

New Year's Eve, 1912

Gabe Oppenheim

914-420-7455

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For three lonely people in a town of 4.8 million, the most memorable fact about William Jay Gaynor, the 94th mayor of New York City, was not the assassination attempt he survived, which left him with a bullet lodged in his throat that would later kill him; or the fact that he downed a brandy on ice when he awoke from the shooting in the hospital (he had requested water but the doctor had offered alcohol); it wasn't his rejection of Tammany Hall politics; or his landmark decisions while serving on the state Supreme Court; or his tendency to manage affairs through the receipt of and response to letters, which were sent to him from the highest of citizens and the lowest, the latter group including a rat catcher who sent off a missive when jury duty occupied so much of his time that he no longer felt able to run his business.

Nor, should it be said, did these three souls remember Gaynor for his clipped eloquence, about which he once wrote, "I only aim to express what I have in my mind briefly and in the most expressive words. The most expressive words are short words."

No. For a bartender named Charlie Mullen, a tenement boy named Sollie Leiner, and a young lady named Samantha Norton, what most distinguished Gaynor in their minds – which did not wind up lasting as long as they would have liked, but preserved this recollection so long as they could any – what endured after all the ephemera of current

events had faded – the elections and the bribes and the frauds – was the unpredictable New Year's Eve of 1912.

The problem was the calendar. Dec. 31, 1911, was to fall out on a Sunday. Mayor Gaynor, being a good, clean man, and a former member of a Catholic lay order, wanted to keep the day as the holy period that it was. More to the point, he had staked his political reputation on an ability to sober the city up, and had earlier in the year challenged citizens to find a single saloon still vending liquor illegally on a Sunday afternoon in violation of the excise law, promising a reward of \$10. No money was ever dispensed, so far as I know, yet it was said that saloons continued to fill foamy glasses from the beer tap, and one politician's estimate had about 350 of the 400 drinking dens in the city still in contravention of the books.

Nevertheless.

In the weeks before the big day, the mayor refused to dole out all-night liquor licenses to the hotels for New Year's Eve. This meant that they could sell liquor until 1 a.m. as usual (although liquor had to be sold with a bite of food), but thereafter, no hooch could change ownership from barkeeper to patron. It also meant a big problem for Charlie Mullen, the manager of a small, ratty hotel on Broadway in the 90s, a narrow, four-story place that occupied a corner of a dilapidated building, with peeling wallpaper, carpets curling in at the edges and tobacco-stained counters. In fact, it was said about Mullen's hotel, which was not its name, that a sandwich had once lain untouched and rotting on a lobby table for so many weeks that, when a painter finally came to touch up the room and move the sandwich aside, a great cloud of debris – like a puff of smoke or the exhaust of a motor-coach – flew up in his face and blinded him.

Because of its decaying nature, the way it stank of unfulfilled dreams and overripe women, with its oily, ornate tablecloths that tried too hard, like an opulent society lady who, once aged, paints herself excessively in makeup so that she resembles a clown more than a dame, because customers would walk in and, while waiting for the concierge at the front desk or the bellhop, be reminded of Miss Havisham's place, or an old wedding cake preserved without success in an icebox, Mullen's hotel had few occupants and only a few more customers at its bar-restaurant. Indeed, in any given month, Mullen had difficulty paying the rent and had to take out loans just to keep operating the business. What prevented it from sinking entirely, as far back as Mullen could recall, was precisely the New Year's Eve the mayor had just gone and ruined, for each year, regardless of the magnitude of its debt, or the reviews in the papers, the hotel was able to make back all that it had lost, as inebriate New Year's revelers, already lost in the bacchant rites, and discriminating between institutions only insofar as they were open and serving, stumbled into the lobby at about midnight and ordered into the wee hours. By morning, when the rise in headaches coincided with that of the sun, their tabs to a person read more like the manifest of a ship than a diner's check.

It was not to be this year, Mullen kept repeating to himself, shaking his head and then actually mouthing the words, as if he couldn't believe them until they formed on his lips. It was all so sudden and surreal. How long had he been planning for this night? How many times had he hummed "Auld Lang Syne" in the previous weeks, while sweeping the corners of the lobby shop, or decorating the small, bowed tree he had erected by the revolving door, a door which he had had installed only the previous year, and with his own money? And now, what was to become of this hotel, owned, it was true, by another

man, but effectively his own, this small place where he ate and slept and worked, where he could lose himself in the exhaustion of labor, crowding out from his mind the loneliness inherent in being an immigrant with a family back home and no roots to tie one to his new land? This hotel *was* that tie, his only one, and without it, he'd lose the scrap of identity he had managed to scavenge – the only thing that gave him a face, that made him somewhat recognizable, even if only a little, so that there was at least a chance, small still, that when he died, and was laid out on a cold slab in the morgue, someone might take note of his features and exclaim yes, that man looks familiar, he is the one who ran a ratty hotel, the one with the rotten sandwich, on the corner of Broadway in the upper 90s. There was nothing Mullen could do. Neither a bullet nor Tammany Hall had stopped Gaynor, and it seemed unlikely that a hunched Irishman, with stringy hair and only a single waistcoat to his name, would stop him now. The hotel's only hope, he realized, the only thing that might yet save his job, and his source of meaning, such that it was, would be a loophole in the law – some little hitch he could find to circumvent the prohibition and keep the liquor flowing.

It was a long shot, he realized, but being that it was his only shot, he immediately set about the task of research. That afternoon he went down to City Hall and requested a copy of the relevant ordinances. And that night, a mug of draught clenched tightly in his fist, he began poring over the list of statutes, beginning with the very first.

Sollie Leiner was a believer in geography. Every morning, he left the tenement he shared with his frazzled parents and his sickly sister and walked the two blocks to the family

butcher shop to pull up the grates from the damp, sticky spot on the sidewalk, and unfurl the awning and slice the pastrami, which the hobbling woman would request conspiratorially, as if only they were privy to it – not the meat in general, but Sollie’s special pieces – the ones he supposedly set aside– “a half-pound of the first cut – the *prime* cut – not the scraps.”

Each woman believed she was getting his best, and in previous years, this had been an innocuous deal between the shop boy and the women. It was his way of paying back a favor – even if the meat was just the same meat, albeit dressed up –for the affection they lavished on him, which, while painful – his cheeks went red from the pinching – was always warmer, more welcoming and less strident than what passed for fondness in the claustrophobic one-and-a-half room box he occupied unwillingly.

Recently, however, the women had begun smiling differently at him, almost with an upwards curl, as though this 18-year-old man were a completely separate character, worthy of separate intentions, from the gawky, curly-haired boy who had milled behind the counter for so long. The upward inflection, which somehow showed more teeth *and* more lip, did not go unnoticed by Sollie, and in fact, repelled him with its flirtatiousness, though he would have been unable to characterize it.

But he knew it disgusted him. The shop had always been his place to expand, to let loose the largeness of his personality, which was confined in his home – *by* his home –by its physical smallness and the cramped, suffocating relationships to which it was conducive, like a small culture plate that grows harmful bacteria.

The shop had been another world. He was the little butcher behind the milky glass counter, the independent storekeeper, allowing, with his powerful pronouncements, hard-

luck customers to buy on credit, and, when the shop was empty, exploring himself, in the only way children can, with complete and unabated innocence. He'd press his fingertips into the display case and examine the spiral idiosyncrasies of his print – which was marvelous and enthralling, like a little map of Paris he had once seen on a torn pamphlet lying by the gutter. Yes, it was just like a maze or a city, only it was his pattern, uniquely so, etched into him with such delicacy that it could never be copied, or worse yet, erased. But the women's newfound attention destroyed all that. They were repressed women, and their smiles reflected it, full of fantasy and hopelessness and derision – as though he'd be naïve to take them seriously – and he knew none of them would ever act. And that intimation – not just that they'd never touch him, but that he'd never be so bold as to demand it – cramped Sollie in the one place he had felt at ease.

