaine into a timeless work of art be misused in such a crass and undignified way? For a moment Jimmy felt responsible for the lives of everyone in the room, as though he had personally damaged every last one of them by misleading them into believing that self destruction was something sacred and transformational worth shunning the world and hijacking the rest of your life for.

Just as Jimmy was about to go to the toilet, a dark haired man in a blue and red plaid shirt who had been dancing with a can of beer in his hand slipped on a wet spot and collapsed in the middle of the dance floor. The people around him didn’t seem to notice and just kept on dancing. Jimmy ran over to the side of the fallen man. He was unconscious. Jimmy cleared a few people away and dragged him over to the side of the room, opening up the buttons of his shirt. One woman stepped over the body
like it wasn’t even there. A bouncer walked slowly passed them and Jimmy tapped him several times on the leg, but the large man ignored him until Jimmy stood up and grabbed his arm. He turned around and in the same motion pushed Jimmy up against the wall.

“What the hell was that for?” Jimmy shouted.
“No one grabs my arm like that.”

Jimmy pointed down to the man on the floor and the bouncer looked grudgingly down at the crumpled form.

“I don’t bloody care. That’s no excuse. You don’t push security around in this place unless you want to get thrown out on your ass.”

Jimmy held back his rage and stepped away from the man on the floor.

“We’ll take it from here,” said the bouncer, suddenly seeming to take hold of his senses and realize what was happening, but without any apology.

Jimmy groped through the smoky din of bodies and deep blue light until he found Markus, who was still sitting alone in a corner.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Jimmy as he shook him.

Without a word Markus stood up and followed Jimmy out into the street. The flashing skull was still rotating on the wall as he walked off towards Tottenham Court Road. A faint pink colour had spread into the far horizon. Somehow it seemed far too early for dawn.

Chapter 3.3

A year later Jimmy and Ainsley moved into a larger flat in South Kensington, two blocks north of Kings Road. Situated on the first floor of an Edwardian apartment block, it had a large rectangular kitchen with three bedrooms, a living room with a large bay window, and an oval foyer by the front door. A set of French doors in the kitchen opened up into a small fenced-off garden area with five varieties of perennials and a row of rose bushes. It was listed as a “handyman’s special” and obviously needed a lot of work, but with the money Jimmy made from recording royalties and regular club appearances around Europe he had the hardwood floors refinished and the ceilings plastered and repainted in eggshell white. The two extra bedrooms were used as studies with Ainsley setting up a small darkroom and digital photo lab in one and Jimmy equipping the other with samplers and various items of recording equipment.

With Ainsley’s graphic skills and a little help from local record stores Inner City Eye records was born. His first independent release was called Over, a ten minute ambient synthesizer moving in counterpoint to a distorted operatic voice and a much smoother, perhaps even seductive, bass track replacing the harder more aggressive underpinnings that were the hallmarks of the Mirage period. All in all he was happy to move on from the gratuitous darkness of the last few years. The night at The Leisure Lounge was the real turning point. What was it all for? he had asked himself the day after Markus left as he was flipping through one of Ainsley’s books, a collection of photo portraits of famous artists and writers. In the middle of the book was a photo of Arthur Rimbaud in his youth. Jimmy noted his high cheekbones,
dramatically coiffured hair, and deep probing eyes. On the facing page was a photo of Rimbaud a few days before his death. His skin was wrinkled, almost calcined, his expression bitter and trenchant. Thick shadows hung over the socket of each eye as if the curtains of his soul were already half drawn. Out of the corners of each eye were etched the grey marks of defeat. Jimmy felt dead inside. There was no way he could go on.

“I want to die like August Renoir,” he told Ainsley as they were lying awake in bed, the smell of fresh paint still heavy in the air. “I’m sick of all the darkness. I’ve worn it like a dusty old cloak all these years, casting my anger out in every direction, worshipping destitution like some kind of new god. I grew up on the streets. I hated everything when I was a teenager. I burned inside with such anger. If it wasn’t for the music scene in Detroit I probably would have ended up in jail.”

“I guess it was necessary,” said Ainsley. “All the energy you put into music dissipated those feelings, providing a channel to deal with them while also ultimately leading to your success.”

“That’s a pat explanation,” Jimmy remarked with some disappointment. It was as though she was trying to sum up his years of pain and struggling in a simple statement, like an accountant preparing a year-end tax report that once submitted would never be viewed again.

Ainsley shrugged her shoulders. “Somehow, though, I never saw you as truly dark. It was a fascination in you but not an integral part. I wouldn’t be with you if that was the case.”

“To die like Renoir, surrounded by beautiful children in a lush summer garden,” Jimmy insisted.

“Not something more edgy and modern like Mike Kelley’s Kandors?” she asked flippantly. They had just seen them the week before at the Gagosian, the bizarre luminous cities forged as identical replicas from the many manifestations of Superman’s miniature encapsulated city from Krypton highlighting our destructive obsession with pop culture and inability to escape our own past.

“Only if I can get them back on loan from Brainiac’s new downtown gallery,” was his mordant reply.

“Christ, Jimmy. Spare me,” she hollered. “Can you come down to earth just for once? All you care about is your own emotional state. You never pay attention to what’s going on around you. The thing about you is that everything in your life has to conform to some higher ideal of beauty or you just turn away from it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Markus, for example. Have you even written him since his visit?”

“In fact, I have. The letter was returned with no longer at this address scribbled on it. So, I take it he must have moved without giving a forwarding address.”

“So nice of you to follow up on your old friend.”

“It’s not the kind of friendship we have. He’s always been the one who initiated things. He doesn’t need my support.”

“Then why do you think he came to visit you?”

“He was just passing through.”

“If that’s what you want to believe, then believe it. You can be so bloody insensitive sometimes.”

Jimmy stared like a confused child into the bright green ocean surging between her tightened eyelids. He’d never seen her so angry before.
A week after they moved into the South Kensington flat Jimmy was sitting in his living room reading a music tabloid that he had just picked up from the local news agents. Ten thousand copies of his new CD had just been released in London, Brighton, and Manchester with another thousand in Amsterdam, Paris, and Brussels.

“Listen to this,” he said to Ainsley as he held the tabloid out in front of him as though it were some kind of statutory declaration. “While pretending to set new bounds in his musical direction he has only managed to make an obvious move into the mainstream by emulating Air, Daft Punk and Massive Attack. Then it goes on to say that my best days were up and that I should have stuck with Mirage instead of going independent. At the end for some silly and unexplained reason it quotes the statement I made a few weeks ago to the press that The Smiths are the nervy romanticism of Television with more urgency and self irony - a guitar lick becomes a monumental reflection of the pain and humiliation of every young man on the planet. Probably just trying to get all the Morrissey fans to turn against me. I’m not sure why I even take these jokers seriously.”

“Then don’t,” said Ainsley tersely. “If you sit around believing everything everyone says about you, you’ll never get anywhere.”

“I never wanted to be famous, anyway,” Jimmy said bitterly. “I just wanted to create things. Not that I wanted to be poor or anything. I just hate all the hype. Maybe it’s good that it got a bad review. I feel like such a clown and phoney whenever I walk into a record store. It’s like all my inner feelings are put on display for people to judge. Some get into it. Some laugh at it. Some hate it. How would you like to get up on stage in a clown suit and tell everyone about all your failures in life?”

Ainsley was sitting in a chair on the other side of the living room reading a book, barely listening.

“I agree,” she said without lifting her eyes from the book.

“It’s failures that drive art anyway. Not successes. Success is dull. Maybe those critics were right about Over. I meant it as over in the sense of my dark period, but maybe it really meant over, period.”

“Why don’t you record something else?” she asked mechanically.

“You haven’t even been listening, have you?”

Ainsley dropped the book. “I’m sorry, she said. This book is just really good.”

Jimmy walked out of the room.

The next day he tried to get back into his work. For the first half hour he was enthusiastic, but all of his attempts to start a new piece ended in exasperation and by noon he had already given up. He had nothing to say. His life had become so comfortable, so free of struggles or adversity of any kind that to mirror his existence in a work of art would lead only to the sort of drab and lifeless trash that fills airports and bus stations, only with less drama and enthusiasm. While at first he found this state nurturing and relaxing - the first real peace he’d known in all his life - it gradually began to eat away at him. Maybe he was one of those bland pointless people that had walked past him every day for the last thirty-five years. Since his early youth his life was based on difference. It was not that he had contempt for the commonplace, but that he strove to make more out of his life than the average person, to reinvent himself through new experiences and attitudes towards life. Whenever he felt complacent he’d begin to detest himself and clamber to find a way out to a new level or vista from which he could see his past as a necessary but outmoded form of
being. These were the qualities that he had always adored in the works of Rilke. The existential unease that drives men mad in the darkness of night. The journey to find that one wild chord that would drive him over the edge into a new way of seeing. Maybe, he thought, this tepid state of normality was yet another new stage in life that had its challenges and fruits. But perhaps it was really just a dead end. That was the cruelest thing about life - or maybe the most exciting, he didn’t know. You never knew if what you were experiencing was right or wrong, good or bad, a learning experience that was a stepping stone towards some kind of exalted state of being or just one more stroke of bad luck that would eventually – if you were foolish enough to take it seriously - push you a step closer to the grave. But whatever the truth was, in a life bent on exploration and discovery ending up in a state of self-contentedness was the kiss of death. It was that one mode of existence that wasn’t allowed. It was flawed from the outset - a horse latitudes of the soul.

