

Hanya Yanagihara

A Little Life

*To Jared Hohlt
in friendship; with love*

1

THE ELEVENTH APARTMENT had only one closet, but it did have a sliding glass door that opened onto a small balcony, from which he could see a man sitting across the way, outdoors in only a T-shirt and shorts even though it was October, smoking. Willem held up a hand in greeting to him, but the man didn't wave back.

In the bedroom, Jude was accordioning the closet door, opening and shutting it, when Willem came in. "There's only one closet," he said.

"That's okay," Willem said. "I have nothing to put in it anyway."

"Neither do I." They smiled at each other. The agent from the building wandered in after them. "We'll take it," Jude told her.

But back at the agent's office, they were told they couldn't rent the apartment after all. "Why not?" Jude asked her.

"You don't make enough to cover six months' rent, and you don't have anything in savings," said the agent, suddenly terse. She had checked their credit and their bank accounts and had at last realized that there was something amiss about two men in their twenties who were not a couple and yet were trying to rent a one-bedroom apartment on a dull (but still expensive) stretch of Twenty-fifth Street. "Do you have anyone who can sign on as your guarantor? A boss? Parents?"

"Our parents are dead," said Willem, swiftly.

The agent sighed. "Then I suggest you lower your expectations. No one who manages a well-run building is going to rent to candidates with your financial profile." And then she stood, with an air of finality, and looked

pointedly at the door.

When they told JB and Malcolm this, however, they made it into a comedy: the apartment floor became tattooed with mouse droppings, the man across the way had almost exposed himself, the agent was upset because she had been flirting with Willem and he hadn't reciprocated.

"Who wants to live on Twenty-fifth and Second anyway," asked JB. They were at Pho Viet Huong in Chinatown, where they met twice a month for dinner. Pho Viet Huong wasn't very good — the pho was curiously sugary, the lime juice was soapy, and at least one of them got sick after every meal — but they kept coming, both out of habit and necessity. You could get a bowl of soup or a sandwich at Pho Viet Huong for five dollars, or you could get an entrée, which were eight to ten dollars but much larger,

so you could save half of it for the next day or for a snack later that night. Only Malcolm never ate the whole of his entrée and never saved the other half either, and when he was finished eating, he put his plate in the center of the table so Willem and JB — who were always hungry — could eat the rest.

“Of course we don’t *want* to live at Twenty-fifth and Second, JB,” said Willem, patiently, “but we don’t really have a choice. We don’t have any money, remember?”

“I don’t understand why you don’t stay where you are,” said Malcolm, who was now pushing his mushrooms and tofu — he always ordered the same dish: oyster mushrooms and braised tofu in a treacly brown sauce — around his plate, as Willem and JB eyed it.

“Well, I can’t,” Willem said. “Remember?” He had to have explained this to Malcolm a dozen times in the last three months. “Merritt’s boyfriend’s moving in, so I have to move out.”

“But why do *you* have to move out?”

“Because it’s Merritt’s name on the lease, Malcolm!” said JB.

“Oh,” Malcolm said. He was quiet. He often forgot what he considered inconsequential details, but he also never seemed to mind when people grew impatient with him for forgetting. “Right.” He moved the mushrooms to the center of the table. “But you, Jude—”

“I can’t stay at your place forever, Malcolm. Your parents are going to kill me at some point.”

“My parents love you.”

“That’s nice of you to say. But they won’t if I don’t move out, and soon.”

Malcolm was the only one of the four of them who lived at home, and as JB liked to say, if he had Malcolm’s home, he would live at home too. It wasn’t as if Malcolm’s house was particularly grand — it was, in fact, creaky and ill-kept, and Willem had once gotten a splinter simply by running his hand up its banister — but it was large: a real Upper East Side town house. Malcolm’s sister, Flora, who was three years older than him, had moved out of the basement apartment recently, and Jude had taken her place as a short-term solution: Eventually, Malcolm’s parents would want to reclaim the unit to convert it into offices for his mother’s literary agency, which meant Jude (who was finding the flight of stairs that led down to it too difficult to navigate anyway) had to look for his own apartment.

And it was natural that he would live with Willem; they had been roommates throughout college. In their first year, the four of them had shared a space that consisted of a cinder-blocked common room, where sat

their desks and chairs and a couch that JB's aunts had driven up in a U-Haul, and a second, far tinier room, in which two sets of bunk beds had been placed. This room had been so narrow that Malcolm and Jude, lying in the bottom bunks, could reach out and grab each other's hands. Malcolm and JB had shared one of the units; Jude and Willem had shared the other.

"It's blacks versus whites," JB would say.

"Jude's not white," Willem would respond.

"And I'm not black," Malcolm would add, more to annoy JB than because he believed it.

"Well," JB said now, pulling the plate of mushrooms toward him with the tines of his fork, "I'd say you could both stay with me, but I think you'd fucking hate it." JB lived in a massive, filthy loft in Little Italy, full of strange hallways that led to unused, oddly shaped cul-de-sacs and unfinished half rooms, the Sheetrock abandoned mid-construction, which belonged to another person they knew from college. Ezra was an artist, a bad one, but he didn't need to be good because, as JB liked to remind them, he would never have to work in his entire life. And not only would *he* never have to work, but his children's children's children would never have to work: They could make bad, unsalable, worthless art for generations and they would still be able to buy at whim the best oils they wanted, and impractically large lofts in downtown Manhattan that they could trash with their bad architectural decisions, and when they got sick of the artist's life — as JB was convinced Ezra someday would — all they would need to do is call their trust officers and be awarded an enormous lump sum of cash of an amount that the four of them (well, maybe not Malcolm) could never dream of seeing in their lifetimes. In the meantime, though, Ezra was a useful person to know, not only because he let JB and a few of his other friends from school stay in his apartment — at any time, there were four or five people burrowing in various corners of the loft — but because he was a good-natured and basically generous person, and liked to throw excessive parties in which copious amounts of food and drugs and alcohol were available for free.

"Hold up," JB said, putting his chopsticks down. "I just realized — there's someone at the magazine renting some place for her aunt. Like, just on the verge of Chinatown."

"How much is it?" asked Willem.

"Probably nothing — she didn't even know what to ask for it. And she wants someone in there that she knows."

"Do you think you could put in a good word?"

"Better — I'll introduce you. Can you come by the office tomorrow?"

Jude sighed. “I won’t be able to get away.” He looked at Willem.

“Don’t worry — I can. What time?”

“Lunchtime, I guess. One?”

“I’ll be there.”

Willem was still hungry, but he let JB eat the rest of the mushrooms. Then they all waited around for a bit; sometimes Malcolm ordered jackfruit ice cream, the one consistently good thing on the menu, ate two bites, and then stopped, and he and JB would finish the rest. But this time he didn’t order the ice cream, and so they asked for the bill so they could study it and divide it to the dollar.

involved the combing out and braiding together of many pieces in order to make one apparently endless rope of frizzing black hair. The previous Friday he had lured them over with the promise of pizza and beer to help him braid, but after many hours of tedious work, it became clear that there was no pizza and beer forthcoming, and they had left, a little irritated but not terribly surprised.

They were all bored with the hair project, although Jude — alone among them — thought that the pieces were lovely and would someday be considered significant. In thanks, JB had given Jude a hair-covered hairbrush, but then had reclaimed the gift when it looked like Ezra's father's friend might be interested in buying it (he didn't, but JB never returned the hairbrush to Jude). The hair project had proved difficult in other ways as well; another evening, when the three of them had somehow been once again conned into going to Little Italy and combing out more hair, Malcolm had commented that the hair stank. Which it did: not of anything distasteful but simply the tangy metallic scent of unwashed scalp. But JB had thrown one of his mounting tantrums, and had called Malcolm a self-hating Negro and an Uncle Tom and a traitor to the race, and Malcolm, who very rarely angered but who angered over accusations like this, had dumped his wine into the nearest bag of hair and gotten up and stamped out. Jude had hurried, the best he could, after Malcolm, and Willem had stayed to handle JB. And although the two of them reconciled the next day, in the end Willem and Jude felt (unfairly, they knew) slightly angrier at Malcolm, since the next weekend they were back in Queens, walking from barbershop to barbershop, trying to replace the bag of hair that he had ruined.

“How's life on the black planet?” Willem asked JB now.

“Black,” said JB, stuffing the plait he was untangling back into the bag. “Let's go; I told Annika we'd be there at one thirty.” The phone on his desk began to ring.

“Don't you want to get that?”

“They'll call back.”

As they walked downtown, JB complained. So far, he had concentrated most of his seductive energies on a senior editor named Dean, whom they all called DeeAnn. They had been at a party, the three of them, held at one of the junior editor's parents' apartment in the Dakota, in which art-hung room bled into art-hung room. As JB talked with his coworkers in the kitchen, Malcolm and Willem had walked through the apartment together (Where had Jude been that night? Working, probably), looking at a series of Edward Burtynskys hanging in the guest bedroom, a suite of water towers by the Bechers mounted in four rows of five over the desk in the den, an

enormous Gursky floating above the half bookcases in the library, and, in the master bedroom, an entire wall of Diane Arbuses, covering the space so thoroughly that only a few centimeters of blank wall remained at the top and bottom. They had been admiring a picture of two sweet-faced girls with Down syndrome playing for the camera in their too-tight, too-childish bathing suits, when Dean had approached them. He was a tall man, but he had a small, gophery, pockmarked face that made him appear feral and untrustworthy.