So Sollie Leiner thought, daydreaming, on a particularly dreary afternoon sitting behind the meat counter. He was sallow-looking that day, and his father had earlier yelled at him for not scooping up a brown ball of chopped liver that had spilled to the floor. Sollie had been aware of it, he just hadn't brought himself to do it yet. Now he stared at his nails, which he made a point of trimming regularly – hard and clear with a thin crescent at their tips – not so long as to be capable of scratching, he thought to himself, nodding approvingly, but not so short that he couldn't tap them on the glass without making that satisfying clinking sound. He took good care of himself, he thought. He was in control.

An old woman in a green sweater walked in.

“Hello, *my* Sollie,” she said, extending a short, stubby arm toward his face, like a lonely contagious person, looking to spread her disease, if only to have company. “What do you have today?”

“The same as always,” he said, though she wasn’t listening.

“Because the issue is, the Schwartzes are eating by us on Friday, and you know them, they’re used to better than I usually afford. They’re eating by us, so I have to give them what they’re used to.”

“Whatever you want, I have, I’m sure.”

“Is that *so*, Sollie?”

“Actually, I may have a package of turkey in the back that was smoked only yesterday. I’ll just go and...”

Sollie turned quickly for the small opening that led to the back of the shop. Almost heaving, he pushed down the low hallway to the back wall, the outside wall of brick, and sat himself down on a hard crate. He hunched over and tried to slow his breathing.

It was not that he disliked manhood.

It had been good to him so far, elongating and refining his features so they had a polished smoothness, like a pebble in the rain. He possessed brutal handsomeness in his smallest gestures, in the poised way he played his hands over the wax paper or slid his grip down the knives. He possessed a power now, and though he could not name it, he understood it, realized its uses, and longed with greater passion and melancholy each day to exercise it. While the women – the round, plodding, demeaning women – without ever realizing it, made a joke of his feelings. Made them into a crude little game, as though he were some trifling toy, available for the use of dejected, hopeless women, who wrapped themselves in so many shawls and stoles, so many thick woolen layers, it seemed as though they were trying to compensate for their great hollowness.

Sollie returned to the front.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Moskowitz,” he said, with an unfortunate smirk he could not suppress.

“I must be forgetting myself. The turkey we get *tomorrow*.”

He knew his urges were legitimate and was not about to let them become the grotesque jokes of ridiculous women. He was penned in from every side by the early days of December, 1911. In the quick way his big eyes darted from one person to another, from object to object, you could tell he was searching for an exit. He knew that if he *were* to somehow escape the crooked, inviting smiles, he’d have to do it himself. It would not be done for him.

Sollie Leiner, as we have said, was a believer in geography.

He believed in geography the way people believe in rivers. You could choose whether or not to enter them (except for the first one, in which you started), but once you had, you were under their sway, and very forcibly subject to their movements. And if you decided you didn’t want to be carried along – that is, if you were sentient and alive enough to notice your conveyance in the first place – you had to paddle hard, against the current, just to get out. Sollie Leiner knew this. He had watched sons follow fathers, daughters follow mothers. He had seen professions stay in families and families stay in professions. And maybe that was another way to say it – that family was destiny, for there was little difference between family and place in the Lower East Side, the whole area being one, large extended unit, and that was a major part of Sollie’s claustrophobia to begin with. But in any case, family or place, Sollie was stuck, being carried and buffeted by the circular, repetitive river of butchering and nursing – his feeble sister required nightly attention – and he was wise enough to comprehend this at 18 years of age and search for

an outlet, some tributary from the main stream that would bring him to a new place, some place where he could grow.

Samantha Norton was sure she had heard it all before.

The family would be supping at the Hotel Knickerbocker on New Year's Eve, and wouldn't it be absolutely exceptional, unprecedented, my dear, to be in a dining room with more than a 1,000 other people as the impresario J.B. Regan rang out, through the use of an electric push-button, nine different bells planted in various corners of the floor, at the strike of midnight.

Samantha looked up at her mother blankly, unmoved. She did not attempt to conceal her lack of enthusiasm, which showed itself in the pallor of her stare and in the drooping line of her lips, nor did she venture to explain herself. If her mother could not apprehend, immediately, just how routine the plan was, it was not worth her time or energy to argue. For she was fatigued, as usual. So she sat there, on the edge of her bed, until her mother, whose hair was done up in rollers, understood her daughter's complaint – or *thought* she understood – and withdrew into the hallway, trying to step on her tiptoes – as though the delicacy of her step were in some way related to her daughter's fragile mental state – but actually clonking hard on her heels, creaking the wooden floor in each stride. “That girl is so *sensitive*,” she'd say to Florence, her nurse, later that night. “It is because she has not met a man who has taken an interest in her.”

Samantha, as usual, did not move much from the side of the bed that afternoon. She didn't need to. All that was taking place, all that could take place, was in her mind, as she

recounted the events of previous Decembers, of New Year's Eve, 1911, 1910, 1909 and so on. They went as far back as her coming out party, which from her current perch of 23 years, seemed a very great distance. There had been the party they had gone to at the Hotel Astor – when she had danced with a perfectly proper boy named Oliver, who smelled of pomade and powder, impressing upon her the idea that he had spent more hours and effort in the preparation of appearance than she. There was the smaller affair they had once joined in to host with the Roosevelts, where everyone drank too much and the champagne flutes kept clanking in their terrible cacophony, until one slipped from a hand or a table and came crashing onto the ground in front of a stunned Archibald Potter. Samantha chuckled recalling this. And yes, there had been that starry night, when the sky looked like spilled oil, and they had occupied a big circular booth in the corner of Martin's, which did have a certain charm, even if the people didn't, because there were party favors, papier mache hats for men and mandolins for women.

Samantha grew even more tired remembering previous years, exhausted not by the exertion of recollection – because the past came to her quite easily and sharply, perhaps too so – but by the exertion of indolence. She was doing nothing now, and what made it worse, she was recalling the nothings she had done previously. Each year, starting with its first morning, in the small hours of Jan. 1, she had begun with nothing – a party of great temporary chatter, rising and falling like the suspension cables of a bridge – and ended with the very same nothing on the following Dec. 31. And it wasn't just on the special occasions. There were parties thrown all the time, usually without reason and only a bit more often with pretense (“Oh, Wilson just purchased the finest parcel in Massapequa – you *must* come see”). The various society ladies were newly determined

each go-round to best the others, to finally and forever bring into this world an event capable of transcending monotonous routine – a party so lavish and decadent that you really *wouldn't* have to return to daily life the next day – a party you could stay at, reveling, forever.

Samantha stood up, threw her arms behind her, in a kind of windmill stretch and walked in her nightgown from the bed to the sink. Her whole body felt dull and leaden, as though her previous lethargy had, after a period of rest, only grown heavier.

She bent over the red ceramic basin, noticing the pink rims under her eyes. Then she turned on the faucet, let it run for a few moments, until it felt so sharply cold it might as well have been hot, then splashed her face. It was like the prick of a needle. Momentarily exquisite, then gone.

“Florence!” she called out from the bathroom doorway, her face still dripping wet, letting small reflective beads trickle down the shoulders of her gown, and then onto her breasts.

“Oh, Florence!”

Her mother’s nurse came in, panting, 10 seconds later. “What is it, Sammy?” she asked, between breaths. “Is everything alright?”

Samantha eyed Florence from head to toe. She was truly a beautiful woman – not done up, of course, because she was working, but naturally pretty, with thick eyebrows like strokes of charcoal in an impressionist drawing. She had narrow hips, and a pencil waist, and either by design or through labor, two strands of her flaxen hair rested softly on her collarbone, the rest tied back in a ponytail.

Samantha never would have guessed, at this juncture, that her father would in a decade’s time leave her mother for this woman.

“Yes, yes, everything is *fine*. I was just wondering, that’s all.”

“About what, my sweets?”

“You have been given the evening off for New Year’s Eve?”

“I most certainly have. And I am looking forward to it more than ever this year, yes I am.”

Samantha’s eyes lit up like matches in a forest. Florence noticed, of course, and was reminded of a holiday card she had received from an old school friend: “May your future be as bright as Edison’s new electric light.”

“So,” Samantha urged, “what *are* you doing?”

She said it like someone who, having wandered a dark room for ages, had just now traced with her hands the outline of a door, and, finding it closed, determined to push it open.

Florence hesitated.

“What are the big plans?”

Florence sighed.