The following evening he went out with Ainsley to a restaurant in Chelsea. The place was filled with the usual assortment of apparently meaningful west London journalists, literati, and artists with their velvet pants, Buddy Holly glasses, and deep troubled gazes desperately urging everyone around them to ask them what they thought about the latest trends in art and style. The restaurant had become immediately famous because of a fistfight that occurred there between David Bowie and Lou Reed sometime back in the seventies. Jimmy and Ainsley sat beside a gay black couple in matching satin suits playing chess and sipping some liqueur from oversized Brandy glasses.

“Good week?” asked Jimmy.

“Yes, very good,” answered Ainsley. “I’m double printing images of naked men and railway yards on emulsion-treated cloth for a show I’ve been asked to do in Manchester. I think it’ll work out pretty well. I’m having a bit of a hard time with the emulsion sticking to the cloth, but I’m getting there. It’s a part of my theory that men are modelled on machines. Psychologically, I mean. I think men come from this belief that the world and other women are just grounds for conquest. That’s where the rail yard fits in. The pilgrimage of the west.”

“Oh come on, that’s a bunch of outdated jargon.”

Ainsley ignored him and continued. “And then there’s this show down in Brighton at the art school. They want something bigger in poster art. So I’m not sure what to do, yet. I’ve got a month to figure out some sort of strategy before I go into the studio and start working.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“I’m still not so sure about what you just said.”

“About men?”

“Yes.”

Just then a woman walked into the restaurant. Jimmy caught her from behind, a reflection in the back glass of the bar behind Ainsley. All he saw was a brown jacket and a mat of rich brown hair. His heart stopped.

“Come on. The way men approach everything. The way you go through the day. I see it in you. You get up with this serious look like you want to go out to battle and you come home at night like an old war horse wanting to soothe its wounds from that battle.”
Without hearing a word Ainsley said, Jimmy gazed at the woman from the other table. He stared at her face, round, even plump at the cheeks, and that combination of milk and raspberry in the color of the skin. The large dark eyes, moving intelligently back and forth as she stared at the man across the table from her. He was slight in build with a cocoa complexion and short kinky hair and had a red plastic jacket tied around his hips. Beside him sat a man with a long black moustache in the style of a conquistador. It at once ushered forth images of religious torture and sexual excess, contrasting sharply with the sterile modernity of his silver coated windbreaker and black pinstripe dress pants.

“And the way when we first slept together. You took me and undressed me without even a flinch. Do you know what was going through my head that night after we had sex? You just conked out and I couldn’t sleep.”

“No,” said Jimmy, still not sure whether the woman was who he thought it was. It had been so long and her features had been obscured from his memory.

“I really doubted what it meant to you.”

Jimmy turned to her with a look of half attention. “That was ages ago.”

“What was going through your head? You seemed so indifferent.”

“We were both drunk. Have I been indifferent since?”

“No. You’ve quite nice. Friendly. Warm. But that one night you weren’t all there.”

“I can’t remember.”

Jimmy looked askance to study the woman’s face, trying to balance his attention surreptitiously between Ainsley and the back glass of the bar.

“There’s someone else, isn’t there?” She said sharply. Her words dropped like a stone into his lap.

“I told you all there was to tell.”

She got up and went to the bathroom. Jimmy took the opportunity to walk over to the bar and order a drink. When he passed the woman he saw her profile in full light. She turned and looked directly at him. Their eyes met as total strangers. There was that sudden coldness of two people catching each other in the act of checking each other out. Her eyes shifted out of focus and Jimmy turned his head away. Her chin receded into her neck in a typically English fashion and her nose was a shade bulkier than it should have been. His heart settled. He ordered a beer from the bar so as not to look suspicious and returned to the table. Ainsley was seated and flipping through a fashion magazine.

“I think I’d look good in one of these if I only had a more feminine figure,” she said.

She held up a picture of a Latino woman with short straight hair cropped evenly across her eyebrows in a tight white dress flared at the hips with a loose fitting cotton blouse.

“Sex appeal isn’t about the body,” said Jimmy

“I don’t believe that.”

There was a sudden movement in the mirror followed by a flash of brown hair. The woman put on her coat and left with the man in the red coat. Jimmy turned his head and watched them walk out.

“Well, I’m tired and have a lot to do tomorrow,” said Ainsley.

“Let’s go, then.”
They walked home hand in hand as if nothing had happened. Yet it had. There was no way anything could ever be the same again. As they walked home he felt like an impostor. That night he stayed up late in the back garden of their flat under the dim light of the porch. There was a light rain falling from the roof. It trickled down the gentle slope into a drainpipe and into a puddle a few feet from his feet. He watched it for over an hour, every drop awakening a new memory. When the rain had stopped he walked into his music room and unlocked an old trunk. He rummaged through it until he found a now yellowed envelope. He opened it and took out the letter inside. Without reading it he held it to his chest. *The Spanish Harlem Incident*, he thought. Then walked over to his desk and turned on his sampler, feeling enthusiastic about his life for the first time in well over a year. The first rays of morning already breaking into the room and there was a smell of something like freshly polished leather hanging in the air.

**Chapter 3.4**

Two weeks later Jimmy was sitting awake in his private room fiddling with a new sampler he’d bought used through a local bargain newspaper. It was one in the morning and Ainsley was still in bed. As he slipped a new disk into the hard drive of his computer he became acutely aware of the fact that over the last few weeks he had spent less and less time with her and when they did do things together it seemed more like she was just an old friend rather than his lover. When they showered together the sight of her smooth white figure ceased to arouse him. It wasn’t that she was unattractive to him. Not at all. The tingling green gems of her eyes were as beautiful as ever. What had changed was something inside him, or between them, he wasn’t sure which. It was as though regarding her as a sexual being was suddenly a kind of violation or act of aggression against her. But maybe this was what love was supposed to be like. Maybe he was expecting too much in asking her to be the object of his desire forever. Wasn’t it enough of a blessing that they never argued - or at least not until recently, a small enough sample that it could just be written off as little more than a bad patch - and had so many tastes both artistic and musical in common?

Later that night they were out at a pub on Kings Road after a day shopping in Knightsbridge. Jimmy felt edgy and exhausted and ordered a pint of lager to calm his nerves. Ainsley ordered a coke and sat across from the table for almost ten minutes before Jimmy finally broke the silence.

“I’ve never felt so out of sorts,” he said.

“We know Major Tom’s a junkie, strung out on Heaven’s high, hitting an all time low,” she sang the words to Bowie’s *Ashes to Ashes* under her breath as though to mirror his comment. He wanted to retort with the only words of the song he remembered, “I’m happy. Hope you’re happy too,” but it could only have been with sarcasm so instead he just looked at her in exasperation and shook his head. “Maybe you just need a holiday,” she said in a reconciliatory tone before withdrawing into silence. Jimmy looked out the window and yawned. Maybe he was being selfish in bringing his personal ennui into the relationship. Wasn’t it his problem to solve? He felt sorry for Ainsley having to put up with his listless introversion.
“I’m sorry,” he said.

He put his hand on her shoulder from across the table and everything suddenly became clear to him. Since the night at the Chelsea restaurant it had slowly began to dawn on him how dead he had been inside since Madelaine left his life. As he looked into Ainsley’s eyes he could only see Madelaine - but more clearly than he had in years and more clearly than even Ainsley herself - and a new sense of purpose filled his heart. He had to find Madelaine and see what happened to her. He couldn’t let those memories of her vanish into the past. The woman in the restaurant had conjured forth a pantheon of half formed recollections which rustled inside him like sheets of faded newsprint laden with stories about glorious times that had long since come to pass. Since that night he’d spent virtually every evening alone in the back garden struggling to intensify his every thought of her without consciously registering the growing pattern. When he looked back on their first meeting he could no longer remember what, exactly, she had said. How tall was she? What colour were her eyes? Was she really as angry as she had sounded during the phone conversation? What was she wearing? A few fragments of dialogue still echoed in his mind, incomplete and broken, becoming less and less audible with every passing day like an echoing voice fading away into the hollow of a canyon. No. Nemesis wasn’t enough.

Lift her into the permanent beauty of music and she’ll never die, he once thought. But now he could see the flaw in his actions and how empty a gesture his signature piece and biggest musical success really was. That beautiful woman, whose leagues of rich brown hair once fell over those dark stormy eyes, which oscillated from warmth and tenderness to anger and alienation, had become little more than a cave painting on the stony walls of his heart. Even his feelings for her had dulled to the point they had transformed into mere memories of feelings and these recollections spanned as far back as his feelings for her but no further. No matter how hard he tried, he could not make her appear before him to rekindle those feelings in flesh and blood. He had tried rereading her letter. He had tried looking at the cartoon Markus had drawn. He listened to Nemesis over and over again, but to no avail. These sentimental items were no less able to renew his love for her as historical documents could make great wars repeat themselves before the eyes of historians. Yet wasn’t the fact that he was obsessed with reawakening his love enough to confirm that he was still in love with her?

Jimmy let his hand drop from Ainsley’s shoulder. They left the pub and walked home in silence. When they got back he retreated to his room to work on his computer. Five minutes later Ainsley kicked the door open and threw an envelope on the top of the sampler.

“We have to talk,” she said, staring at him with cold accusing eyes. In the deepened creases of her face were the imprints of anger and frustration.

Jimmy picked up the envelope.

“About?” he asked with false naivety.

“Come on!”

He opened the envelope. Inside was the letter from Madelaine. The paper was slightly yellowed with age.

“And?” she asked, beckoning him to search the envelope further.