They introduced themselves, explained that they were here because they were JB's friends. Dean told them that he was one of the senior editors at the magazine, and that he handled all the arts coverage.

"Ah," Willem said, careful not to look at Malcolm, whom he did not trust not to react. JB had told them that he had targeted the arts editor as his potential mark; this must be him.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Dean asked them, waving a hand at the Arbuses.

"Never," Willem said. "I love Diane Arbus."

Dean stiffened, and his little features seemed to gather themselves into a knot in the center of his little face. "It's DeeAnn."

"What?"

"DeeAnn. You pronounce her name 'DeeAnn.'"

They had barely been able to get out of the room without laughing. "DeeAnn!" JB had said later, when they told him the story. "Christ! What a pretentious little shit."

"But he's *your* pretentious little shit," Jude had said. And ever since, they had referred to Dean as "DeeAnn."

Unfortunately, however, it appeared that despite JB's tireless cultivation of DeeAnn, he was no closer to being included in the magazine than he had been three months ago. JB had even let DeeAnn suck him off in the steam room at the gym, and still nothing. Every day, JB found a reason to wander back into the editorial offices and over to the bulletin board on which the next three months' story ideas were written on white note cards, and every day he looked at the section dedicated to up-and-coming artists for his name, and every day he was disappointed. Instead he saw the names of various no-talents and overhypes, people owed favors or people who knew people to whom favors were owed.

"If I ever see Ezra up there, I'm going to kill myself," JB always said, to which the others said: You won't, JB, and Don't worry, JB — you'll be up there someday, and What do you need them for, JB? You'll find somewhere else, to which JB would reply, respectively, "Are you sure?" and "I fucking

doubt it,” and “I’ve fucking invested this time — three whole months of my fucking life — I better be fucking up there, or this whole thing has been a fucking waste, just like everything else,” everything else meaning, variously, grad school, moving back to New York, the hair series, or life in general, depending on how nihilistic he felt that day.

He was still complaining when they reached Lispenard Street. Willem was new enough to the city — he had only lived there a year — to have never heard of the street, which was barely more than an alley, two blocks long and one block south of Canal, and yet JB, who had grown up in Brooklyn, hadn’t heard of it either.

They found the building and punched buzzer 5C. A girl answered, her voice made scratchy and hollow by the intercom, and rang them in. Inside, the lobby was narrow and high-ceilinged and painted a curdled, gleaming shit-brown, which made them feel like they were at the bottom of a well.

The girl was waiting for them at the door of the apartment. “Hey, JB,” she said, and then looked at Willem and blushed.

“Annika, this is my friend Willem,” JB said. “Willem, Annika works in the art department. She’s cool.”

Annika looked down and stuck out her hand in one movement. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said to the floor. JB kicked Willem in the foot and grinned at him. Willem ignored him.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” he said.

“Well, this is the apartment? It’s my aunt’s? She lived here for fifty years but she just moved into a retirement home?” Annika was speaking very fast and had apparently decided that the best strategy was to treat Willem like an eclipse and simply not look at him at all. She was talking faster and faster, about her aunt, and how she always said the neighborhood had changed, and how she’d never heard of Lispenard Street until she’d moved downtown, and how she was sorry it hadn’t been painted yet, but her aunt had just, literally just moved out and they’d only had a chance to have it cleaned the previous weekend. She looked everywhere but at Willem — at the ceiling (stamped tin), at the floors (cracked, but parquet), at the walls (on which long-ago-hung picture frames had left ghostly shadows) — until finally Willem had to interrupt, gently, and ask if he could take a look through the rest of the apartment.

“Oh, be my guest,” said Annika, “I’ll leave you alone,” although she then began to follow them, talking rapidly to JB about someone named Jasper and how he’d been using Archer for *everything*, and didn’t JB think it looked a little too round and weird for body text? Now that Willem had his back turned to her, she stared at him openly, her rambling becoming

more inane the longer she spoke.

JB watched Annika watch Willem. He had never seen her like this, so nervous and girlish (normally she was surly and silent and was actually a bit feared in the office for creating on the wall above her desk an elaborate sculpture of a heart made entirely of X-ACTO blades), but he had seen lots of women behave this way around Willem. They all had. Their friend Lionel used to say that Willem must have been a fisherman in a past life, because he couldn't help but attract pussy. And yet most of the time (though not always), Willem seemed unaware of the attention. JB had once asked Malcolm why he thought that was, and Malcolm said he thought it was because Willem hadn't noticed. JB had only grunted in reply, but his thinking was: Malcolm was the most obtuse person he knew, and if even *Malcolm* had noticed how women reacted around Willem, it was impossible that Willem himself hadn't. Later, however, Jude had offered a different interpretation: he had suggested that Willem was deliberately *not* reacting to all the women so the other men around him wouldn't feel threatened by him. This made more sense; Willem was liked by everyone and never wanted to make people feel intentionally uncomfortable, and so it was possible that, subconsciously at least, he was feigning a sort of ignorance. But still — it was fascinating to watch, and the three of them never tired of it, nor of making fun of Willem for it afterward, though he would normally just smile and say nothing.

“Does the elevator work well here?” Willem asked abruptly, turning around.

“What?” Annika replied, startled. “Yes, it's pretty reliable.” She pulled her faint lips into a narrow smile that JB realized, with a stomach-twist of embarrassment for her, was meant to be flirtatious. Oh, Annika, he thought. “What exactly are you planning on bringing into my aunt's apartment?”

“Our friend,” he answered, before Willem could. “He has trouble climbing stairs and needs the elevator to work.”

“Oh,” she said, flushing again. She was back to staring at the floor. “Sorry. Yes, it works.”

The apartment was not impressive. There was a small foyer, little larger than the size of a doormat, from which pronged the kitchen (a hot, greasy little cube) to the right and a dining area to the left that would accommodate perhaps a card table. A half wall separated this space from the living room, with its four windows, each striped with bars, looking south onto the litter-scattered street, and down a short hall to the right was the bathroom with its milk-glass sconces and worn-enamel tub, and across from it the bedroom, which had another window and was deep but narrow; here, two wooden

twin-bed frames had been placed parallel to each other, each pressed against a wall. One of the frames was already topped with a futon, a bulky, graceless thing, as heavy as a dead horse.

“The futon’s never been used,” Annika said. She told a long story about how she was going to move in, and had even bought the futon in preparation, but had never gotten to use it because she moved in instead with her friend Clement, who wasn’t her boyfriend, just her friend, and god, what a retard she was for saying that. Anyway, if Willem wanted the apartment, she’d throw in the futon for free.

Willem thanked her. “What do you think, JB?” he asked.

What did he think? He thought it was a shithole. Of course, he too lived in a shithole, but he was in his shithole by choice, and because it was free, and the money he would have had to spend on rent he was instead able to spend on paints, and supplies, and drugs, and the occasional taxi. But if Ezra were to ever decide to start charging him rent, no way would he be there. His family may not have Ezra’s money, or Malcolm’s, but under no circumstances would they allow him to throw away money living in a shithole. They would find him something better, or give him a little monthly gift to help him along. But Willem and Jude didn’t have that choice: They had to pay their own way, and they had no money, and thus they were condemned to live in a shithole. And if they were, then this was probably the shithole to live in — it was cheap, it was downtown, and their prospective landlord already had a crush on fifty percent of them.

So “I think it’s perfect,” he told Willem, who agreed. Annika let out a yelp. And a hurried conversation later, it was over: Annika had a tenant, and Willem and Jude had a place to live — all before JB had to remind Willem that he wouldn’t mind Willem paying for a bowl of noodles for lunch, before he had to get back to the office.

did. Still, that had been his only sadness as a child, and even that was more of an obligatory sadness: He was fatherless, and he knew that fatherless children mourned the absence in their lives. He, however, had never experienced that yearning himself. After his father had died, his mother, who was a second-generation Haitian American, had earned her doctorate in education, teaching all the while at the public school near their house that she had deemed JB better than. By the time he was in high school, an expensive private day school nearly an hour's commute from their place in Brooklyn, which he attended on scholarship, she was the principal of a different school, a magnet program in Manhattan, and an adjunct professor at Brooklyn College. She had been the subject of an article in *The New York Times* for her innovative teaching methods, and although he had pretended otherwise to his friends, he had been proud of her.