“Oh, nothing that grand,” she said, embarrassed not by the meanness or poorness of her plans, in comparison with the Nortons’ (for she was past that point with them), but by the immorality. “I and a few acquaintances are to meet up at a hotel uptown. Granted, it’s not a large hotel, or a particularly fine one, but, if you vow to do as I say instead of how I do, I’ll confide in you its charm.”

“Oh, please tell me— you know I would never do anything rash, or tell anyone.”

“It’s the hooch,” she said, in a muffled, surreptitious voice. “The fellow there keeps serving it all night long.”

Charlie Mullen couldn't drag himself to bed the night he got copies of New York's laws. When he finally did drag himself there, he could not fall asleep. And when he finally did fall asleep, it was a partial one, more a skimming of the surface than a real plunge into the depths of unconscious. It was the loophole he was searching for. It kept returning to him, in various forms, throughout the night, and each time he seized at it as though it was the real thing, what would actually enable him to keep the hotel, even though he knew it wasn't. The very fact that he seized at these ideas, like he was afraid they'd flutter away from him, indicated how unserious they were. Finally, at about 4 a.m., he nodded off. The next morning, Mullen peeled himself off the mattress eagerly. He felt sprightly, as though some major burden had been lifted from him and spirited away in the middle of the night.

Over the sink, he admired his form in the mirror. He dabbed a puffy brush into the shaving cream, which was the color of pancake batter, and pulled a razor blade from an old glass jar of preservatives that he had washed out and saved. He began scraping the stubble from his neck. That's when it hit him – not the idea for the loophole, no, not quite – but the fact that, some place in his dreams the night before, such an idea *had* come to him and was now in his possession. There was no pressure, then, he thought to himself, smiling even as he brought the glinting blade swiftly upon the hairs of his upper lip. The idea would not flutter away, now that it had planted itself into the deep recesses of his mind. He may not get at it immediately, or even in the next couple of days. But sure as the sun would rise it would come to him, and so long as it did before Dec. 31, which was in a little more than a week, he'd be fine.

Mullen spent the rest of the day lounging in a wicker chair, which he had removed from the lobby and placed on the sidewalk. He chatted up passersby and even made sure to invite them to his New Year's gala.

Still, as the days passed, slowly at first, and then very quickly, he grew nervous. Perhaps the idea won't come to me until after New Year's, he said to himself. Thoughts, after all, are oblivious to the artificial separations of the calendar. How should my brain know it's the 31st? Or what if it never comes at all, burying itself deeper and deeper each year until it becomes one of those painful holes, one of those names or faces you can't recall, the kind that always burrows itself deeper than your mind can reach, eternally elusive and yet ever so knowable?

These questions depressed Mullen. He was very far behind on the previous month's hotel rent – for he had leased the building from its true owner – and he kept thinking of his son, Brian, whom he hadn't seen for 10 years. He'd be all grown up by now, Mullen thought. He'd be big enough to have his own job, bring home his own wage. To support other people. Probably has a beautiful wife. A loud, crying baby.

Then, sitting outside on the sidewalk one morning, smoking and letting the wind scorch his cheeks, a cone of ash fell from the paper tip of his rolled cigarette, into a crack in the ground, and Mullen got an idea. It wasn't the idea for the loophole – no, not quite – but it was a notion that maybe, if he were to do something active, he could coax the brilliance out of himself, facilitate its release, in the same way his customers, on previous New Year's nights, had lubricated themselves with alcohol in order to ease out into the open the secret feelings they were otherwise unable to express, like stopped-up plumbing in need of a chemical flush.

He decided to have flyers and placards printed out with the little money he still had – there was a place on 23rd that could turn such projects around in a single day – to advertise the hotel’s all-night festivities, the ones he was determined to save. Since he had no employees – and was hoping anyway that the bitter-fresh air might revive him, in all its harsh acridness – he decided to walk around the city himself to post the papers on cinderblock walls and fences. And so he did, crossing from one street to another, up and down the infinite avenues, stopping only to grab a sandwich from some shop in the 60s and to get a coffee on Lexington when his heavy eyes started closing at 4 p.m., as the darkness set in. That night, when he returned to his small room and unbuttoned his vest, he was overcome with a refreshingly thorough exhaustion, different from his usual partial weariness that allowed him, by dint of his great anxiety, to stay up for a few hours each night worrying and not fall asleep until 3 a.m., which ensured in turn he’d be tired yet again the following day. On this night, however, he quickly went silent, except for long, heaving breaths, like a massive ship that, having just crossed the choppy Atlantic, comes to dock at the end of its journey in the sleepy water of the Hudson River.

The next morning when he awoke, a single word, representative of the entire scheme he had so long tried to extract from his brain, like a miner deep in a vein of minerals, hacking away, rested on the end of his tongue. It sat there for awhile, unuttered – because even though it was sure to beat the letter of the law, even though it was a surpassingly clever exploitation of a glaringly obvious loophole, it also went against every principle he had set for himself in running the ratty hotel – to say nothing of its impracticality.

Reservations.

Sollie Leiner sat in the back, in the same wooden pew he had defaced with his nails only a few months earlier, when he had scratched a small “x,” no larger than the size of a quarter, into the lip of the bench he now covered with his thighs.

He squirmed, as though trying to wriggle out of his seat. It was one thing to be stuck in synagogue for services, he thought. But this, this was unnecessary and gratuitous, third night of Chanukah or not. Why have the mayor speak at all? Surely, it’s a political gesture, but couldn’t they honor him, and reward his tolerance, another way? Preferably one that didn’t require the community’s attendance at a long and involved speech? Was he the only one who felt trapped in this large and majestic hall, with its arched brick entranceway and vaulted ceilings, which managed to capture the essence of each cantorial sound and directly refract it, seemingly by way of the great shafts of lights that fell down on the congregation, into each worshipper’s ear?

There *was* something disconcerting about it, about being in such an elevated and lofty building, while outside, you were still in the ghetto, still among the wooden-wheeled pushcarts, on Rivington Street, not far from the tailor or even from your own little hovel. Sollie looked around. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying it. Shlomo Katz kept bobbing his head up and down, his eyes closed, as though deep in meditative prayer, like some fish that must come up for air periodically no less than it must plunge deep into the water to survive in the first place. Rose Stern, the sympathetic widow, kept pushing a handkerchief toward her face without ever actually using it, as though her hand were trapped in some purgatorial middle ground, halfway between her pocket and her eyes.

And Moses Cramer, the pickle merchant, continually elbowed the man next to him – was that Lipschitz, the baker? – each time he found a point the least bit noteworthy, as though, bereft of a writing implement, he were using his arm to underline the important sections of the mayor’s speech.

There must’ve been at least 2,000 people waiting outside the synagogue, just to see the mayor enter. People in the apartments across the street had removed their Chanukah candles from the windowsill so that they could get a look. And then he had come in, and knowing the customs and laws better than his assistants, and the journalists on his trail, the other non-Jews in the room, had not removed his hat. He had demanded to see a *siddur* during the recitation of Psalm 30 – “A song for the dedication of the house, by David” – and had won a raucous applause for chastising the ushers, who had attempted to hush the crowd.

“Wherever the Jew goes, he is always loyal to the government,” Mayor Gaynor had said in beginning his speech. “If you are estranged from a country, it is only because you are oppressed. If you leave Russia, it is not because you are disloyal, but because you are badly treated.”

Even Sollie had been forced to beam at these comments, which hadn’t at all sounded calculated or pandering, but instead like heartfelt empathy and thought-out camaraderie. He had swelled with pride, like a dense, knotted rope of dough that, having sopped in the rays of sun or the heat of the oven, puffs into the golden-brown loaf of challah.

But the mayor had continued speaking.

“Originally, your ancestors were all farmers. They had flocks and sowed and reaped. The reason you have not continued to have farms is because for many centuries you couldn’t

own land and were driven off the farms. But I hope that in this great free country you'll all begin to teach your children to go back to the farms and be farmers."