He slipped his fingers down to the bottom and pulled out the cartoon that Markus drew along with a piece of paper with something scribbled on it. It was a poem about a man who sits beneath a water pipe letting the trickle of the water wash away the
tears of his memory dated the night he and Ainsley went out to the restaurant in Chelsea.

“I thought you forgot about her,” she said without inflection.

“Look, I’m sorry. I can’t lie any more.”

“You confuse me. It’s been so long. Or have you seen her again?”

“No.”

She shook her head in a gesture of pained surrender and walked out into the kitchen. She drew the curtains and smashed a plate on the floor. Jimmy ran to her side and put his hand on her wrist. She shook it off.

“Get away from me.”

“Ainsley,” he pleaded.

“Don’t Ainsley me. I get the feeling you love me the same way you loved her – just as some fantasy image in your mind. And do you know what? I think were too proud to admit that you really loved Josephine, as that would have meant your initial romantic impressions of Madelaine were all a mistake. And who could be so cold as to love an image of a woman he hardly knows more than a real person?”

“Wait a minute…you told me to write that letter to her.”

“Oh, give me a break and take responsibility for your own stupid actions for once.”

“I’ve never seen you like this. Calm down!” he said, shaking her shoulder ever so slightly.

“Oh, no,” she said with exaggerated emotion. “A moment of passion creeps into our relationship. Can’t you see what’s happening to us?”

Jimmy looked at her. He pressed his lips together in nervous anticipation, fearing the flood accusations that were building up inside her.

“It’s not what you think,” he said.

“What isn’t? You’ve been sitting alone for the past three weeks pining away for a woman who might not even exist anymore for all you know. Do you know how that makes me feel?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve just felt so useless lately. Whenever I wake up I feel like a nobody. I stare at the ceiling until I force myself out of bed to prepare myself for the same charade I go through every day of my life. I don’t know what it is. I seem to have lost all my enthusiasm for everything…except perhaps her.” He paused and looked down in shame. Ainsley looked at him with a mixture of contempt and pathos.

“I mean, look at you,” Jimmy continued. “You’ve got your work. You seem to love it like nothing else. I’m envious. For the first time in my life I seem to have lost my drive to achieve. I used to walk through the streets of New York in such awe of everything around me. Things as drab and pointless as a garbage can lid in a back alley seemed to radiate such colour and life. I remember once I was watching a boat drift through the harbour and there was something in its slow deliberate motion that made me think of a chord. I went home immediately and before I knew it I’d a new melody kicking around in my head. Everything was a beginning. Now all I have is endings.”

“Would you come down to earth for once? You can’t expect to base your entire life on all these arty little epiphanies. There’s so much more. Do you realise how narcissistic it is to go through life expecting everything and everyone to make you feel some grand emotion worthy of a great symphony or Renaissance sculpture garden? It’s a sort of vampirism. You draw blood from life, killing it as you recycle its
remains into your music. And now that you’re uninspired by life you sit around like a little kid at a day-care needing someone to tell him what to do to alleviate his boredom.”

“That’s not true,” he said. “I’ve lost all interest in art in favour of life. That’s why I’ve dropped music. If I could I’d crush Mirage into the ground. What really bothers me is different. It’s much worse. It’s inescapable, and infinitely more complex.”

“And what might this be?” she said sarcastically.

“I can’t put my finger on it. I just feel everything is slipping away from me.”

“Christ, Jimmy. Most of the world doesn’t have the time to worry about things like that. You’re just bored. Success has spoiled you. You just sit around collecting record royalties complaining about one thing or another. If it isn’t Venables then it’s something else. What’s happened? There was always an electricity in you. You were always doing things. You were never idle.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Her eyelids sank together. She stood there for over a minute with her eyes closed holding Jimmy’s hand. “This is the first heart to heart we’ve had for so long. So I might as well take advantage of it. I have something to tell you and I don’t want you to be shocked.”

“What?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

She walked into the bathroom and came back a moment later. Her fist seemed to be clenched around something.

“It’s all coming apart at once. I never wanted it to happen this way.” She opened her hand and tossed a small bottle of pills on the floor. She threw her head in her hands. Jimmy rushed over to her and pulled her head into his chest. She resisted.


Jimmy picked up the bottle. It had the name of some drug he’d never heard of on the side.

“Antidepressants,” she said. “Anti-fucking depressants.”

“What?” Jimmy asked sharply. “For how long?”

“The last six months.”

“Come on. You don’t need these!” He threw them on the floor.

“Jimmy. You don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. It’s all a plot by the drug companies to get everyone with nothing more than a minor heart ache hooked on their products.”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“More? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Because I was afraid you’d react like you are now.” She stepped away from him. “I’m clinically depressed. That’s what three doctors have said. I guess that makes it official. Without these pills I’d be walking through life wanting to kill myself every day.”

“I don’t believe you. It all seems so weird. You’ve always been such a happy person. I’ve never seen you really upset about anything before.”

She shook her head in disgust. “You can be such a fucking block-head sometimes. Do you know what it’s like to be raised in a family where everyone says
that women aren’t supposed to burden the world with their problems? Do you know how hard it is?”

“Why didn’t you say something before?”

“Didn’t you just listen to what I said? Are you deaf? When it’s been beaten into you since day one that you’re always supposed to be smiling and helpful. My God, Jimmy. I felt I couldn’t tell you or it would ruin our relationship. But now it doesn’t even seem to matter to you any more.”

“Ainsley. If anything doesn’t matter it’s her. She’s in the past.”

“Please Jimmy. No more lies. Our love has been just one big lie. I’ve lied to you, you’ve lied to me.”

“That’s not true.”

“You love her. Even if you didn’t, can’t you see how this changes everything? I can’t go on being the same with you. I can’t go through life being someone’s sweet little girlfriend. I have to break away. I have to be independent.”

“Is that why you’ve been depressed? Because you don’t love me anymore?”

“You’re always putting words in my mouth. Can’t you let me speak for once? All those nights in the pub I just sat and watched you drink one beer after another because you didn’t have anything to say to me anymore unless you were drunk.”

“That’s an exaggeration, but I’m glad we’ve finally talked about it. Why did you wait for so long to bring it up?”

“Me? Why didn’t you just come out and tell me you didn’t love me if that was the case?”

“Now you’re putting words in my mouth. I never said I didn’t love you.”

“You never said it, but you felt it. You’re just afraid to face your own feelings.”

“It’s just a bad spell. It’s my work. I have to get it together and get back into music. Then everything will be better.”

“It’s not that simple. It’s not just you’re problem. It’s mine, too.”

“Let’s calm down.”

“Jimmy, I have to leave. I have to get off this shit.” She gestured over to the pills. “All those years and I still don’t even know who I am. All those feelings - the real me - hasn’t even been let out yet - if it exists at all. I’ve just been some artificial construct of my boyfriends and parents all these years.”

“Ainsley.”

“No, Jimmy. Don’t start pretending again. You know you never touch me anymore. You know you don’t kiss me after we’ve made love. Come on. Who are we trying to fool?”

“What if...” As the worlds came out something inside of him stopped trying and the sentence fell short. Ainsley left the room and slammed the door. Jimmy took the envelope and threw it into the corner.

“I’m setting you - both of us - free from this torture,” she yelled through the door.

Jimmy couldn’t let her go. No matter what was happening between them now, she was still his best friend. To lose her would be disastrous.

Ainsley came back out with her shoes on. “I’m staying at a friend’s house tonight,” she said. She walked out the door.

Jimmy sat alone in front of a silent stereo for the rest of the evening. As the night wore on his mind became clearer. His nerves settled and he felt a new strength stirring inside him. He could now see himself and Ainsley in their full hypocrisy. Not
only had he been hiding his feelings for Madelaine - her very existence - all along, but so too was Ainsley hiding her true self from him. They’d been together for almost two years now and were already numbed to each other and unable to tap whatever it was that had brought them together in the first place. Sure the fondness and affection was still there, they always would be, but so very much else was lacking. As he sat there reflecting on their relationship something inside him suddenly wanted to protect Ainsley and compensate her for all the emotional damage he had caused her. If Madelaine was never in the picture all this would never have happened. Clinical depression was a serious thing and he couldn’t let her down when she needed him the most. He had to try harder, bend his emotions backwards in time and through some bizarre miracle will their love back into existence. After sifting through a series of fruitlessly vague memories he finally conjured forth the image of the first time he kissed her. Clear and radiant she stood there before him and in the strength of this image the full impact of her on his life became obvious. She entered his life when he was spiralling downwards and had nothing to look forward to but the emptiness of commercial success. She showed him the meaning of true love and devotion. He had to stand by her. It was his duty.

At four in the morning Ainsley walked through the front door and stormed upstairs. Jimmy followed her into their bedroom. There he found her, spread across the bed in all her beauty, an open flower suspended on the soft ripples of a woodland pond. He put his arm around her, knowing full well that it could be the last time they’d sleep together. He had to convince her he still loved her.

She squeezed his hand, not letting go for almost half an hour.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“No. I’ve been so insensitive. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own languor and sense of purposelessness that I ignored you when you needed me the most.”

“You should go see her,” she said.

“No. I have to stand by you. This...you...it’s all put a new sense of purpose in my life.”

“I’ll be OK,” she whispered slowly. “Just let me be alone after tonight. I need my space. Just for a while.”

Jimmy was silent. He squeezed her hand, hoping to rekindle some kind of spark between them.

“I think you should see her,” she repeated.

“It’s over, Ainsley. It’s just something I needed to piece together.” As the words left his lips he knew a part of him was lying. “It’s just memories.”