She had always been busy when he was growing up, but he had never felt neglected, had never felt that his mother loved her students more than she loved him. At home, there was his grandmother, who cooked whatever he wanted, and sang to him in French, and told him literally daily what a treasure he was, what a genius, and how he was the man in her life. And there were his aunts, his mother's sister, a detective in Manhattan, and her girlfriend, a pharmacist and second-generation American herself (although she was from Puerto Rico, not Haiti), who had no children and so treated him as their own. His mother's sister was sporty and taught him how to catch and throw a ball (something that, even then, he had only the slightest of interest in, but which proved to be a useful social skill later on), and her girlfriend was interested in art; one of his earliest memories had been a trip with her to the Museum of Modern Art, where he clearly remembered staring at *One: Number 31, 1950*, dumb with awe, barely listening to his aunt as she explained how Pollock had made the painting.

In high school, where a bit of revisionism seemed necessary in order to distinguish himself and, especially, make his rich white classmates uncomfortable, he blurred the truth of his circumstances somewhat: He became another fatherless black boy, with a mother who had completed school only after he was born (he neglected to mention that it was graduate school she had been completing, and so people assumed that he meant high school), and an aunt who walked the streets (again, they assumed as a prostitute, not realizing he meant as a detective). His favorite family photograph had been taken by his best friend in high school, a boy named Daniel, to whom he had revealed the truth just before he let him in to shoot their family portrait. Daniel had been working on a series of, as he called it, families "up from the edge," and JB had had to hurriedly correct the

perception that his aunt was a borderline streetwalker and his mother barely literate before he allowed his friend inside. Daniel's mouth had opened and no sound had emerged, but then JB's mother had come to the door and told them both to get in out of the cold, and Daniel had to obey.

Daniel, still stunned, positioned them in the living room: JB's grandmother, Yvette, sat in her favorite high-backed chair, and around her stood his aunt Christine and her girlfriend, Silvia, to one side, and JB and his mother to the other. But then, just before Daniel could take the picture, Yvette demanded that JB take her place. "He is the king of the house," she told Daniel, as her daughters protested. "Jean-Baptiste! Sit down!" He did. In the picture, he is gripping both of the armrests with his plump hands (even then he had been plump), while on either side, women beamed down at him. He himself is looking directly at the camera, smiling widely, sitting in the chair that should have been occupied by his grandmother.

Their faith in him, in his ultimate triumph, remained unwavering, almost disconcertingly so. They were convinced — even as his own conviction was tested so many times that it was becoming difficult to self-generate it — that he would someday be an important artist, that his work would hang in major museums, that the people who hadn't yet given him his chances didn't properly appreciate his gift. Sometimes he believed them and allowed himself to be buoyed by their confidence. At other times he was suspicious — their opinions seemed so the complete opposite of the rest of the world's that he wondered whether they might be condescending to him, or just crazy. Or maybe they had bad taste. How could four women's judgment differ so profoundly from everyone else's? Surely the odds of theirs being the correct opinion were not good.

And yet he was relieved to return every Sunday on these secret visits back home, where the food was plentiful and free, and where his grandmother would do his laundry, and where every word he spoke and every sketch he showed would be savored and murmured about approvingly. His mother's house was a familiar land, a place where he would always be revered, where every custom and tradition felt tailored to him and his particular needs. At some point in the evening — after dinner but before dessert, while they all rested in the living room, watching television, his mother's cat lying hotly in his lap — he would look at his women and feel something swell within him. He would think then of Malcolm, with his unsparingly intelligent father and affectionate but absentminded mother, and then of Willem, with his dead parents (JB had met them only once, over their freshman year move-out weekend, and had been surprised by how taciturn, how formal, how *un-Willem* they had been),

and finally, of course, Jude, with his completely nonexistent parents (a mystery, there — they had known Jude for almost a decade now and still weren't certain when or if there had ever been parents at all, only that the situation was miserable and not to be spoken of), and feel a warm, watery rush of happiness and thankfulness, as if an ocean were rising up in his chest. I'm lucky, he'd think, and then, because he was competitive and kept track of where he stood against his peers in every aspect of life, I'm the luckiest one of all. But he never thought that he didn't deserve it, or that he should work harder to express his appreciation; his family was happy when he was happy, and so his only obligation to them was to be happy, to live exactly the life he wanted, on the terms he wanted.

"We don't get the families we deserve," Willem had said once when they had been very stoned. He was, of course, speaking of Jude.

"I agree," JB had replied. And he did. None of them — not Willem, not Jude, not even Malcolm — had the families they deserved. But secretly, he made an exception for himself: He *did* have the family he deserved. They were wonderful, truly wonderful, and he knew it. And what's more, he *did* deserve them.

"There's my brilliant boy," Yvette would call out whenever he walked into the house.

It had never had to occur to him that she was anything but completely correct.

he would start unpacking the large items and breaking down the boxes. Carolina and Black Henry Young, who were both strong but short, would carry the boxes of books, since those were of a manageable size. Willem and JB and Richard would carry the furniture. And he and Asian Henry Young would take everything else. On every trip back downstairs, everyone should take down any boxes that Jude had flattened and stack them on the curb near the trash cans.

“Do you need help?” Willem asked Jude quietly as everyone began dividing up for their assignments.

“No,” he said, shortly, and Willem watched him make his halting, slow-stepping way up the stairs, which were very steep and high, until he could no longer see him.

It was an easy move-in, brisk and undramatic, and after they’d all hung around for a bit, unpacking books and eating pizza, the others took off, to parties and bars, and Willem and Jude were finally left alone in their new apartment. The space was a mess, but the thought of putting things in their place was simply too tiring. And so they lingered, surprised by how dark the afternoon had grown so quickly, and that they had someplace to live, someplace in Manhattan, someplace they could afford. They had both noticed the looks of politely maintained blankness on their friends’ faces as they saw their apartment for the first time (the room with its two narrow twin beds—“Like something out of a Victorian asylum” was how Willem had described it to Jude — had gotten the most comments), but neither of them minded: it was theirs, and they had a two-year lease, and no one could take it away from them. Here, they would even be able to save a little money, and what did they need more space for, anyway? Of course, they both craved beauty, but that would have to wait. Or rather, they would have to wait for it.

They were talking, but Jude’s eyes were closed, and Willem knew — from the constant, hummingbird-flutter of his eyelids and the way his hand was curled into a fist so tight that Willem could see the ocean-green threads of his veins jumping under the back of his hand — that he was in pain. He knew from how rigid Jude was holding his legs, which were resting atop a box of books, that the pain was severe, and knew too that there was nothing he could do for him. If he said, “Jude, let me get you some aspirin,” Jude would say, “I’m fine, Willem, I don’t need anything,” and if he said, “Jude, why don’t you lie down,” Jude would say, “Willem. I’m *fine*. Stop worrying.” So finally, he did what they had all learned over the years to do when Jude’s legs were hurting him, which was to make some excuse, get up, and leave the room, so Jude could lie perfectly still and wait for the pain

to pass without having to make conversation or expend energy pretending that everything was fine and that he was just tired, or had a cramp, or whatever feeble explanation he was able to invent.

In the bedroom, Willem found the garbage bag with their sheets and made up first his futon and then Jude's (which they had bought for very little from Carolina's soon-to-be ex-girlfriend the week before). He sorted his clothes into shirts, pants, and underwear and socks, assigning each its own cardboard box (newly emptied of books), which he shoved beneath the bed. He left Jude's clothes alone, but then moved into the bathroom, which he cleaned and disinfected before sorting and putting away their toothpaste and soaps and razors and shampoos. Once or twice he paused in his work to creep out to the living room, where Jude remained in the same position, his eyes still closed, his hand still balled, his head turned to the side so that Willem was unable to see his expression.

His feelings for Jude were complicated. He loved him — that part was simple — and feared for him, and sometimes felt as much his older brother and protector as his friend. He knew that Jude would be and had been fine without him, but he sometimes saw things in Jude that disturbed him and made him feel both helpless and, paradoxically, more determined to help him (although Jude rarely asked for help of any kind). They all loved Jude, and admired him, but he often felt that Jude had let him see a little more of him — just a little — than he had shown the others, and was unsure what he was supposed to do with that knowledge.

The pain in his legs, for example: as long as they had known him, they had known he had problems with his legs. It was hard not to know this, of course; he had used a cane through college, and when he had been younger — he was so young when they met him, a full two years younger than they, that he had still been growing — he had walked only with the aid of an orthopedic crutch, and had worn heavily strapped splint-like braces on his legs whose external pins, which were drilled into his bones, impaired his ability to bend his knees. But he had never complained, not once, although he had never begrudged anyone else's complaining, either; their sophomore year, JB had slipped on some ice and fallen and broken his wrist, and they all remembered the hubbub that had followed, and JB's theatrical moans and cries of misery, and how for a whole week after his cast was set he refused to leave the university infirmary, and had received so many visitors that the school newspaper had written a story about him. There was another guy in their dorm, a soccer player who had torn his meniscus and who kept saying that JB didn't know what pain was, but Jude had gone to visit JB every day, just as Willem and Malcolm had, and had given him all the

sympathy he had craved.