This was the moment when Sollie's smile twisted into a grimace. As it was, he felt confined in the small enclave on the Lower East Side, but at least there he could take solace in the urbanity he knew existed – through blind faith, for he had never seen it – outside the invisible gates of Hester Street and Essex and Grand. His very proximity to the sophisticated people assuaged him, even if he had never taken advantage of it. They were there, at least, those people of the dinner clubs, and being so close, he always, in his mind, had the possibility of going to see them, of closing the butcher shop early, or neglecting to nurse his sister, and sneaking out the grates of the fire escape – which had been retrofitted on his building per the First Tenement House Act – to walk uptown to Times Square and seat himself imperiously at one of the white tables. The city, though never explained to him, had sunk into his bones; and even if his fellows wanted to farm still – and from the hooping, it sounded they did – they had to realize they were no longer suited to it, that they had become a people of the boisterous bustle. They had to realize this, Sollie thought, dismayed at the way Markowsky stood in his pew, bringing his hands together in a great whooshing clap. Why, this very gathering here, with its noisy, overlapping chants and side-conversations, with its irrepressibly chaotic public dialogue – between neighbors and friends and rivals and the mayor – was the very proof. Jews needed density, its only drawback being, Sollie forced himself to acknowledge, the convenience it lent their enemies, when it came time to draw them all together for the slaughter.

Of course, to the degree they needed to be bunched, at the center of a circle, Sollie still wanted to be distant from them, on the circumference, in a more expansive place. This way he could draw a radius, this way he could measure how far he had traveled from the group. But farming! That would be worst of all.

“Your pushcart men make very little money and could do much better on a little farm on Long Island or upstate,” continued the mayor. “It was while you were on farms that you produced your wonderful scriptures and had your government and your freedom.”

Sollie felt he had been slapped in the face. His cheeks were red. He wanted to spit out the taste of salty air in his mouth, the briny residue, stimulated by the mayor’s suggestion that they resettle themselves in the barren tidal marshes of a desolate place. George! He meant well, surely, but what a terrible, isolating arrangement – like being exiled by the Czar to Siberia. All cold and nasty, with those high weeds and insurmountable dunes. Free of throbbing vitality, cold and lifeless, like a man without a pulse. A stiff corpse. Years later, the synagogue, still in its same spot at the tip of Manhattan, would employ a world-renowned cantor and Yiddish theater actor named Moishe Oysher. He’d tell a reporter one day, “A great cantor mixes joy and sorrow in his voice until you can’t tell which you feel. My grandfather was a great cantor, and when he would laugh, he would cry.”

Now, Mayor Gaynor gave a curt little peroration and stepped down from the rostrum. A professor made a few remarks, followed by a city parks commissioner and Congressman Goldfogle. Sollie didn’t move but remained in the back, dreaming, more determined than ever to breath in the noxious air of his city before it was too late.

Samantha Norton and her family lounged, languidly, on the breezy porch overlooking the water. They almost never went to their Long Island summer house – 21 acres on the shore in Great Neck – in the brutal cold of December, when the water whipped up the wind, like an agitator egging on his impulsive friends – but Florence had urged Mr. Norton, the mining magnate, to do something about his girl’s health, her torpid listlessness worsening everyday, and it being an unseasonably warm week – mid-60s three days running – Mr. Norton could think of nothing better than to take her here, to the calm of the country, where the air might revitalize her before the big night of New Year’s Eve.

A faint knock came from the other side of the house.

“That must be Gregory,” Mr. Norton said, with his subtly boastful tone. It was a matter of pride for her father, Samantha knew, that each time they came out to the Island, even on a trip as sudden and unexpected as this one, the foreman of the local rail station – Gregory, as everyone called him, though uncertainty remained as to whether it was a given or surname – paid him a visit. Usually, they spent a few hours talking – ostensibly about current events – but both men understood the point of the visit, the silent deal being transacted each meeting: Gregory was honoring Mr. Norton as a great gentleman, one deserving of a visit from the local workers upon his every return to the town, and in return, Gregory was receiving from Mr. Norton the honor of being allowed to discuss the current trends with such a gentleman – and of finding out, in the first place, just what those trends were – the news not always traveling as far or as fast as the locals would like.

There were a few occasions on which Mr. Norton, upon returning for the summer, longed to hear Gregory's account of what had transpired while he was gone. Foremost among these was the summer after the 1905 tragedy. Louis Fitzgerald Jr., the only son of General Fitzgerald, had been crushed to death the previous November by an eastbound train while crossing the tracks at the Great Neck station. Of course, it was a sensitive issue to bring up with the man responsible for the station, so Mr. Norton did his best, on the ride out to the estate, to phrase his request just so. When he got there, though, and finally met with Gregory, all he could bring himself to say, flushed with embarrassment and eagerness, his heart jumping in his breast, was: "Tell me what happened to the Fitzgerald boy."

"Welcome, yet again," Gregory now said, addressing the family as he stepped out onto the veranda. "To what do we owe this unanticipated visit? The weather, I am sure, but then, you must have missed the company, as well."

Samantha smiled. Gregory had the most genial, spirited disposition, despite his nearing dotage, his dissolved family, his lonely job in a place empty most of the year. He was not overly eager, in the dishonest way of so many; he was just himself, maintaining an equilibrium that Samantha respected utmost of all the traits she had encountered in men since becoming aware of them several years earlier. He could have been handsome once, she thought, noticing the way his uncombed brownish hair even now fell naturally into a keen side-part, despite all his boyish attempts to let it hang, and the way his nose cast a small shadow onto his cheek, like the work of an artist who, retracing the lines of the drawing, moves them slightly to one direction, so that two parallel lines now exist that

somehow, instead of competing for your attention and confusing the drawing, focus your eyes and sharpen what they see.

Samantha suddenly became conscious of her own appearance. The sun was beginning to set, and she wanted to imagine herself as the beneficiary of the bronze rays, as being made subtly more beautiful by the reflective sheen they would lend her strawberry blond hair, or the freckles they would enhance and draw out on her delicate face. It was in moments like these, when the overwhelming theater of nature made her forget her surroundings, closing them off to her as the darkened lights do on Broadway, that she abruptly believed again she was a child, whose goal it was to preen and prettify, preparing herself ultimately for a Prince Charming, who'd come and whisk her somewhere magical, though neither the girl nor adult version of Samantha had ever identified on the map where such a place might be.

“What are your plans for this New Year’s Eve, may I ask?”

Gregory had splayed himself awkwardly over the end of a chaise longue.

“Oh, nothing too extraordinary,” Mr. Norton replied. “We will be at the Hotel Knickerbocker.”

“In Times Square?”

“Precisely. Now, if you ask me, *that* is the extraordinary matter.”

“Your eating in Times Square? That does not strike me as at all unusual.”

“No, no, Gregory. Not our dining there, but the fact of the masses swarming into the small spaces between the buildings and now even in the buildings, what with all the new hotels built there in the last half-decade or so.”

“Which hotels, Sir?”

“First of all, you know, Gregory, that the Knickerbocker took the place of the old St. Cloud Hotel – once a top-rate place. And then the Astor expanded and Rector’s moved from its three-story building to one with 14 stories.”

“That is quite an expansion.”

“Why, that is not even the half of it. It is not just the scale that has changed, my friend – though that would have been sufficiently drastic. But it is the opulence. At a certain point you wonder what good it does.”

“Is the new Rector’s so much nicer than the one it replaced?”

“It is the ceiling, Gregory. The ceiling.”

“In the lobby, Sir?”

“No, no – in the dining hall.”

“It was painted? Who, may I ask, were the artists?”

“No, not painted – *gilded*. With \$14,000-worth of gold leaf.”

“That *is* extraordinary. Have you seen it yet?”

“I have not. But I plan on poking my head in before we enter the Knickerbocker, just to have a look. It does sound like one of those things you must see, even if it is not to my taste.”

The sun died behind the tall, pointy trees on the distant edges of the Sound. It was chilly. Samantha was snapped out of her reverie, feeling dry. She had a horrible sensation in her hands, which were numb and cracking. She was uncomfortable in them, in her own skin, as though if she touched anything – even two fingers together – it would feel the way nails on a blackboard sound. A touch would become maddeningly, frighteningly, screechy.

She looked about her with the grogginess of a person woken too soon, before her dream has had sufficient time to wind down, to metamorphose gradually into reality. She remembered Gregory. Shadows now wrapped his face, and she could discern only the tight bulge of his shoulder in a jacket. Perhaps the darkness deceived her, but he looked stronger to her eyes than she had ever realized – broader, and more densely muscled. He sat there, checking the hour on a pocket watch, and cut such a figure, poised and assured, that Samantha was instantaneously vexed.