“You have to see her, Jimmy. I can tell it’s unresolved. You have to sort it out or you and I will never make it together again.”

There was a tangible coldness in her expression. Suddenly he sensed something he was almost afraid to acknowledge.

“What is it,” he said. “Really.”

“What do you mean?”

“I get the feeling you just want to get rid of me. You seem way to eager to let me go back to loving her.”

Ainsley let out a sigh. She closed her eyes and a tear fell to the pillow on which her head was resting. In one swift motion she turned her head and fell into his lap.
“There’s someone else,” she said as she burst into tears. “I’m in love with someone else.”

He wanted to be angry but couldn’t.

“Ainsley, my sweet,” he said. “Ainsley...it’s taken all of my courage...”

“You have no courage, only a disdain of all life that you pass off as some sort of transcendent nobility.”

“Ainsley...” He started caressing her head.

She didn’t answer. Jimmy looked out the window into the bright morning light. Dawn had already arrived. Clusters of tiny greyish clouds had gathered into larger formations, tinted pink and orange by the first rays of the sun. In the distance, an enormous thunderhead hung over the horizon like a great black root reaching down into the Earth. He kissed her ear and fell asleep. The next morning she packed her bags and left.
BOOK 4

Chapter 4.1

A delicate haze had settled over London. The last few leaves had already fallen from the trees, leaving behind rounded clusters of bare and twisted boughs suspended on rows of heavy moss-covered trunks. What were once lush embankments of bushes and flowers had become little more than colourless walls of wiry knotted branches. The tourists had mostly gone home, leaving the downtown cafés virtually empty. Jimmy took a sip of his coffee and tapped a sugar spoon on the restaurant table. He took an envelope out of his pocket and pulled out an airplane ticket. He went over the itinerary one last time. He’d be leaving Gatwick at 12:38 in the afternoon and arriving at 2:45 in New York and flying back three weeks later. That was more than enough time to visit old friends like Markus and find out what happened to Madelaine. For all he knew she may have moved to another city. If that was the case, he’d have to find out which city and then make whatever plans were necessary to get there in what little time he had. He slipped the ticket into his coat pocket, paid for his coffee, and stepped out onto Charing Cross Road. Then he bought a bag of honey-roasted peanuts from a street vendor and walked to Piccadilly Circus to catch the first train home. As the stations flickered by, questions rattled through his head as though mimicking the motion of the train on its passage through the darkness of the tunnels. A lump grew in his throat. How would Madelaine greet him? Would she still be angry or would she treat him as an old friend? Could he so much as bear to face Josephine? Maybe both of them would refuse to see him. And what about Markus? They hadn’t even spoken since his last visit to London and perhaps he didn’t even live in New York anymore.

He woke up early on the day of the journey, packed lightly and caught the first train from Victoria to Gatwick. The bleak tenements of Clapham gradually gave way to the red brick townhouses of Croydon with their tiny square lawns and lines of hanging laundry. In what seemed like no time London had completely dissolved into the green hills of the country. He felt a strange sense of ease and facility. He’d been stuck in London for so long that he’d almost forgotten what it was like outside.

The train pulled into Gatwick and he stepped off the train and made his way up the stairs to the departure lounge. He checked in and boarded the airplane on schedule. Within half an hour they were airborne. After a glass of wine and a light lunch he fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, they were already making landing preparations. He looked out the window as the plane arced through the islands of blue-grey clouds, descending towards the runway. He saw the golden caps of Manhattan’s largest skyscrapers stabbing upwards through a thin veil of smog like a bed of nails. A feeling of excitement tingled through him. All the dirty basements and crummy bar and restaurant jobs he trudged through to get where he was filled him with a romance for the past. Even the worst experiences seemed worth reliving when looked at in the
right way. He’d do it all again: the unheated apartments with samplers and guitars scattered across the floor; the rugs stained with pizza sauce, beer and ashes; the late nights in basement dance clubs that hung like scabs off the lacerated elbows of Avenue A.

The plane hit the runway with a sudden dip and in less than ten minutes he was in the baggage claim zone waiting for his suitcase. He cleared customs and caught a bus into Manhattan. After a short nap in a cheap hotel on the Upper East Side, he called local information from a phone booth to track down Markus. The operator connected him immediately. After three rings Jimmy heard a click on the other end. There was a moment of silence before a deep grisly cough filled his ears. “Hello,” said a voice.

“Yes, I’m looking for Markus,” said Jimmy.
“Yeah,” said the voice. “Who is this? The connection’s awful.”
“Jimmy.”
“Jimmy! Man, I’m sorry.”
“I wasn’t sure if it was you or not.”
“I’ve got a sore throat...wait. Are you in town?”
“Just flew in tonight.”
“What are you doing?”
“Tonight?”
“Whenever.”
“Nothing. Let’s go out.”
“Sure.”
“I tried sending a letter a year or so ago, but it just came back in the mail.”
“I’ve moved so many times, I don’t even know my phone number any more.”

After a few minutes of conversation they decided to meet at his apartment and then go to a new Tapas bar in the west village. Jimmy hung up the phone and called a cab immediately. It was so long since he had seen Markus, he hardly knew what to expect. When he got to the building the elevator door opened slowly and Markus walked out into the lobby. He looked old and worn. His hair was grey around the edges of his ears and his face sagged into the beginnings of a permanent frown. He had put on about twenty pounds and his style of dress had changed. Instead of the brightly coloured synthetic sports gear he always used to wear, he was dressed in soiled work clothes. His shirt was untucked and open at the bottom, exposing the pinkish-brown bulge of his stomach. Jimmy felt he was standing before a complete stranger.

“Hey, if it isn’t The Inner City Eye,” Markus said in gentle mockery. “Come on in.” They took the elevator up to the third floor and stepped into his apartment. The furniture looked old and faded and there was a stack of dirty dishes on the coffee table in the living room.

“Maybe if the man himself touches my shoulder a little of that magic will rub off on me.”

“Magic?” Jimmy replied. “I haven’t done anything new in over a year.”
“Maybe you’re just running out of steam like the rest of us.”
“So, what’s been happening with you?”
“It hasn’t been so good.”
“Really,” said Jimmy.
“Remember what I was telling you?”
“About? It’s been so long.”
“Nicole.”
“Yes,” said Jimmy with concern.
“Well it just gotten worse and worse. One night I got so sick of it all I went out and got so drunk I ended up going home with the first woman I met. It was one of those crazy hormone nights that you just have to bow down to and accept. The next morning I came home to find the door locked. After knocking for what seemed like an hour Nicole finally opened the door. She was holding Ella in her arms. The sight was so moving I broke down and cried at her feet. It all came to me at once how we’d all gone so wrong.”
“I don’t know what to say,” Jimmy reflected.
“It was just on an impulse. The way she’d been acting the last year I half expected her to punch me in the face. Instead she stepped aside and let me walk in. It felt so weird. It was like I was walking into the house of an utter stranger. I walked through the living room and into the bedroom. To my surprise…” His eyes became watery and he started speaking slowly, word by word as if he was struggling to keep his memories of the event from tearing him apart. “There…she…I mean…well. This guy was there. Right on the bed. I can still remember the pale white skin of his body. Like skin left too long in water. He looked so weak and sickly.”
Markus took a deep breath and shook his head in disgust as if the man was still standing there in front of him. “I turned back to Nicole. She was standing directly behind me still holding Ella. She was crying. Ella, I mean. Who’s this, I asked? She didn’t even answer me. Instead the guy got up. He was buck-naked and didn’t even try to cover anything up. The fucker just shook my hand and apologised. He said he’d been sleeping with Nicole for over two months and was glad that we’d finally met. I couldn’t believe his balls. He was so cool and confident about everything I figure he must have been armed. And then I turned back to Nicole. I expected at least some kind of sympathy. After so many years and Ella. Instead she just looks at me real cold with eyes so cruel they could kill and asks me to leave.” He looked at Jimmy and laughed in pained self-irony. “All she had for me was hate after all those years. I was so fucked up over it I ran out of the house and kicked over the dinner table on the way.”
“That’s horrible. At least I can still talk to Ainsley.”
“Still talk? What do you mean by that?”
“We split up last year.”
“You too?” Markus said with casual lack of concern. “Seems like that’s just the way things are these days. You guys seemed so set the last time I saw you.”
“Yes, but so did you and Nicole.”
“I don’t know man. I still don’t know what I did wrong. She didn’t even give me a decent explanation. She said she just couldn’t talk to me anymore and wasn’t attracted to me. I asked Nicole about Ella and how she changed everything and Nicole gave me this thing about how Ella made her realise the depth of true love and how we just didn’t have it between us. I’m just hoping she’ll come back. I don’t know what drove her against me, but I can’t stand being out of her life.”
“Is she still seeing that guy?”
“Worse. They’re living together.”
“Do you at least get to see Ella?”
“She only lets me once every two weeks. Since I went bankrupt...”
“You went...”
“I don’t want to talk about it,” Markus interrupted. “It was sometime last year.”
“Last time I saw you...”
“Yes. It was pretty close then. I remember I told you.”
“So...”
“Look. I don’t care about anything anymore except getting her back. I’ve been writing poems about her, hoping she’ll change her mind. All along I think you were right about girls. I was such an idiot to say all those things about you and Madelaine.”
“Funny...now I’m not so sure I was right.”
“Who knows?”
“Have you shown her any?”
“What?”
“The poems.”
“I’m afraid to. It’ll show her I’m weak. She’ll just take that as bait to prey on my passion for her. Woman love strong men who ignore them.”
“That’s such a cliché. Since Ainsley and I broke up...”
“Both of us single,” he interrupted. “A bunch of losers.”
“Yeah, I know,” said Jimmy.
“What ever happened to those golden days? You and Madelaine, me and Nicole. It was so perfect.”
“Maybe for you,” said Jimmy.
“Ha!” Markus pulled a crinkled sheet of loose-leaf out of his pants pocket and unfolded it. “Listen to this one.” He cleared his throat and began to read.