One night shortly after JB had deigned to be discharged from the clinic and had returned to the dorm to enjoy another round of attention, Willem had woken to find the room empty. This wasn't so unusual, really: JB was at his boyfriend's, and Malcolm, who was taking an astronomy class at Harvard that semester, was in the lab where he now slept every Tuesday and Thursday nights. Willem himself was often elsewhere, usually in his girlfriend's room, but she had the flu and he had stayed home that night. But Jude was always there. He had never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and he had always spent the night in their room, his presence beneath Willem's bunk as familiar and constant as the sea.

He wasn't sure what compelled him to climb down from his bed and stand for a minute, dopyly, in the center of the quiet room, looking about him as if Jude might be hanging from the ceiling like a spider. But then he noticed his crutch was gone, and he began to look for him, calling his name softly in the common room, and then, when he got no answer, leaving their suite and walking down the hall toward the communal bathroom. After the dark of their room, the bathroom was nauseously bright, its fluorescent lights emitting their faint continual sizzle, and he was so disoriented that it came as less of a surprise than it should have when he saw, in the last stall, Jude's foot sticking out from beneath the door, the tip of his crutch beside it.

"Jude?" he whispered, knocking on the stall door, and when there was no answer, "I'm coming in." He pulled open the door and found Jude on the floor, one leg tucked up against his chest. He had vomited, and some of it had pooled on the ground before him, and some of it was scabbed on his lips and chin, a stippled apricot smear. His eyes were shut and he was sweaty, and with one hand he was holding the curved end of his crutch with an intensity that, as Willem would later come to recognize, comes only with extreme discomfort.

At the time, though, he was scared, and confused, and began asking Jude question after question, none of which he was in any state to answer, and it wasn't until he tried to hoist Jude to his feet that Jude gave a shout and Willem understood how bad his pain was.

He somehow managed to half drag, half carry Jude to their room, and fold him into his bed and inexpertly clean him up. By this time the worst of the pain seemed to have passed, and when Willem asked him if he should call a doctor, Jude shook his head.

"But Jude," he said, quietly, "you're in pain. We have to get you help."

"Nothing will help," he said, and was silent for a few moments. "I just have to wait." His voice was whispery and faint, unfamiliar.

“What can I do?” Willem asked.

“Nothing,” Jude said. They were quiet. “But Willem — will you stay with me for a little while?”

“Of course,” he said. Beside him, Jude trembled and shook as if chilled, and Willem took the comforter off his own bed and wrapped it around him. At one point he reached under the blanket and found Jude’s hand and prised open his fist so he could hold his damp, callused palm. It had been a long time since he had held another guy’s hand — not since his own brother’s surgery many years ago — and he was surprised by how strong Jude’s grip was, how muscular his fingers. Jude shuddered and chattered his teeth for hours, and eventually Willem lay down beside him and fell asleep.

The next morning, he woke in Jude’s bed with his hand throbbing, and when he examined the back of it he saw bruised smudges where Jude’s fingers had clenched him. He got up, a bit unsteadily, and walked into the common area, where he saw Jude reading at his desk, his features indistinguishable in the bright late-morning light.

He looked up when Willem came in and then stood, and for a while they merely looked at each other in silence.

“Willem, I’m so sorry,” Jude said at last.

“Jude,” he said, “there’s nothing to be sorry for.” And he meant it; there wasn’t.

But “I’m sorry, Willem, I’m so sorry,” Jude repeated, and no matter how many times Willem tried to reassure him, he wouldn’t be comforted.

“Just don’t tell Malcolm and JB, okay?” he asked him.

“I won’t,” he promised. And he never did, although in the end, it didn’t make a difference, for eventually, Malcolm and JB too would see him in pain, although only a few times in episodes as sustained as the one Willem witnessed that night.

He had never discussed it with Jude, but in the years to come, he would see him in all sorts of pain, big pains and little ones, would see him wince at small hurts and occasionally, when the discomfort was too profound, would see him vomit, or ploat to the ground, or simply blank out and become insensate, the way he was doing in their living room now. But although he was a man who kept his promises, there was a part of him that always wondered why he had never raised the issue with Jude, why he had never made him discuss what it felt like, why he had never dared to do what instinct told him to do a hundred times: to sit down beside him and rub his legs, to try to knead back into submission those misfiring nerve endings. Instead here he was hiding in the bathroom, making busywork for himself as, a few yards away, one of his dearest friends sat alone on a disgusting

sofa, making the slow, sad, lonely journey back to consciousness, back to the land of the living, without anyone at all by his side.

“You’re a coward,” he said to his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His face looked back at him, tired with disgust. From the living room, there was only silence, but Willem moved to stand unseen at its border, waiting for Jude to return to him.

Things would be easier, however, if his parents actually respected the same divisions of space and time that Malcolm did. Aside from expecting him to eat breakfast with them in the morning and brunch every Sunday, they also frequently dropped by his floor for a visit, preceding their social calls with a simultaneous knock and doorknob-turn that Malcolm had told them time and again defeated the purpose of knocking at all. He knew this was a terribly bratty and ungrateful thing to think, but at times he dreaded even coming home for the inevitable small talk that he would have to endure before he was allowed to scruff upstairs like a teenager. He especially dreaded life in the house without Jude there; although the basement apartment had been more private than his floor, his parents had also taken to blithely dropping by when Jude was in residence, so that sometimes when Malcolm went downstairs to see Jude, there would be his father sitting in the basement apartment already, lecturing Jude about something dull. His father in particular liked Jude — he often told Malcolm that Jude had real intellectual heft and depth, unlike his other friends, who were essentially flibbertigibbets — and in his absence, it would be Malcolm whom his father would regale with his complicated stories about the market, and the shifting global financial realities, and various other topics about which Malcolm didn't much care. He in fact sometimes suspected that his father would have preferred Jude for a son: He and Jude had gone to the same law school. The judge for whom Jude had clerked had been his father's mentor at his first firm. And Jude was an assistant prosecutor in the criminal division of the U.S. Attorney's Office, the exact same place his father had worked at when he was young.

“Mark my words: that kid is going places,” or “It's so rare to meet someone who's going to be a truly self-made star at the start of their career,” his father would often announce to Malcolm and his mother after talking to Jude, looking pleased with himself, as if he was somehow responsible for Jude's genius, and in those moments Malcolm would have to avoid looking at his mother's face and the consoling expression he knew it wore.

Things would also be easier if Flora were still around. When she was preparing to leave, Malcolm had tried to suggest that he should be her roommate in her new two-bedroom apartment on Bethune Street, but she either genuinely didn't understand his numerous hints or simply chose not to understand them. Flora had not seemed to mind the excessive amount of time their parents demanded from them, which had meant that he could spend more time in his room working on his model houses and less time

downstairs in the den, fidgeting through one of his father's interminable Ozu film festivals. When he was younger, Malcolm had been hurt by and resentful of his father's preference for Flora, which was so obvious that family friends had commented on it. "Fabulous Flora," his father called her (or, at various points of her adolescence, "Feisty Flora," "Ferocious Flora," or "Fierce Flora," though always with approval), and even today — even though Flora was practically thirty — he still took a special pleasure in her. "Fabulous said the wittiest thing today," he'd say at dinner, as if Malcolm and his mother did not themselves talk to Flora on a regular basis, or, after a brunch downtown near Flora's apartment, "Why did Fabulous have to move so far from us?" even though she was only a fifteen-minute car ride away. (Malcolm found this particularly galling, as his father was always telling him brocaded stories about how he had moved from the Grenadines to Queens as a child and how he had forever after felt like a man trapped between two countries, and someday Malcolm too should go be an expat somewhere because it would really enrich him as a person and give him some much-needed perspective, etc., etc. And yet if Flora ever dared move off the island, much less to another country, Malcolm had no doubt that his father would fall apart.)

Malcolm himself had no nickname. Occasionally his father called him by other famous Malcolms' last names—"X," or "McLaren," or "McDowell," or "Muggeridge," the last for whom Malcolm was supposedly named — but it always felt less like an affectionate gesture and more like a rebuke, a reminder of what Malcolm should be but clearly was not.

Sometimes — often — it seemed to Malcolm that it was silly for him to still worry, much less mope, about the fact that his father didn't seem to like him very much. Even his mother said so. "You know Daddy doesn't mean anything by it," she'd say once in a while, after his father had delivered one of his soliloquies on Flora's general superiority, and Malcolm — wanting to believe her, though also noting with irritation that his mother still referred to his father as "Daddy"—would grunt or mumble something to show her that he didn't care one way or another. And sometimes — again, increasingly often — he would grow irritated that he spent so much time thinking about his parents at all. Was this normal? Wasn't there something just a bit pathetic about it? He was twenty-seven, after all! Was this what happened when you lived at home? Or was it just him? Surely this was the best possible argument for moving out: so he'd somehow cease to be such a child. At night, as beneath him his parents completed their routines, the banging of the old pipes as they washed their faces and the sudden thunk into silence as they turned down the living-room radiators better than any

clock at indicating that it was eleven, eleven thirty, midnight, he made lists of what he needed to resolve, and fast, in the following year: his work (at a standstill), his love life (nonexistent), his sexuality (unresolved), his future (uncertain). The four items were always the same, although sometimes their order of priority changed. Also consistent was his ability to precisely diagnose their status, coupled with his utter inability to provide any solutions.