He really did possess all that was needed to succeed in this world, she decided. It was clear from the way he indulged her father, asking him questions to which he already knew the answers, that he had intelligence – untapped like a spring hidden in the ground. And his looks she had known about from that time it all unfolded before her, when she was about 16 or so, and she found herself alone upstairs in July, and the sound of his steps ascending the staircase had sent little beads of sweat running down her back, pooling in the arch above her hips.

Why, then, had he spent all his life in this small town? Why had he never left, or at least attempted to? Was it complacency that bade him remain, at the whim of seasonal guests who scurried elsewhere once the climate had become the least bit intemperate? Or had it been sheer misfortune – had Gregory planned to leave and then been stymied, trapped, perhaps, by familial entanglements before he could even understand them?

The thought made Samantha shudder. From the kitchen, through a screen door, Florence noticed this. It was more movement than she had seen Samantha make in weeks, even if it was somewhat convulsive.

Perhaps, Florence thought, the time here has done her good.

Perhaps, there has been some stimulus.

Not long after Mullen first arrived in America, he signed up for a small art class given in downtown loft by a generous dowager named Mrs. Gary. She taught the course because she had little to occupy her time now that her husband was dead. Actually, she had never had much to occupy her time, but only now did the vacuum strike her as a defect. Perhaps decades earlier, even as late as her 30s, she had known herself well and understood that she was a woman of great talent and equal ambition. But she had repressed such feelings for so many years, all throughout her marriage, that they had become secret even to her, not revealing themselves again until months after her husband's cremation, when a certain measure of self-awareness had returned. By that point, however, she had become so terribly burdened with the idea of beginning an art career at so late an age that she had been forced to convince herself, just to put off the anxiety, that her time had passed, that it was too late to start, and the best contribution she could now make was teaching.

As for Mullen, he had taken Mrs. Gary's course because of his own secret – the one he had concealed from his numerous relatives upon embarking from the town of Killarney. It was true he was going to America to make a better life for all of them, to work hard in any job that would take him, to build up a small bit of savings on which his kin could eventually live – and he wound up keeping this promise without exception, working long and hard at the hotel not just for himself but with all the others in mind. Yet he had always had, even as he scraped for money, a loftier goal in mind, one that he had held from the age of six, when he had first come across a man in the town who could replicate

his likeness on a thick sheet of paper. It wasn't just that he wanted to be an artist, although that was part of it; it was that he wanted to be famous, someone who could both replicate others' faces on the page and have his own face be immediately recognized by others. It was that he wanted to be someone whom people consulted – not for advice of a practical nature but for opinions – what a glorious word! – on the topics of the day, all the subjects that consumed people, the ones they discussed with each other as a secret password, to signal that they were part of the club, that they had passed the fraternity's entry exam.

So with these outsized and thoroughly impossible dreams clouding his judgment, Mullen had signed up for the art class after securing a position at the hotel. He would never have done it in the reverse order – pursuing his artistry before, or at the expense of, a stable job – because despite his more sensitive inclinations, which you would've never intuited if you had seen him, he was still, at heart, a working man, from the stock of working men, and it would've been a betrayal of all he had been taught to subordinate labor to imagination, even if only for a few months. Perhaps this is what separated him from the true artists, although there were other impediments.

Mullen constantly felt the need to ask Mrs. Gary why the prints she hung on the wall were considered masterpieces. He was no dolt, of course, and because he was able to differentiate the style of Leonardo, for example, he was able to identify which paintings belonged to that artist and which, therefore, were to be venerated. But as to why Leonardo, or any other artist, had earned such a coveted place in the first, Mullen found himself perpetually flummoxed. It was nice what they did, yes. He could see the beauty in the compositions, without a doubt, and so too the splendid contrasts of light, the way it

played on their faces, or their striated muscles. But then, there were other pictures, some vended by ordinary men on the various street corners of Manhattan, that also seemed, in their way, beautiful – and these, Mullen knew, were not just *not* considered masterpieces but were dismissed as *rubbish*. So what gave? What made these works – many of them literal depictions of events anyone could portray, so long as he had read the Bible – so exceptionally worthy of attention and praise? Why, if I had made the effort, I could have crafted the faces just that way, Mullen once whined, like a petulant schoolboy, to Mrs. Gary. I could have made a face scream like Munch, he said. I could have painted in points, or caught the dimples of light on a pond of water lilies. And Mrs. Gary – ever a patient a woman but now, suddenly, flustered, more with herself for an inability to provide a definitive answer than with the simple and earnest questioner – turned to Mullen, with a graceful and almost mischievous sideward glance, and, in a cathartic sigh of exasperation, said, “It is because they did – they decided to do it, I mean – and you – you did not.”

That was the trick to obvious ideas, Mullen decided now, recollecting the entire episode of the painting class – it wasn’t so much that they required a great deal of mental calculation to find out; it was that they required a person to have in mind that he was searching for them in the first place.

The afternoon before New Year’s Eve. Mullen was sitting in a lounge chair in the lobby, dozing off with a big grin on his face. He had stayed up all the previous night setting up the place for celebration, which involved hauling the liquor up from the dank cellar, where more than a few times he had seen the squiggly line of a rat’s tale slip under brick walls, and marking out reservations on his white ledger, for each of which reservations he

had set aside four bottles of cheap wine and six bottles of beer. That was his brilliant plan: the law proscribed selling liquor past 1 a.m. But if he could sell the patrons their drinks beforehand – as part of package deal with their reservations – then they could choose, if they were so inclined, to drink the bottles past 1 a.m. in the hotel. At that point, the beverages would be theirs, and thus, so would the choice of venue for their consumption. Nothing would pass from Mullen’s possession to the customers’. Everyone would be clean.

Of course, it was easier said than done. For, in order to inform the populace of this sudden change – that now, the hotel would require reservations (in past years advance notice had meant setting down one crooked leg before the other) – Mullen had to order a new, revised set of flyers. The change had also meant he had had to cross town once more and post the flyers to any open space he could find. This he did and, finding fewer open spaces than he would have liked – fewer, in fact, than were necessary to inform a sufficient number of people, sufficient, it should be said, to save the hotel and, by extension, his livelihood (and by further extension, his life), and finding also that some other hoteliers had conceived an idea similar to his – Mullen took to ripping off other advertisements and filling the void – odd that there should be such a large space between all the cluttered papers, he’d mutter aloud, in order to be less conspicuous (which made him inevitably more so) – with his own.

Florence, Mrs. Norton’s nurse, did not fail to take notice of this abrupt change. For a full year, now, she had been looking forward to the events of New Year’s Eve, and while, deep within her, she highly doubted that they could recur, she nevertheless had hoped and prayed and pretended it was the likeliest thing in the world. Yes, why, absolutely – it

must happen once more, she'd tell her reflection in the mirror, while combing out the knots in her hair after a long day of service, or while trying on the one iridescent garment she owned – a dress of aqua-blue silk she had been consigned by her employer – in a dreamy sort of vision. Each time, standing before the long, rectangular pane of glass, she'd push out the wrinkles with her hands, pressing down on the sides of the dress, like a potter smoothening clay, as though she were shaping herself, trying to make it so that her body was an object, a vessel, some piece separate from her hands, which, therefore, could reasonably be imagined as belonging to someone else.

She'd be lost by the end of this gesture, dizzied and conveyed by the memory of a man named Eliot whose sharp jaw had pressed against her in the stairway to the cellar, who had led her there by hand, having whisked her from the slovenly others, the filthy older men who had fallen over themselves in the lobby, drooled onto their checkered coats, and cussed, all crushed hope and malignant spirit. She had been wearing the same sea-foam fabric that night – had she thought twice, she would have realized what small difference color made in a dark cellar – and he had said very little to her – only that she smelled a certain way, and reminded him of a painting he had once seen – and they had kissed only for a few minutes, and she had been forced to convince herself afterward that the sooty marks now bespotting her dress were not from the grime of a laborer's hands (why she needed to was a mystery even to her, for as far as she was aware, her job and its rank meant little to her, and so too others') – and ever since, in the intervening year, she had taken to crying when the thought momentarily snuck up her, caught her unawares, that a real man of society, a real Eliot, would have never dined at a place like Mullen's in the

first, and if, by some miracle, had wound up there once, would be sure never to make the mistake again.