"Angel of my bedroom flying
With white cotton wings
Lift me up and touch me
With the clouds of your desire"

“I know it’s pretty lame,” Markus continued. “But I guess love is always like that when it’s real.”

“Maybe,” said Jimmy as he gazed with continued disbelief at Markus, who was now slouched against the wall like a wounded animal protecting itself from further injury.

The doorbell rang. Markus got up to answer it. Nicole walked in followed by a small girl with kinks in her hair and a pink bonnet. “Jimmy,” said Nicole awkwardly. She smiled brightly and walked cautiously over to Jimmy. He stood up and shook her hand. Her wrists had become thin and bony. Her face was different than he remembered it. There was something more severe in her glance, something less generous in her smile. Thin, almost imperceptible wrinkles sprouted from the outside corners of her eyes and her hair, once dyed a shocking breed of platinum, was long, brown and carefully combed back, ending in a tight bundle controlled by a hairpin. Dressed in her long blue raincoat, grey skirt and white cotton blouse, she looked like a Baptist school librarian on a field trip.

“Jimmy,” she said again, this time with a pronounced note of surprise in her voice. “My God. I hardly expected to see you here.”
“I just flew in today.”
“Business?”
“Not really. It’s been so long. I just felt I had to throw a stone over the wall.”
“We’ll have to go out for coffee.”

Markus leered for a moment in the background before skulking away into an adjacent room. Jimmy felt suddenly uncomfortable. Nicole’s separation from Markus had imposed an obvious barrier between them. He turned to the little girl and patted her on the head. She turned her head away and buried it in the folds of her mother’s skirt.

“Come on Ella,” said Markus from the other room. “Say hello to your uncle Jimmy.”

Her face peeped out of Nicole’s skirt. She had a tiny smile and big green eyes.

“I’ve been so busy lately with home renovations,” said Nicole. “It’s such a chore picking out the right wall paper pattern to fit the furniture. And then once you get it you have to make sure it’s all lined up. And just when you’re sure you got all the bubbles out from under it you go for a coffee and come back fifteen minutes later to see that its already half dried and there’s a whole new bubble the size of a yacht just staring you in the face. It’s so exasperating.” She shook her head and laughed. “I just bought this amazing new wall hanging the other day. When I got home and put it up, I realised that it was so beautiful that it made everything else in the apartment look awful. So I ended up taking it back.”

When Markus returned to the room he was holding a cello by the neck, carrying it like a bloated walking stick. Nicole’s face became more serious as she turned to him.

“The reason I dropped by was to get your signature on this IRS form. I was just in the neighbourhood.”

“Sure.” Markus grabbed a pen and signed the piece of paper she was holding in her hand.

After a few minutes of platitudes, Nicole buttoned up her raincoat and tugged on Ella’s hand. “We should go,” she said. Jimmy gave her a reserved hug while Markus stood there brooding at the back end of the front hall.

Later that night Jimmy and Markus went to a Jazz club. When they got there they sat in silence for almost twenty minutes waiting to order listening to the warm-up act. Eventually, a slim Latino man, a golden hoop hanging flirtatiously from his ear, walked by the table and eyed them for a moment before walking away.

“What was that all about?” asked Markus.

“You tell me. He just walked up and stared.”

Markus looked down at the table and sighed. Jimmy looked away, trying to come up with something positive to say that didn’t sound superficial or condescending. But after a minute of silence he gave up. His mind was empty. Perhaps it was jet lag. Or maybe he had eaten too much. But then a far more daunting thought entered his mind. He struggled to smother it, but quickly gave in. He leaned back in his chair and looked across at Markus as he let the thick dark ink of the idea ooze slowly through his mind. A taxi rushed by outside, casting the momentary glare of its headlights into Jimmy’s eyes.
Chapter 4.2

The next day Jimmy took the green line to Spanish Harlem. When he got to the closest stop he stepped off the train and walked out of the station – exactly the same one he always used to disembark at when he used to go to visit Madelaine and Josephine. The streets were exactly as he remembered. The peeling pink and yellow paint on the fronts of the crumbling brick townhouses stood out like a signpost pointing the way to his past. There were even, as there always used to be, children playing basketball in the middle of a back alley. He slowed his pace as he rounded the final corner before their apartment. When the building - or was it now a shrine? - came into view he stopped and looked around. He took a deep anxious breath, trying to hold back the memories churning with ever-greater intensity inside him: “These times are just a mess. Tune out the past and just say yes...it’s nineteen sixty three, its nineteen sixty four, its nineteen fifty seven...put it all behind you, now it’s all behind you.” All he had experienced with the two sisters had been hermetically sealed inside the walls of that song, and even then, only as a collection of fading images and impressions that had only now been released into the daylight of his mind after countless seasons lying away in darkness. After almost a minute without so much as moving a limb, he summoned whatever courage he could find and slowly approached the building. He rang the upper doorbell. In a matter of moments he heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The door opened and a rotund Latin woman opened the door. She looked at him suspiciously as if she thought he was a representative of some government office coming to investigate her.

“I’m looking for Madelaine Merle,” he said.

“Madelaine Merle?” She held up her index finger as if to ask him to wait and she went upstairs. A moment later she returned holding a piece of paper with an address scribbled on it. Jimmy reached out his hand to take it but she pulled it away and produced a pen from underneath her apron.

“I need for mail,” she said.

Jimmy nodded his head and used the pen to copy the address down on a scrap of paper from his wallet. From the numbers he concluded it was somewhere in Chelsea.

“Thanks,” he said.

He took the subway down to Chelsea immediately. The address corresponded to an isolated red brick town house with a black metal fire escape and an enclosed backyard guarding a single tree - its leaves reddened to the point of saturation in their late autumn glory - and a white wicker swing. Through the front window he could see what looked like two figures moving through a kitchen. A child’s voice rang through the air, rising above the low-pitched drone of the traffic. Jimmy walked around the back and peered through the dense red undercover provided by the tree. There in the lawn were two children, both boys, with clear white skin and rich mops of deep brown hair falling over their eyes. They looked like twins, no older than three - had it really been that long? One of them had a plastic shovel and was slamming it defiantly into a mountain of dirt that the other one was trying to protect with a plastic hoe. The one with the hoe stopped and looked over in Jimmy’s direction before continuing his play battle. The face was unmistakable. Those eyes, drawn so perfectly by Markus in the cartoon, shining like dark pools in a hidden meadow. He
wrapped his fingers around a wet twig that was hanging in front of his face and stuck the tip into his mouth.

As he watched the two children vie for king of the tiny mound an aching sense of awe that bordered on anguish welled up inside him. It was similar to his experience with Ainsley at the Gagosian as they stood there in the midst of Mike Kelley’s Kandors: no matter how eerily beautiful they were or profound his emotional response, he could never really be a part of their glassy shimmering world. Should he go inside? he asked himself. No, he couldn’t. Not now. Life had taken its turn and everything had been decided. There was no point. It would only ruin what she had already built for herself and open up old wounds. The children were enough. They stood there before him like outcasts from some lost line of medieval royalty. The fruits of their mother’s beauty. Everything from their small pouting faces to the white swing and the red brick walls of the house was too perfect to disturb. He felt like a criminal for even standing there peering on the scene before him.

Jimmy was lost in reflection when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Jimmy,” a bewildered voice exclaimed from behind. He turned around. It was Madelaine. She was holding a suitcase in her hand. Her face was almost exactly the same as he remembered, but tempered with the calm dignity of motherhood. Her eyes were filled with a tender look of surprise. She held out her arms and went to hug him, but Jimmy was still too shocked to respond appropriately and just stepped back into the tree behind him.

“I wasn’t going to bother you.”
“You’re not,” she said in a soft but matter-of-fact way. “You could never bother me.”
“How’s Josephine?” he asked clumsily.
“She’s fine. We don’t talk much anymore, but I can give you her phone number. I’m sure she would be happy to hear from you.”
“They’re beautiful,” he said, looking at the children.
“Twins,” she said. “Beautiful only when they’re not wrecking the house.”
“Names?”
“Richard and Frederick.”
“Traditional,” said Jimmy, maintaining a sense of pat formality in his voice.
“I read about you. I saved a copy of a magazine with you on the cover.”
“It’s not as fun as it sounds,” he said.
“It must be fulfilling on some level.”
“Sure,” he agreed without much conviction.

They looked at each other awkwardly, not really knowing where to take the conversation. So much had passed that no words could express a fraction of what they really wanted to say.

“Jimmy.”
“What?”
“I was so afraid.”
“Afraid? Of me?” he demurred.
“Of your feelings. They shook the foundation of everything I had.”
“I’ve had other loves,” he digressed so as not to let her think he had flown all the way to New York just for her.

In response to his defensive posture she took his hand and pressed it disarmingly against her thigh. She looked over to where her children were playing. His eyes
followed her gaze and his heart dropped. Since her last phone call he’d been afraid of what might happen if they ever saw each other again. The tone of her voice that day made him feel that she would forever be looking down at him in scorn. Yet there she was towering before him again, every bit as lively and warm as she’d been the first night they’d met.