The next morning he'd wake determined: today he was going to move out and tell his parents to leave him alone. But when he'd get downstairs, there would be his mother, making him breakfast (his father long gone for work) and telling him that she was buying the tickets for their annual trip to St. Barts today, and could he let her know how many days he wanted to join them for? (His parents still paid for his vacations. He knew better than to ever mention this to his friends.)

"Yes, Ma," he'd say. And then he'd eat his breakfast and leave for the day, stepping out into the world in which no one knew him, and in which he could be anyone.

2

AT FIVE P.M. every weekday and at eleven a.m. every weekend, JB got on the subway and headed for his studio in Long Island City. The weekday journey was his favorite: He'd board at Canal and watch the train fill and empty at each stop with an ever-shifting mix of different peoples and ethnicities, the car's population reconstituting itself every ten blocks or so into provocative and improbable constellations of Poles, Chinese, Koreans, Senegalese; Senegalese, Dominicans, Indians, Pakistanis; Pakistanis, Irish, Salvadorans, Mexicans; Mexicans, Sri Lankans, Nigerians, and Tibetans — the only thing uniting them being their newness to America and their identical expressions of exhaustion, that blend of determination and resignation that only the immigrant possesses.

In these moments, he was both grateful for his own luck and sentimental about his city, neither of which he felt very often. He was not someone who celebrated his hometown as a glorious mosaic, and he made fun of people who did. But he admired — how could you not? — the collective amount of labor, *real* labor, that his trainmates had no doubt accomplished that day. And yet instead of feeling ashamed of his relative indolence, he was relieved.

The only other person he had ever discussed this sensation with, however elliptically, was Asian Henry Young. They had been riding out to Long Island City — it had been Henry who'd found him space in the studio, actually — when a Chinese man, slight and tendony and carrying a persimmon-red plastic bag that sagged heavily from the crook of the last joint of his right index finger, as if he had no strength or will left to carry it any more declaratively, stepped on and slumped into the seat across from them, crossing his legs and folding his arms around himself and falling asleep at once. Henry, whom he'd known since high school and was, like him, a scholarship kid, and was the son of a seamstress in Chinatown, had looked at JB and mouthed, "There but for the grace of god," and JB had understood exactly the particular mix of guilt and pleasure he felt.

The other aspect of those weekday-evening trips he loved was the light itself, how it filled the train like something living as the cars rattled across the bridge, how it washed the weariness from his seat-mates' faces and revealed them as they were when they first came to the country, when they were young and America seemed conquerable. He'd watch that kind light

suffuse the car like syrup, watch it smudge furrows from foreheads, slick gray hairs into gold, gentle the aggressive shine from cheap fabrics into something lustrous and fine. And then the sun would drift, the car rattling uncaringly away from it, and the world would return to its normal sad shapes and colors, the people to their normal sad state, a shift as cruel and abrupt as if it had been made by a sorcerer's wand.

He liked to pretend he was one of them, but he knew he was not. Sometimes there would be Haitians on the train, and he — his hearing, suddenly wolflike, distinguishing from the murmur around him the slurpy, singy sound of their Creole — would find himself looking toward them, to the two men with round faces like his father's, or to the two women with soft snubbed noses like his mother's. He always hoped that he might be presented with a completely organic reason to speak to them — maybe they'd be arguing about directions somewhere, and he might be able to insert himself and provide the answer — but there never was. Sometimes they would let their eyes scan across the seats, still talking to each other, and he would tense, ready his face to smile, but they never seemed to recognize him as one of their own.

Which he wasn't, of course. Even he knew he had more in common with Asian Henry Young, with Malcolm, with Willem, or even with Jude, than he had with them. Just look at him: at Court Square he disembarked and walked the three blocks to the former bottle factory where he now shared studio space with three other people. Did *real* Haitians have studio space? Would it even occur to *real* Haitians to leave their large rent-free apartment, where they could have theoretically carved out their own corner to paint and doodle, only to get on a subway and travel half an hour (think how much work could be accomplished in those thirty minutes!) to a sunny dirty space? No, of course not. To conceive of such a luxury, you needed an American mind.

The loft, which was on the third floor and accessed by a metal staircase that made bell-like rings whenever you stepped on it, was white-walled and white-floored, though the floors were so extravagantly splintered that in areas it looked like a shag rug had been laid down. There were tall old-fashioned casement windows punctuating every side, and these at least the four of them kept clean — each tenant was assigned one wall as his personal responsibility — because the light was too good to squander to dirt and was in fact the whole point of the space. There was a bathroom (unspeakable) and a kitchen (slightly less horrifying) and, standing in the exact center of the loft, a large slab of a table made from a piece of inferior marble placed atop three sawhorses. This was a common area, which

anyone could use to work on a project that needed a little extra space, and over the months the marble had been streaked lilac and marigold and dropped with dots of precious cadmium red. Today the table was covered with long strips of various-colored hand-dyed organza, weighted down at either end with paperbacks, their tips fluttering in the ceiling fan's whisk. A tented card stood at its center: DRYING. DO NOT MOVE. WILL CLEAN UP FIRST THING TOM'W P.M. TX 4 PATIENCE, H.Y.

There were no walls subdividing the space, but it had been split into four equal sections of five hundred square feet each by electrical tape, the blue lines demarcating not just the floor but also the walls and ceiling above each artist's space. Everyone was hypervigilant about respecting one another's territory; you pretended not to hear what was going on in someone else's quarter, even if he was hissing to his girlfriend on his phone and you could of course hear every last word, and when you wanted to cross into someone's space, you stood at the edge of the blue tape and called his name once, softly, and then only if you saw that he wasn't deep in the zone, before asking permission to come over.

At five thirty, the light was perfect: buttery and dense and fat somehow, swelling the room as it had the train into something expansive and hopeful. He was the only one there. Richard, whose space was next to his, tended bar at nights and so spent his time at the studio in the morning, as did Ali, whose area he faced. That left Henry, whose space was diagonal from his and who usually arrived at seven, after he left his day job at the gallery. He took off his jacket, which he threw into his corner, uncovered his canvas, and sat on the stool before it, sighing.

This was JB's fifth month in the studio, and he loved it, loved it more than he thought he would. He liked the fact that his studiomates were all real, serious artists; he could never have worked in Ezra's place, not only because he believed what his favorite professor had once told him — that you should never paint where you fucked — but because to work in Ezra's was to be constantly surrounded and interrupted by dilettantes. There, art was something that was just an accessory to a lifestyle. You painted or sculpted or made crappy installation pieces because it justified a wardrobe of washed-soft T-shirts and dirty jeans and a diet of ironic cheap American beers and ironic expensive hand-rolled American cigarettes. Here, however, you made art because it was the only thing you'd ever been good at, the only thing, really, you thought about between shorter bursts of thinking about the things everyone thought about: sex and food and sleep and friends and money and fame. But somewhere inside you, whether you were making out with someone in a bar or having dinner with your friends, was always

your canvas, its shapes and possibilities floating embryonically behind your pupils. There was a period — or at least you hoped there was — with every painting or project when the life of that painting became more real to you than your everyday life, when you sat wherever you were and thought only of returning to the studio, when you were barely conscious that you had tapped out a hill of salt onto the dinner table and in it were drawing your plots and patterns and plans, the white grains moving under your fingertip like silt.

He liked too the specific and unexpected companionability of the place. There were times on the weekends when everyone was there at the same time, and at moments, he would emerge from the fog of his painting and sense that all of them were breathing in rhythm, panting almost, from the effort of concentrating. He could feel, then, the collective energy they were expending filling the air like gas, flammable and sweet, and would wish he could bottle it so that he might be able to draw from it when he was feeling uninspired, for the days in which he would sit in front of the canvas for literally hours, as though if he stared long enough, it might explode into something brilliant and charged. He liked the ceremony of waiting at the edge of the blue tape and clearing his throat in Richard's direction, and then crossing over the boundary to look at his work, the two of them standing before it in silence, needing to exchange only the fewest of words yet understanding exactly what the other meant. You spent so much time *explaining* yourself, your work, to others — what it meant, what you were trying to accomplish, why you were trying to accomplish it, why you had chosen the colors and subject matter and materials and application and technique that you had — that it was a relief to simply be with another person to whom you didn't have to explain anything: you could just look and look, and when you asked questions, they were usually blunt and technical and literal. You could be discussing engines, or plumbing: a matter both mechanical and straightforward, for which there were only one or two possible answers.

