

Chapter 6

Ecstasy

The week leading up to the rave passed in ages of desperate impatience. I spun my room into a fashion typhoon. I held more conversations with the mirror than with people. I also started writing several messages to him. *Dear O., I am busy with a project and won't be able to make it. Sorry. Dear O., are you familiar with the notion of twin flames? Dear O., without wishing to alarm you, I'm only telling you this because I thought you might be able to explain it, as I myself have no idea what is happening. After all, I don't even really know you, but I'm somehow frantically in love with you and think I have been since the first moment I saw you. I also feel I'm going a bit mad.* Then I pressed delete. Then it was Thursday.

The night was an extreme blue. The shapes of Bucharest—in their spooky, Soviet melancholy—glowed in orange and green under a thick fog. The Press House, with its ghastly brutalism, rose like a missile from the darkness of a nearby park. There were a few old, industrial facilities around. They were vast and disk-shaped, resembling UFOs. And somewhere on the edges of this picture, a sky tower pierced the storm clouds, producing a jade shimmer. It rained softly.

I had met up with Georgina and Mikaela, who were familiar with this kind of scene. We were jostling our way through a crowd on the steps of Facility B. Georgina was wearing a vintage leather jacket, paired with tight black jeans that suited her pencil legs. Her brown scratchy hair, unfastened, looked just like a barbecue scraper. Her face was heavily painted in shades of black, pink, and peach. Her lips, bloated by lip-gloss, had deep white craters on the border. There was a baroque sort of horror about Georgina and her squinting bird eyes, blazing with intelligence. Next to her, Mikhaela looked perfectly pedestrian. Her jeans were awfully paired with some synthetic boots, a cheap green jacket, a tight white shirt. Something about her shiny, mass-market chicness conveyed—in that typical way

that fashion does—a lack of intellect. As for me, I've always been somewhat of a classicist, with a taste for role-playing. Tonight, I was playing a Russian spy. I wore leather trousers with a see-through turtleneck, and long, suede army boots.

We walked into the lobby area—a low-lit shell with bulging steel ribs where rust sprouted like ancient algae. There was that intensely jumbled noise of social chatter. Five parallel lines of about fifty people flowed and merged into the mass inside. Some eight meters ahead, a man who looked like an 18th century executioner ushered people in, halting the flow at every five or six persons. I could hear a kind of screeching metallic noise, something awful, comparable only to a chorus of power saws with a backup jackhammer striking at intervals of 1-2-1-2. I remember wondering what sort of people listened to this music. The extremeness of it disturbed me.

“Didn’t you say he was like a Count or something?” Georgina’s little, annoying eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I said he looks like a Count.”

“Then what’s he doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean look around you.”

I did. The population seemed a mix of drug addicts, problematic teens, the full buffet of eating disorders, low-management drones, dough-faced pimps and, sporadically, a smartly dressed person, resembling an architect.

“So?” I said.

“So, you seem to think he’s some Nietzschean fuck god.”

“I assume this is where you tell me he’s not.”

Georgina harbored that instinctive caution of the bad girl, who viewed all men as devices of evil. This was owed to a catalog of heartbreaks and a secret, overanxious sensitivity which compile, together, the femme fatale’s entire mystery.

“I’m just saying. No one is a Nietzschean fuck god.”

“Oh, don’t be a dream-killer, Georgina,” said Mikhaela. Mikhaela practiced a very special trademark of diplomacy. Hers was a personality of nervous

submission. She was the kind of girl who laughed and happily agreed with everything you said but would testify against you in a courtroom.

“If he sounds too good to be true”, I said coolly, “it’s only because people in this country are dumb and unattractive. Nobody makes a big deal of being hot and intelligent in New York.”

“Gosh, you’re profound!”

“And I think it’s quite intriguing that he goes to these places. He’s a chameleon. A shape-shifter.”

“I think you should just listen to your heart,” said Mikaela, shivering absent-mindedly.

I said, “Yes, thank you, Roxette.”

Georgina insisted. “All I’m saying, Helen, is you’ve been speaking to the guy for a month, and he hasn’t even asked you out.” With a classy artifice, she sucked in her cigarette, its tip blooming in a fiery disk, before flipping it away with her thumb. The only reason I tolerated Georgina was because the girl had an impossible instinct for style. And not just any style, but a very rare kind at that— independent of money and clothes, drawn directly from some obscurely spiritual source.

