

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MANHUNT*

GRETCHEN FELKER-MARTIN

BLACK FLAME

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WANT
IT?





Gretchen
FELKER-MARTIN

p r e s e n t s

Black Flame



NIGHTFIRE

Tor Publishing Group

N E W Y O R K

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For

Danny AND Halina

*We have such sights
to show you!*
—Clive Barker, *The Hellbound Heart*

Sometimes, watching a movie is a bit like being raped.
—Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*

THE CAST AND CREW OF
The Baroness

Written and directed by KARLA BARTOK

Score by ANTONIN GOLDNER

Karla Bartok *as* THE BARONESS

János Varga *as* THE CHAMBERLAIN

Ilya Kapfelberg *as* THE BEAUTIFUL BOY

Mehdi Ionescu *as* THE ABBESS

Weronika Zamfir *as* THE GIANTESS

The Baroness

Staten Island

1985

The Baroness stepped forward, head thrown back and nostrils flared, bloody knife raised high. Her pancake makeup seemed to blaze in the garish glow, and as she raised the severed head—a silly prop, really, just wax and papier-mâché and some sort of fake blood oozing from the neck—Ellen forced herself to take a breath. This kind of thing always made her think of Freddie, made her think of the midnight shoot and their fight and that long, terrible drive home after they'd broken up. She wiped the sweat from her upper lip with her handkerchief. On the projector screen the Baroness was laughing, spots flickering on the print. It was in rough shape. Badly degraded. It went to black mid-shot, the projector hissing.

Their visitor from Berlin's Institut für Filmerhaltung, a plump and professorial man by the name of Josef Haas, pushed himself back from the conference table and popped to his feet as the projector wound down. For a moment he was bathed in its silvery-white glow, his ruddy cheeks and graying push-broom mustache rendered demonic by harsh shadows, and then the light clicked out, the overhead fluorescents came on with a whining buzz, and he was just a short, fat man in rumpled clothes again. He smiled warmly and began to speak.

“Incredible, isn't it? Still captivating fifty years later. We'd believed it was lost, most likely burned after the SS raided Bartok's country house in thirty-five—a crackdown on so-called degenerate artists—until liquidators found the negative and a selection of varyingly intact release prints stored in the attic of a foreclosed apartment unit belonging to one Ernst Schlemecher, a former Nazi party official living under an assumed name. The whole place was packed to the rafters with wigs and riding crops and ivory dildos—that sort of thing. During the war he managed a warehouse

where the SS stored evidence against undesirables, most of it eventually burned or forgotten, but as conditions in Berlin deteriorated he was able to smuggle out a great deal of subversive material. One wonders how he might have felt about playing such a central role in returning Bartok's work to the public eye, but as fate would have it, he spent the last weeks of his life in a vegetative state."

"A queer Nazi," Phillip chuckled, shaking his head as he flipped his notebook shut and capped his pen. "Jesus."

Haas looked uncomfortable. Ellen wondered if he was gay. Her palms itched at the thought. It wasn't that she didn't like gays; it was just that they unsettled her, made her feel trapped and nauseous and panicked. A dog locked in a hot car. They'd taken enough of her life. *Your own fault*, said a small, nasty voice in the back of her head. *You're sick. Wrong.*

William Shrier cleared his throat, breaking the tension and drawing all eyes to the head of the table. "Incredible, yes." He was a big man in his midsixties, red-faced and fleshy with enormous hands and a nearsighted squint. A haze of cigarette smoke swirled around his gray-suited bulk. He'd helmed the Path Foundation since well before Ellen's time. "And far from our usual remit. We restore American films here, Mr. Haas. *Significant American films.*"

No one said out loud that the last such film, *White Knight*, directed in 1911 by avowed Klansman Richard Truett Cathy, was the reason the Path was taking private inquiries at all, but the knowledge hung in the air like a bad smell. They'd lost contract after contract in the week after the story broke, ferreted out by Rachel Feldman at the *Times*. They were on life support now, kept afloat by fringe lunatics and academic contracts with universities too big and too old to care about a little bad press. Modern conservatives didn't make movies. They didn't care about movies. There was no money coming from the Buckleys and Limbaughs of the world, no matter how quickly they'd rushed to the barricades during the height of the scandal.

"Publicity will be largely on the German end," said Haas. "This is a film of the utmost importance to *world* cinema, Herr Shrier. It would also go a considerable way toward demonstrating your sympathy to the Jewish people."

Mr. Shrier pursed his lips. Ellen glanced at the Institut projectionist, respooling the reel. She didn't want to work on this. *The Baroness* was ugly. Disturbing. Men in drag performing bizarre occult rituals. Beasts and devils of papier-mâché and rubber cavorting on soundstages made to resemble wooded glades. Lascivious bodies grinding and touching. Needles pulling skin. They needed the money, would probably have to shutter the whole Foundation without it, but she found herself staring hard at Mr. Shrier, hoping that he'd turn it down.

The woman sitting to Haas's right, Willa Katz, smirked a little as she knocked a cigarette from a pack of Camels and plucked it with her cherry-red lips. She was maybe forty—Bartok's niece, or his great-niece. Ellen couldn't remember. She blew smoke, white clouds of it from her mouth and nostrils swirling together. "A million dollars," she said. Her English was thickly accented. *A mill-yun doll-hairs*. "If it's—kā tu to saki? If it's *good work*, bonus of two hundred thousand."

That wiped the smile off Phillip's face. Ellen just stared, not really believing what she'd heard. No one in archival science had that kind of money to blow on a single restoration. Not the BFI, not the Academy, not Wolfson. It was enough to keep the lights on for another six months, and if it *did* wash the bad taste out of the industry's mouth it would put them on strong footing to reclaim lost grants, find new backing, do all the things Ellen had listened to Tanya in Accounts Payable tear her hair out over since the *White Knight* debacle. Everyone at the table fell silent.

Ellen wished that Mr. Shrier would turn it down anyway, would send it somewhere else. Maybe give it to Scorsese, for the archive he was trying to fund. Let him try to sell America on demons and crazed Jewish drag queens. It was shlock. Garbage. It frightened her. This kind of thing could hurt people.

Mr. Shrier's brow furrowed. He leaned forward, his big hands clasped on the tabletop. "Mrs. Katz, with all due respect, why isn't the Institut handling this restoration itself?"

"There are certain ... *tensions* in Berlin," said Haas. "Right-wing radicals. Critics of Mr. Bartok's work among the city's social elite. Mrs. Katz is concerned about the possibility of censorship. Or sabotage."

"We do have an opening in our pipeline next week," said Tanya, stepping deftly into the uncomfortable silence. She turned a page in the

binder laid out in front of her. “Here. Once the *Robin Hood* prints ship back to Warner Brothers.”

“If we agree,” said Mr. Shrier tightly, greed and distaste at war on his broad features, “any announcement of our involvement will have to wait until after our board convenes next month.”

Mrs. Katz exhaled a thin stream of smoke. She sucked some back into her nostrils. “You Americans. So sensitive.” She tapped ash into the ceramic dish in front of her. “Labi. Fine.”

There was a lot of back-and-forth after that. Delivery timeline, different film-cleaning solutions, international copyright. Tedious. They hadn’t needed Ellen after all. They so rarely did outside the lab. She sat in silence as Mr. Shrier explained the plot of *The Iceman Cometh*’s Broadway adaptation to a bemused-looking Haas, thinking of the Baroness’s wild stare and bloodied hands, of the flickering torchlight throwing her shadow vast upon the walls of her ruinous castle. Her job now.

She would just have to grin and bear it.

★ ★ ★

“Ellie works in film,” said Ellen’s father as he cut his New York strip into neat, identical cubes. The meat was gray; Brad Kramer never ate anything without first ensuring it was totally devoid of both color and moisture. “She restores the classics. Aren’t you working on that Reagan picture, El? *Angel Face*?”

“*Angels Wash Their Faces*,” said Ellen, picking listlessly at her mesclun salad. She hated eating at Le Hollandaise. Everything on the Brooklyn bistro’s menu felt like it was trying to outsmart her, and winning. “That was years ago, Daddy. We have a few things in process now. We’re getting a new—”

“Interesting stuff,” said Brad. “Don’t you think, Jesse?”

Jesse Cavill, Ellen’s dinner companion, smiled. He was a small man, an inch or two shorter than Ellen, with neat, dark hair and a narrow face. “Absolutely, Mr. Kramer. My father always says, without art, what would this city be?”

“Boston,” said Ellen’s mother, Janet, dropping first one olive and then another into her third martini of the evening.

Everyone laughed. Ellen felt as though she were stuck in an aquarium, looking out at herself as she ate and made small talk. Jesse was her mother's idea, the son of old bridge friends. They'd played together summers in Montauk, apparently, but Ellen had no memory of it. She remembered finding a dead dogfish on the beach at the point, its cold, black eye staring up at her, a rotten fish reek wafting from its open mouth. She remembered her cousins Madison and Morgan holding her under the surf, Maddie's hand on the back of her neck. She remembered going to the Chester with her father to see *The French Connection*. Gene Hackman sweating in the dark as he stripped the French guy's car, fingers probing its oiled crevices. Jesse Cavill was just a name. A color. A smell she couldn't quite recall.

After dinner, as Ellen's parents waited for the valet to bring their car around, Jesse asked if he could walk her home. He took her arm and led her down the sidewalk through the falling snow. Snow, on December 1. The city already looked like a postcard. Freddie had loved to hold her arm in public, though it had always made Ellen nervous.

Someone will see. It could get back to my parents.

And you're ashamed of me.

No—not—I'm not—

Spoiled white girl out here playing house. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking.

Freddie, don't—

The crowd thinned as they turned down Grand off of Dean, walking under the LIRR. Pigeons roosted on the beams, cooing in the quiet between trains. Their droppings blanketed the steel. Their molted feathers drifted in the air. Jesse pushed her gently back against a bridge support and rose up to kiss her. It was timid. Awkward. His mouth tasted of the Shiraz they'd had with dinner, and of some bitter, acrid lip balm. His hands lingered near her arms, fingertips brushing the sleeves of her wool coat. A car whipped past behind him, the wind ruffling their hair and sending fresh snow swirling around their feet. He broke the kiss, smiling sheepishly. There was a deep, sucking need in his eyes.

"Thank you," said Ellen.

He hovered behind her as she unlocked the front door of the brownstone where she lived. He came up the stairs like a small, nervous dog, eyes

darting to and fro, nostrils twitching at the smell of incense in the air. In bed he was hesitant and fretful, pawing at her with his slender fingers, his soft palms. A few times he said, "Um, could you..." in a plaintive voice, but trailed off without finishing. When he softened inside her he would reach down and work himself frantically, the head of his circumcised penis rubbing against her inner thigh.

Will you fuck me?

Freddie's long, sculpted features smeared and shifted in her memory, like oil on glass.

I don't use it like that.

Jesse came on her leg with a thin, whimpering grunt. A little more wetted the sheets. For a moment something very much like hatred flashed across his features, but then without warning he ducked his face between her legs and poked the tip of his tongue at her vulva. The phantom taste of his lip balm filled her mouth. He kept a tight grip on her thighs as he licked at her, never making more than a moment's contact. His saliva cooled on her skin. He clambered over her leg and came to lie beside her, his big blue eyes alive with excitement.

"I've never done that before," he whispered, as though sharing a delicious secret. "Did you come?"

She stared at the ceiling, wishing there was something—a stain, water damage, a whorl in the plaster—to let herself dissolve into. It would have been more bearable than lying there next to his *need* as it swelled to cover her, as it pressed itself against her skin and slopped over the edges of her double bed, as it climbed the window like a slime mold following a trail of sugar. She thought of the Baroness in her iron and leather bustier, her hair slicked down beneath a backswept headdress, eyes like Norma Desmond's staring deep and mad into the camera.

"Yes."

Technical Selection

The Brickworks had never made bricks. Ellen wasn't sure how it had gotten its name, except maybe that it was made of red brick and looked a little like a factory. Long and narrow, it stretched for nearly a block along the Kill Van Kull and towered six stories high. A half mile of offices, restaurants, gas stations, and ports insulated the building from the island's suburbs, which meant getting up at five to beat the rush across the Verrazzano-Narrows, the sky still dark, the air so cold the insides of Ellen's nostrils froze before she reached the bodega on the corner.

A sausage, egg, and cheese on an onion bagel. A pack of Camels. A copy of the *Times*. Rattling along the streets on her first bus as shopkeepers rolled up their aluminum doors and unlocked their security gates. Babies crying in their mothers' arms. Men looking at her. Edging closer. A transfer at Sunset Park, the sun just up and blinding white, and then a second bus, this one much quieter, across the dizzying bridge over the Narrows, New York Harbor flashing like a silver mirror on her right.

Ellen was early today. She stepped off her last transfer and into the warm, ozone-smelling updraft of a subway vent, her quilted winter coat rustling in the wind. Molly sat where she always did, leaning against the wall in the recessed and unused security entrance to the old glove factory, her good leg and the stump of her right hidden within a blue sleeping bag patched with peeling duct tape. She broke into a smile when she caught sight of Ellen among the other disembarking passengers. "There's my girl," she croaked.

Ellen dropped onto the stoop beside the other woman, handing over the brown paper bodega bag she'd carried from Brooklyn. Molly had a Camel in her mouth and lit within five seconds. She sucked deep lungfuls between bites of her sandwich. "How are things at the shelter?" Ellen asked.

A plume of smoke. The crowd from the bus had nearly dispersed. Molly sniffed. “Bad,” she said. “Getting worse. You see the president, tell him come on down to Our Lady, I want to talk to him. See if he knows what to do with these babies dying. Least it’s warm.” Molly fell silent for a moment. Worry creased the corners of her cloudy eyes. “Bless you, honey. You all right? Still got all your teeth?”

“Top and bottom,” said Ellen, smiling a little.