They all worked in different mediums, so there was no competition, no fear of one video artist finding representation before his studiomate, and less fear that a curator would come in to look at your work and fall in love with your neighbor's instead. And yet — and this was important — he respected everyone else's work as well. Henry made what he called deconstructed sculptures, strange and elaborate ikebana arrangements of flowers and branches fashioned from various kinds of silk. After he'd finish a piece, though, he'd remove its chicken-wire buttressing, so that the sculpture fell to the ground as a flat object and appeared as an abstract

puddle of colors — only Henry knew what it looked like as a three-dimensional object.

Ali was a photographer who was working on a series called “The History of Asians in America,” for which he created a photograph to represent every decade of Asians in America since 1890. For each image, he made a different diorama representing an epochal event or theme in one of the three-foot-square pine boxes that Richard had built for him, which he populated with little plastic figures he bought at the craft store and painted, and trees and roads that he glazed from potter’s clay, and backdrops he rendered with a brush whose bristles were so fine they resembled eyelashes. He then shot the dioramas and made C-prints. Of the four of them, only Ali was represented, and he had a show in seven months about which the other three knew never to ask because any mention of it made him start bleating with anxiety. Ali wasn’t progressing in historical order — he had the two thousands done (a stretch of lower Broadway thick with couples, all of whom were white men and, walking just a few steps behind them, Asian women), and the nineteen-eighties (a tiny Chinese man being beaten by two tiny white thugs with wrenches, the bottom of the box greased with varnish to resemble a parking lot’s rain-glossed tarmac), and was currently working on the nineteen-forties, for which he was painting a cast of fifty men, women, and children who were meant to be prisoners in the Tule Lake internment camp. Ali’s work was the most laborious of all of theirs, and sometimes, when they were procrastinating on their own projects, they would wander into Ali’s cube and sit next to him, and Ali, barely lifting his head from the magnifying mirror under which he held a three-inch figure on whom he was painting a herringbone skirt and saddle shoes, would hand them a snarl of steel wool that he needed shredded to resemble tumbleweeds, or some fine-gauge wire that he wanted punctuated with little ties so that it would look barbed.

But it was Richard’s work that JB admired the most. He was a sculptor too, but worked with only ephemeral materials. He’d draw on drafting paper impossible shapes, and then render them in ice, in butter, in chocolate, in lard, and film them as they vanished. He was gleeful about witnessing the disintegration of his works, but JB, watching just last month as a massive, eight-foot-tall piece Richard had made — a swooping sail-like batwing of frozen grape juice that resembled coagulated blood — dripped and then crumbled to its demise, had found himself unexpectedly about to cry, though whether from the destruction of something so beautiful or the mere everyday profundity of its disappearance, he was unable to say. Now Richard was less interested in substances that melted and more interested in

substances that would attract decimators; he was particularly interested in moths, which apparently loved honey. He had a vision, he told JB, of a sculpture whose surface so writhed with moths that you couldn't even see the shape of the thing they were devouring. The sills of his windows were lined with jars of honey, in which the porous combs floated like fetuses suspended in formaldehyde.

JB was the lone classicist among them. He painted. Worse, he was a figurative painter. When he had been in graduate school, no one really cared about figurative work: anything — video art, performance art, photography — was more exciting than painting, and truly *anything* was better than figurative work. “That’s the way it’s been since the nineteen-fifties,” one of his professors had sighed when JB complained to him. “You know that slogan for the marines? ‘The few, the brave ...’? That’s us, we lonely losers.”

It was not as if, over the years, he hadn't attempted other things, other mediums (that stupid, fake, derivative Meret Oppenheim hair project! Could he have done anything cheaper? He and Malcolm had gotten into a huge fight, one of their biggest, when Malcolm had called the series “ersatz Lorna Simpson,” and of course the worst thing was that Malcolm had been completely right), but although he would never have admitted to anyone else that he felt there was something effete, girlish almost and at any rate certainly not gangster, about being a figurative painter, he had recently had to accept that it was what he was: he loved paint, and he loved portraiture, and that was what he was going to do.

So: Then what? He had known people — he *knew* people — who were, technically, much better artists than he was. They were better draftsmen, they had better senses of composition and color, they were more disciplined. But they didn't have any ideas. An artist, as much as a writer or composer, needed themes, needed ideas. And for a long time, he simply didn't have any. He tried to draw only black people, but a lot of people drew black people, and he didn't feel he had anything new to add. He drew hustlers for a while, but that too grew dull. He drew his female relatives, but found himself coming back to the black problem. He began a series of scenes from Tintin books, with the characters portrayed realistically, as humans, but it soon felt too ironic and hollow, and he stopped. So he lazed from canvas to canvas, doing paintings of people on the street, of people on the subway, of scenes from Ezra's many parties (these were the least successful; everyone at those gatherings were the sort who dressed and moved as if they were constantly being observed, and he ended up with pages of studies of posing girls and preening guys, all of their eyes carefully averted from his gaze),

until one night, he was sitting in Jude and Willem's depressing apartment on their depressing sofa, watching the two of them assemble dinner, negotiating their way through their miniature kitchen like a bustling lesbian couple. This had been one of the rare Sunday nights he wasn't at his mother's, because she and his grandmother and aunts were all on a tacky cruise in the Mediterranean that he had refused to go on. But he had grown accustomed to seeing people and having dinner — a real dinner — made for him on Sundays, and so had invited himself over to Jude and Willem's, both of whom he knew would be home because neither of them had any money to go out.

He had his sketch pad with him, as he always did, and when Jude sat down at the card table to chop onions (they had to do all their prep work on the table because there was no counter space in the kitchen), he began drawing him almost unthinkingly. From the kitchen came a great banging, and the smell of smoking olive oil, and when he went in to discover Willem whacking at a piece of butterflied chicken with the bottom of an omelet pan, his arm raised over the meat as if to spank it, his expression oddly peaceful, he drew him as well.

He wasn't sure, then, that he was really working toward anything, but the next weekend, when they all went out to Pho Viet Huong, he brought along one of Ali's old cameras and shot the three of them eating and then, later, walking up the street in the snow. They were moving particularly slowly in deference to Jude, because the sidewalks were slippery. He saw them lined up in the camera's viewfinder: Malcolm, Jude, and Willem, Malcolm and Willem on either side of Jude, close enough (he knew, having been in the position himself) to catch him if he skidded but not so close that Jude would suspect that they were anticipating his fall. They had never had a conversation that they would do this, he realized; they had simply begun it.

He took the picture. "What're you doing, JB?" asked Jude, at the same time as Malcolm complained, "Cut it out, JB."

The party that night was on Centre Street, in the loft of an acquaintance of theirs, a woman named Mirasol whose twin, Phaedra, they knew from college. Once inside, everyone dispersed into their different subgroups, and JB, after waving at Richard across the room and noting with irritation that Mirasol had provided a whole tableful of food, meaning that he'd just wasted fourteen dollars at Pho Viet Huong when he could've eaten here for free, found himself wandering toward where Jude was talking with Phaedra and some fat dude who might have been Phaedra's boyfriend and a skinny bearded guy he recognized as a friend of Jude's from work. Jude was

perched on the back of one of the sofas, Phaedra next to him, and the two of them were looking up at the fat and skinny guys and all of them were laughing at something: He took the picture.

Normally at parties he grabbed or was grabbed by a group of people, and spent the night as the nuclei for a variety of three- or foursomes, bounding from one to the next, gathering the gossip, starting harmless rumors, pretending to share confidences, getting others to tell him who they hated by divulging hatreds of his own. But this night, he traveled the room alert and purposeful and largely sober, taking pictures of his three friends as they moved in their own patterns, unaware that he was trailing them. At one point, a couple of hours in, he found them by the window with just one another, Jude saying something and the other two leaning in close to hear him, and then in the next moment, the three of them leaning back and all laughing, and although for a moment he felt both wistful and slightly jealous, he was also triumphant, as he had gotten both shots. *Tonight, I am a camera*, he told himself, *and tomorrow I will be JB again*.

In a way, he had never enjoyed a party more, and no one seemed to notice his deliberate roving except for Richard, who, as the four of them were leaving an hour later to go uptown (Malcolm's parents were in the country, and Malcolm thought he knew where his mother hid her weed), gave him an unexpectedly sweet old-man clap on the shoulder. "Working on something?"

"I think so."

"Good for you."

The next day he sat at his computer looking at the night's images on the screen. The camera wasn't a great one, and it had hazed every picture with a smoky yellow light, which, along with his poor focusing skills, had made everyone warm and rich and slightly soft-edged, as if they had been shot through a tumblerful of whiskey. He stopped at a close-up of Willem's face, of him smiling at someone (a girl, no doubt) off camera, and at the one of Jude and Phaedra on the sofa: Jude was wearing a bright navy sweater that JB could never figure out belonged to him or to Willem, as both of them wore it so much, and Phaedra was wearing a wool dress the shade of port, and she was leaning her head toward his, and the dark of her hair made his look lighter, and the nubby teal of the sofa beneath them made them both appear shining and jewel-like, their colors just-licked and glorious, their skin delicious. They were colors anyone would want to paint, and so he did, sketching out the scene first in his book in pencil, and then again on stiffer board in watercolors, and then finally on canvas in acrylics.