“Did you get the package I sent?”
“Yes,” she said with hushed gratitude. “No one’s ever done anything like that for me. I didn’t know how to respond.”
“Don’t worry,” he said. “I understand.”
“It would have been a betrayal of everything my life was based on.”
“I almost didn’t send it. I thought it would end up driving you even further back.”
“It didn’t drive me back. There’s always been a place in my heart for you. In my mind I think of you in the corner of my garden sitting on the swing talking to me. I always liked the intensity of your eyes when you spoke of abstract things.”
“Abstract things?” Jimmy repeated wistfully before mounting his courage. “Do you think love is abstract?” A yellow bird with deep red wing tips landed on the fence beside them.
She looked puzzled by his question and finally let his hand drop.
“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe.”
He looked at her with a mixture of elation and confusion. He wasn’t sure what he felt for her was love or just the memory of a love for what she once was. It was as if all his images and impressions of her since he last saw her that day many years ago had spawned an independent being with a life all its own that ceased to have anything to do with her.

“You were everything to me,” he bled forth in protest to his own sense that she might have drifted away. “You were all those quiet strings resonating in the background of my music. You were all those magical lines in Rilke about the impossibility of love in a universe whose very rules are dead set against it.”
“Jimmy...” she cautioned him, visibly embarrassed by the gravity of his words. He suddenly felt gratuitous, even pompous, yet the words continued to flow beyond his control. “All those things that you were to me, Madelaine. What would they have become if we were ever together? Would they have died as well?”

“Will you ever marry?”
“If I do I’ll never expect out of it what I once expected from you. There’s a place inside me for you that will never be occupied by anyone else. How long did we know each other? A few months at most and even then only an hour or two a week. But you were everything that the beginnings of love were supposed to be.”
“Jimmy. Don’t you ever think for a minute you didn’t move me. You were very considerate of me. When you told me how much you loved me I could hardly believe it since you never showed it in my presence.”
“I was a coward.”
“You must have been strong to hold back.”
“There were other things. My recording contract.”
“On the surface you were always so understated. Unless you were talking about one of your ideas you were always so calm and controlled. The first time I saw you behind the bar at The Swan I thought to myself this man rules this place with such gentle authority.”
Jimmy stroked a lock of hair behind her ear and tightened his lips together. The sun slipped behind a cloud, casting a sudden shadow on the city. In the dampened light, free of any glare, her skin assumed a deeper and richer tone. She looked like a figure lifted from a stained glass mural, her cheeks and hair were so saturated with colour.

“Life is ultimately disappointing,” he uttered slowly and carefully as though sharing some profound truth.

A tear fell from her eye and she turned away to look at her two children playing.

“Yes,” she said. “But could it have been otherwise? Would you have been any happier if you had me? And do you really think that I’ve been satisfied with my life over all these years? Would you have made me any happier? I don’t know. Some people will always be unhappy. Sometimes I feel that I’m one of those.”

“Madelaine,” Jimmy urged her.

“Your life has been so different from mine. You’ve experienced professional and artistic success at a level I will never see.”

“I didn’t mean to imply…”

Her expression suddenly changed and he knew right then that she had already decided she had said too much and would say no more. “I have to go,” she said.

“I’m on my way out to visit my mother. She’s sick.”

“I hope it’s not too serious.”

“The doctors aren’t sure yet.”

“It’s strange, but I feel like I’ve almost come to know her.” He wanted to say more but instead remained silent. Anything he said further would risk reminding her of the phone conversation.

“I’ll give her your best. I’ve told her about you.” She stepped back a few feet.

“I’m in town for a few more weeks.”

“Jimmy,” she said seriously. “We can’t. I’m coming back in a week, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Sure,” said Jimmy, doing his best to conceal his disappointment. “I understand.” Then he continued in reflection. “You know, sometimes I hate being a man. You always have to pretend you’re strong in every situation. You always have to pose. Act like you don’t care.”

“And women always have to pretend they’re sensitive.” She said with a pointed smile as she stepped further away, her eyes shifting side to side as if she had already disengaged herself from him. “You look good.”

“So do you,” he added, although at that very moment she had already begun to look like a stranger. She had always been myriad people to him. She could be sullen and introspective, stormy and contentious, sweet and gentle, or whimsical and giddy. Now she was a mother. She wore her new role like an elegant hand-woven shawl over her shoulders, exuding an aura of graceful maturity that he’d never seen in her before.

“It would never have worked,” she said.

“I know.”

A second tear emerged from her eye. It rolled down her cheek like a tiny droplet of mercury on a silk tablecloth. She gave him a hug, holding on for longer than he expected. Her weight leaned heavily into him. For a moment he felt as if they were part of the same flesh and blood. He ran his fingers through her hair and pressed his
cheek against hers but quickly sensed the intimacy was too much for her. She pulled away.

“I’m sorry about the letter.”

“What else could you have done?”

“I really have to go.” She took out a pen and carefully wrote a phone number on a piece of paper. “My sister would love to hear from you.” She turned around and walked away. *Has she really forgiven me?* he felt the urge to ask. But after a moment of reflection he decided it wasn’t appropriate.

She walked further down the alley and then rounded the corner to the front of the house. When she had disappeared from view he started walking slowly away, watching his feet as they splashed through the small puddles lined with thinly frosted rims of ice. A great darkness welled up inside him. Now there was truly nothing.

He wandered through the streets of Manhattan for the next three hours, a disenchanted prophet with no mission or purpose left to guide him. When he got back to his hotel room it was four in the morning. He flicked on the television and watched a test pattern, its thick coloured bars wavering slightly as the image slid in and out of focus, until he finally fell asleep.

**Chapter 4.3**

When morning broke Jimmy picked up the phone to call Josephine. As he held the receiver in his hand the thought occurred to him that it was too early to call and he might end up disturbing her. He started to dial anyway, but a feeling of self-condemnation rapidly descended on him. What right did he have to try to re-establish contact with her after all that he had done? Perhaps it was better to just leave it the way it was and let her get on with her life. Liberated by this conviction, he set the phone down and walked across the room to look out the window. The sky was overcast and a thin layer of frost coated the outside of the windowpane. In all the pale glory of the early morning light a new thought entered his mind, as if somehow planted there by the very rays themselves of the fledgling sun. No matter what he did Josephine would eventually find out from Madelaine that he had been in town and his failure to call her would be seen by both of them as either an act of cowardice or even worse, a crude and thoughtless oversight, regardless of what she had last said to him in her letter. So with renewed purpose, he marched back over to the phone and picked up the receiver. But just as he started to punch in the seven digits of her number a heavy, almost painful, feeling surged through his stomach. It wasn’t that he expected to have a bad time with Josephine, but more that he was suddenly possessed by the realization that if he waited any longer to get in touch with her he’d just spend that much more time thinking about what was going to happen. *Would she be angry? Was she still in love with him? Had she ever even loved him at all, not to mention as much as *they* said she did?* As he waited for the first rings his feelings shifted yet again and a peculiar bitterness towards Madelaine and her mother emerged inside him. They had made things much worse than they had to be. Although he was certainly the instigator, there was no reason they had to get involved - especially behind Josephine’s back.
After the third ring he heard a click. “Hello,” said a female voice. It seemed far too deep and sturdy to be Josephine.

“Hello,” he replied uncertainly. “Is Josephine there?”

“This is she,” she said, a note of guarded curiosity in her voice.

“It’s Jimmy.” He felt suddenly ashamed, like a rapist forced to confront the victim of his crime.

“Jimmy,” she replied with cautious surprise. He could almost feel her desperately trying to bridle her emotions. “When did you get in?”

“I flew into town a few days ago. I got your number from directory assistance,” he said with some trepidation. Given her last letter, was not the risk of being caught out in a white lie better than the potential damage caused by opening the conversation by saying he had just been with Madelaine? “I was wondering if we could get together.”

“That would be nice.”

“Is tonight OK?”

“I have a few things to do early on,” she said yieldingly. “I’ve been helping out in a play. But after that...”

“Is ten good? Ten at The Tree?”

“It closed down. But there’s another bar a block down. I can’t remember the name, but it has a black horse above the door.”

“Sure. I’ll find it.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll be there at ten.”

Jimmy showed up twenty minutes early. He took a table in the back, half way across the room from a large crowd, who had seated themselves by the bar. He wondered why she would even meet him after what she had said in her last letter, but perhaps she had moved on and whatever forces had brought them together in the first place would take over and feelings of mutual friendship would prevail. But as his eyes patrolled the room, the thought suddenly occurred to him that it was all a set up and Madelaine just wanted him to face Josephine so he could fully grasp the enormity of his transgressions against her.

Josephine arrived ten minutes late. She was wearing a dark blue suede jacket and had a black wool scarf coiled loosely around her neck. She walked slowly up to the table with a half smile on her face. He was surprised how beautiful she looked, yet he couldn’t help to feel that it was somehow a strained and unhealthy beauty. Gone was the look of innocence that had once emanated so strongly from her face. Her eyelids were heavy and dark, her face joyless and remote, her thin smile a poor mask for whatever anguish lied beneath it.

He stood up to hug her and she conceded, but only with cautious reserve, letting her arms drop to her side rather than lifting them around his shoulders. It was like hugging a rag doll. He let go of her quickly and they sat down.

“You look well,” she said tenderly. He tried to remember what it was like to make love to her, yet it seemed more like a memory attached to a completely different set of people or something he had once seen on television. Perhaps his guilt had driven an irreversible wedge between them.

“So do you,” he said.