“Honestly, Helen”, she was saying, “I thought you were smarter than falling for some—some Whatsapp whisperer. Who might be impotent or—or an adrenaline junky who’s using you for—”

“What could he *possibly* be using me for if we haven’t seen each other? Don’t you see this very detail makes it all so innocent?”

“I don’t know. People are weird. Maybe he’s just sad. Or bored.”

“You’re sad. *And* you’ve bored me. You don’t understand. Neither of you. It’s called ‘Kitab al-Tawq al-something’,” I said, pushing onward through the crowd. “The old Arabian art of prolongation.” They looked at me with that contained superiority of those determined to pity. “Look, I know all of this is—unusual. I know from the outside it seems that he’s just playing me. And that I’m able to see that should prove I’m being reasonable about all this. But it only seems to you that way because—well, because you don’t know him. I know him. Stop looking at me

like that. You look just like a bunch of unimaginative peasants. You don’t know someone by whacking them off in a Peugeot, Georgina. It’s their mind you know—their ideals, their opinions, their *dreams*. The only reason people make a big deal of meeting in person is because they’ve got no writing skills. Everything that’s highest in humans is in writing.”

“You know they’ve got very slick human trafficking schemes these days. They’d pay good money for a specimen like you.”

“Thank you. They’d pay shit for you.”

At that moment, we reached the front and the executioner let us in.

Inside was a bedlam. I estimated a thousand people—moving as a single body under a traveling blue aurora. It was a world I vaguely recognised from nineties music videos. A kind of glitchy, poorly executed *Space Age* aesthetic. Gradually, my eyes adjusted and I captured some snapshots which, by random flashes, meant: bad teeth, eyes rolled back, sweat, failure, poverty, and death. It felt like some scene was cut from *White Sensation*, reimagined on a fifty-dollar budget. A kind of urbanized folk vibe. That cheap, mimetic kitsch that plagues every Eastern-European country.

“The music is soooooo sick!” Georgina was shouting.

Then Mikaela yelled in my ear: “He’s just out of his Milano set! Back-to-back for twenty-four hours! Travels with a doctor! Stabs him back if he slips into a hole!”

Then Georgina again: “He’s soooooooooo sexy!”

The man at the turntables looked like a sick fish dying in the moonlight. Thin as a stick, with wisps of black hair plastered on a huge forehead. His bone-white face looked like it was carved from soap scum. He could’ve easily starred in those “*Don’t Do Drugs*” campaigns for teens. I smiled at them a sad, indifferent smile. Around us, bodies were leaping in every direction. A jungle of enchanted clinging vines—shoulders and fingers and appendages, and sometimes a pale face shining in the limelight. I took out my phone and wrote him: *Where are you*, as pulses of light drilled into my eyes, explosions of red and blue revealing mouths wide open in an animal abandon. The bodies churned together, inhaling and exhaling in rhythm,

vanishing and reappearing in the light beams like ghosts under the moon. I kept pushing, squeezing, looking around, drifting through the human sea—a ghost on the Styx searching for the Dark Prince of the Underworld—until my phone jerked in my hand and, by now gasping for air, I looked down and opened his message. Then I seized Georgina and Mikaela and dashed toward the stage.

I saw him first. He was twisting his head from left to right with a kind of childish expectancy. For a second, I stood and watched him. The bodies around him seemed to slow, as if dancing underwater. A vivid demonstration of time-distorting love. He was wearing a white t-shirt and dark jeans with a jumper on the hips. He seemed to engage with three men and two women. Both the women had the puffy, asexual air of middle-aged nannies. They wore shapeless jeans, round-collar blouses, and denim jackets which emphasized their side hips. Jealousy was out of question.

When he noticed me, he smiled with a kind of relief, and we stood there for a moment, silently locking eyes in the chaos, and the world around us froze and seemed to hum with a kind of liturgical awe. I pushed through the bodies, jerking Georgina and Mikhaela by the hand, an extremely nervous impatience now pulling me towards him with that violent gravity of love. I felt all kinds of throbbing emotions, and the absolute need to repress them, and the twitching, beastly lust for his hands on my flesh in that squalid atmosphere, when one of the nannies suddenly snatched him and—just as I reached them—kissed him on the mouth.