“And the blues?”

“Better,” Ellen lied. She stood, smoothing the front of her coat. “You should quit those things, Molly.”

“You read the news?” Molly tapped the front page of the *Times*. A nightclub burning in black and white. Eighty-three dead. She blew a smoke ring. It wavered through the air until it met the updraft of the vent and blew apart in ribbons of pale gray. “Maybe you should start.”



Phillip was already in the lab by the time Ellen made it up to the fourth floor and scrubbed in. She could hear his music through the thin foam insulation of his Walkman’s headphones. Elvis singing “Don’t Be Cruel,” his voice tinny and far away. She thought she remembered that song playing in her father’s Coupe de Ville as Jacob and Mallory bickered on either side of her in the big back seat. A trip somewhere, the summer of ’62 or ’63. She’d loved to watch her father’s big hand on the steering wheel, so steady and assured. Seagulls wheeling over water somewhere. Oyster Bay? She’d always hated Elvis.

She headed to her examination bench, where the final reel of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* awaited her. The idiots at Warner had run it threaded wrong God knew how many times; all three reels were covered in minute cuts and scratches, to say nothing of the dirt and grime and fingerprints that still needed to be removed. She sighed, considered ducking out for a fresh coffee from the break room on four, and then reached grimly for the paper cup half-full of yesterday’s she’d left on the little collapsible table beside her chair and sipped at it. Cold. Burnt. She set it down, pulled on a pair of latex gloves, checked the notations she’d made in her project log listing every imperfection still to be rectified, and put her foot on the

selector pedal under the bench, advancing the frames slowly. The frame counter on the back of the bench ticked up. There. Errol Flynn stared back at her through the magnifying lens from a soundstage Sherwood Forest, his eyes bisected by a little slit. Probably a flange had done it. Once she'd dealt with the last tears the final reel would be ready for the ultrasonic cleaner.

Ellen bent low over the magnifying lens, which spanned the bench's three tracks from front to back. With fine-tipped tweezers she gently teased the edges of the cut out from where they'd curled under, smoothing them flat with a gloved fingertip. The new adhesive tape was much better than the old Dow stuff, which had tended to wrinkle, but still it took precision to bring the cut together without bowing the three frames it crossed. It would show, but with the neg in such poor shape and no known release prints any better off, it was the best they were going to get. Anyway the whole project was aimed at a VHS rerelease, so nobody really cared what it looked like. She cut the tape on the dispenser's lip and pressed it carefully into place. Errol Flynn's eyes were whole again, except for a needle-thin line where the cut had been. She crossed out the entry for 2-3206-9 in her log and advanced the print.

The faint warble of Phillip's music faded from Ellen's awareness as she lost herself in the reel. Work was the only place she felt like herself. Everything else ran together. Her parents, Jesse, dinner at her sister's in Sands Point, the bus, the LIRR, the subway roaring through the dark. At her desk it felt like reality slowed down enough that she could take it in, that its problems could be fixed, its inhabitants understood and predicted. Things were so much simpler in celluloid.

For a split second, she remembered the little movie she'd shot on Fire Island, the only time she and Freddie had ever really gone out together. Freddie's dark eyes, wide and frightened and excited. Freddie's perfect lips, stained from eating strawberries. The little roll of her belly spilling over her bikini bottoms, the most erotic thing Ellen had seen before or since.

Ellen forced the memories down. She'd been sick then. Confused. Dr. Decker had helped her see that. It had felt good to throw off convention in college, to play the firebrand and scream at her parents about Israel and Apartheid and the prison industrial complex, but heroin felt good, too, at least early on. Then it started eating through you. Everywhere you looked you saw injustice, struggle, another fight to pick, and none of it changed

anything. None of it meant anything. One big, selfish ego trip, and it was never enough. People still called you *rich girl* behind your back, still asked you why you didn't cut your parents off, why you didn't boycott this, protest that, use *this* word instead of *that* word on your sign for the march.

In the lab, Ellen's problems were known and clean and simple. Her brain and hands offered up solutions without conscious effort, applying solvents and removing debris, transforming clutter into clarity. She took Errol Flynn, all ripped apart and fuzzed with little motes and smears of darkness, and turned him back into a smirking knave in bloused sleeves and a feathered cap. The kind of man her parents dreamed she'd marry. The kind of man *she* dreamed of marrying, she reminded herself as she spot-cleaned around another tear before taping it. The kind of man who would touch her in ways she'd never felt before, whose lips and fingers and private parts would awaken all her body's dead, cold places.

You're killing me, her mother had said. We'll never hold your children. It will kill your father. And Bubbe, all she went through, think what this will do to her.

Sometimes she almost made herself believe it, in the mental haze of solvents and adhesive fumes after a long day bent over a reel, that the right man could make her feel alive as nothing in the past thirteen years had done. More often she knew she would lie still and cold beneath a thousand Jesse Cavills as they squirmed and trembled on top of her, set there like dolls by her parents, by their parents. Sometimes the thought that any baby she had would be *like her* intruded at the edges of her consciousness. What would happen to it, if it were?

Are you saying something happened to you? You got better. That's all. Dr. Decker fixed you. He opened you up and drained all that pus and stinking sewage, and it became another woman and went off to do whatever evil things those women do. It left you clean, and whole. And empty.

She pressed the pedal, advancing the reel another frame. Another. Flynn's smile disappeared into a ragged, widening tear that stretched to the reel's end.

Some things couldn't be fixed.

★ ★ ★

The ultrasonic cleaner, a sort of glass-fronted tower the size and shape of an armoire, loomed at the far end of its own room adjoining the lab, its solution tank lit from within so that a watery amber light played over the tiled walls. There was a faint whiff of trichloroethane in the air, a sweet and dreamy smell, like fresh-baked ladyfingers cooling on the counter, but not enough to worry Ellen. The vents were always on in here, a hollow, booming whine of distant fan blades sucking gases up and out of the room. A few years back Norman Wilkes, a technician at the Kodak lab in Baltimore, had died when a blocked vent stopped drawing air while he was working overnight. By the time he realized something was wrong he'd been too dizzy to escape the room, too winded to call for help. They'd found him the next morning in a puddle of his own cold piss, the big Lipsner cleaner still whirring away at the cartoon he'd threaded. Donald Duck chopping down a tree while Chip and Dale looked on, mouths open in silent horror.

Ellen unlocked the pneumatic glass doors of the cabinet. Inside, the top half of the cleaner consisted of two cams and a foot-wide metal frame containing staggered vertical rows of padded wheels. The frame hung from a chain a little like a bicycle's attached to a small motor that would lower it into the tank of trichloroethane once the film was threaded. She took the reel out of its case and locked it into the right-hand cam, then ran the film painstakingly back and forth through the padded cleaning wheels before clamping the tail, six feet of blank film attached to allow the rest of the reel to move freely through the machine, to the smaller left-hand cam. It took nearly a quarter of an hour to thread all three hundred feet, and by the time she was through she felt a little lightheaded.

She closed and locked the cleaner with a sigh and peeled off her gloves, wrinkling her nose at the feeling of latex tugging at her skin. She set the machine and crouched to watch as it began to unspool, the frame sinking into the chlorine solution, the film playing out through the amber liquid. The buffing wheels spun up with a throaty whir. In a few days the print would be duped and the new master sent back to Warner Brothers, probably to be neglected and torn apart by idiots again.

Errol Flynn flickered through the amber gloom, dirt swirling black around him.

It was dark out when she left the Brickworks a few minutes after six, passing first through the empty lab. Phillip always left a little before five. A biting wind blew in off the Kill Van Kull and there was no sign of Molly at the bus stop. Ellen felt a pang of guilt; she'd meant to bring the other woman lunch, but it had slipped her mind. She boarded her bus and unfolded the newspaper she'd bought that morning, paging past the headlines without reading them.

Arts and Culture, her regular weeknight date. There was a Carpenter double feature playing at the Rosewood in half an hour. *Halloween* and *The Thing*. She chewed her lip. She was tired, but the idea of going home to her cold, empty apartment held no appeal, and she knew she wouldn't sleep. She kept thinking of *The Baroness*. Those wide, staring eyes. That blazing pancake makeup. Those strong, long-fingered hands gripping the hair of her victim's severed head. Ellen shivered, folding the paper. Sleet pounded the bus's windows. Its wheels hissed through the mounded slush and grayish snow. The other passengers swayed in their seats beneath the dim overheads, looking out into the dark.

By the time she reached the Rosewood, two stops and three blocks later, she was damp and half-frozen, her fingers stiff, her nose itching with the cold. She got her tickets and went to the restroom to warm herself under the hand dryer, hanging her coat on one and holding her hands under the other until her knotted joints began to relax a little. It wasn't until she was cleaning her fogged glasses over the sink that she heard the noise from the stall farthest from the door. Soft, insistent little sounds. A gasp. A whimper. A low voice, speaking quickly.

Ellen froze, the tap still running. Without meaning to she found herself creeping step by careful step across the tiled floor until she was close enough to press an ear to the enameled steel door of the stall.

"... make you my dog," whispered a woman's husky voice. "Sleep at my feet, lick my hand, come when I call you."

A second voice, tremulous. High. "Please, Princess. *Please*."

"Do you want it?"

"More than anything."

The sound of a zipper.

"Get on your knees."

Ellen jerked her head away as if burned, a fierce blush rising in her cheeks. She snatched up her coat and ran out of the restroom, making a beeline for the main theater across the carpeted lobby with its rococo molding and glass-fronted concession counter. *Get on your knees.* The voice hissed like a snake, slithering around and around in shrinking circles in her head as she joined the light crowd going up the steps and shuffled through the dark to take a seat beside a fat, bearded man in a newsboy cap and Jets windbreaker. She folded her coat over her lap, picturing chapped lips an inch from an ear festooned with piercings. *Get on your knees.*

“Let’s All Go to the Lobby” began as the rest of the audience filed in, chattering and tearing open candy wrappers while they took their seats. Popcorn and soda and boxes of candy strutted on-screen, singing in their old-timey voices. Buy us. Eat us. It struck Ellen as grisly, suddenly. Some wit in the back popped a bottle of champagne, sending the cork flying across the room and nearly giving Ellen a heart attack.

“You all right?” asked the man beside her, sounding genuinely worried. Ellen only nodded. Her heart raced.

Do you want it?

The commercials started. Dennis Hopper. F. Murray Abraham in lace cuffs and silken hose. It all passed in a blur. Before Ellen knew it they were well into the first movie, Donald Pleasance directing his haunted gaze to left of camera. “I met him fifteen years ago,” he said, his tone hushed. “I was told there was nothing left; no reason, no conscience, no understanding in even the most rudimentary sense of life or death, of good or evil, right or wrong.”

A smeared, distorted white mask drifting through the dark. A knife. A pretty brunette screaming.

Do you want it?

To kneel on the cold tile, looking up at a lover’s bare stomach, at the undersides of heavy breasts, braless under a rain-dampened sweatshirt, at a cruel smile and tangled golden hair. Eye shadow smudged and running. Chipped fingernail polish. The zipper’s halves coming apart without a sound, and the smell of piss and sweat and pussy in her nostrils. The taste on her tongue. Denim rubbing rough against her face. Coarse curls, and slick velvet beneath.

Please, Princess.

The second movie. A dog running flat-out over a frozen wasteland, a helicopter in pursuit. A long, lean Black man roller-skating through the halls of a cluttered research station. Her seatmate left, sidling past her and tugging down the brim of his cap as on the screen flesh bloomed and twisted, bubbled and ran like mercury. Opening and opening and opening.

Ellen looked along her row. Only two other people, a couple making out at the far end, bathed in liquid swirls of light as a flamethrower roared in the endless dark and cold. Slowly, she slipped a hand under her coat. The heat was almost overwhelming. Even through the front of her slacks it was like touching something molten. She pressed her palm against herself as Kurt Russell gathered blood in petri dishes, trying to divine which of his fellow researchers were alien flesh hiding in familiar skin. She stroked herself, exerting just enough pressure to pull the liquid fire deeper up into her belly. Her breathing came a little fast and ragged.

Get on your knees.

“Looks fun,” a man’s voice whispered in her ear. “Mind if I join you?”

She was up and heading for the door before he made it over the back of the seat next to hers. From the corner of her eye she saw him coming after her, a skinny white man a few years younger than she was, big ears and cropped, dark hair. What had she been thinking? She was mortified. Her face burned. Her hands shook as she hurried down the steps and out across the lobby.

“Hey!” the man shouted after her. “Wait!”

The freezing rain had stopped, at least, but the cold cut like a knife as she stepped outside, still struggling into her coat, and waved down a passing cab. It pulled up to the curb, sending a tide of half-melted slush over her feet. She pulled the door open and slipped inside. “Hancock and Jefferson, in Bed-Stuy.”

“Hey!” The man again. Angry now.

The cab driver pulled back into the sparse traffic. Looking over her shoulder, Ellen saw the man standing alone on the curb, silhouetted by the light of the theater’s facade. She felt his breath on her neck again and shivered, her skin crawling. She thought of the boots under the door of the bathroom stall and raised a hand to cover her mouth, hot tears suddenly threatening to spill.

What’s wrong with me?

★ ★ ★

There was a message from Jesse on her answering machine when she got home. *Hi, Ellen, I had such a wonderful time with you. I'd love to see you again. Call my secretary at—*

She went to bed.

★ ★ ★

The office was quiet when she got in the next morning. Most of the Foundation was in Jersey for most of the week; some kind of convention about new solvents and EPA regulations. Phillip was spooling up a new print at his desk. He looked a little pale. "Couldn't sleep," he said, smiling wanly at her look of surprise at seeing him already in. "Your new one's coming in soon, by the way."