That had been four months ago, and he now had almost eleven paintings

completed — an astonishing output for him — all of scenes from his friends' lives. There was Willem waiting to audition, studying the script a final time, the sole of one boot pressed against the sticky red wall behind him; and Jude at a play, his face half shadowed, at the very second he smiled (getting that shot had almost gotten JB thrown out of the theater); Malcolm sitting stiffly on a sofa a few feet away from his father, his back straight and his hands clenching his knees, the two of them watching a Buñuel film on a television just out of frame. After some experimentation, he had settled on canvases the size of a standard C-print, twenty by twenty-four inches, all horizontally oriented, and which he imagined might someday be displayed in a long snaking single layer, one that would wrap itself around a gallery's walls, each image following the next as fluidly as cells in a film strip. The renderings were realistic, but photo-realistic; he had never replaced Ali's camera with a better one, and he tried to make each painting capture that gently fuzzed quality the camera gave everything, as if someone had patted away the top layer of clarity and left behind something kinder than the eye alone would see.

In his insecure moments, he sometimes worried the project was too fey, too inward — this was where having representation really helped, if only to remind you that *someone* liked your work, thought it important or at the very least beautiful — but he couldn't deny the pleasure he got from it, the sense of ownership and contentment. At times he missed being part of the pictures himself; here was a whole narrative of his friends' lives, his absence an enormous missing part, but he also enjoyed the godlike role he played. He got to see his friends differently, not as just appendages to his life but as distinct characters inhabiting their own stories; he felt sometimes that he was seeing them for the first time, even after so many years of knowing them.

About a month into the project, once he knew that this was what he was going to concentrate on, he'd of course had to explain to them why he kept following them around with a camera, shooting the mundane moments of their lives, and why it was crucial that they let him keep doing so and provide him with as much access as possible. They had been at dinner at a Vietnamese noodle shop on Orchard Street that they hoped might be a Pho Viet Huong successor, and after he'd made his speech — uncharacteristically nervous as he did so — they all found themselves looking toward Jude, who he'd known in advance would be the problem. The other two would agree, but that didn't help him. They all needed to say yes or it wouldn't work, and Jude was by far the most self-conscious among them; in college, he turned his head or blocked his face whenever anyone

tried to take his picture, and whenever he had smiled or laughed, he had reflexively covered his mouth with his hand, a tic that the rest of them had found upsetting, and which he had only learned to stop doing in the past few years.

As he'd feared, Jude was suspicious. "What would this involve?" he kept asking, and JB, summoning all his patience, had to reassure him numerous times that of course his goal wasn't to humiliate or exploit him but only to chronicle in pictures the drip of all of their lives. The others said nothing, letting him do the work, and Jude finally consented, although he didn't sound too happy about it.

"How long is this going to go on for?" Jude asked.

"Forever, I hope." And he did. His one regret was that he hadn't begun earlier, back when they were all young.

On the way out, he walked with Jude. "Jude," he said quietly, so that the others couldn't hear him. "Anything that involves you — I'll let you see in advance. You veto it, and I'll never show it."

Jude looked at him. "Promise?"

"Swear to god."

He regretted his offer the instant he made it, for the truth was that Jude was his favorite of the three of them to paint: He was the most beautiful of them, with the most interesting face and the most unusual coloring, and he was the shyest, and so pictures of him always felt more precious than ones of the others.

The following Sunday when he was back at his mother's, he went through some of his boxes from college that he'd stored in his old bedroom, looking for a photograph he knew he had. Finally he found it: a picture of Jude from their first year that someone had taken and printed and which had somehow ended up in his possession. In it, Jude was standing in the living room of their suite, turned partway to the camera. His left arm was wrapped around his chest, so you could see the satiny starburst-shaped scar on the back of his hand, and in his right he was unconvincingly holding an unlit cigarette. He was wearing a blue-and-white-stripped long-sleeved T-shirt that must not have been his, it was so big (although maybe it really was his; in those days, all of Jude's clothes were too big because, as it later emerged, he intentionally bought them oversized so he could wear them for the next few years, as he grew), and his hair, which he wore longish back then so he could hide behind it, fizzled off at his jawline. But the thing that JB had always remembered most about this photograph was the expression on Jude's face: a wariness that in those days he was never without. He hadn't looked at this picture in years, but doing so made him feel empty, for

reasons he wasn't quite able to articulate.

This was the painting he was working on now, and for it he had broken form and changed to a forty-inch-square canvas. He had experimented for days to get right that precise shade of tricky, serpenty green for Jude's irises, and had redone the colors of his hair again and again before he was satisfied. It was a great painting, and he knew it, knew it absolutely the way you sometimes did, and he had no intention of ever showing it to Jude until it was hanging on a gallery wall somewhere and Jude would be powerless to do anything about it. He knew Jude would hate how fragile, how feminine, how vulnerable, how *young* it made him look, and knew too he would find lots of other imaginary things to hate about it as well, things JB couldn't even begin to anticipate because he wasn't a self-loathing nut job like Jude. But to him, it expressed everything about what he hoped this series would be: it was a love letter, it was a documentation, it was a saga, it was *his*. When he worked on this painting, he felt sometimes as if he were flying, as if the world of galleries and parties and other artists and ambitions had shrunk to a pinpoint beneath him, something so small he could kick it away from himself like a soccer ball, watch it spin off into some distant orbit that had nothing to do with him.

It was almost six. The light would change soon. For now, the space was still quiet around him, although distantly, he could hear the train rumbling by on its tracks. Before him, his canvas waited. And so he picked up his brush and began.

JB to tell him. “Langston *Hughes*?!” JB groaned. “Let me guess—‘A Dream Deferred,’ right? I knew it! That shit doesn’t count. And anyway, if something really *did* explode, that shit’d be down in two seconds flat.”

Opposite Willem that afternoon is a Thom Gunn poem: “Their relationship consisted / In discussing if it existed.” Underneath, someone has written in black marker, “Dont worry man I cant get no pussy either.” He closes his eyes.

It’s not promising that he’s this tired and it’s only four, his shift not even begun. He shouldn’t have gone with JB to Brooklyn the previous night, but no one else would go with him, and JB claimed he owed him, because hadn’t he accompanied Willem to his friend’s horrible one-man show just last month?

So he’d gone, of course. “Whose band is this?” he’d asked as they waited on the platform. Willem’s coat was too thin, and he’d lost one of his gloves, and as a result he had begun assuming a heat-conserving posture — arms wrapped around his chest, hands folded into his armpits, rocking back on his heels — whenever he was forced to stand still in the cold.

“Joseph’s,” said JB.

“Oh,” he said. He had no idea who Joseph was. He admired JB’s Felliniesque command of his vast social circle, in which everyone was a colorfully costumed extra, and he and Malcolm and Jude were crucial but still lowly accessories to his vision — key grips or second art directors — whom he regarded as tacitly responsible for keeping the entire endeavor grinding along.

“It’s hard core,” said JB pleasantly, as if that would help him place Joseph.

“What’s this band called?”

“Okay, here’s the thing,” JB said, grinning. “It’s called Smegma Cake 2.”

“What?” he asked, laughing. “Smegma Cake 2? Why? What happened to Smegma Cake 1?”

“It got a staph infection,” JB shouted over the noise of the train clattering into the station. An older woman standing near them scowled in their direction.

Unsurprisingly, Smegma Cake 2 wasn’t very good. It wasn’t even hard core, really; more ska-like, bouncy and meandering (“Something happened to their sound!” JB yelled into his ear during one of the more prolonged numbers, “Phantom Snatch 3000.” “Yeah,” he yelled back, “it sucks!”). Midway through the concert (each song seeming to last twenty minutes) he grew giddy, at both the absurdity of the band and the crammedness of the

space, and began inexpertly moshing with JB, the two of them sproinging off their neighbors and bystanders until everyone was crashing into one another, but cheerfully, like a bunch of tipsy toddlers, JB catching him by the shoulders and the two of them laughing into each other's faces. It was in these moments that he loved JB completely, his ability and willingness to be wholly silly and frivolous, which he could never be with Malcolm or Jude — Malcolm because he was, for all his talk otherwise, interested in propriety, and Jude because he was serious.

Of course, this morning he had suffered. He woke in JB's corner of Ezra's loft, on JB's unmade mattress (nearby, on the floor, JB himself snored juicily into a pile of peaty-smelling laundry), unsure how, exactly, they'd gotten back over the bridge. Willem wasn't normally a drinker or a stoner, but around JB he occasionally found himself behaving otherwise. It had been a relief to return to Lispenard Street, its quiet and clean, the sunlight that baked his side of the bedroom hot and loafy between eleven a.m. and one p.m. already slanting through the window, Jude long gone for the day. He set his alarm and fell instantly asleep, waking with enough time only to shower and swallow an aspirin before hurrying to the train.