The mind fails you when exposed to things it wishes to reject. Bluntly put, how I felt that instant was how one might feel if their face slid off their skull. His lips pressed back with a routine kind of ease. The kind of kiss given in kitchens, over a casserole of potatoes. They knew each other, intimately.

“Helen!” he said, embarrassed.

I was glued to the ground.

“What took you so long?!”

I nodded absent-mindedly, smiling, a bit crazy.

“This is Helen, guys! She’s a—she’s a friend of mine!”

A friend. He might as well have called me his cup holder. I shook everyone’s hand, smiling in pain—met Daniel, and Alex, and Adam—while Georgina and Mikaela mingled with the women. Then we pivoted and it was my turn to meet them. One of them was his old schoolmate.

“And this is Clara!” he said of the other. “My wife!”

Oh, Dark and Devious Lord. “Come again?!” I said.

“I’m Clara! Claaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrraaaaaa!”

“Yes, thank you!” I smiled. “Nice to meet you!”

I wanted to die.

At this point in the story, I should stop to say something. There is a violence in writing. A kind of toxic-intelligent-invisible violence. This force works quietly, slowly poisoning the soul’s most vulnerable properties. The right words *can* kill. Fortunately, I don’t know the subject well enough to find pleasure in its suffering. And a writer must practice control in his tricks. Like a King on pardoning day, he must separate the riffraff from those who’ve earned their crucifixion. So, for the purpose of our story, I will say only this of Clara:

She was neither beautiful, nor ugly. She was not fat, nor thin. Her eyes revealed no kindness, but they betrayed no cruelty either. She was tall and generously gifted on the hips. A kind of slow, lazy, giant-like appearance. With ash-blond hair, and abnormally crammed features on a very wide face, there was a blankness to Clara that repelled even curiosity. I could not read anything in her. She seemed—as I thought then—a living, breathing, softly-crystallized blankness (like a plump cloud) to the extent that what I felt in the moment was not hatred at all, but the cringey, almost happy discomfort of a snow leopard greeting a sheep.

Next, I felt rage. A feeling that I could explode. This was worsened by Georgina, who was now giving me that impertinent “I-told-you-so” face. I was so angry I wanted to kick her. And then the strobes dimmed, and the lasers stopped, and an awful quiet sank. Stillness. Blackness. A gust of air and a flurry of murmuring life traveling through the blackout. How could I haven’t guessed that he was married? *Why* had I not thought of it? I wondered if it was possible to weep

without sound. To leave was out of question. I had to boil in the torturing embarrassment long enough to disassociate my exit from it. I had to *act* normal. As if I didn't love him. As if the entire world was another one, and I was a different person, and he was a different person, and Clara was just an unremarkable appendage. Yes, an act. A role. But how to do it? No one would expect of anyone to act under demonic possession. It is the same with love. Acting is impossible, for the sheer reason that acting is a break from self—inhabiting an outside position. One cannot simply break from self when the inside is frothing.

I was thinking all this when the drop hit like a bomb, and the crowd came alive, and pushed and swelled with wave-like momentum. I tried dancing, moving, but my legs were full of stiffening substance. Formaldehyde? This just as Georgina and Mikaela were pulling my hands up, shouting in my face, adding to my misery an annoyance so deep, my vision blurred with tears. I felt that I could smack him, then kiss him, then angrily make love to him. And with this, I felt the woozy warmth of his aura on mine. I sniffed the physical smell of his body. I saw the lustrous black coil of his hairline. Then he turned his head slightly, the pores on his neck catching a strobe light, erect like dandelion seeds, as my stomach churned in cycles of sweet agony. And Clara's chubby smile behind him—in the early stages of a neck lump—who bobbed her head like some well-nourished farm bird. *How* could he have married such a woman? *Why?* The discrepancy between them seemed perverted almost—morally and intellectually wrong—not unlike a hostage situation. When she started grinding against him, I turned and shoved through the crowd, half-blind from the strobe lights, hunting for some space where I could think and weep liberally, and by the time I'd reached the bathroom, my eyes gushed a hot river. A girlfriend was one thing. A wife would be basically immovable. Oh stupid, cursed, clown-faced Georgina. She'd never let me forget this.