They met the usual delivery guy, Darryl, at the freight elevator doors a few minutes later. Ellen signed for the long, flat crate, which Phillip and Darryl lifted together onto one of the low tables built into the lab walls. The nails squealed as they pried it open, releasing a strong chemical stink. Inside, four cans lay tightly packed in sawdust, each one with a hand-lettered label, English under the German. SHOW 1, SHOW 2, NEG 1, NEG 2.

"Foreign movie, huh?" said Darryl, pushing up the brake locks on his dolly with the toe of his boot.

Ellen nodded. She signed the receipt form on his clipboard, her signature tight and illegible. Something about Darryl always made her anxious and irritated. His big, wide frame and bulging calf muscles left her feeling inadequate, somehow, as though she were stunted. A runt. She left Phillip to finish up with him and went to unpack the show print, wiping sawdust off the cans with a clean cloth. They'd been oiled recently and the first one opened without a sound. Ellen's heart sank at once.

The print was in pitiful shape, covered in tears and debris. Parts of the first reel were heat-damaged, warped and crinkled, images faded beyond legibility. The second boasted several long stretches in which dozens of cells had been spotted with solvent, and at some point someone had done a slapdash job applying what Ellen thought might be homemade RenoVex to parts of both reels in an attempt to preserve them, warping and discoloring them further.

It took an hour just to spool them at her table, and under magnification the credits, already spidery and hand-lettered, were hardly legible, and scratches and debris hid most of the opening sequence, the beautiful young hero climbing the steps to the Baroness's castle through a fog of slits and artifacts left behind by detritus on the film.

"Jesus, what a mess," said Phillip, appearing at her shoulder. He was smoking again, something Ellen had begged him not to do in the lab a hundred times. "We just got the master for *Bedtime for Bonzo* from Universal; you should see what those clowns did to it."

"In a minute," said Ellen, not looking up. "Put that out or take it outside, would you?"

"It's freezing out," he complained. "I practically lost the tip of my nose getting here. We should be getting hazard pay."

"Mm-hm." She bent closer to the magnifying lens, advancing the selector through the Baroness's first appearance. "Take it up with HR, Shackleton."

He dropped the cigarette into her coffee and left, muttering under his breath. She ignored him. Giving in to the anger crawling under her skin would only make it worse. Phillip wasn't above spreading rumors. A few years earlier he'd told half the secretarial pool she moonlighted as an exotic dancer, a salacious little piece of nastiness people had enjoyed pretending to believe. He was a man; he could point her out at lunch and whisper to the man beside him, "I fucked her," and that would be the truth as far as everyone else was concerned. Ellen pinched the bridge of her nose as hard as she could stand and then took a deep breath.

There was no point in thinking about it.

★ ★ ★

By three in the afternoon there was no getting around it; the show print was shot. Next to unusable, except for the last quarter of the second reel. Ellen slouched in her seat, rubbing her temples. She kept thinking of the bathroom stall at the Rosewood, of the boots under the door and the voice she'd heard through the metal. She took a sip of cold coffee without thinking and spat it out at the taste of ash and nicotine. She needed a fresh cup. *She* needed a cigarette. Sighing, she got her coat and took the service

elevator down to the alley between the Brickworks and the warehouse next door. The air was dry as a bone and so cold she felt her nose hairs freeze before she got her cigarette out.

An ambulance whizzed through the slush at the far end of the alley, sirens wailing. Ellen exhaled. The wind took the smoke at once. It drifted out over the Kill Van Kull, which was running fast and dirty. She wondered what it would feel like to leap in feetfirst. The smack of the river's surface. That overwhelming shock of cold. Would she fight, or would she sink right away? Was it peaceful down there in the dark, among the broken bicycles and rusted cans? She ground the cigarette out under her heel and went back inside.

The negative's first can was so rusted that Ellen had to get a hammer from the maintenance department in the basement and knock the hinges loose before she could get it open. Sweaty and a little winded, she hauled it across the lab and slotted it into place on her desk's first rack. She sprayed and washed her hands at the station by her little unused office, then pulled on a fresh pair of gloves and sank back into her seat.

Delicately, she smoothed out the start of the strip on the work surface with her palm. For its first few feet the film was ragged at the edges, marred by bubbles and pits. It looked almost like an acid burn. Squinting, she lifted the print and scooted her chair closer to her desk. There was something odd about the opening cells, something about the Baroness's castle. The selector advanced. Not a single frame, but a dozen all at once. The end of the reel hissed through Ellen's hand, slicing through her glove. A fiery line of pain burned across her palm and thumbnail followed by a deep, vertiginous wave of nausea.

She shot to her feet, head swimming. Her chair clattered to the floor. Her coffee spilled, Phillip's sodden cigarette rolling across the floor. Blood poured from her cut hand onto the work surface, spattering the print. It welled up thick and dark from her thumbnail, which had been split down to the bed. Her vision narrowed. Blood dripped from the edge of the desk.

"Ellen?" Phillip called. "Are you all ri—oh, *Jesus*."

The world shrank to a keyhole; the room spun. A wall. A light. The shipping crate, pale fingers emerging from within to grip its side. The floor. Footsteps.

The keyhole closed.



Ellen drifted back into consciousness a little at a time. She was somewhere bright and clean. There were people around her. Her right hand hurt, especially the tip of her thumb. She blinked. The shadows moved.

Someone was talking now, a gray-haired blur smoking a cigarette by a window. The building nurse. Any workplace that handled film treatment chemicals had to have one. It was an OSHA reg, she vaguely remembered. She'd done a training with the woman when she'd first been hired in '79. Marlene or Darlene. Maybe Darla. Something like that.

"Hey, there you are." Phillip, sounding at once relieved and patronizing. He bent into her field of view from her left, face hazy, eyes pale smears. "You gave me a real scare, kid."

Ellen coughed, fumbling her glasses on one-handed as she straightened. She was in a padded leather chair in the nurse's office, and the sun was almost set. Her right hand was tightly bandaged. Her mouth was dry and cottony. "What happened?" she croaked. She remembered film running swift and black across her hand, like an adder.

"You stepped on the pedal," said Phillip. He swam into focus as she got her glasses situated. He looked a little pale. His sleeves were rolled up and there were stains under his armpits. "The edge of the reel really got you. How are you feeling?"

At the window, the nurse lit another cigarette from the cherry of her last. She was thinner than Ellen remembered her, a gaunt and bony woman of perhaps fifty, her short gray hair stiff and spiky. "It missed the tendons," she said in a thick, gravelly French accent. She waved her cigarette dismissively. "You'll lose the nail, but it grows back."

"Thank you." Ellen didn't know what else to say. She felt lightheaded. She didn't want to look directly at her hand. She couldn't remember stepping on the pedal. "Is the print all right?"

Phillip grinned. "Told you it'd be the only thing she cared about." He chuckled. "It's fine. You didn't get any blood on it."

Ellen screwed up her face in discomfort as she turned and put her feet on the floor. The last thing she remembered was red covering the darkened cells. Maybe she'd been confused. Still, there had been so much blood.

The nurse looked unimpressed. “Eat something,” she said. “Stop in tomorrow, I will change the bandages. Now I’m closing up.” She tapped ashes into her tray. “And don’t shower.”

Phillip helped her out of the nurse’s office and into the hall. They passed a note board full of complaints about stolen lunches, ads for roommates, plant sitters, dog walkers. All the mundane little bonds that kept a place like the Brickworks in a state of sullen détente. She knew some of her coworkers knew about her past. She knew Phillip had probably poisoned others against her with invented trysts and scandals. He’d once told her that he’d spent a passionate night with three supple young switchboard operators at a conference in New Hampshire in ’72. She would never fit in.

That’s not why I work here, she told herself. Her thoughts moved a little more easily. She felt steadier. *I do it because I’m good at it, because I like it, because my father called in favors for me. I work here because it keeps me safe.*

“You need help getting home?”

Ellen shook her head. “No. I’m going back up. I want to square the prints away before I punch out.”

“Jesus, save some fun for the rest of us, Kramer.”

He left her at the elevators. She resented the assumption that she’d handle his time card, although she would. He was always doing this to her. Gingerly, she flexed her injured hand. It hurt, but not so bad she wouldn’t be able to handle the print or the table. She felt an unreasonable anxiety over working off the negative, though even a quick glance had been enough to confirm it was the only real choice. *It didn’t bite you,* she told herself as she rode up to the lab, still a little woozy and holding her bad arm against her chest. *It’s just film. It slipped.* She must have stepped on the selector, though she had no memory of it. How else could it have happened?

The elevator stopped. The doors slid open with a bright, metallic *ding*. Someone stood outside the Accounts Payable offices at the far end of the hall, their hand on a doorknob and their face lost in shadow. Most of the building’s fluorescents were off for the night, but a single bank burned pale and lonely over them. The figure wore black. They were very tall.

“Hello?” Ellen called. She stepped out of the elevator. “Tanya?”

The figure disappeared into the office, ducking under the doorway. For a moment, before the door closed behind them, Ellen could hear breathy

laughter. Then the click of a lock turning, and nothing. She stood still for a moment. A private party. Mr. Shrier and the rest of the Foundation's brass were gone and someone was taking advantage. She turned and headed in the opposite direction, looking back over her shoulder only once. A light flickered beneath the door the stranger had gone through.

★ ★ ★

In the lab she spent the better part of an hour disinfecting her desk and chair, rubbing at the half-congealed blood with a soapy rag, breathing bleach fumes through a paper mask. A little blood had gotten on the show print, but there was none on the negative except a thin film on one edge where it had cut her. She softened it with soap and water before gently, slowly scraping it away with a scalpel. It should have been everywhere. She remembered blood pouring over the cells. Blood dripping from the edge of the desk.

The floor was worse. Her blood had swirled together with the spilt coffee to create a tacky, gummy mess that smelled of copper and burnt coffee beans. At least it went quicker with nothing important to work around. By the time she was done her cut had bled through her bandages and her split nail was stinging and itching furiously. A little bleach must have soaked through the tape and cotton. She shoved her rags into the garbage chute and washed up, peeling off the nurse's neatly wrapped bandages to expose the wound beneath, tidy little stitches marching from the heel of her hand up to the base of her index finger. Water swirled red in the emergency wash sink, then pink, and finally clear before she turned the tap off and painstakingly rewrapped her hand.

Her chair creaked as she sat, blowing out a long, weary breath. The first reel of the negative lay where she'd left it. After a moment's hesitation she pulled it across the desk and spooled it onto the receiving rod. She guided the magnifying lens into position. For what felt like minutes she stared in disbelief at the print, and then she pushed the lens away and switched off the desk light. She rose and got her coat. She didn't let herself think the unthinkable until the elevator doors closed.

The castle, so clearly a cheap miniature in the show print, was real in the negative. It couldn't be. Not really. She crossed the lobby and went out into

the howling winter wind. She rode the bus in silence among swaying passengers, faceless in winter hats and scarves. *Maybe it isn't a release print*, she thought, looking out the window. Snow whirled through the dark. *Maybe it's a test. An early cut. They made a mock-up of a set they couldn't get, then something changed and they reshot on location.*

By the time she arrived at her apartment she had almost convinced herself the whole thing was a figment of her imagination, that getting cut had addled her, left her suggestible and spooked. That was when she saw Jesse Cavill, bundled up in an enormous overcoat, sitting on her building's front steps. Her heart sank. She wanted to take a Seconal and forget her day, not listen to Jesse whimpering.

"Ellen," he said, a little plaintively. "I was worried. You weren't answering your phone."

She stared at him. He looked pathetic, his nose red and running, his eyes watery. "I was working."

"I left messages," he countered defensively, struggling to his feet. "You didn't answer."

"Jesse..." She sighed. "It's cold. I'm tired."

Tears glistened in his long, dark lashes. "I'm here for you. Why are you pushing me away?"

"I just want to go to bed."

Jesse seized her injured hand and dragged her up the steps. Ellen couldn't breathe. She stumbled on the stairs and banged her knee. Black spots danced in her vision as Jesse got an arm around her waist and pushed her ahead of him, releasing her hand and propelling her to the door. "Then let's go," he sobbed. "If that's all I am to you, let's go up and ... and *fuck*." He said it like a fussy teenager, simultaneously horrified and enthralled by his own boldness.

Ellen leaned against the door, winded, her wounds burning as though she'd dipped her hand in molten lead. A wave of black depression crashed over her. She found her key and led him through the mudroom and into the hall. The doors muffled the sound of the wind.

He came after her. He was saying something, voice whiny and needling, covering her in little cuts until all her feelings ran out of the flapping, empty purse of her skin and soaked into the carpet. She kicked off her boots. She left her coat on the floor at the foot of the stairs. Meltwater from her hair

soaked the collar of her turtleneck as she led the way upstairs and down the hall to her bedroom. She sank onto the edge of her bed, staring at Jesse as he stood in the doorway, childlike in his enormous coat and scarf. He looked at a loss.

“Aren’t you going to fuck me?” she asked. Blood dripped from her bandages to stain the rug.

For a moment she thought he might actually do it, but he only blushed and looked away. “I just wanted to make sure you were all right,” he said stiffly. “I’ll leave now.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ellen. “It’s been a terrible day.”

Jesse sniffed. “For me, too.”

He’s so weak, she thought as he undid the buttons of his peacoat. She laid back on the blankets and let him squirm on top of her. She thought of the beautiful boy climbing the steps to the castle, of the miniature and the looming edifice of stone. Jesse’s face eclipsed her view of the dome light, two darkened bulbs and a clot of dead flies revealed by the flickering third.

“I love you,” he told her as he undid the button of her slacks. “Is it too soon to say that? I don’t care.” He touched her face. His other hand clawed at the waistband of her underwear. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I love you,” he said again as he pushed himself into her.

Ellen thought of the bathroom, of the boots beneath the door, of the voices whispering behind it.

Do you want it?

Jesse’s thrusting pushed her up against the headboard. He closed his eyes, sweat beading on his furrowed brow. His mouth hung open like an imbecile’s.

More than anything.