The restaurant where he worked had made its reputation on both its food — which was complicated without being challenging — and the consistency and approachability of its staff. At Ortolan they were taught to be warm but not familiar, accessible but not informal. "It's not Friendly's," his boss, Findlay, the restaurant's general manager, liked to say. "Smile, but don't tell people your name." There were lots of rules such as these at Ortolan: Women employees could wear their wedding rings, but no other jewelry. Men shouldn't wear their hair longer than the bottom of their earlobes. No nail polish. No more than two days' worth of beard. Mustaches were to be tolerated on a case-by-case basis, as were tattoos.

Willem had been a waiter at Ortolan for almost two years. Before Ortolan, he had worked the weekend brunch and weekday lunch shift at a loud and popular restaurant in Chelsea called Digits, where the customers (almost always men, almost always older: forty, at least) would ask him if he was on the menu, and then laugh, naughty and pleased with themselves, as if they were the first people to ever ask him that, instead of the eleventh or twelfth that shift alone. Even so, he always smiled and said, "Only as an appetizer," and they'd retort, "But I want an entrée," and he would smile again and they would tip him well at the end.

It had been a friend of his from graduate school, another actor named Roman, who'd recommended him to Findlay after he'd booked a recurring guest role on a soap opera and had quit. (He was conflicted about accepting

the gig, he told Willem, but what could he do? It was too much money to refuse.) Willem had been glad for the referral, because besides its food and service, the other thing that Ortolan was known for — albeit among a much smaller group of people — was its flexible hours, especially if Findlay liked you. Findlay liked small flat-chested brunette women and all sorts of men as long as they were tall and thin and, it was rumored, not Asian. Sometimes Willem would stand on the edge of the kitchen and watch as mismatched pairs of tiny dark-haired waitresses and long skinny men circled through the main dining room, skating past one another in a weirdly cast series of minuets.

Not everyone who waited at Ortolan was an actor. Or to be more precise, not everyone at Ortolan was *still* an actor. There were certain restaurants in New York where one went from being an actor who waited tables to, somehow, being a waiter who was once an actor. And if the restaurant was good enough, respected enough, that was not only a perfectly acceptable career transition, it was a preferable one. A waiter at a well-regarded restaurant could get his friends a coveted reservation, could charm the kitchen staff into sending out free dishes to those same friends (though as Willem learned, charming the kitchen staff was less easy than he'd thought it would be). But what could an actor who waited tables get his friends? Tickets to yet another off-off-Broadway production for which you had to supply your own suit because you were playing a stockbroker who may or may not be a zombie, and yet there was no money for costumes? (He'd had to do exactly that last year, and because he didn't have a suit of his own, he'd had to borrow one of Jude's. Jude's legs were about an inch longer than his, and so for the duration of the run he'd had to fold the pants legs under and stick them in place with masking tape.)

It was easy to tell who at Ortolan was once an actor and was now a career waiter. The careerists were older, for one, and precise and fussy about enforcing Findlay's rules, and at staff dinners they would ostentatiously swirl the wine that the sommelier's assistant poured them to sample and say things like, "It's a little like that Linne Calodo Petite Sirah you served last week, José, isn't it?" or "Tastes a little minerally, doesn't it? This a New Zealand?" It was understood that you didn't ask them to come to your productions — you only asked your fellow actor-waiters, and if you were asked, it was considered polite to at least try to go — and you certainly didn't discuss auditions, or agents, or anything of the sort with them. Acting was like war, and they were veterans: they didn't want to think about the war, and they certainly didn't want to talk about it with naïfs who were still eagerly dashing toward the trenches, who were still excited to be in-country.

Findlay himself was a former actor, but unlike the other former actors, he liked to — or perhaps “liked” was not the word; perhaps the more accurate word would be simply “did”—talk about his past life, or at least a certain version of it. According to Findlay, he had once almost, almost booked the second lead in the Public Theater production of *A Bright Room Called Day* (later, one of the waitresses had told them that all of the significant roles in the play were for women). He had understudied a part on Broadway (for what production was never made clear). Findlay was a walking career memento mori, a cautionary tale in a gray wool suit, and the still-actors either avoided him, as if his particular curse were something contagious, or studied him closely, as if by remaining in contact with him, they could inoculate themselves.

But at what point had Findlay decided he would give up acting, and how had it happened? Was it simply age? He was, after all, old: forty-five, fifty, somewhere around there. How did you know that it was time to give up? Was it when you were thirty-eight and still hadn’t found an agent (as they suspected had happened to Joel)? Was it when you were forty and still had a roommate and were making more as a part-time waiter than you had made the year you decided to be a full-time actor (as they knew had happened to Kevin)? Was it when you got fat, or bald, or got bad plastic surgery that couldn’t disguise the fact that you were fat and bald? When did pursuing your ambitions cross the line from brave into foolhardy? How did you know when to stop? In earlier, more rigid, less encouraging (and ultimately, more helpful) decades, things would be much clearer: you would stop when you turned forty, or when you got married, or when you had kids, or after five years, or ten years, or fifteen. And then you would go get a real job, and acting and your dreams for a career in it would recede into the evening, a melting into history as quiet as a briquette of ice sliding into a warm bath.

But these were days of self-fulfillment, where settling for something that was not quite your first choice of a life seemed weak-willed and ignoble. Somewhere, surrendering to what seemed to be your fate had changed from being dignified to being a sign of your own cowardice. There were times when the pressure to achieve happiness felt almost oppressive, as if happiness were something that everyone should and could attain, and that any sort of compromise in its pursuit was somehow your fault. Would Willem work for year upon year at Ortolan, catching the same trains to auditions, reading again and again and again, one year maybe caterpillaring an inch or two forward, his progress so minute that it hardly counted as progress at all? Would he someday have the courage to give up, and would he be able to recognize that moment, or would he wake one day and look in

the mirror and find himself an old man, still trying to call himself an actor because he was too scared to admit that he might not be, might never be?

According to JB, the reason Willem wasn't yet successful was because of Willem. One of JB's favorite lectures to him began with "If I had your looks, Willem," and ended with, "And now you've been so fucking spoiled by things coming to you so easily that you think everything's just going to *happen* for you. And you know what, Willem? You're good-looking, but *everyone* here is good-looking, and you're just going to have to try harder."

Even though he thought this was sort of ironic coming from JB (Spoiled? Look at JB's family, all of them clucking after him, pushing on him his favorite foods and just-ironed shirts, surrounding him in a cloud of compliments and affection; he once overheard JB on the phone telling his mother he needed her to get him more underwear, and that he'd pick it up when he went to see her for Sunday dinner, for which, by the way, he wanted short ribs), he understood what he meant as well. He knew he wasn't lazy, but the truth was that he lacked the sort of ambition that JB and Jude had, that grim, trudging determination that kept them at the studio or office longer than anyone else, that gave them that slightly faraway look in their eyes that always made him think a fraction of them was already living in some imagined future, the contours of which were crystallized only to them. JB's ambition was fueled by a lust for that future, for his speedy arrival to it; Jude's, he thought, was motivated more by a fear that if he didn't move forward, he would somehow slip back to his past, the life he had left and about which he would tell none of them. And it wasn't only Jude and JB who possessed this quality: New York was populated by the ambitious. It was often the only thing that everyone here had in common.

Ambition and atheism: "Ambition is my only religion," JB had told him late one beery night, and although to Willem this line sounded a little too practiced, like he was rehearsing it, trying to perfect its careless, throwaway tone before he someday got to say it for real to an interviewer somewhere, he also knew that JB was sincere. Only here did you feel compelled to somehow justify anything short of rabidity for your career; only here did you have to apologize for having faith in something other than yourself.

The city often made him feel he was missing something essential, and that that ignorance would forever doom him to a life at Ortolan. (He had felt this in college as well, where he knew absolutely that he was the dumbest person in their class, admitted as a sort of unofficial poor-white-rural-dweller-oddity affirmative-action representative.) The others, he thought, sensed this as well, although it seemed to truly bother only JB.

"I don't know about you sometimes, Willem," JB once said to him, in a

tone that suggested that what he didn't know about Willem wasn't good. This was late last year, shortly after Merritt, Willem's former roommate, had gotten one of the two lead roles in an off-Broadway revival of *True West*. The other lead was being played by an actor who had recently starred in an acclaimed independent film and was enjoying that brief moment of possessing both downtown credibility and the promise of more mainstream success. The director (someone Willem had been longing to work with) had promised he'd cast an unknown as the second lead. And he had: it was just that the unknown was Merritt and not Willem. The two of them had been the final contenders for the part.

His friends had been outraged on his behalf. "But Merritt doesn't even know how to act!" JB had groaned. "He just stands onstage and sparkles and thinks that's enough!" The three of them had started talking about the last thing they had seen Merritt in — an all-male off-off-Broadway production of *La Traviata* set in nineteen-eighties Fire Island (Violetta — played by Merritt — had been renamed Victor, and he had died of AIDS, not tuberculosis) — and they all agreed it had been barely watchable.

[READ MORE](#)