“Madelaine and Ramon are still together.”

He felt an urge to confess that he had lied about the telephone number and had just seen her yesterday, but he stopped. If she found out he saw Madelaine first she
would all but certainly be devastated, but if he hid the fact he had seen her she might eventually find out anyway and they would be back at square one. Since Josephine had not yet mentioned anything to him and the sisters - by Madelaine’s own admission - rarely spoke, perhaps it was best to just let it go unless Josephine first brought it up and then explain himself later if it actually came to that. “Really,” he said neutrally.

“He still hits her. I’ve done all I can to convince her to leave. Having two children didn’t change a thing.”

“Two children?” he asked with feigned surprise.

“They’re lovely. Absolutely lovely.”

“I can imagine,” he said. “I mean, Ramon is such a handsome man.”

“I don’t think so. He has a tiny chin and he’s so boring. Most people take his quiet laid-back way as a kind of European sophistication. It’s so funny. She used to think I had a crush on him before they got married. Once she was so jealous she even cornered me in a telephone booth and kicked me.”

“She’s got quite a temper.” He wondered what Josephine might have done to arouse such a violent reaction. Maybe she did like Ramon after all and was just covering up by saying she didn’t. If so, then maybe all of her talk about Madelaine’s awful marriage was just some envious concoction in her mind.

“She’s so jealous. When we first met you Ramon was flirting with another woman. She’s the sort to do anything to goad him on and get his attention.”

Perhaps that was it, Jimmy thought. He was only there to make Ramon jealous. But there was always the chance that Josephine already knew he had already seen Madelaine first and was only trying to torment him.

“I never liked Ramon,” he said bluntly.

“He’s not a bad person,” she said in his defence. “Just misguided. They don’t have much money these days. Neither do I, actually. My father’s been sick for so long, she hasn’t been able to pay the medical bills or the taxes. So we’ve been giving her as much money as possible to help her out.”

Jimmy experienced a sudden feeling of empathy as he looked across the table at her. In all her sadness she was more radiant than ever. Even though his sexual attraction for her had all but died he was possessed by an overwhelming urge to save her. Confess to all your lies and marry her, he thought. Marry her, you lousy fuck. Save her from all this. It’s the least you could do for her, after all you put her through.

“What about you?” she asked. “I don’t mean to be so depressing.”

“I’m OK.”

“Have you found someone?” Her eyes were wide open and inviting. Lost in the misty azure fortress of her gaze it was suddenly clear that whatever elephant there had been standing in the room - most obviously her last letter to him - had, at least for that moment in time, ceased to exist and would never be mentioned again.

“There was someone,” he said. “But you know...”

Josephine nodded her head. Jimmy imagined that the sudden look of fatigue that emerged in her eyes was really a disguised form of disappointment over what he had just said.

“Is it possible to become everything around you?” she asked in a tone of philosophical regret. It reminded him of a conversation he’d had once with Madelaine. The two sisters were once again consubstantial.

“In what way?”
“I used to fill my head with foreign things. Thoughts of books and films from other countries. It used to make me feel different. Now I just feel the same. When I get on the subway I feel like I’m the same as everyone around me. The old woman with her grocery bag, the up-and-coming lawyer with his brief case.”

“I always thought you could save yourself from you surroundings. Now I don’t know. Maybe it’s just some kind of snobbery.”

The conversation shifted to more trivial topics and after several drinks they got up and left. In a moment they were standing outside the bar watching the streaks of yellow cabs blend into the soft night air.

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“Just some hotel.”

“Is it on the way?”

“To where?”

“Anywhere?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

She stepped a foot back, sensing his reluctance.

“Will I see you again?”

“I guess so,” he said. He wanted to grab her, take her back to his hotel and make love to her all night. He had been so foolish to have ever preferred Madelaine. What did it matter that he felt less attraction for Josephine? His shear pity and guilt would be enough to drive their love for the rest of his life. Attraction was never at the heart of sex anyway. It was only at the beginning, but there and nowhere else, a bit of gift-wrapping around something much greater and more significant.

“Would you like to come back to my place for tea?”

“I’d love to, but...”

Her face suddenly changed and her expression became more penetrating. “I can tell you feel something for me. I can see it in your eyes. I know I must sound bold, but I’m not stupid. You love me and part of you wants to be with me. But you still love Madelaine and always will...”

“I love you, but...” He paused, struggling for some abstract excuse that might smooth things over. “Time...”

“No, Jimmy. You’re lying. You saw her yesterday and pretended you didn’t. Maybe you thought you could hide it and get more sex from me. But what good is a man if he can’t be honest to a woman?” She stepped back another foot. Then two. She turned around and then turned her head to him. “Goodbye, Jimmy. I don’t think we should ever see each other again.”

“Josephine...”

He held out his hand as she walked down the street. It was as if an entire period of his life had been torn from his memory. He wanted to stop her, but couldn’t. This time he knew it was over as he had once again and irrevocably been exposed as the liar and ersatz romantic he always had been. To force the issue would divide the family forever. She was the only innocent one in the entire situation and he’d already hurt her enough. Sure, her innocence had a manipulative edge to it. But was it even her fault? Wasn’t purity and virtue always manipulative anyway?

Jimmy stood there in the street listening to the sounds of the endless violent city as she vanished into the distance. He walked back into the bar and ordered a drink. Although it was still early, something told him it was going to be another sleepless night. *Milk and blood*, he thought as he looked out at the streets, now empty and
quiet. A man in an orange parka that could have been Markus five years before walked by throwing pebbles on the sidewalk. A woman chased a toy dog across the street. A family stood in front of a movie theatre waiting to get in. *Milk and blood*, Jimmy repeated in his head. *Milk and blood.*

**Chapter 4.4**

Jimmy edged away from the pier before turning to walk back towards the main road. A mass of white fog stirred over the urban wasteland that quivered there before him, stretching out in every direction like a hundred abandoned parking lots; in the background a row of buildings rose like fingers from the hands of an ageing warrior, some broken, some bent, some carefully severed as though through surgery, some still perfectly formed. Beyond the buildings a motorway faded away into the distance. A few cars streaked by - alive with the voltage and colour of the evening - as if a paintbrush had smeared their very forms across the blackened landscape that framed them. The sky rumbled with light and darkness. A layer of clouds moved along the dusk horizon and a pre-storm dampness filled the air. A tall man approached from the distance as Jimmy forged across sprawling industrial wasteland, once a strip mine, once a building site, once a garbage dump - it didn’t seem to matter anymore as now it was merely a damnation, rife with random excavations and broken fence posts. Jimmy walked towards the river, almost menacing in its sleek black reflectance. A gust of wind disturbed its smooth mirrored surface, etching a chain mail pattern into its shiny black skin. The man came closer. He was tall and slim, yet broad and powerful in the shoulders. A light drizzle fell from the sky, glazing the skyscrapers across the river with a thin luminescent film; a cushion of mist still hung over the city, diffuse and glowing in the angel-breath of the metropolis. This was once all his, the thought reassured him as he sat on an oil drum beside the dock watching the man approach. All this. The buildings. The water. The bridges reaching like a network of cables out into the lives of a million strangers. The alleyways with their bleak grammar of darkness and endless mounds of rusted wheels.

A barge went by, slicing through the smooth black linoleum of the river’s surface before vanishing behind a wall of mist. On the horizon, the clouds suddenly collapsed into a grey diaphanous sheet, just barely visible from the faint light of a sun already well below the line of visibility. Soon even the mist was swallowed into the ever-darkening estuary of the sky. It was thirty-three and he was once again alone. Gone was all the pain. Gone was the humiliation. Gone were all the bloodied frays and wounds. Yet even in this deficiency he was still a complete and autonomous being. A torn limb, now healed and rounded at the end, unable to ever accept its missing partner, but still crippled in its lack. He would have almost preferred the pain. Sanguinity. The compromise of anger and love was always bland friendship in the end. He kicked a wine bottle by his feet and heard it splash into the East River. His river.

He looked up at the man. His bold face and calm insightful eyes belied the ragged impression conveyed by his torn black parka and faded blue jeans. A fallen deity renegade from some bleak subterranea. Kinks of brown curls sprouted from his
rounded, almost bald, head and his eyes were noticeably downcast. He shifted his head fearfully back and forth as if he half-expected to be assaulted by a street gang. There was something tortured in his face that the darkness had not yet revealed. He walked up to the oil drum and stopped.

“Jimmy,” he said.

“I was waiting here for quite a while. Walking back and forth along the dock until I finally gave up and came here to sit down.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can stand it,” said Markus, as though picking up a fragment of a previous conversation he expected Jimmy to remember. “It’s like what we had never meant anything.”

“There’s nothing worse than the thought that the woman you just bled out your heart to wasn’t even listening.”

A cluster of black clouds gathered in the sky, forming an almost imperceptible mantle over the serried Manhattan skyline, now only visible from its own illumination.

“I think you were right all along,” Markus admitted. He looked weak and vulnerable in his demoted state, a potential victim for the coming storm. A thread of lightning wiggled through the sky. A random black wave crashed on the shore like a messenger of impending darkness or herald of the sea’s ultimate domination of the land. The East River had casted a grim sense of unreality over everything that stood in its perimeter. “If I would have been more romantic, shown Nicole that she was that special one rather than just some woman I ended up with...”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been right. Not about love. Not about anything. I don’t even know what I feel anymore.”

“No. You had principles. You followed them. I didn’t. I just went through life letting things happen to me. I let Nicole and Ella happen to me. There was nothing deliberate about it at all. I was chosen.”