Selection of a place to cry is always a matter of personal aesthetics. It can add an extra torturing element to the act of suffering. It is far superior—for example—to suffer on a serpentine sofa than a festival toilet, and those who scorn this, clearly are insensitive to the soothing power of art and beauty. I bent over the sink and

splashed my face with water. On the floor, there were Beetlejuice tiles that climbed halfway up the green walls. The mirrors were scrawled with lipstick and marker. A neon above spread a dim, chlorophyll light, filling the space with a Korean horror vibe.

Three girls stood beside me, each with their respective sink. One had very close eyes—something stupidly round, almost owl-like about them. The other was short and plump and looked, with her purple plaid skirt and white crop top, like a cupcake. The third was the leader of the pack. About her there was something aristocratic—an English duchess swapped at birth. Perhaps it was her elongated jaw, or her bulbous, lashless eyes, or the way she patted her cheeks gracefully with scrawny hands. But there it was, shining through the hand-me-downs and chipped black nails, just as it always does. That calm, conscious self-possession.

“What's wrong, Babygirl?” the Duchess asked.

“Nothing,” I sniffled.

“Looks like something.”

I was intent on ignoring them.

“Bad place for love, babe.”

“He hit you?” said Cupcake.

“What? No! He—God no!”

“Must've done something.”

“How do you know it's a man?” I said, annoyed. Owl-face eyed me vulgarly. “Um,” I fumbled for words, “I—I meant a woman has ample reasons to cry.”

“Ample?” The Duchess was washing her hands. “I don't know about ample.” She shut the spout and shook them of water. “But there are two things in the world I'd cry for.” A short, studied pause punctured by the paper towel ripping. “Way I see it, ain't no shit worth cryin' for except for true love and spilled blow.” She made a little poof of imaginary powder in my face. “And you ain't no coke kind of girl.”

“She ain't?” said Owl-face.

“Look at her boots,” said Duchess. “Her boots are worth more than your kidneys, Roxanne. Nah—I bet you're some big shot's daughter.”

“Fall for the doorman’s son, babe?” They sneered three ashy, joyless sneers. “He brought you here?”

“Does Daddy know you’re being a baaaad girl?” This, Owl-Face said while opening her mouth and baring a fat, thick-crusting tongue which made me gag inside.

“I doubt my father knows anything about me,” I said while tying my hair.

“It’s okay. We won’t tell him. We like bad girls.”

I stared at them with the lifeless boredom of someone opening a tuna can.

“Want something that’ll make ya’ feel better?” The scruffy duchess thrust her hand into her scruffy bag and took out a pill. She held it up with three talismanic fingers. “Takes aaalll your royal pains and makes them disappear.”

“What is it?” I said with hasty curiosity.

“It’s called a Heineken.”

“You mean like a ddd-drug?”

They exploded in laughter. “Nobody says ‘drug’ anymore. Whataya think this is? Trainstopping?!”

“It’s just a happy pill.” said Cupcake. “Don’t you like being happy?”

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

I started to leave but then I heard, with a kind of superb rhythmic theatrics, like some 80’s hairspray commercial: “And in half an hour, you’ll feel hotter than Beyonce.” I had to give it to the Duchess—she could muster a good catchline.

The truth is it seemed like a bad deal to trade my lucidity for a transitory happiness. It would dissolve as quickly as it arrived. Confidence, on the other hand—that unteachable flair of inhabiting oneself—fitting cozily inside one’s body, style, ideas, language—is indeed the *empress* of all human feelings. I could even argue that in chasing happiness, whatever the brand, we are really just seeking a smug sense of inner coherence. Obviously, I took the thing and popped it in my mouth. Then I walked out.

I had barely taken two steps when I saw him—his Spanish head blackened by the background lights. I was starting to wonder if all my heart flapping could

induce a full-blown heart-attack. With an epic use of will, I pushed past him. It is nearly impossible to walk in the opposite direction of the person you love. Every molecule in your body resists it. I walked on, blindly. Though I was afraid to look, my whole being apprehended his body behind me, very hard and very clear. When he touched my elbow, I lost it. I shouted, turning around:

“You’re married!!!”

“I am?” That devilish smile. “What gave it away?!”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“Are we being naggy now?!”

“N-no, but—”

“It makes no difference!” he shouted. “And you never asked!”

“Not asking doesn’t justify withholding!”