By New Year's Eve, Florence had made her reservation. But it was just this fantasy – that some man, who had always secretly watched her, had noticed the efforts she put even into fluffing pillows and seen her through her lowest points, when she felt as though she could never so much as lift a starched linen again, would come back and undertake her rescue – that had made her hesitate when Samantha pushed and pushed for details of her plans. It was a reasonable wariness; fantasy remains somehow viable in the unspoken domain of the imagination; only when we try to put it to words does it sound ridiculous. But eventually, she gave in and informed Samantha that the place was in the 90s, on Broadway, and run by the good-natured Irishman. Then she began to feel sick.

At first, she figured, the nausea was merely figurative. She had become queasy at the idea of being saved, or, perhaps more accurately, queasy at the underside of such hope – what might happen, that is, if no one came at all, she having placed all her faith in a single outcome. It is like when we count on a vacation to an airy place to revitalize us. It might happen. And yet, if it does not, and we have pinned all our hopes for rejuvenation on it alone, then we are lost. No other trip or restorative will do the trick. We have exhausted optimism on a single possibility.

But as the day of New Year's Eve progressed, as Florence felt the waves of heat rise in her temples, and the stickiness form in the cups of her palms, and the cold chill climb her spine, as though ice were coursing through her, pumped from the nervous system outward, she began to understand what was wrong. Hers was not a figurative sickness. It was not the expression of an ineffable belief that had turned her; it wasn't the

disappointment that she foresaw; or even the embarrassment of understanding the expectations she had kept secret from herself. It was, instead, a mild form of influenza – one that would, perhaps to her own benefit, prevent her from going out at all.

Samantha Norton knew none of this. She had spent the day on the edge of her bed, her fingers gripping the side of the mattress, rocking back and forth. She hadn't noticed Florence leave the apartment; hadn't noticed her parents walking through the hallways, asking each other various questions about who would and wouldn't be attending the dinner that night, which weren't really the type questions to which they wanted answers but were uttered to take up time, as place setters, in order to fill the wait before the event. She just sat there, imagining. Despite all the years she had lived in the city, the Upper West Side was still a mystery to her. She wondered what it was like on a busy night, when bodies inadvertently bumped into each other, when paths unintentionally crossed, when the streets were all like a pond, a small pond, in which different schools of fish overlapped, whishing this way and that, gliding up against other reflective bodies, the electric silvers and blues and yellows, with those faint glimmers of the metallic, as though they were coated in aluminum or copper or bronze. Samantha wondered what unexpected encounters developed from these intersections, what turns of fate awaited those who, not knowing quite what they wanted, but knowing the necessity of change, had set themselves on a crash course. She kept seeing one big group of fish fly into another, so that all the blue space of water was filled, and two colors merged into one – some new shade neither she nor anyone else had ever seen before.

It was resolved that she'd sneak out of dinner. She had known that from the moment Florence had revealed her plans. As to how, she was now nervously calculating. She would say that she had come down suddenly sick – some ailment of the stomach, or a kind of grippe – and she'd excuse herself to the restroom, which she'd casually avoid in turning instead toward the exit. From there, however, her relative inexperience with the city – with the harsh smoke seeping from its grates, like Indian signals that puff upward, from a bonfire beneath a blanket, and with the rude independence of each pedestrian, determined, as though life were at stake, to reach his location – she would not know how to proceed. She had a vague sense – from whom or where she did not know – that an exit existed from the Hotel Knickerbocker into the 42nd Street Subway station below it. If that were the case, she could perhaps ride the train up to Broadway. She could alternatively hire a coach to bring her there, but that solution brought with it its own problems. She did not know how much drivers were paid for such trips, nor did she know whether, dressed as she'd be, she wouldn't in some way draw untoward attention from the driver, or beg unnecessary questions from him, about why such an elegant girl, from the doors of such an elegant hotel, would choose to ride uptown to a place rather distant in all senses of the term. Still, these details didn't deter her. They were not the key to an enterprise like this, she decided, putting off until later their final resolution (she thought perhaps she may, even more recklessly, decide them in the last moment, that very night). No – the key to tricky ideas was not figuring them out – it was knowing, from the start, that you were searching for them at all.

Sollie Leiner had the sort of creamy and slick residue on the ends of his fingers that could be best described by comparison to the liquid it most nearly resembles: peanut oil. It was not that, of course, but instead the accumulated greases and fats, congealed and solidified, from a full day at work in a butcher shop – and one that served recent immigrants, who had, before coming over, made a regular diet of *all* the various parts of the animal, including those which better-off people make a practice of discarding. The day was over. He had lowered the grates, and walked the few blocks home, and climbed the narrow, dimly lit staircase, in whose shadows, he was sure, small piles of hair had gathered, like little mounds of sawdust. He had opened the front door, making sure to lift it as he pushed, so the weight of the dead wood wouldn't hang on the dry hinges, forcing out a lone and awful creaking sound, but such a sound had sounded anyway, sending his mother into another of her many fits, a long tirade in a non-English language that, after a period time, had begun to resemble, to Sollie's ear, the trilling of a high-pitched animal. He had, in this way, managed to drown her out, to accustom himself to the constant, shrill cries, in the same way we lose ourselves in the loud squawks from the caged specimens in the zoo.

Sollie had sighed. He had sat himself in the corner, near his prone, blanketed sister, who was so extensively swaddled in the white cloth, so tightly wrapped, cocooned and protected – she was not allergic to the very air, Sollie had wanted to shout – that she looked like a large pastry – one of the swirly ones, like rugelach. He had placed his large yet gentle hand on her, genuinely sympathetic, sad, even despairing, and his mother had shouted, “Lift that off her! She is liable to catch cold from you, in her weakened state.” And Sollie had done as he was told, had looked up to his father earnestly, expectantly,

hoping for some small bit of commiseration, even a look, but had received nothing, just paleness, frightening whiteness, like a blank page before the eyes of a writer, and had sighed again. He had then excused himself to the hallway, had claimed he needed a breath of air, of which even his mother had had to concede there was very little in the one-and-a-half room apartment, and that was where he now found himself, wondering whether he should follow through on the idea that had just entered his head, though it seemed to him, quite realistically, that it had been there the whole time, since he had begun his days in the butcher's shop, only now he realized he was looking for it.

“It really was a terrible shame,” Mr. Norton told the bespectacled man to his right, an older gentleman – the statesman of the group – about the theft of his wife’s \$10,000 gem necklace the previous summer.

“We were, at the start, quite sure it had been an inside job,” he continued.

“Of course! Who else would have had such easy access, or known even where the jewels were kept?”

Billington removed his glasses and clasped his fingers around the bridge of his nose, as though enervated by the accuracy of his guessing. Life must be easy for him, mused Samantha, seated only a few seats away – always to think he was right like that – it must make for easygoing – never having to doubt oneself or think you could have done things differently, better, in fact, than you did.

“But the detectives quickly disproved the theory. We have always trusted our Island staff anyway, but there was a moment there, I’m ashamed to say, when I was caught up in the

fever of my wife's friends. They kept insisting, despite all evidence to the contrary – all the fingerprinting and searches, all the questioning – that one of the Negroes must have done it.”

“Shameful,” Billington said.

“I almost felt it served them right, in the end, when they found the real thieves up in Connecticut.”

“Yes, yes – I recall reading about that. They were amateurs, surprisingly.”

“Far from it. Professionals, in fact – the ones responsible for a host of other major heists, including the Richards diamond. You recall it, yes? We should have known there was a connection. Unlikely that ordinary people would know the very bedroom cabinet where Mrs. Norton kept it. They had such an economy of movement, the thieves. They entered through the window nearest the dresser.”

“Very clever.”

Samantha bit into a piece of pineapple chicken on her fork. Her mind was elsewhere, and her teeth sunk right through the bird's flesh, onto the hard metal tines. The cold point and tinny taste sent a severe pain up through her gums, as though they were particularly sensitive, as though she were eating iced cream. She kept her head down, staring into her plate, trying to avoid being drawn into the conversation.