The Negative

“Just saw Rodney Dangerfield getting out of a car over on Sea Gate and Wadsworth,” said Phillip, voice muffled by the bagel clamped between his teeth. He shucked his coat and peeled off his winter gloves before taking a bite. “They’re shooting something in Grasmere. I hear Pesci got shitfaced in the Narrows last night.”

“Hmm,” said Ellen. Her brother, Jacob, liked Rodney Dangerfield. He’d once spent an entire summer on the Cape driving the rest of them insane playing his records over and over in his room.

I get no respect ... when I was a kid and we’d play hide and seek, nobody would look for me.

She advanced the release print, then shifted the lens up to the negative track. In the cold light of day the difference between the two opening sequences was even more stark. The same boy looking back over his shoulder, but completely different lighting, different locations. That was all. No mystery, no magic. Just two separate shoots. It was almost disappointing.

The negative was in much better shape than the release print, but there were still tears, debris, and scratches to mark in her little notebook, distortions and gaps in the aged film’s gel coating, missing intertitles. The thousand little things that made up a film, and which the slightest error could destroy, obscure, or mar beyond saving. Ellen tried to keep her focus on practicalities as much as she could. The film itself disturbed her. Men in women’s clothing. Children capering in costume as imps and gargoyles. Dark splashes of blood across pale skin and wetted stone. Bodies writhing in elaborate tangles. Rubber and leather. Iron and broken teeth.

The beautiful boy—Ilya Kapfelberg, she’d learned while scanning the credits—made his way through the elaborate festivities and arcane horrors of the Baroness’s castle, begging to deliver his message to its unseen

mistress as her guests subjected him to grotesque indignities and tests of courage and wit.

In one sequence, masked and costumed guests brought the boy deep into the castle's bowels where a form twice a man's height stood wrapped in burlap and chained to a wall, unseen limbs pushing against the cloth in disturbing configurations. The boy was made to kneel. A laughing noble made a small cut in the fabric with a knife. Ellen could hardly make herself look at the curved and hairless penis that emerged. It made her sick. Glistening fluid on the boy's fair cheek. Dripping from his perfect lower lip.

A duel. A tryst. An orgy. A nun opening her habit and a nearly seamless cut to a centipede's writhing legs. A bald man disappearing bit by bit as he climbed a crumbling stair. A woman slashed by a Turk's jeweled scimitar and left to bleed out on an altar, her blood falling upward through the ruined roof. Men and maidens swapping clothes in a long hall of mirrors as the boy wandered in confusion, kissed and kissing, bruised and weary, until finally he came at the end of all his travails to the rooms of the Baroness—director Karla Bartok himself in his armored bustier and lacquered headdress. Their lovemaking. Her sword. Ilya's severed head in her outstretched hand.

That night she dreamed of them. Bartok and Kapfelberg and all the rest shaving their legs in a bathhouse, steam swirling around their naked bodies as they kissed. As they touched. As they disappeared together into shaded alcoves. An eye. A wrist. The curve of a plump thigh. A shapely calf moving slow under white silk. A mouth pulled wide by steel hooks, ropes of drool swinging from a pointed chin.

★ ★ ★

On Wednesday, she forgot Molly's breakfast.

"That's okay, doll," said Molly when Ellen handed over her paper and her cigarettes. She coughed into the crook of her elbow, her shoulders shaking with the force of it. "I'm watchin' my girlish figure. What happened there?" She pointed to Ellen's bandaged hand with an unlit cigarette.

"I work with, um, with film," said Ellen. She took the cigarette Molly offered her. "It can cut you if you aren't careful."

"I guess it's like that loudmouth Schlafly's always saying in the *Post*." Molly blew jets of smoke from her nostrils, coughing again. "The movies are gettin' too violent."

"You should see what I'm working on right now," said Ellen. "This old print from the thirties, this German thing. It's sick. It makes me sick. Disgusting horror stuff."

I can't stop thinking about it.

"Oh, I love the scary ones," Molly croaked. "My pop, he used to take us to the Saturday night double feature at the New Garden—back when the ceiling opened up if it was good weather. We saw *Dracula* there, with Bela Lugosi, and my sister Jeannie peed her pants it scared her so bad." She laughed, trailing off into another coughing fit. Her lips were gray by the time it subsided and she settled back against the doorway. "Love the scary ones."

"They give me nightmares," Ellen said, stubbing her cigarette out on the sole of her boot before getting up off the stoop. "I'll try and stop by with lunch, Molly."

Molly coughed. "Bless you, you're a doll."

It made Ellen sad to think of Molly as a little girl, to picture her with her father, to imagine her screaming in terrified delight as Lugosi loomed out of the dark and bent low over Helen Chandler's flawless white neck, his lips just parted, his pupils dark pinpricks in his huge, wild eyes.

That afternoon she went back to the bus stop with a bottle of cough syrup and an egg salad sandwich. Molly's sleeping bag was empty. Her crutch was gone. Ellen found her in an alley squatting awkwardly with one shoulder against the wall, urinating over a drain. She groaned as she relieved herself. Drops of pee soaked into the long underwear hanging from her skinny buttocks, the greasy jeans she wore over them. Ellen turned away. She set her plastic shopping bag with Molly's things on the stoop and left at a brisk walk, feeling embarrassed and revolted.

They're like stray cats, her aunt Frieda had told her once. They'd seen a heavyset Black woman in a raincoat pushing a cart along the sidewalk in Floral Park, muttering to herself. Frieda had put an arm out as though to ward Ellen from the woman's gaze. *You feed them once, they keep coming back.*

Ellen stayed late in the lab that night. She didn't notice when Phillip left, though when she passed his desk on the way back from the vending machines she saw he hadn't made much headway with *Bedtime for Bonzo*. He'd probably twiddle his thumbs until something else came in, then dump the rest of it on her to finish. He'd been at the Path Foundation a year longer than Ellen and was related to one of the board members, a fact he never hesitated to remind her of when she pushed back against his acts of petty tyranny. That same self-satisfied smirk every time. *Uncle Laurence wants me taking point on this one, Kramer. Nothing I can do, and I wouldn't push the issue. You're still new here. Well, new-ish.*

She sank back into her seat, gnawing on the granola bar she'd bought. Did she feed Molly just to make herself feel powerful? Did she sit and talk with her just to know she was superior to someone else? She took a wipe from the dispenser next to her station and cleaned her hands before returning to the film. The emulsion sides of both reels were cataloged, but the backs still needed close inspection. The images were murkier viewed in reverse, harder to parse, but rather than relieving Ellen's discomfiture it gave her the sense that the film was hiding from her somehow, that in the sheltering dark it was changing itself, conjuring terrible new images from a hidden place.

The outline of the Chamberlain, played by former Hungarian circus geek János Varga, with his fishhooked mouth and hanging sleeves. The beautiful boy stripped naked by pale, slaving ghouls. She had always liked the way skin looked in photo negative, that midnight void limned in slivers of phosphorescent silver between the teeth, along the curve of a raised limb. She loved the white glare of the night sky through the castle windows and the black flame burning in the hearths and caged between the darkly gleaming glass of lanterns. She had always preferred working with negatives when possible. Something about the inversion of the world made it easier to spot the imperfections in the film.

She marked a tramline scratch that ran from the 3,045th cell to the 3,063rd. Oily fingerprints over a pornographic close-up on a woman's hairy vulva. There was something between the lips of her sex. Something framed by her long, slender fingers. A ghostly hemisphere of white against the stygian black of her flesh. Ellen advanced the reel hurriedly, hands shaking.

She straightened up and mopped sweat from her brow with her handkerchief. She felt sick to her stomach.

Do you want it?

She took a steadying breath and shifted her foot to the reverse pedal, rethreading the reel. It was only pictures. Everyone involved was dead, probably. If not in the Shoah then through the simple march of time. She'd missed two fingerprints and a small scratch. Were those prints Ernst Schlemecher's? Had the old Nazi pored over his stolen treasure like a boy with a dirty magazine kept hidden under the mattress? She wondered if he'd ever seen anyone gassed. She didn't really know how it had happened, the moving and killing of so many millions of people. Who had manned the trains? Who had staffed the checkpoints? Who had cooked the food and built the tents and dug the sewers, and where had the gas been refined and stored, and who had built those showers—those dark places, cold and merciless, that had tormented her with nightmares all through Hebrew school of drowning on dry land with naked, starving people clustered tight around her?

She put her elbows on the desk and rested her head in her hands, staring down at her reflection in the film. She wasn't pretty. Jaw jutting. Nose too big. Ears sticking out. Eyes big and muddy brown with dark bags under them. She seldom thought of herself as Jewish anymore. Her parents never went to shul. Out of all of them only her sister Mallory, who had married a cantor, had much to do with any of it. Who was Ellen Kramer to sit here fretting about the Holocaust? What could she do for the dead? Her Bubbe had always hated talking about it. *You don't pay attention in school?* she'd snapped when Ellen, perhaps six or seven, asked her about the tattoo on her forearm. *You know what it is.*

Ellen closed her eyes. It was late. The muffled noises of the sonic cleaner in the next room throbbed at the edge of hearing, luring her away from the lab's bright lights, from the eye-straining murk of the reel. Down into a deeper darkness.

In a white room layered with shadows, a black flame burned atop a candlestick. Ellen held it. Someone had given it to her. Someone very beautiful. All around her, past the edges of the candle's light, things began to stir. Ellen took a step toward the distant outline of a door. The things retreated, but she saw the arms and legs entwined, the faces buried in soft

pubic down, the skin pulled back in dripping sheets and pinned to frames of braided hair and bone. A woman split from nose to pubis wriggled on the floor like a crushed insect.

The sound of footsteps. A peal of thunder. In an attic room lit only by the fleeting flash of lightning an old woman sat cross-legged on the floor beside a window, a baby swaddled in her arms. Ellen crept closer. "Are you all right?" she heard herself say, though she hadn't spoken. "Do you remember me?"

The baby stirred. It whimpered and began to wail. The old woman did nothing. The next flash of lightning showed the needles driven through her shriveled eyes, the staples scalloping her lips against her blackened gums. She had been dead a long time. Ellen reached into her arms and pulled at the baby's swaddling. A chimp's rictus grin greeted her. A wizened, hairy little hand reached out for hers. She turned and ran. The flame of her candle guttered wildly. The walls were all decaying cloth that flapped and billowed in a wind she couldn't feel. She ran on for what felt like hours until at last she saw a light shining in through a rip in a dusty, moth-infested hanging.

Through the hole she saw a staircase rising toward her. Her view tilted as she held her breath, the velvet wings of moths brushing her face. A woman climbed the stairs, a woman with a sharp, narrow face like a carving knife and hair teased and oiled into spreading horns. She wore a gown of midnight scales and her own skin swung in soft sheets from her arms and in strips from her cheeks. After her came naked things that scrambled on all fours, collared men with callused knuckles and eyes stapled open, lids split and peeled back, jaws cut in two from chin to breastbone so that the swinging halves of their jawbones clacked as they climbed. Plucked birds flapping raw and headless. Something wet. The hissing slither of hot meat over cold marble.

Onward through the maze of shifting draperies. The floor beneath her slick black glass. Starving shadows dogging her slow steps. She heard soft, breathless laughter. *Do you want it?* someone whispered. The sound of a bellows sucking air. A dark heat. The candle's flame jumped up. A camera whirred somewhere nearby, shooting in the dark.

More than anything.

She woke to the chime of the elevator doors sliding open, still staring at the reel.

A moment later Phillip walked into the lab, shrugging out of his dark winter coat. “Jesus,” he said when he saw her. “Were you here all night?”

Ellen blinked. “What?”

“You look like shit,” he said. He hung his coat on one of the hooks by the door and tugged his scarf loose, shaking half-melted snow onto the linoleum floor. “Did you sleep here?”

She stared at him. He chuckled. “You’ll make some lucky man one hell of a wife someday, Kramer,” he said. He sat down at his desk and put on his headphones. Buddy Holly started crooning a moment later.

Well all right, so I’m bein’ foolish ...

Ellen blinked again. Her neck was stiff. There was a sour taste in her mouth and her feet felt damp and sweaty. It was Thursday. Mr. Shrier and the rest of the office would be back from the convention by lunch. He would want her opinion on technical selection—which print would serve as the new master for the restoration. She didn’t have time to go home or shower first. Fumbling through the detritus on her side table, she found her notebook and paged through it. She’d been in the low 5,000s. The last thing she remembered was a fingerprint over a shot of the beautiful boy in the clutches of demons, his ashen locks plastered to his face with sweat, his shirt and cloak half torn away from the slender, hairless body beneath.

There. She moved her thumb to the entry, frowning. There were dozens more beneath it. She turned the page. The reverse side was filled with her cramped handwriting. The next page. The next. She shut the notebook. The reel was on its final cell. The counter on the back of the desk read 16,043. She had finished her inspection. *You’re working too hard*, she thought. She felt a little lightheaded as she stood, Buddy Holly’s voice ringing in her ears. *Well all right, well all right.*

★ ★ ★

The bathroom was cool and quiet. The vents hissed, exchanging air. Ellen locked the door and ran the tap until the water came out cold enough to numb her fingers, then took her glasses off and splashed some on her face. The stinging chill sharpened the edges of things a little. She’d fallen asleep at her desk. She’d slept poorly and some of what she’d done had slipped her mind. A little lapse. It could happen to anybody.

Eleven thousand cells don't check and notate themselves.

She brushed the thought aside. It was a fluke. A fugue state, like sleepwalking, or tunnel vision driving at night, reality thinning out at the periphery. She splashed more water on her face, then drank a palmful and turned off the tap. It dripped, a gentle *plunk, plunk, plunk* of water on porcelain. In the mirror, from the corner of her eye, she saw the last stall door on the left shiver in its frame as though something had struck it from within.

"Hello?" she whispered, her throat suddenly dry. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Hello?"