“Right then . . . Well, Officer, this is just one big misunderstanding—”

“Why did you invite me tonight?! Am I some kind of joke to you?! Was this your idea of a fun little sick....test?!”

“She wasn’t supposed to come!”

“This can’t go on!”

“We’re being precocious again...”

“I mean it!” I grabbed his neck and shouted in his ear: “You can say your little Oxford Dictionary words, but this must stop, *whatever* it is!” For mysterious reasons, I felt the need to shout again: “I mean it!”

He angled his head down, tensing his brows while also arching them in a sort of seductively sly smirk. He was proud of my retort. Then he leaned in, pressing his palm on the wall, so that I was barricaded by his chest. He stared at me and I stared back, and for a second, I was no longer me, but something captured and pinned down—like a butterfly in a jar—and all I wanted was to stay there forever.

The next thing he was pulling me through the crowd. We were merging with a thick, dark mass—fingers, mouths, and half-formed faces. As we pushed through them, they jolted like jellyfish. Surrounding us: a light storm, smoke blasting down, purple lasers zooming over a red haze. My eyes, along with the communication of our torsos, were stimulated to an almost critical level. We pushed in deeper,

dancing in bursts—he moving with that feline assurance of his, engaging with strangers, hips fluid as mercury, shouting “Ye-ye-ye!”, then laughing, then turning with a smirk to face me, pulling me closer. I was in Heaven. I was in Heaven and stars were exploding before me, so that I simply couldn’t see.

Without delay, he grabbed my waist, so that I could feel all the crests and canyons of his body, very hard and very specific. He gripped me tighter and began rolling his hips on mine, as my womb filled with sap and my mouth squeezed out a sigh. I wondered if under all the bass and drums, I could moan and grunt freely. Then all my inhibitions melted and, as I grabbed his neck, so the hammering of the music seemed to quicken—becoming clearer, louder, faster, *harder*, while our noses brushed in the dark and we exchanged wet lungfuls of brisk breath. We were a blur, a delirious damp blur of flesh, probing fingers, open mouths trembling with want, as giant jellyfish around us leapt and squeezed us in between their silky bodies, adding to our closeness an extra coat of compression. His mouth grazed my ear and my sex burst into a flight of doves. The rhythm stuttered, glitched, gasped, dropped with the erratic gentleness of flapping hands, whistles in the synthwave, the drum machine rising again, faster and louder, like a thumping heart on the verge of collapse. I wondered how in the world it would be possible to stop, to pull apart, if the act of pulling apart, by some acute hormonal crash, wouldn’t just kill me.

Over his shoulder, strobe lights sliced across the bodies. I saw spilled gin on the floor sparkling in rivers, the confetti of cigarette ash, a red sequin winking in a blue light—so lonely and beautiful, it almost made me cry. We continued our dance in the flurry of the waning hours. Around us, bright shafts sliced the air like winter mist spilling from a canopy. I felt sick with joy sensing the dandelion pores of his neck hardening under my touch and his veins bulging with blood. I felt also, as I watched the ornamental globe floating above the crowd like an ice-cream bowl, that I could rip my clothes off and run track sprints on the walls.

A kind of vibrating voltage settled in my body. My vision sharpened. My touch awakened. I could feel the texture of the air coiling like snakes around my fingers. I felt as if I’d reached the peak of everything—like a cheetah on the grassland—

every muscle fiber burning with freedom, the world under my toes spinning full-orbit. I dashed around the globe like lightning, dove from a cliff straight into Milky Way, threw a rope around the cosmos—through the entirety of space and time—and across its knot his hips were locked on mine. Some primal sexual energy that threatened to destroy me flew between our groins like a bright, magical cord. I felt like Prometheus. Chosen, powerful, formidable. I was on fire, fire, FIRE. And not just that, but then some irrepressible speech demon possessed me to shout in his ear:

“Oh, I feel so AAAAALIIIIIVE! I want to!—I want to!—to—AAAGGGHHH!!!—”

His brows shot up in surprise. It is remarkable what the unshackled subconscious of a blossoming young woman holds. Especially one of the Orthodox tradition. I did not have the words for the pictures in my mind. Only the body’s ancient memory, grunting and contorting like some large primeval worm. I rolled my eyes and tilted my head back. I felt full and I felt free. The urge to remove my clothes and be naked was unbearable.