“Chosen by others or chosen by our feelings, what difference does it make? When I met Madelaine I didn’t choose to fall for her. It just happened. I was a victim of my own feelings. And then I made her entire family a victim.”

“Come on...they must have been screwed up to begin with.”

“But I screwed them up even more. Or my feelings did...”

“Love was all timing, I used to think. But I guess I’ve finally learned to respect your approach to life. I remember in the bar you swore you’d pursue her life or death and I scorned you for it. Now I can only admire you.”

“What are you talking about? I just saw her a few days ago. I thought that maybe she might not be as beautiful as I remembered and that in retrospect I would conclude that the times we shared were just the result of some temporary madness or hormonal reaction. Or maybe I only fell for her out of need and loneliness. But no. When I saw her I realised that I was right to pursue her.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“But when I saw Josephine I suddenly felt angry at Madelaine for tearing up the letter and making things far worse than they had to be.”

“You followed your feelings and she did too. You were right all along - maybe even Madelaine and Josephine were right. You were all noble. What else could you do? The situation was stacked against everyone.”

“I was only right in some ways, though. Dead wrong in others. Dead fucking wrong.”
“And I was wrong to go through life moulding myself to other people’s expectations of me. Like Nicole. Like everyone. That’s what my life was like. A life of going with the flow. Now look where it’s got me. I never get to see my own daughter anymore.”

“Oh, give me a break. I know you better than that. If you woke up tomorrow and found that it was all a bad dream you’d forget this conversation and go on like you were before.”

“No. When Nicole left I felt like I’d been had. It made me think. It made me resolve to be more like you. To choose my own path and follow it regardless of the consequences.”

“I quit choosing my own path. After Ainsley. After Madelaine. The two things I wanted most in life - success in music and her – came to nothing. The doors to her and Josephine are forever shut and I succeeded at music only to find I didn’t care about being famous anymore…” Jimmy paused and spit on the ground. “And when I got involved with Ainsley it was just a case of good timing. There was no great moment of passion. It just happened. No real romance. Just as it was with you and Nicole. But even then it didn’t work. I’m giving up on love. I’m giving up on music.”

“Don’t say that. You’re just going through a bad spell.”

“No.”

“You taught me a lesson about love and commitment.”

“There isn’t a damn lesson. All my ambitions, my ideals, my unrequited love, it means nothing. Life just swept it away.”

“I never should have slept with that woman.”

“Come on. Nicole was already sleeping with someone else.”

“But still it was behind her back and must have made things even worse. Maybe if I hadn’t, Nicole would have taken me back.”

“Would she have? And what if I hadn’t slept with Josephine? Would Madelaine have left Ramon? Who’s really to say? I spent the last five years in love with a woman who could never love me even if she wanted to.”

“Maybe she did have feelings for you but her marriage prevented her from expressing them.”

A dog barked in the distance and the echo was engulfed by the black tides of the East River. Jimmy looked across the water at the Chrysler Tower. “I always thought that love was something permanent and immutable that rose above time and space and never burned out.”

Markus threw his head into his hands. “I’m such a waste of space,” he said. “A complete nobody.”

“Love. It’s all so ephemeral. A ballet of situations and nothing more. And like a ballet, it has its beginning, middle, and end.”

“But to even have a sniff at the illusion you need money – and I don’t have any.”

“Oh, fuck money, fuck love.” Jimmy took a bottle of wine out from his coat and pulled off the cork. They finished it in a matter of minutes, sharing swigs as the rain intensified. “Something’s gotta change. Something’s gotta happen,” said Jimmy. He stood up and thrust his arm into the air.

“Christ. You just sit there going on and on about your self-made problems. Look at me. Open your eyes. I’m the guy with real trouble. Bankruptcy.
Family...Underneath it all, you’re just some spoiled whiner. At least you made it big in the end.”

“Spoiled?” Jimmy’s mouth dropped in remonstration. “I can’t believe you just said that.” He stood up and pushed Markus off the oil drum. Markus fell into a pool of mud. “I owe you one for all those off-colour remarks about me using Josephine for sex.”

Markus stood up and grabbed Jimmy and threw him down. Jimmy caught Markus’s leg before he hit the ground and they both ended up crawling in the mud. They grappled in the rain like two figures in a cheap western, never quite coming to blows, grabbing awkwardly at each other while at the same time struggling to stand up.

Jimmy finally broke free. He snatched the wine bottle and ran out towards the dock.

“Choose your weapon,” he shouted in an English accent as he disappeared in the distance, a pinpoint shadow consumed by a landscape of shadows.

Markus sat in lonely consternation. The rain beat away at his face and chest robbing him of that effortless sense of composure that was once his trademark.

“Jimmy, come back,” he cried out into the rain. “I’m afraid.” All he heard was the hissing, the endless hissing of a billion tiny water droplets careening off the ground. But Jimmy was long gone, running in leaps and bounds along the pier. He swept his hands in wide arcs as he ran as if portraying the flight of a giant bird. Fucking hell. Fucking hell, he screamed.

There would be more women, he convinced himself. There always would be. Of course he would always have his memories. Nobody could ask for better ones. And then there was his music. More music. He had to get back into it. It had always been his weapon, his focus. He’d move back to the US and start recording. Get out of England with all its grime and apathy. There was no way Mirage could stop him.

Jimmy stopped by a post and picked up an empty wine bottle. He walked backwards in careful even strides until he was almost thirty yards away from the post. Your confusion, my illusion, like a mask of self hate confronts itself an dies, he muttered aloud as though repeating a prayer. He cocked his arm back and took aim. In one swift motion his hand came down and the bottle went spinning through the air, sailing directly towards its target. There was a hollow, low-pitched smash. Tiny pieces of glass flew outwards only visible because they reflected the harbour lights more strongly than the rain. He walked up to the post. There was nothing remaining of the bottle. It was a direct hit.

“I’ve still got it,” he said. “I’ve still got my eye and my arm. I’ve got something. I’m not going to quit. I’m not going to give up.” A security guard appeared in the distance, watching on as he weighed the potential threat of the situation. Jimmy broke into gallop and didn’t slow down until he was ten feet in front of Markus, who was now holding a newspaper over his head, protecting himself from the rain. Jimmy was once again eclipsed by a sense of hopelessness and defeat.

“Well?” Jimmy implored.

“Well, what?”

“Have you chosen your weapon?”

“I don’t think I can. I’m finished. I give up.”
“Not me. I’m a survivor. A million women could ravage my life and I’d no
doubt shed a million tears but I’d still make it. That’s the difference between me and
you.”

“I don’t understand all this. Why are you so angry? You should be helping me.
I have to find a new job. We have to stick together. Maybe I can be your manager.”

Jimmy sat down beside him and put his arm around him. “I’m sorry. I don’t
know what I’m saying.”

“You’ll recover.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is?”

“I wish I could go back and experience it all over. I wish I could sit beside her
like I did that first night at the party and get to know her all over again. But it’s too
late. It’s gone its course.”

“You’ll find someone else.”

“That’s not it. Don’t you understand?”

“What’s to understand?”

“I want to step backwards. I want to burn for her like I used to. I want to relive
it all. When I saw her the other day my feelings had transformed into a sort of dry
acceptance. I can’t stand it...this emptiness.”

“You confuse me. If your feeling have dried up, then you can’t really love her...”

“I’m sorry,” said Jimmy. “I’m not making any sense. I thought I had something
more important to say.”

The two figures leaned into each other and stared out into the maddening black
carnival of the night. Jimmy imagined that somewhere in the distance a gala
ceremony was taking place to honor the career of someone he had never heard of for
something that would never even influence him; the image of Iggy Pop, supine and
floating above a stage with a white sheet draped over him as in a coroner’s office,
appeared before him - was it something he had seen on a bootleg or magazine cover
in some Ann Arbor record store so long ago or something his mind had unconsciously
assembled all these year that had no source in reality at all? Jimmy looked up. A
group of teenagers had gathered about twenty yards away. They whispered amongst
themselves, as though trying to decide whether or not to mug the two men. A car
roared by. Jimmy thought he could hear The Rolling Stone’s She’s Like a Rainbow
playing on a radio somewhere off in the distance.

“They look like queers. They might try to rape us,” said one voice.

“Yeah. What the fuck are they doing out in this weather anyway?” said another.

“They might have guns.”

“Let’s fuck off,” said the first voice. The figures shuffled off into the darkness.

Jimmy turned to Markus and imagined that his friend’s face was that of
Madelaine. He wanted to pull her soft body up to his. The plumb red of her nipples
against the milky white of her breasts. The smooth contours of her neck, flanked by
cascades of deep brown hair, falling to the slender ivory mantle of her shoulders. The
rise of her stomach before the slow dip down to her hot quivering thighs. He
imagined making love to her - the foamy white swell of warmth and beauty rising
before him as he pushed his lips and tongue bluntly into hers.

He kissed Markus on the cheek but he didn’t even notice, the sound of his own
sobs standing out so intensely against the hissing of the rain. Jimmy knew he would
find love again. There would always be time for that. That’s one thing he could
always be sure of. Time. In the end that’s all there was. But it would never be the same as it was that first pale night he met her. Maybe it would be just as good with someone else - or maybe even better - although he somehow doubted it, but whatever the case it would never be the same. Jimmy watched the small bellows of mist coil from his mouth as he breathed into the cold night air. The East River, cradle of light and darkness and all things beget of light and darkness, had made its stand.

THE END

Thank you for your time! If you enjoyed this book please leave a good review and check out my other novels online! David M. Antonelli