Her voice echoed from the walls. *Hello, hello, hello?*

The door jumped in its frame again. This time she heard the hinges groan a little. Shadows moved under the door. Rubber soles squealed and skidded over tile. *You're dreaming*, Ellen told herself as she turned from the mirror. She took a step toward the stall. Another. She could hear people breathing. A voice, low and husky. "Make you my dog," it murmured. "Sleep at my feet, lick my hand, come when I call you..."

Ellen pressed her ear against the stall and closed her eyes.

"Please, Princess," the second voice whined. *Please, please.*

The creak of new leather.

"Do you want it?"

"More than anything."

The metallic slither of a zipper pulled down.

"Get on your knees."

A wet sound. The sound of kissing. Of slurping. Licking. A low groan of release. Ellen found her hand between her legs. Her groin was hot to the touch. Burning as though with a lethal fever. Like the moment between touching a hot frying pan and all the nerves in your palm lighting up at once.

The sucking grew louder. Wetter. The groan became a scream, a cry torn up from deep inside the stomach. Then, the sound of tearing flesh. A rippling crunch. The scream became a strangled howl. A lion's roar of challenge. Joints popping. Bone crunching. Ellen looked down and saw blood flowing over and around her shoes.

Do you want it?

The scream shrank, dwindling, collapsing in upon itself in a dull, sucking roar as the voices of shrieking apes rose up in chorus. Wolf song. The screams of diving raptors. Something she thought might be the bass grunt of an alligator calling out to attract mates. She was dripping through her slacks. Her hand was sinking through the fabric, finding pliant flesh that clung like glue to her fingers. The heat. The heat of it.

Something struck the door with awful force. The hinges broke. A weight bore down on her, crushing her against the floor, pressing her face into the copper stink of—

Ellen blinked.

She was standing at the sink. The tap was still dripping.

★ ★ ★

Mr. Shrier's secretary, a stooped woman in her late seventies named Irma Overbrook, looked at Ellen through her bifocals the way you might look at a sick cat. Pitying, but with an underlying fear that it might vomit on your carpet. "He'll be with you in just a minute, honey," she said in her pack-a-day voice. When no response was forthcoming she returned to her large-print crossword, pushing her bifocals up her nose with the eraser of her pencil.

Ellen had been waiting for nearly an hour on one of the trim, fashionably uncomfortable black chairs across from Mrs. Overbrook's desk and the door to Mr. Shrier's office. Out the window a tug towed a container ship down the Kill to be unloaded at the port. Ellen watched a sailor walk the deck between the towering containers, the collar of his jacket raised against the icy spray. It was snowing. She imagined herself dressed like that, walking that pitching deck with her wool hat pulled down and a cigarette clamped in her teeth. She imagined sweat dripping down the crack of her ass, and the deep, pleasant ache in her muscles at the end of a long day.

"Asp," Mrs. Overbrook muttered to herself, her pencil scratching against paper.

Ellen turned away from the window. "What?"

"Three-letter word for a venomous snake."

The intercom buzzed.

The pencil scratched again. "He'll see you now."

The blinds were drawn in Mr. Shrier's office. Cold winter light fell in bars over the Oriental carpet. William Shrier, huge and blond in shirtsleeves and tan slacks, sat at his desk eating macaroni salad from a Styrofoam box, a lit cigarette smoldering between the first and second fingers of his unoccupied hand. A pair of samurai swords rested on a stand on the side table beside his bar cart. "Sit," he said through a mouthful of pasta and mayonnaise. "Tell me where we are."

Ellen sat, conscious that her hair was coming out of its bun and that there were coffee stains on the collar of her blouse. "I've determined the negative is the best choice for a remaster." The real castle. The real hill. A scribble of animated lightning splitting the heavens. "The original is too damaged for restoration. Between heat distortion and the homemade preservation solution—"

Mr. Shrier nodded, waving his cigarette to cut her off, and speared another clot of pasta salad. "And Phillip agrees?"

Phillip couldn't sort vacation photos.

"He does."

"I'll have Mrs. Overbrook cable Berlin. Are you wondering why I called you in personally?"

Ellen hadn't wondered. Mr. Shrier was notorious for micromanaging his technicians. On a particularly difficult restoration, a privately owned first-generation dupe of Raoul Walsh's *Big Trail* that had survived a fire in the owner's bunker, he'd actually come into the lab and stood over their shoulders for hours at a time. "I was, sir, to be honest."

"It's awkward," he said, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin. "We're a few months from our annual leaflet, but we'd like to start getting word about the film to the right people."

Ellen stared at him, confused. Did he want her to draft some kind of press release?

Mr. Shrier looked annoyed. He raised what was left of his cigarette to his lips and inhaled. "The right people," he said again. Smoke trickled out between his big white teeth.

Oh, thought Ellen, embarrassed and a little disgusted. He means Jews.

"Jew—Jewish people. Your people. Academics. Critics." He seemed uncomfortable, his balding forehead furrowed. He snorted more smoke and

exhaled it in a thin white jet. “There are a lot of them—of you—in that racket, aren’t there? I want them to know what we’re doing, with the film.”

Ellen felt like she was sleepwalking. Did he think she could just walk into the *Post* and tell all the Jews on staff she was rehabilitating the place that restored Klan movies? “I—who would you like me to talk to?”

“It should be natural,” said Mr. Shrier. “We’re not advertising. We’re not apologizing. It’s not a new direction, it’s the only direction we’ve ever moved in. Freedom of speech is one of our founding principles. Preserving the past to secure the future. History. Society. Do you know Rachel Feinburg at *TIME*?”

“Feldman. She wrote the article about *White Knight*.”

Shrier pressed his intercom and leaned toward the microphone. “Mrs. Overbrook, get me a table for two at noon this Monday. Katz’s Deli.”

“I should leave a name, maybe?” Mrs. Overbrook shouted back, her hoarse croak muffled by the intervening wall.

Mr. Shrier sighed. He pressed the button again. “Kramer, Mrs. Overbrook. Your intercom is right beside the phone.”

“Oh, for the young lady.” The speaker squealed with feedback. Mrs. Overbrook’s amplified voice rang from the walls. “I thought, why is he going to the Lower East Side?”

Belatedly, Mr. Shrier pushed a cigarette case across the desk. Ellen shook her head. They listened to Mrs. Overbrook slowly dialing out on the far side of the wall. Ellen wondered what the staff at Katz’s would think about someone trying to make a reservation. “Be careful with Fein—Feldman,” he said. “She only looks stupid. She’s sharp, under the blubber.”

“Wouldn’t it be better for Mr. Slattery or someone in public relations—”

“No, I don’t think so.” He leaned back in his seat and picked up his plastic fork. “Thank you, Kramer.”

Ellen got up, feeling slightly dazed. She owed Mr. Shrier. Her father owed him. They golfed together. He’d done them a favor hiring her while the gossip was still fresh. She wondered if he’d had a similar conversation with her father just before. *Make sure the right people know what we’re doing for you, Brad.*

“And Kramer?”

She stopped at the door, looking back. “Yes, Mr. Shrier?”

“Go home and change.”

Emulsion

By the time Ellen collapsed fully dressed onto her bed, she could feel a fever coming on. The phone rang in the hall. She kept thinking of the sound of Mr. Shrier chewing, of the pasta and mayonnaise squelching between his white, even teeth. She slept. The sky was rose and lemon one moment, black the next. Snow drifted past her window. Her landlady's little terrier was barking downstairs, and her wounded hand throbbed in time with her pulse. She remembered the cold, petrifying cut of the film's edge slithering across her palm and through her thumbnail. A noose of razor wire drawing taut.

I should quit, Ellen thought suddenly. She sat up, the room swimming around her, her forehead burning to the touch, and took off her boots. The sheets were damp and dirty where snow had melted on them. *I should leave. Those people don't respect me. They make me work on filth, send me out to dance like a trained monkey.* She began to shiver as she made her slow and halting way toward the bathroom. Her teeth chattered as she urinated. It felt as though someone had put a curling iron up her privates. She began to cry.

The phone was ringing again. She wiped herself and staggered back to bed, picturing Jesse with his telephone's cord wrapped around him like a baby's umbilical, sucking on the receiver. She slipped a hand into the waistband of her slacks. Her skin felt raw and gummy where the damp fabric had rubbed against her. Awkwardly, she kicked her way free of the garment and let it slide to the bedroom floor. Her legs pimples in the sudden chill as she pulled the tangled sheets and blankets up over herself. The chills came in waves.

Someone was sitting in the chair she'd placed in the corner. From her vantage point beneath the covers she could see a pair of legs, barefoot, in a skirt of rough, dark cloth. The feet were covered in cuts and half-healed scabs. Women's feet, Ellen thought. The sight of them filled her with

disquiet. The long, slender toes flexed against the bloodied floorboards. The skirt shifted as the woman crossed her legs.

“Who’s there?” Ellen whispered. She had the sudden ridiculous thought that it might be her Bubbe’s ghost coming to kill her for spending her bat mitzvah money on pot, but it was only a heap of clothes. Her coat, and a puddle of meltwater spreading from its hem where it trailed on the floor.

She slept again.

In her dream she was watching Heise’s *The Kiss*, which she’d first seen in her senior seminar on Sexuality in Early Film. She was in a dark room. A projector whirred somewhere behind her, the noise of the reel oddly thick and liquid, and on the wall before her May Irwin and John Rice were cuddled close together, nearly mouth to mouth. They were, she knew, reciting the closing lines of *The Widow Jones*, the stage musical they’d starred in a year earlier. A play inside a film inside a dream. That was funny. The two actors kissed. The image seethed with little cuts and artifacts. Black blemishes dancing in emulsion.

“It’s not the first kiss,” a voice whispered in her ear. Strong fingers gripped her shoulder. She smelled oil and blood. The flat, cold tang of copper. “It’s the last.”

The film began to burn. Holes opened up, their edges flickering red, the cells distorting as the image shivered back and forth over the wall. May Irwin’s face crinkling inward, glowing red and orange. Ellen turned to look back over her shoulder. A naked man hung from the ceiling, wrapped in leather straps and pinned in place by rusted iron spikes. In the raw socket of his right eye a projector lens flashed and shimmered. Film snaked through a gash in the side of his face, coiling around a bloody ear and down the length of his body to vanish between his legs. As he screamed, Ellen saw the reel unspooling in his mouth. Flames spurted from his nostrils and between his teeth. Blisters spread outward from his lips, forming and bursting. The fire engulfed his head. The reel broke with a bright, clear pop and white light flared through the cleft in his cheek, blackening the side of his skull. His hair burned like old grease, dripping in wisps and clots from his peeling scalp.

They were kissing, Ellen and the burning man. The room was black, but sun poured down on the chaise where they sat through a window in the ceiling. Across the room a man in shirtsleeves sat glistening with sweat

behind a table on which stood some sort of camera, its reels unhoused to either side of the lens. A kinetograph. Her face burned where their lips touched. The film coiled tight around his features and cut her skin as it sawed through his, leaving bloody fissures weeping, touching, their lips and the lips of their wounds, the heat of the kiss and heat of the fire. The black walls. All tar paper. The man sweating behind his table. They were burning. She was burning. In the cells racing over the dying man's flesh she could see Rice and Irwin tearing at each other with curved fangs and gnarled claws.

No, not Rice and Irwin. It was her and Freddie, her kneeling between the other woman's legs, Freddie's hands in her hair, Freddie's cock in her mouth. The muscles in her back shifting under sweat-slicked skin in the sepia haze. The kiss. Freddie's thighs crushing her head. The smell of her. The coarse hair on the little pouch of fat above her sex. That voice in her ear again. That tar-and-velvet voice.

Do you want it?

Freddie came in her mouth, and her semen burned Ellen's tongue to cinders, dissolved her throat, ate through her stomach until her body bent and crumpled like the film in the kinetoscope, until she twisted in upon itself. Burning celluloid. Fire coming through and out of her in gouts of pulsing black. Freddie burning with her in the black room, in the camera's eye, the *tick-tick-tick* of the kinetoscope's mechanism. The reel advancing, stopping, advancing again as the light stamped their inferno on the film.

Nothing between the frames. Little roaring gasps of blackness. Freddie. Nothing. Fire. Nothing. Skeletons dancing in a bruise-colored inferno.

Ellen woke on her belly in the hall, the sweat-soaked sheets tangled around her legs.

The phone was still ringing. Slowly, her thoughts thick and sticky, her joints aching and swollen, Ellen pulled herself up against the wall and wrestled the receiver from its cradle. "Hello?" she whispered, her voice an old crone's stentorian croak. "Who is this?"

"This is Jesse. Jesse Cavill. Is ... is Ellen there?"

She coughed, her throat tight. Her injured hand felt like it had been packed full of hot coals. The idea of talking to Jesse made her so tired that she considered simply hanging up. Instead, she cleared her throat with a horrible dry clucking sound and said: "This is Ellen."

“Ellen? You sound terrible. Are you all right?”

“I’m sick,” said Ellen. The hall light was off, but in the faint illumination coming from her bedroom behind her she could see the bathroom door standing ajar at its end. “I have a fever.”

“Why didn’t you love me?” asked Freddie.

The bathroom door opened just the slightest bit, the uncoiled hinges groaning. “What?” Ellen whispered, clutching the phone tight against her burning cheek as she stared fixedly into the sliver of darkness between door and frame. She thought she could see something moving there. The darkness seething like television static. “What did you say?”

“I said, no one will ever love you.” The line crackled, spitting white noise. “Why don’t you go into the bathroom? I’m waiting for you.”

“No,” Ellen whispered, shaking her head.

One by one, pale fingers emerged from the darkness to grip the door. Black silk fluttered around a form-fitting sleeve. A face slowly took shape in the seething shadows. Mad, staring eyes the pallid blue of glacial ice. A mouth stretched into a gaping snarl by rusty hooks, gums glistening. Infected. János Varga with his cropped ears and his long, thin Roman nose. The Chamberlain. His lips twitched, bloody. His teeth parted and came together.