“Did you take something?!” he yelled in my ear.

“Whaaaaat?!?!?”

“Pills! Did you take a pill?!”

My eyes swelled in an innocent stare, but then I remembered the scruffy duchess in the bathroom and, laughing and flapping my hair, I yelled:

“Yes! I think so! Ohhhh yes, yes, YEEEEES!”

Orange dots with neon blue antennas—which I took as fireflies—appeared behind his head. Then the roof unwrapped and above us were billions of stars, and the people danced in tall emerald grass.

He chuckled with a kind of affectionate awe. “Have more where that came from?!”

“Some girl gave it to me in the bathroom!”

“Do you know her?!”

“NOOOOO!” I was laughing hysterically again.

“Do you remember the name?”

“I don’t know her!”

“The pill!”

More moaning and hair-flapping.

“Oh, you’re so young! So painfully young!” He pulled my head into his shoulder, then, looking into my eyes with a kind of parental sternness, he said: “How much did you take?!”

“Just one!”

“One whole?!”

I nodded like a well-behaved child, to which he took my arm and tugged me through the crowd until we reached the part of the club just outside the bathroom.

“Look,” he said earnestly. “I’m going to ask you to do something foul! And you’re not going to want to do it, but I’m afraid you’ll just have to!”

And just like that, my ghostlit Victorian romance crashed violently into the present. I stared at him with a mix of confusion, clarity, sadness, disgust. I could feel—with a kind of gag impulse—the pious little preacher that my mother so thoroughly trained, rearing up inside me like a mouth toy.

“Listen—”

“Let go of me!” I jerked my arm. “Who do you think you are?! I may be in this—this *heightened* state, but I’m NOT one of your bimbos! Sex is SACRED to me! SAAACRED!” I started fanning my face with my hands. “You think I’m going to just open my thighs and have you squash me against some toilet bowl?! My GOD! I don’t know what’s worse! White neon on pale skin, or—or the MORAL problem!” I fanned faster, harder. “Oh, how STUPID I’ve been! You’re just like all of them! And to think that all this time I thought—well, I thought I was in LOVE with you! But you—you—you DISGUST me!”

“Are you done?”

“And what’s so great about sex anyway?! You do it, it’s done. I was hoping you had more imagination than that! Jesus—” I said, still fanning, “—why is so HOT in here?! Aren’t you hot?!”

“You don’t listen well, do you?”

“Let’s just go outside or something. I think I’m gonna be sick!”

“Look, I want you to go in there and put three fingers down your throat. Can you do that for me? Very deep and very fast.” I gulped. “It’ll make you throw up. You’ll feel better after, alright? Will you do that for me?”

“And why on Earth would I ever *do* such thing?”

“Well, because, with the three-hundred milligrams of methamphetamine you have in your body, for the first time judging by your bearings—plus other possible toxins—let’s see—benzocaine, fentanyl, laundry detergent”—I blinked rapidly — “you just might get to live. Ok? Come on, go now, please.”

The sudden jolt to consciousness came accompanied with dread. I had taken God knows what experimental drug from the scruffy duchess in the bathroom who, in an effort to get rid of it, gave it to me. My heart pounded dangerously. My body shook in cold drops of sweat. I was three minutes away from a most unattractive swoon, complete with heaving, shaking, perhaps some bodily emissions. And then, of course, there was the question of dying. I was pressed back on a wall, trying very hard to remember my name, my birthday, little crazy facts such as: “*You like white peaches with cream, you hate filth, you like white peaches with cream, you hate filth.*” Then my name flew away in a sandstorm. When small green men began attacking the place, and I was sure the party was an alien conspiracy to take us to some deep-space human experimentation farm, I grabbed the door frame, pulling myself up, and walked—stumbled, actually—into the bathroom. In the corner of my eye, I saw him whisper something to a horse-faced girl who looked like a Victorian farmer. I entered the bathroom and faced a lineup of laughing, spinning African masks, from which I escaped by running into a toilet stall, straight into the arms of its inhabitant.

Oh sweet, frosty, soothing porcelain. I’ve always had a thing for china, ceramics, all sorts of sharp-shiny-cold things. With fabulous flair, I expelled an ocean of puke inside the toilet bowl. What a strange sense of peace there is in being your body’s powerless vessel. Letting yourself go to the power of its physiology, as

if taken and shaken by some ancient force. In retrospect, it is extremely pleasurable.