“In the end, I think I got more enjoyment from seeing Mrs. Norton's face, the look of shock upon it, when she found out her precious stones had been taken, than I have from all our previous summers out there.”

Samantha could not help herself now. The stifling pettiness of the conversation – the small revenges her father took against her mother and vice-versa – was pressing in on

her, and she needed, urgently, to extend her perspective beyond the squabbles of the small, idle clan. She looked around the ballroom. There were maybe 2,000 people in the five dining rooms. She did not see the famed tenor Caruso, but perhaps he wasn't there. She had overheard a snippet of a conversation on walking in, some rumor about him being sick.

The tables and walls were ornamented with roses and chrysanthemums and palms. The lights on the ceiling were bright and disorienting, like a million little camera flashes. So too were the bubbles in the champagne flutes, which popped and reformed with a dizzying, unceasing effervescence. Somehow, this prompted Samantha to imagine the men, in their ridiculous coattails, excusing themselves from the tables to assume the position of portraitist under black fabric hoods. They focused in just so and squeezed the pumps in their hands, and the bulbs went blinding white for a moment, sending powder into the light air, and the men removed themselves from the hoods, examined the poses they had just captured, and grinned wickedly, too satisfied, as usual, with the work they had conducted.

She bit down on another piece of chicken, lowering her incisors gently so as not to pierce through. It worked, but only too well – her teeth, far from slicing the food, avoided it altogether and cut into her lower lip, which immediately swelled. She was relieved in a way to be able to focus on something – anything. She now took a perverse pleasure in the sensation of blood filling her lip as it might the body of a feeding mosquito. She extended her tongue over the bump. It was plump, cushy, like a pillow stuffed with buckwheat. “Excuse me,” she said softly, backing her chair out from the table. “I need to attend to something. I will be right back.”

She walked slowly at first, and then picked up her pace as she neared the door. Once in the hallway, she headed straight for the restroom, both to fool others and calm herself. There she splashed water on face and ran her hands through her ripe, shimmering hair. Some of the water brushed out onto her red gown, which, cut as it was in a small v and yet covering nearly everything, was suggestive for what it didn't show. The water trickled down to her thighs.

She left via the hotel's underground exit, which led directly to the Subway tracks. But she did not take the Subway. A sudden change of heart – a burning inside her for the open air and loud commotion of the streets, and a half-awareness of the dynamite explosion, during the construction of the tunnel, that had killed so many – spurred her to run up the stairs, onto the damp sidewalk and hail a hansom cab. “Broadway and 90th,” she told the driver in a great huff, as though she were gasping for air, so thoroughly and purely was she sucking up the sky around her, like a child puckering his lips around a straw, his cheeks caved in.

Sollie Leiner had scraped his leg. At a breakneck speed he had dashed from the hallway outside his apartment, pressed onto the stairs and hurled himself down. In the ensuing rush, in which he was carried more by his momentum than the force of his strides, he had tumbled over himself, on a landing where the stairs changed direction at a right angle. Somehow, flailing his arms out, he had managed to catch the pole of a banister – a wooden piece, worn smooth and shiny from the many hands slid over it – and his body had swung like a tethered ball and crashed into the balustrades. He was lucky it was just a scrape.

Out on the street, he looked up at the buildings around him and noticed for the first time the raked angles they formed against the sky. He noticed the odd shapes they made against the black, and the way, set against each other, they seemed to resemble monsters – like giant scarecrows, all lines and points. The air was rather mild – in keeping with the trend of the entire year, the one on whose furthest boundary Sollie now stood, eager to cross over. It had been the last of the dry years, and for two weeks in early July, the heat had been so oppressive as to kill 1,000 in the swarming city. For the past month, the temperature had not dropped below 40 degrees, and recently, there had been a low pressure in the air, which seemed to hang like a solid substance, sluggish and unmoving, above all the land in the northeast, like a visitor who, taking the host's reception for granted, lingers in the house long beyond his welcome. There had come with it a turbid fog.

Sollie once more broke into a run, passing a family on one sidewalk and a pallid, bluish figure with large, sunken eye sockets on another. After about five blocks, his run had slowed to a trot, and after five more, it had become a walk, a more even pace seeming to him more sustainable. He was deceived. No sooner had he extended his legs into a nice, easy stride than he felt the heavy, buildup of acid in them from all the movement. It was a terrible paradox. Had he kept running – and continued to expend energy he didn't have – the adrenaline he had already stimulated, and the pattern of motion he had already set up, would have kept him going. As it was, he now found himself crouched on the sidewalk, doubled over and right out of breath. For the first time he countenanced the thought – which he had put off for all the years since his awakening – that perhaps he didn't have the strength, as a solitary and unsupported swimmer, to counteract the river's current. He

felt in his tight chest the keen pains of an overactive heart, an organ beating wildly just to keep up with his ambition.

He was ready to give up.

Then an approaching taxi cab made itself visible, trotting up behind him, slowly – almost like a poised swindler or pickpocket – and pulled to the curb.

“You look like you need a ride,” said the driver, who in the darkness of the shadows remained entirely invisible, save for a fat cigar poking from of his lips. Sollie instinctively stepped back, with a small shudder.

“C’mon, boy,” the driver urged, gruffer now. “Hop on.”

Sollie – too exhausted even to think, driven on by the primal urges underlying thought, the ones which subtly control us but reveal themselves only in our tired moments, in the pockets of despondency, when the rational processes we’ve constructed are stripped away, and all we have left, to instruct and direct us, are hungry grunts – did as he was told. But before he could so much as provide a destination, the driver had flicked his wrists with a flourish, like a cowboy brandishing a lasso, and the reins had made a transverse wave, like the breaker of an ocean, and the carriage had galloped off into the dark night, like a detective in a long coat after solving a crime.

Sollie had no idea where he was going.

But having already drained his reserves, having gone through his entire supply of anxiety and beaten his body against the ground, he couldn’t bring himself to be nervous, couldn’t rouse himself from a gentle, sleep-like torpor. Far from tensing him, in fact, the trip’s dark ambiguity was soothing, all the more so for its rhythmic accompaniment, the clip-clopping of the horse’s hooves against the street’s pavement, a form of brick called

Belgian blocks. He liked the sound of that, Sollie did – “Belgian blocks.” It was like the beat of drums, steadying, consistent.

The driver let him off somewhere uptown, in the 80s. “End of the line,” he said tersely, in the same abrupt, mysterious way in which the trip had commenced. Sollie tried to thank him, looking down at his scuffed shoes, but when he picked up his head to meet the driver’s eyes, the carriage was gone.

Sollie wandered forward hesitantly, but with curiosity, like a boy plopped down in the middle of a carnival midway. He was, too, like a person who wakes up in a new place, perhaps a hotel, and, upon opening his eyes, marvels at the strangeness of his surroundings. It was quiet, Sollie noticed, almost eerily so. He had imagined these streets to be wilder and more teeming, swelling to the point of suffocation with the overflow of dinners and parties. The people must be inside somewhere, he thought, feeling a sudden pang of exclusion, as though only he had not received an invitation. He tried to peer into windows, but they seemed dark. He kept moving northward – like someone with nothing to lose, like a dreamer who, in the midst of a particularly extravagant vision, realizes its surreality and, opting to take full advantage, acts in the imagined life more recklessly than he would in the real one, the one that counts. Sollie felt he was living some other person’s life in a blessedly generous arrangement; he was given the permission to accrue benefits but declared immune to the possible losses.

And then, as though he had been spilled on by a drunk – with amber beer, perhaps, or a spirit of molasses – he found himself bathed in a thick, syrupy light. It drew him forward, with great curiosity, as though it were glowing only on him – no one else was in the street, as far he could tell – and so deep and so viscous did it catch him, like a puddle of

glue, that he felt he should respond, should answer whatever it was bonding him. He hurried up the sidewalk to find the source, stopping dead about 10 feet on, in front of a dingy place with an indecipherable name on the window. The light seeped through the clouded pane of glass, and he heard now the faint pitches of a woman's laughter and then a brash, fulsome roaring, as if from a man foaming at the mouth. He stood there listening for a moment, transfixed, growing with each new guffaw or giggle more furiously interested, deranged almost, in the way of a single-minded hunter who, having narrowed his focus and concern to a single creature, with its specific appearance and unique sounds, loses all awareness of a larger world – ceases to care, in fact, that he have such awareness – and with a concentrated mind pursues the lone, heated animal – such a predatory desire being a natural component of his condition – through the dense and isolating jungle.