“Come here, baby,” purred Freddie’s voice. “Crawl to me.”

The Chamberlain stepped back into the shadows, his pale eyes glinting in the dark, until nothing else of him was visible. There was a sound of running footsteps. Ellen pressed herself against the wall beside the side table, breathing hard. Her thoughts felt flurried. She could smell Freddie’s perfume, sweet and salty over tangerine, and the phone felt cold against her burning cheek. Somewhere behind her in the direction of her bedroom, a floorboard creaked.

“Shteyner zol zi hobn, nit kayn kinder,” Freddie said, only it wasn’t Freddie anymore, but an older woman’s voice, raspy and guttural. “Do you understand?”

The sound of fire chewing flesh.

“Ellen?”

She blinked. She was on her back, Jesse staring down at her, his nose and cheeks bright red between his scarf and winter hat.

How did you get in here? she thought, but the words wouldn't come. Her throat was on fire. Her head was pounding. The phone was off its hook, the receiver lying beside her, and the dead line warbled in her ear.

The Chamberlain appeared at Jesse's shoulder. He leered down at her as Jesse knelt, babbling something she couldn't understand, feeling her forehead, lifting her hand between his until finally, mercifully, staring into the monster's shining eyes, she blacked out.

★ ★ ★

The first thing Ellen said when she woke in her bed to the sight of Jesse looking down at her was "How did you get in?"

"Your superintendent," said Jesse, smiling. "I called your mother and told her I was worried about you, that you weren't answering the phone or the door. She had him let me in."

Ellen stared at him. *This man is being kind to me*, she thought. *He picked me up off the floor and tucked me into bed. He sat with me until my fever broke. What's wrong with me? Why do I feel so angry?* It made her sick to think of his hands on her, of his body against hers as he carried her to her bedroom.

"I don't want you to come here anymore."

Jesse's face wrinkled like pudding skin, pinched by rage at the corners of his eyes and mouth, before smoothing out into a mask of blandly pleasant concern. He brushed her sweaty, tangled hair out of her eyes. "I think we can talk about that once you're feeling better," he said, smiling.

"Please leave. I want to sleep."

"I'm not going to leave you while you're like this."

Ellen felt as though someone were sitting on her chest. Had Jesse's shirt been off when she woke up? She couldn't remember. His chest hair was sparse and colorless, his stomach concave. He looked like a little boy. Someone stood behind him in the doorway, but Ellen couldn't see without her glasses. Jesse looked down at her, his lips twitching in and out of a nervous smile. "Did you know that you're the only girl I've ever made it with?"

"I'm thirty-three," she croaked.

"What?"

“I’m not a girl.”

His expression crystallized into a rigid mask. “The only *woman*,” he snapped. Tears shimmered in his eyes. “Are you trying to humiliate me?”

“Condom.”

He sniffled. “Save your voice,” he said, undoing the front of his jeans. “Don’t talk.”

He pressed his thing against her, shimmying his narrow hips between her legs. He’d pushed the blankets up her body. She was naked from the waist down and his thing, half-hard, rubbed pointlessly against her inner thigh. The blurry figure in the doorway shifted, a hand creeping down the front of its black robes. Metal glinted at the corners of its mouth. Wet flesh. Bare.

“Condom,” Ellen rasped again.

“You’re going to hurt your throat,” said Jesse. He put a hand over her mouth, his fingers tentative, his lips pursed in distaste.

Ellen imagined raising her hands to his face and scratching out his eyes, imagined the heat of his blood running over her as she plunged her thumbs into his sockets, as she scrabbled in his mouth and pulled his tongue taut and sank her teeth into the slick, squirming muscle. She imagined stuffing her fist into the bloody hole of his mouth, pushing hard against the spasmodic muscular action of his throat. His fingernail nicked the edge of her left nostril, a stinging, burning pain that made her want to sneeze as he thrust against her.

You’re supposed to pee yourself, thought Ellen. *When this happens, you’re supposed to pee.*

He reached down with his free hand and pushed himself inside her, the head of his thing rubbing against her dry lips, pushing them apart. It hurt. “You look very nice,” he panted, pumping frantically. It felt like being fucked with driftwood. “You should wear your hair down more often.”

His fingers tightened on her face as he came inside her. His lips peeled back from his teeth like a horse’s. His eyes narrowed to dark, glazed slits. He shuddered. Something tore inside Ellen’s vagina, a deep, red, scalding pain; she squeezed her eyes shut, tears leaking down her fevered cheeks.

I wish I was a giant, she thought as he murmured promises and endearments in her ear, his weight pressing hot and sticky down on her. *I wish I could break his arms and push him down onto the sheets, that I could*

stretch his anus with my penis until he ripped open and bled out on the bed, begging me to stop.

I wish I was a monster. I wish I was a man.

The thing in the doorway, still touching itself, smiled.

★ ★ ★

Ellen woke from dreams of insects crawling on her skin to an empty bed and a plate of breakfast food left on her nightstand. Her breathing was still ragged, her chest congested, her throat sore and sandpapery, but she was able to sit up without the room swimming around her. There was a scrap of paper on the plate, a smiley face and a *J* scribbled hastily beside the single stone-cold egg and a little mound of raw onion and potatoes. Two uneven triangles of white toast, unbuttered. There was a little archipelago of bloodstains on the sheets. Ellen took a piece of toast. She chewed the brittle bread mechanically. It tasted like nothing at all.

Jesse had left her kitchen in ruins. She tipped the rest of his offering into the trash and stacked the dish with the others he'd left in the sink, soaking in the icy murk, bits of onion floating soft and swollen around coffee mugs, the handle of her Teflon skillet coated in grease and protruding at an angle. Iridescent slicks of oil glimmered on the water's surface. Ellen stared at her reflection in it for a while. The thought of putting her hands into the sink to clean made her stomach turn. She went to the bathroom instead.

She was sore when she peed. Very sore. When she looked between her legs after, there was blood in the toilet bowl. Slowly, delicately, she wiped herself, wincing at the sting of it. She could still feel Jesse's hand over her mouth. Soft. Damp. She could smell his bitter cologne. Resting her head in her aching, tingling hands, she began to cry. When she was through, she dragged herself back into bed and slept.

This time, she didn't dream at all.

Duplication

It was raining Monday morning when Ellen took a cab from her apartment to Katz's Deli on the Lower East Side. Her stomach still hurt and she'd developed a persistent itch in her vagina, but the fever had passed.

She had never been to Katz's. Her brother, Jacob, and his friends had liked it, she knew, had derived some sense of adult rebellion against their parents' white-bread facades from its unpretentious East Side Jewishness, but she had been only six or seven during what their mother called his "bad spell." Crossing the curb and walking in now, the bell over the door chiming brightly, Ellen could see why he'd liked it. The bosomy woman and big, barrel-chested man shouting and taking tickets and shoving sandwiches across the counter to the people queued there, the old men playing chess in a far corner. It felt, not adult, but *grown-up*. Worldly. Like something out of a Billy Wilder movie.

A matronly woman bussing tables with ruthless efficiency, dishes piled high in the crook of her arm, caught sight of Ellen and made a beeline for her, locals scooting their chairs out of her way like Arctic bergs crumbling under the keel of an icebreaker. "Take a number at the counter," she snapped. "Wait in line. We don't have waitresses."

"Um, yes, but I'm here to meet some—"

"Corner table," said the waitress, pointing with a jerk of her chin. Ellen followed its line and had to fight the urge to gasp out loud. She'd heard people call Rachel Feldman fat, but that hardly covered it. Seated with her back to the wall at a small table in the corner left of the deli's entrance, she looked like one of those women Ellen's Bubbe would have called a whale. Something too big to survive on land. She was also disarmingly pretty, her soft face framed by waves of platinum-blond hair, a pair of dark beauty marks at the corner of her right eye. She had a wide, expressive mouth,

painted coral red, with a perfect Cupid's bow arch to her upper lip that made Ellen deeply uncomfortable.

"I ordered for you," said Rachel as Ellen made her way over and sank into the seat opposite hers, feeling out of place and off her guard. She kept catching other patrons looking at her. Mostly older people. Neighborhood people. "The best pastrami in the city."

An enormous sandwich cradled in wax paper sat between a drift of bright, firm dill pickle spears and a cup of matzo ball soup. "Thank you," Ellen said mechanically. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"You're from their lab," Feldman mused. With perfectly manicured nails—the same shade of coral as her lipstick—she plucked a dill spear and bit it in half with a crisp yet delicate crunch. The motion of her huge, soft arms and massive breasts beneath the white silk and China blue patterning of her blouse was mesmerizing. Waves in an ocean of perfumed cream, and nothing so harsh as Shalimar. Sandalwood, maybe. A hint of violets. "I remember. I saw your picture in a back issue of the Journal of Film Preservation when I was researching the article. You look tired."

Ellen swallowed. She didn't like food. It made her uncomfortable, made her think of her Bubbe's bathroom scale, her mother's little Weight Watchers cards, the ear-splitting shriek of Richard Simmons inspiring fatties on the television. It made her think of Freddie, who at their first meeting in the college cafeteria had licked salt and grease from her fingers and said the most obscene, erotic thing Ellen had ever heard. *I love to eat*.

She gathered her thoughts, pushing Freddie out of mind. "I'm one of the Foundation's restorers."

"Yes," said Feldman. She took another bite of her pickle and licked the brine from her fingers. "You have your own secretary?"

"What?"

"The woman who invited me to this charming little get-together. She said she was from Ellen Kramer's office."

Ellen blushed. Her ears burned.

Feldman smirked. "So, they sent the mailroom Jew." She lifted half her sandwich, glistening golden mustard and dark, fragrant pastrami ribboned between slices of rye, and took a decisive bite, little strands of fat and tissue tearing as she pulled her head back. She chewed, her eyes digging into Ellen's, scouring her bare. "I'm surprised they didn't pin a star on you."

Ellen raised a hand to her cheek as though she'd been slapped. The world seemed to snap into focus. She stood abruptly, banging her knee on the table, and stumbled back a step. People were looking in earnest now. Her face burned. "I'm leaving. I'm very sorry. I'm—I can't. I'm leaving."

"Sit down," said Feldman. "You wouldn't last five minutes in print. Eat your sandwich."

Ellen stood for a moment longer, knees trembling, and then dropped back into her seat. Her face burned. She felt absurdly conscious of her greasy, unwashed hair, the bags under her eyes, the cracked skin on her elbows, the dandruff on her shoulders. She felt like dried-out sewage in front of Rachel Feldman's sleek, immaculate bulk, and angry with herself for rising to such obvious bait. *Stupid*, she thought, staring at her sandwich. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"You have a print of Bartok's *The Baroness*, yes?"

Ellen looked up, irritated. "Do you even need me for this, or should I wait outside until you're finished?"

Feldman's perfect lips quirked. Her eyes twinkled. "Let's start again. I'm Rachel, you're Ellen, we're very happy to meet each other. We're both Jews, both around the business, so, not so surprising we would grab a little lunch. Grandparents from the same shtetl even, maybe."

Ellen picked a little string of fat from her pastrami sandwich. "Yes," she said. "We're restoring it. How did you know?"

"Friends in Berlin," said Feldman.

"I'm supposed to tell you about the movie." Ellen felt herself blushing again. The pastrami smelled incredible. Her mother had never let her have deli food. "Mr. Shrier asked me to."

Feldman smiled, but there was nothing friendly in it. Shadows from the rain on the diner's storefront window ran like serpents over her perfect skin and cold black eyes. "He wants me to take the knife out. Absolve your little neocon outfit for preserving the Klan's legacy. Maybe after the piece runs I can call David Duke and apologize to him, too."

Ellen stared at her sandwich. She tore a little strip of crust from the bread and ate it, savoring the ghost of the pastrami's rich, fatty flavor. *I don't choose the movies we restore*, she told herself. *I don't get a say in who we work with.*

"I'm going to give your boss his puff piece," said Feldman.

Ellen looked up. "What?"

"It won't be what he wants, not all of it, but it'll be enough. In return you're going to screen *The Baroness* for me. Next week, let's say. That way I can file in time. I don't care how you do it."

"I can't just—"

"Take it or leave it."

Desperate for time to think, Ellen finally took a bite of her sandwich. It was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted, the beef spiced with paprika and mustard seed and a dozen other flavors bursting on her tongue, the sinew rendered down to silky softness, and the mustard cutting sharp and fiery through all of it. She chewed and swallowed, on the verge of tears between exhaustion and confusion.

"Why do you want to see it?"

Feldman looked at her as though Ellen had asked why water was wet. "It's the cinematic find of the decade," she said. "I've seen snippets cut from destroyed prints—the beheading, the orgy in the baths—but the entire film..." Her eyes glittered. "You really don't know anything about art, do you?"

I'm nothing to this woman, Ellen thought. It made her frustrated even to think it. She realized in a dim, half-conscious way that she'd expected Feldman to defer to her, that she'd thought her fatness would translate into social timidity. Instead, Feldman was looking at her like she was something that had crawled out from beneath a rock.

"I'll do what I can," Ellen bit out.

Rachel plucked the end of a dill spear from her plate and popped it into her mouth. The sharp, briny smell of it hung in the air. Ellen fought the urge to squirm in her seat. She felt sick to her stomach and excited all at once, hot and wet enough between her legs that she had begun imagining the diner's patrons staring at the wet spots on the seat and front of her slacks when she stood up. *You're disgusting*, she thought, unsure if she meant herself or Rachel. She wanted to throw herself across the table and bury her face in Rachel's breasts. She wanted Rachel to make her finish her sandwich, to scold her for not knowing how to eat like a real Jew, to tell her she was too skinny, just chicken bones and skin. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.