Immediately, a stillness took hold of my body. I had never felt such peace in my life. Through my damp hair, I looked up at a yellow brightness slowly coming into focus, and inside of it I saw a female head—the Virgin Mary—no—Anna Karenina—no, oh gosh—my Mother! She smiled at me from the almond-like halo, her face soft with love, and I relaxed and melted like syrup on her chest. Now she was cooing in some mysterious musical language. Perhaps baby-talk. Perhaps I had died, after all. If death stands any resemblance, I'm not surprised so many junkies go looking for it. Her mouth travelled over my eyebrow to my cheek, as darkness fell for a moment and I saw her as a young girl—blonder and fleshier—a blurred mint silhouette in an old hospital, with my father by her side, holding a baby, holding a girl, holding . . . me. The significance of the image hit me instantly and I whimpered with sorrow and fear. If I wasn't dead, I was *definitely* dying. I wanted to scream at them, to tell them that I loved them, that I was sorry—no—to save me, to grab my hand and pull me out from the silky yellow luminance back into the real world, but then her lips fastened on mine and I froze. Gently at first, then, as I struggled to break free, with increasing pressure, like some life-sucking octopus. I was kissing my mother. My mother was kissing me. It was something spiritually horrific, as if one's brown guts had spilled outside and become the tangible world. Demonic, I remember, was a word that came along with my impression of it. A half-born, shape-shifting demon, writhing into being through the most depraved insinuations. The violence of the thing launched me into another gagging fit, but she held my face and jammed her tongue in deeper, as I squeezed out tears of indefinable disgust.

"Helen? Are you all right?" I heard from some distant exterior.

My name again.

"HELP!" I managed to yell.

Then a pounding on the door which blasted the demon and in place of Mother's head, in front of me—in a fuzzy, increasingly defined pink glow—was a creature, animal in nature, a horse maybe, yes, a horse! I nearly fainted from

horror. I wanted to run, it looked like the animal might bite my head off, but my legs would not work and my heart was thumping so fast that any extra effort might have killed me. The animal then began morphing into a carrot slush of red-brown hair with a white sort of tongue in the middle—a terrible, terrible picture!—then cartilages sprung out from the tongue, and puffy eyeballs, and skeletal contours rendering at last . . . a human head. It was the horse-toothed farmer I'd seen outside the bathroom. She had a look of depravity and, by all appearances, had kissed me after I'd vomited. Had sampled—literally—the punchy purée of my very essence(s). Finally, I opened the door.

There, in the contre-jour, was The Savior himself, come to rescue a pilgrim from the tests of the desert. Apparently, he'd asked the girl to aid me in my gagging. With a great hypnotic silence, he fixed her with his eyes, and she absorbed it all, then went away.

"How do you feel?", he said to me.

I brushed past him, trying to rinse my mouth with saliva. How I felt was like some alien had raped me in a weird initiation process. The word "changed" came to mind.

"Fine", I muttered and splashed my face with water.

"Let's go home", he said in a gentle, fatherly authority.

I wanted to sob like a baby.

Walking out, I found an opulent blast. Cigarette ash, torn wristbands, a tide of napkins soaked in mud. Only a few foot-draggers were circling in orbits. The rest, like a Renaissance fresco, lounged decadently on sofas. We pushed past curtain into the lobby. Smoke stuffed the air, giving the LED lamps a certain mystical quality. I checked my phone. Nearly six in the morning. And Georgina had left me a message. Georgina who I'd utterly forgotten and now miserably remembered. She was sorry about what happened, but she did tell me there was something shady about the bloke, I just wouldn't listen, but she's there for me whatever happens, she and Mikaela, perhaps we could all have a call tomorrow? I cursed inside.

After I got my coat, he took my hand and pulled me through the hallway—past a snoring bodyguard, past a groping couple—some sharp light above revealing beer crates and a bubblegum galaxy freckled around multi-color screw caps. It was like a scene in *True Romance*. Like we were acting in some pulpy crime drama, smeared with erotics and the full litany of biblical sins. My mind was playing *Soft Cell* somewhere in the background. Then we pushed our way under the red burn of the Exit sign, out into a blushing sunrise. Birds were chirping.