Sollie drove through the revolving door without thinking, nearly tripping as it spit him out onto the stained floor. He regained his balance, and looked up, aware of a person standing directly beside him, almost over him. He could feel her there even before his eyes settled on her, more was she like a fixture – an assembled centerpiece on a table, an arrangement of flowers – than a breathing, imperfect person. He felt hot and nervous before he could understand why.

Samantha Norton looked down on the poor boy who stumbled into the room. He hadn't much to recommend him, it was immediately apparent. His clothes hugged him tightly, almost as though he had worn them unchanged since the age of 13 and presumed they'd grow and mature as he. His hair was flaked with little white chips, as if he had been caught in a sudden bout of snow. And his hands were unnaturally long, disproportionate

to his body and thin – where was the thickness in the thumbs? the flesh? – like claws, or the tines of a rake.

She suddenly became conscious of her own appearance, or more accurately, its discordance with her surroundings. She had on a red princess gown, with the high waist so suddenly en vogue falling into a slim drapery around her substantive legs. The body was silk, and the neck and sleeves were chiffon. Her mother had asked the dressmaker for a round neck, but she had gone behind her back and implored the woman for a lower one – why, she still didn't know – and was delighted when, arriving in a bag on her bed one day, that's just what it was.

She now wanted to be covered up, however. She felt exposed.

Sollie caught himself gaping. He quickly gathered himself and moved a step closer to the wooden stand of the maitre d'.

Charlie Mullen watched the boy edge near him. He was drunk, Mullen was, but it had had a sharpening effect on him this night, instead of its usual dulling, and he understood, perhaps more keenly than they did, the small, wordless dialogue passing between them. It aroused in him a paternal response, as though this girl, in the provocative red dress, was his daughter and the boy, sympathetic and hardworking, despite his outer signs of poverty and neglect, was the longtime suitor he at long last had approved.

“Reservations?” he asked, gently.

Samantha turned to the boy again. Perhaps she had been too harsh. He did have a certain waxy polish about him, as though he were a figurine, and the ringlets of his black hair, falling on his brow with innocent abandon, were themselves a kind of perfection. His hands were indeed as long as she had first thought. But was there not something singular

about that as well? Something which differentiated this boy from others, which made him seem more dexterous, more easily capable of manipulation? He seemed now, to Samantha's second glance – which, by the natural order (all people, but women especially, needing to protect themselves by immediately identifying the savory and prejudging the unsavory) was more forgiving than the first – to possess a balanced complement of features. He was delicate, yes, but his shabbiness compensated for that with a rough masculinity. And to the degree he was shabby, he was neat enough – with his peculiar fingers and groomed, medium-length nails – to appear well-composed. She was not sure about any of this, of course. She told herself they were tentative observations, as subject to change and revision as the first ones she had formed, which she now, chastened, compelled herself to rethink.

Sollie Leiner had seen such a beautiful girl before. Her name was Estelle Rice, and she had one weekend appeared without introduction in the shul on Rivington Street. Sollie had just left the main sanctuary, with the same mixture of exhaustion and elated liberty – he was free to go home now! to eat lunch! to have a drink! – that had greeted him after every service since he had turned six, and his nose had been twitching at the faintly scatological stink of the steaming of trays of chulent – a red stew of bean and potatoes with the consistency its onomatopoeic name implied – when he caught sight of her, from an impassable distance. Between them were, many others besides, Mr. Rothenburg and Mrs. Rothenberg – the spelling of their name having been a matter of longstanding dispute between them – and he could only look on as she flew about the social hall with the grace of a bird, taking some women by the arms, letting herself be taken by others, raising her divine forehead to the ceiling, as though to stretch her neck. She was blonde

and narrow-nosed and wide-eyed (so much so that her thin, extensive lashes looked like a child's drawing of rays emanating from a sun), and somehow, her constant movement, the peripatetic fluttering which put her everywhere and nowhere in the stifling room, was masked by her appearance into a thing of majesty, so that instead of seeming restless and antic she was stately, instead of unhinged, statuesque. Sollie had made no effort at the time to reach her, and he wouldn't have known what to say anyway; he had been merely 16 years old.

But he saw now in the girl before him, in the quality of her posture and the subtle arching of her neck, a similar opportunity, and one he felt better suited to take advantage of, although no specific words came to mind. There was her red dress – hanging on her so lightly, as though she were wearing a feather – and he could perhaps comment on that, but if he were to, it would be polarizing, and if she didn't take to it, were it misinterpreted as a leer, he'd be instantly dismissed. Then there was her incongruity – at the maitre'd stand in a dingy place, where she was the lone example of her type, and probably by accident. But again, it was not the type of comment to be received with indifference or moderate feeling; either she'd appreciate his humor or, convinced she had been made a fool for slumming, would reject him without reservation. Sollie felt his mouth go dry and his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth, as unwilling to rise from the surface as a shirt is from a sweaty back. He had the stabbing, queasy thought that this opportunity might slip away. He looked at the big Irish man behind the counter pleadingly, like a toddler whose parents insist on his self-reliance but who nevertheless refuses to acknowledge he's no longer helpless, no longer a baby.

Mullen did not know what to do. He looked at the boy, and then back at the girl, and many differences were obvious between them, but the greatest it seemed was the boy's sudden lack of color, as though he were standing over some kind of drain. Perhaps the lad could not be helped. Perhaps it was not his place to interfere at all.

“Reservations?” he repeated.

Samantha stiffened at the word. She was like a person who, leaving the confines of a hot, moist gymnasium, where muscles ease and movement is fluid, enters the brisk cold of a winter day and tenses into a brittle skeleton.

Sollie tightened, too. He had long believed that the round, plodding women, the ones who surreptitiously requested his prime cuts of meat, were stunting him, stifling his growth into a real creature. Now he found himself rid of them, escaped beyond their grasp, and yet he was still inhibited, still held back, checked not by their mock lewdness but instead by his own timidity. It was his own diffidence, his own apprehension, he could not place the blame anywhere else.

“Do you or do you not have reservations, young lady?”

Samantha felt the tautness in her skin. She would have to excuse herself, to turn back to the door and leave. To return to the Hotel Knickerbocker. To explain everything. To apologize.

An idea came upon her. Her features relaxed, like a piece of hard chocolate that, held over a fire, begins to melt. Her eyes darted across the room, from one slovenly patron to another. She could not spot a sea-foam dress. The nurse had, for some unknown reason, failed to show. The man the nurse had hoped to meet, the one she had heard so much about, was probably absent as well.

“Yes, I’m on the list,” Samantha said, turning up her nose in a small gesture of triumph.

“The name is Florence Howard.”

Mullen eyed the ledger perched on the wooden stand.

“Very well. I see here a table for two,” he said, and, with the most benevolent smile he could muster, motioning toward Sollie, whose knees were locked into their joints, who was doing all he could not to crack, who was, and would remain for now, an entirely passive actor in the determinations of his life, asked, “Is this the man who’ll be joining you?”

And Samantha gave the boy a gentle and compassionate glance, one with all the benefits of the doubt as to appearance, shyness, and maturity. And she was about to open her mouth, about to forge ahead, to take another chance in the series of chances begun that very night, starting with her bursting from the ballroom into the Subway, when in walked a man named Eliot, with a sharp unmistakable jaw-line. A small, barely audible hitch emanated from her choked throat – less an utterance than the restraint of one, like the checked swing of a batter who, suddenly recognizing the pitch, holds his swing mid-motion. And she couldn’t help but look back at the man, darkly handsome and wickedly confident, though she did not say anything, not at first.

But Mullen – a keen observer, who, running a hotel, knew, like all service people, what human nature is, and will always be – did not have to wait on the girl’s response. A new year was about to begin. Forlornly, he already understood just what that would mean in the way of change.