Get a hold of yourself. Your period is coming, you've been working too much, that disgusting movie has you all turned around. She dug her nails into her palms. *That's all this is.*

She opened her eyes to find Feldman smiling at her. "You know," said the critic, her coral-red lips curling into an indulgent smile, "I host a little get-together every Thursday evening. On Fourteenth and First, in the East Village. You should stop by, meet a few people working in the industry. I'm sure they'd all be very interested in what you have to say about Bartok's movie."

Ellen stood up again, struggling back into her coat. "Thank you," she said out of pure reflex. She dug a few dollars and some loose change out of her wallet and tossed it on the table. One of the coins rolled off the Formica and hit the floor with a bright, clear ringing sound. "Enjoy your lunch."

"I always do," said Feldman, and her mocking smile made Ellen want to seize the front of her blouse and kiss her, made her want to throw her legs over the critic's shoulders and press herself against that red, red mouth, open up to that acid tongue.

She turned and hurried for the door, banging her thigh on a table in passing and stammering apologies as she hopped backward away from its occupants, a pair of older women who exclaimed at her in Yiddish, peering owlshly through thick plastic glasses. For a moment Ellen thought of the outline that had watched her over Jesse's shoulder in the throes of her fever. Her head swam as she hobbled to the door, shooting one last nervous glance at Feldman, still smiling in her corner seat, and burst out into the bitter cold. Her privates were burning again; a feverish, acrid heat.

"Taxi!" she gasped, waving her arm. Slush washed over her ankles in a freezing wave as a cab pulled up to the curb. She clambered inside, squeezing her thighs together tight, and closed her eyes as the engine's growl became a purr. She swayed in her seat, torn leather creaking under her, the cab driver asking her where she was going, what was her address.

★ ★ ★

Ellen held it until she was back inside the Brickworks, hurrying past the front desk into the women's bathroom and nearly pissing herself as she fought to undo her belt. Finally, pants around her ankles, head throbbing,

she relieved herself. The burning worsened immediately, enough to make her shove her knuckles into her own mouth to stifle a groan of discomfort. Her right thigh cramped, the muscle jumping frantically, and she dug the heel of her free hand into it, whimpering until the awful tension slackened and passed. She squirted out a few more fitful drops and leaned her cheek against the stall's partition, her tooth-marked fingers sliding from her lips. The metal was cool against her cheek. *I should see a doctor.*

She imagined herself on her knees in front of Rachel Feldman. In front of Freddie. In front of something pale and indistinct. A jumping, skittering image. A dripping smile. Black rubber tight against chafed skin. The vision bubbled, burned, and shriveled away from a tunnel of impenetrable dark. Ellen opened her eyes. Gingerly she cleaned herself and dressed. There were a few spots of urine on the waist of her slacks. At the sink she brushed water over them with her fingers, then sprinkled a little more around the area.

She looked at herself in the stained and water-spotted mirror. There were blotches of color in her cheeks and her hair looked lank and lifeless. The bags under her eyes had darkened to the color of fresh bruises, and there was a pimple forming at her hairline.



Phillip was actually working when Ellen made it to the lab. He glanced over as she hung up her coat. "Jesus," he said. "I don't think I've ever beat you in before."

"I had a lunch with Rachel Feldman, that critic from *TIME*."

He turned, frowning. "That wide load who crucified us over *White Knight*? Why the fuck would you talk to her?"

"Mr. Shrier asked me to." Ellen opened her notebook. She had a particularly dense string of problems ahead of her. Smearred fingerprints, a tricky pair of intersecting cuts, a nearly severed cell. "She's going to write about *The Baroness*."

"Bill's got some funny ideas," said Phillip. "You know he worked on the Stevenson campaign in fifty-two? His old man cut him out of the will over it."

“Hmm,” said Ellen, already absorbed with diluting solvent in a shallow tin dish.

They had to be very careful with old nitrate prints like this. The wrong balance and she could discolor the emulsion permanently, or even warp the film. There was something dried over this stretch of film, a thin slick of detritus that looked to Ellen uncomfortably like the scum of evaporated urine and pubic hair that gathered under the hinges of toilet seats. Slowly, with painstaking attention to detail, she wetted a flannel and began to clean it. It took the better part of an hour to clear the worst of it away, and another fifteen minutes to remove the last few smears with quick, light strokes of a fresh flannel. Her nostrils tingled from the solvent fumes as she sat back, removed her paper mask, and rubbed the tight spot at the base of her neck.

The scene the smear interrupted was a strange one. The beautiful boy, Kapfelberg, by now bloodied and badly disheveled, wandered into the boudoir of a Giantess, a woman a full head and a half taller than he was reclining in a bed behind a gauzy curtain, with things that looked like children suckling at her rows of teats. She reached out toward him. Her long fingers parted the curtains, beckoning him closer, jewels and gilded finger stalls catching the dark torchlight. The title card. Ellen found the translation in the Institut’s packet of supplemental materials.

Come here, my little one! I yearn for
your warmth!

Kapfelberg climbed into the Giantess’s bed. The half-glimpsed things nursing from her scurried away as the curtains parted. The beautiful boy looked like a child in her arms. She pressed her mouth against him. People came into the bedchamber as the two made love. They gathered with their backs to the camera, watching in silence. Bodies writhed behind the gossamer curtains. The boy kicked frantically. The spectators whispered to each other, heads leaning together. The curtains fluttered. Another title card.

Ah, beloved!

A cut to inside the canopy. Sophisticated camerawork for the early thirties. *They must have built another bed*, thought Ellen. *A cutaway model, just the top two-thirds, with a platform for the camera.* She could almost picture Bartok seated at his Mitchell Standard, or perhaps a Bell and Howell, reels whirring in the metal housing, the set sweltering under house lights drawn in close. Fire held in the cupped bowls of concave mirrors. His eye to the viewer's sight, sweat beading on his bald pate as the Giantess rode Kapfelberg before him, the muscles of her back moving like serpents. The little rolls of flesh where her harness dug into her sides. A silken veil. A fall of black hair rendered ghostly pale in negative. Had he loved Kapfelberg? Had he touched those high cheekbones, that perfect mouth, those slender, girlish legs?

Ellen wiped the last of the obscuring scum off the film. It came away easily. Another pass with a dry flannel and she straightened up, pulled off her mask, and crossed the item off in her log. A little of the calm she drew from her work had come over her, though the throbbing burn between her legs had worsened. She stretched, trying to work the kink out of her neck. Phillip had left at some point. She hadn't heard him go.

The lab phone rang.

"Hello?" said Ellen.

"You had your lunch," said Mrs. Overbrook.

"I did."

"Mr. Shrier wants to know, it went well?"

"It did, I think."

Mrs. Overbrook cleared her throat noisily. "She says it did!" she shouted. The line squealed with feedback, then settled. "That's good. He says—"

The line went dead. Ellen sat for a moment, listening to the faint hiss of the lost connection, then replaced the receiver on the cradle. She stared at the phone, thinking of Rachel Feldman's breasts shifting under cream-colored silk, of her Bubbe's protruding collarbone and skinny wrists. She thought of Jesse's hand on her mouth. The taste of his skin. Like milk, just starting to turn.

★ ★ ★

Ellen unbandaged her hand in the bathroom.

The gauze was crusted red and brown and stuck to her gashed palm, taking chunks of scab with it when she tugged. She bit her lip to keep from whimpering as the scaly, blood-colored flakes came away from the raw skin beneath. She opened and closed her hand. The scab flexed, cracking like rotten ice. The gauze and cotton taped around her thumb were trickier. Cotton fibers stuck to skin. The dull, insistent throbbing as she tried to push the tape and bandage off the tip of the digit. When it went, most of her thumbnail went with it, a mottled green-and-purple hunk of keratin. Pus welling from the nail bed. The stink of it, rich and fatty. Feldman's pastrami sandwich. She vomited into the sink.

"Get it together, Kramer," she whispered, wiping her mouth. She rinsed and spat and left the tap running. With a Q-tip she excavated her mangled thumbnail. The film had torn her nail bed. It would probably heal wrong and leave her with a little wrinkle in the keratin. She dabbed the wound with cotton soaked in hydrogen peroxide from the first aid kit in the closet next to the emergency wash station, savoring the bright chemical sting of it, then wet another and did the same for her palm. She opened the fresh gauze she'd bought that morning at the bodega and rewound her bandages.

It took her a little less than half an hour to can a dupe of the release print and lug it down to the test-screening room on two. She threaded the first reel, turned out the lights, and sat down at the projector. It was pure dark in the windowless room. The air felt close and hot. She switched on the projector. DIE BARONIN, the title card declared in the flickering glare. Spots of static. ein film von Karla Bartok

The fake stairs. The fake castle. Ilya climbing toward the dark as hand-drawn lightning crackled over cardboard towers. The Chamberlain awaiting him. Rooms full of revelers. Banquet tables laden with boiled cows' heads and live snails. A naked woman stretched and broken on the rack, gasping theatrically in her close-up. Shadows dancing on the walls. All fake. All safe. Just dead Jews playing a dirty game of dress-up on a cheap canvas set. The whole thing was over in seventy-five minutes, the Baroness holding up Kapfelberg's papier-mâché head as the last shot faded out.

The projector rattled on, splitting the dark with its blank tent of light.

Nitrate

In 1937, the 20th Century Fox film repository in Little Ferry, New Jersey, caught fire in the dead of night. Every restorer and archivist knew the story. When she closed her eyes, Ellen could almost see the sheets of flame roaring a hundred feet high from the building's dust-clogged vents. She could hear Charles Greeves, thirteen years old, screaming in terror as he rolled in the burning grass outside his family's collapsed home, consumed when the fire spread to the archive's outbuildings and then to nearby residential lots. His mother, badly burned herself, beating at him with her housecoat. A heat wave had accelerated the breakdown of the repository's three thousand nitrate prints, releasing flammable gases that built to such a concentration that some unlucky reel spontaneously combusted.

The flame of Ellen's mother's lighter went out. Janet Kramer exhaled smoke, then sucked it back into her nostrils. It streamed out again slowly. "Kim could let that skirt out for you," said Janet, tapping a nail against her gin and tonic. The ice cubes within shifted with a gentle clink. The club was quiet after the Wednesday dinner rush. "You'll have to go to Flushing, but he's worth it. He did all of Sissy Biterman's tailoring when she blew up like a balloon from those pills they had her on—the Prozac, after she had her little episode."

Ellen remembered Sissy Biterman as a chubby, quiet girl on whom she'd had a ferocious crush in Hebrew school. They'd seldom spoken, and she'd forgotten about Sissy until a few years ago when she heard one of Mallory's friends whispering that she'd opened her wrists with a steak knife in the bathroom of her parents' house on the Vineyard. "It's just bloating," she said quietly, picking at her mesclun salad. "I'm on my period."

"Will you be bringing anyone to your father's retirement party later this month?" Janet tapped her cigarette over the ashtray. "You haven't forgotten, have you?"

Ellen pictured Jesse's upper lip curling away from his gums as he whimpered his way through orgasm. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Miriam Cavill tells me you and Jesse have been seeing an awful lot of one another."

"I'm going to break it off."

Janet raised an eyebrow. "Is there someone else?"

Ellen curled linguini around her fork.

"It's a simple question, Ellen."

"No. There's no one else."

Janet exhaled through her nose. "Then I just can't understand why you'd do something like that. It's foolish." She sipped her drink, leaving a fragmented mouth print on the rim in pale red. "It's very foolish."

"I don't like him, Mother."

"What's that got to do with it? Marriage is a job, Ellen. A career. You find someone, you settle down, have his children, stop basting yourself in chemicals in that sweatshop—"

"Mother, I like my work."

"You're thirty years old, Ellen." Another drink. A little rivulet of liquid wended its way down Janet's jaw. "When are you going to grow up?"

"I'm thirty-three. Mom—"

"What happened to your hand?" Janet screeched, seizing hold of Ellen's wrist.

Ellen looked down at her bandages. "Oh, it's—"

"You're mutilated!" Janet turned as the waiter approached with another gin and tonic. "She's mutilated!"

"Ma'am," said the waiter, taking her empty glass with an expression of nervous alarm.

"It was just an accident," said Ellen, annoyed. She didn't like feeling like a side of beef on her mother's cutting board. Not that her mother cooked. Celery sticks and cottage cheese. Weight Watchers and Deal-A-Meal. "A film strip slipped out of a clamp and cut my hand. It's already healing."

"Jesse's very important in Mayor Koch's office. He's special assistant to the mayor. Someday he might hold his own office. A senator. Maybe mayor, someday. Marriage."

Ellen's skin crawled.

Janet's thin-lipped smile showed teeth. "A house."

Cigarette smoke. Dragon's breath. The smell of her mother's Belmonts, imported from Canada, where Janet and her mother and sister had lived after the war, was suddenly nauseating. Ellen averted her eyes from her plate. The greens looked like old, dead skin, leprous and rotting.

"Children."

A nun ate alone two tables over, her back toward them. Under the table, Ellen pushed her thumb into the half-healed cut on her palm, staring at the nun. The slow, sickly pulse of pain drew her out of her reverie. Her mother was staring at her.

"They're working you too hard," said Janet. "Your father can talk to Bill. I want you out of that lab. Those chemicals are destroying your skin. And when you talk with Jesse, don't be shy. Men pretend to want that, but they don't. They want you to make all the decisions."

Ellen blinked. "Talk with Jesse about what?"

"About marriage, Ellen."

"Mother—"

"This is something you're going to do for yourself," said Janet. The nun's fork scraped against bone china. A short, sharp scream. "It simply is. You've had your misadventures, and you've moped for long enough; now you're going to grow up and join the rest of us in reality. Tomorrow night we're having dinner at Capelli's, the four of us. That would be a nice time for him to ask. You should let him know."

Ellen stared at her mother. Janet was prettier than her, though not a beauty like her own mother had been. Had Bubbe given her this talk, maybe in this same restaurant, when Janet balked at marrying Ellen's father? They'd had a long, slow courtship. She'd overheard her aunt Frieda joking about it at Christmas, years earlier ... *Engaged so long they could have sold timeshares*. Something like that.

"What would you have named me if I'd been a boy?"

Janet blinked, taken aback. "Benjamin," she said stiffly. She sniffed. "That's—we discussed. We never made a decision."

"Why Benjamin?"

"It was your father's idea. Are you finished interrogating me now? Can we behave like rational human beings?"

"I'm sorry. It was just something I was thinking about earlier." Ellen probed her wounded palm again. It took her mind off the burning pain

between her legs. “I can’t remember why.”

“There are things I’d like to share with you, Ellen,” said her mother, speaking a little more gently. “Your father and I are getting older. Don’t you want to be with your family now, while you can? Don’t you want to have a family of your own?”

Ellen thought of her mother with Mallory’s children at Yom Kippur, the look of barely repressed dislike on Janet’s thin, angular features as her grandsons, Zachary and Joshua, fought over whose turn it was to take out the trash and baby Aaron wailed in Mallory’s arms. Mallory was a beauty, too, tall and curvaceous where Ellen and Janet were bony and small, her hair falling in chestnut curls, her right cheek dimpled like a fifties pinup girl’s. If Mallory couldn’t make their mother happy, how could Ellen? Any children she had would be just another string of disappointments, hunched and nervous little things, maybe they’d just die inside her. Prolapsed uterus hanging between bloody legs.

The rest of their lunch passed quietly.

Out on the sidewalk, after exchanging goodbyes with her mother, Ellen wondered how Charles Greeves had felt when the flames first kissed his back, igniting his pajamas and his hair, smearing his skin like heated wax as his nerves screamed and died in choral agony. She wondered if he’d ever kissed a girl before the fire had its way with him. If he’d ever put his tongue in another boy’s mouth, maybe on a dare, or held a classmate’s sweaty hand in the dark of a five-cent movie on a Saturday night. Even if he had, the fire had kissed him last and deepest. He’d died curled up like a spider in a closed burn ward, eyes scalded milky gray, oxygen blasting uselessly down his slackening throat.

Ellen took her glasses off and cleaned them on the sleeve of her coat. For a moment she pictured herself snapping them in half, tossing them into the street, and then stepping off the curb after them. Her skin prickled with a shivering wave of heat, her thoughts turning feverish and flurried. She pictured the car bearing down on her, the driver’s face as they lost control and spun out in the dirty slush. Her body conforming to the cold metal. Bones breaking. Flesh tearing open. Would she look beautiful, lying shattered in the gutter?

Do you want it?

A cab pulled up to the curb, the driver yelling something at her in thickly accented English. Ellen put her glasses on. She opened the door and got into the car, the clamor of traffic ringing in her ears.

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The next morning, Jesse called her at work. She took the phone from a smirking Phillip and held the receiver between her jaw and shoulder.

“Hello?”

“I was just thinking of you,” he said. Ellen could hear voices in the background. Men talking. Laughing. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“Is that her, Cavill?”

“I’m fine,” said Ellen. “Please don’t call me at work.”

“I just couldn’t wait to hear your voice,” Jesse said shyly. More laughter and hoots of playful derision from his audience. “I’ll pick you up at eight tonight, all right?”

The burning ache between Ellen’s legs throbbed miserably. She closed her eyes, unable to focus on the film. It was a particularly rough stretch, covered in debris and marred by intersecting cuts and scratches which obscured the mock gladiatorial scene in which a shirtless Kapfelberg crossed swords with a muscular giant wearing nothing but a loincloth and a golden mask worked to look like a crying child. She hated it. “We don’t have plans.”

“We’re meeting your parents at Capelli’s. It’s Thursday. We discussed this the other night.”

His half-hard thing deformed against her leg. The look on his pinched little face, a look of deep, ugly wanting, a wanting so huge and hungry that even taking and having couldn’t touch it, couldn’t make him anything but needy. Mewling. And that thing behind him, that hallucination. Touching itself in the doorway.

“I don’t remember that.”

“Ellen,” said Jesse. He sounded frustrated. He sounded like he was trying very hard to look like A Man in front of his coworkers. “I don’t have time to get into this. I’m just glad you’re feeling better. I’ll be there at eight.”

He hung up. Ellen put the phone back on its cradle and sat for a moment, stuffing down the urge to scream. She spun her chair and found Phillip staring at her with an insufferable grin. “Lovers’ quarrel?” he asked, wagging his eyebrows.

Ellen stood, peeling off her gloves. “I’m going out for a smoke. If he calls again, tell him I’m not here.”

“Ice cold, Kramer,” said Phillip, chuckling as he turned back to his desk. “Ice cold.”

In the alley it was almost too cold to breathe, the wind screaming shrill and fast between the Brickworks and its neighbor. A man stood a few yards away in the driving snow. Ellen thought he might be smoking, too, but it was hard to make out much about him. Her footsteps crunched. She shielded her cigarette from the gale and lit it, resolving not to pay any attention to him. It was probably only one of the archivists, or a janitor. When she finished her cigarette, she looked and found that he was gone. For a moment she stood there feeling somewhere between frightened and dense, wondering if she could have imagined a silhouette in the flurrying white.



Rachel Feldman’s building in the Village looked like the sort of place where Burroughs might have shot someone in the fifties, its lower floors pockmarked with boarded windows, the lobby’s rippled glass facade darkened by grime and smoke. Ellen stood on the curb for a while as her toes slowly went numb in the cold. *I should go home*, she told herself. *She’s just going to jerk you around. She’s going to make you feel like an idiot in front of her friends, like a classless Republican drudge.*

Another voice, mocking and throaty, whispered in the back of her mind. *But that’s not what you’re frightened of, is it, Ellen?*

Her hand shook as she adjusted the strap of her bag, weighted down by the cans she’d taken with her from the lab. No one had batted an eye. Her back was killing her after lugging them the four blocks from the subway station. She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering.

You want to please her, don’t you? You want to make her and all her friends—all those bohemians and poets and braless pothead dykes and

faggots—clap and coo over what a clever little pet you are. Maybe you'd like it if she made you wear a collar. If she held your leash? Are you a bad dog, Ellen?

Ellen crossed the street, skipping nimbly up onto the curb as someone honked at her. She glanced up and down the sidewalk. Laughing girls in winter coats. An old Hasid out on some errand, his beard blown at an angle by the wind so that it resembled the head of an old wicker broom curved by long years of use. He passed her, muttering to himself, and she ducked through the big solid oak front door with its stained glass transom. In the entryway, carpeted in red and wallpapered in golden scrollwork on a deep, dark burgundy, a squat middle-aged doorman sat on a red vinyl stool, reading a copy of *Rosemary's Baby*. He looked up as the door groaned shut, tipping his cap to Ellen.

"Ellen Kramer," said Ellen, wheezing a little at the shock of coming in out of the cold. "I'm here to see Miss Feldman."

"Wonderful," said the doorman with mildly disturbing sincerity, as though Ellen had just announced she was going to put his children through college. He balanced his paperback on his knee, took a little notebook from the breast pocket of his burgundy jacket, licked his thumb, and began to leaf through it. He stopped and tapped his forefinger against the page, smiling behind his salt-and-pepper mustache. "Ellen Kramer."

Ellen couldn't think of anything to say. "Yes."

"Wonderful," the doorman said again, beaming. Without getting up, he pushed the entryway's inner door open onto an unlit lobby. "Miss Feldman is in 8B."

Ellen went in. The lobby was enormous, though the front desk was abandoned, the coat check shuttered, and the brass frames of the elevator entryways had become badly tarnished. The door swung shut behind her with a muted *boom*, leaving her in near total darkness except for the faint lights of the elevator's call buttons. Her footsteps echoed from the walls. She pressed a button. What felt like minutes passed. She looked back at the thin sliver of light beneath the entryway door.

The elevator chimed. Its doors slid open. Inside, water-spotted mirrors distorted Ellen's reflection in a shimmering cascade. She rode up trying not to think about her blotchy cheeks, her sweat-damp hair, her boring, ill-fitting clothes. By the time she rang Rachel Feldman's doorbell she felt

ready to vomit. She tried to conjure up Dr. Decker's voice. *Exposure is the surest route to relapse, Ellen. We're talking about a subculture that's very deviant, that wants to separate you from your family, to rob you of your femininity, your future, your connection with productive society. Is that what you want, Ellen?*

Rachel answered the door in gray slacks and a white T-shirt. For a moment, staring at the pale expanse of her cleavage, Ellen found herself unable to think of anything to say. The collar of her shirt felt tight. Damp from melted snow, it chafed. For a mortifying instant she pictured the baby she'd seen nursing on the bus that morning, a drop of milk rolling down one plump, pink cheek, dimpled fist clutching at its mother's heavy breast.

"I didn't think you'd come," said Rachel. There was a stained kitchen towel slung over her right shoulder, and a dab of cream sauce on her cheek. She smiled. "Don't they teach you not to go with press to a second location?"

Ellen stared, trying to find her tongue. "I brought it," she said at last. She fumbled her bag off her shoulder.

"You're frozen solid," said Rachel. "Come in. I'll make you a drink."

The critic turned and started down the hall before Ellen could protest. Huge, beautiful coats—red wool lined with silk, patterned brocade in sky blue and cream—and scarves hung from wrought-iron hooks along the wall. Ellen touched the sleeve of one, imagining all that beautiful fabric wrapped around her. There was a cane, too, polished cherry with a pearl handle.

Opposite the hooks, framed sketches, paintings, and woodcuts covered the wallpaper. A reproduction of Goya's witches and their goat-headed Satan. A photo of a naked woman with her back to the photographer, her dark hair cascading over her soft shoulders to just above her broad, muscular backside. That Doré drawing, the one with the man staring up into the endless tunnel of Heaven opening up before him.

Ellen passed a room off the left of the hall. Through the half-open door she glimpsed a beautiful man in his fifties or sixties sitting on the side of a narrow bed, crying with his hand over his mouth. His hair, short and parted on the left, was the color of sand, and he was rocking slowly back and forth. Something about him made her chest ache with familiar sorrow. Then she was past, absorbed in trying not to stare at the inch of soft skin, striated with faded, silvery stretch marks, where Feldman's shirt had ridden up in back.

She thought again of Freddie in her bikini, of her soft little tummy and curving hips.

I look fat.

You look incredible.

Feldman's study, past a little kitchen and a spacious living room done in blue and eggshell, was a warren. Books lined the walls. Books lay piled haphazardly on the desk and the chair by the window, which looked out over Fourteenth Street. A VHS player and a twenty-inch color set occupied a stand in the corner, a few dozen tapes set neatly on its shelves. More on a nearby bookcase. Feldman went to the bar cart by her desk and busied herself as Ellen ran her fingers over the spines of her books. Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. Bazin. Kuleshov. Dulac. Bordwell. Metz. The collected essays of Truffaut. She halted, fingertips bare centimeters from the spine of a slim red paperback. The title felt dangerous. Disorienting. The moment between touching the stove and the nauseating feeling of the burn squirming up the nerves.

The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions.

Moving mechanically, not quite knowing why, she took the book from its shelf and thumbed through the first few pages. A dedication. A cartoon. Queers with deformed, distorted faces gathered around a dinner table, bare breasts and huge, pouty lips. A child sitting in a gay man's slender lap. A Cuban flag on the wall. A cake with the hammer and sickle atop it. Under the cartoon, a wildly looping signature.

For my girl. Love, Ned

She closed the book and reshelfed it, her hands shaking. When she turned, Feldman handed her a glass of something dusky amber, a single huge chunk of ice clinking against the sides. "Negroni," said the critic, smiling. She took Ellen's tote and set the cans one by one on the end table beside her drafting desk. Ellen sipped at her drink. It was dark and bitter and delicious.

"You're early, by the way," said Feldman, positioning her desk light and fishing a magnifying glass out of a drawer. She had the first can open and two feet of film across the desk and clamped in place. "That's why there's nobody here. I haven't lured you into a trap."

Ellen looked down at her feet, unable to think of anything to say to that. An image of herself hanging bound and bloody in a snare from the bough of

an ancient oak flashed through her mind. Women riding naked through the trees with arrows in their teeth and nocked to their silver bows.

Do you want it?

“This isn’t it,” said Feldman. She straightened, frowning.

“It’s the show print,” said Ellen. She hadn’t wanted to bring the negative. Her injured hand throbbed just at the thought of it, those cold black serpents coiled and waiting for her back at the Brickworks. “Wait. What do you mean?”

You know what she means.

Feldman gave Ellen an inscrutable look. “You’ve seen it.”

Ellen’s hands shook. The ice in her drink tinkled against the cut glass. “Seen what?”

“The other film,” said Feldman. “The *real* one.”

Ellen let out a bark of laughter, but what she’d meant to sound incredulous was instead a ghastly titter, verging on psychotic. She took a hasty gulp of her drink and swallowed wrong, spluttering and spilling most of the rest of it down the front of her shirt before she could clear her airway and collect herself. “It’s not real,” she wheezed, fumbling her handkerchief out of her jacket and dabbing at her soaked shirt. She looked idiotic, an ugly woman playing dress-up in her father’s clothes. It had been a mistake to come to Feldman’s apartment. “I mean, what do you mean it’s *real*?”

“Bartok made the same film twice,” said Feldman. “Once on a soundstage in Prague, then again, later the same year, at his mother’s ancestral castle in northern Romania. He had inherited it just a few weeks before the shoot, and he was arrested there by SS officers two days after he’d completed editing. The local burgher tipped them off. As far as anyone knew, that was the end of *The Baroness*. Both cuts were with Bartok when he was taken. Before the recent rediscovery, I knew of only two segments to have survived—a three-second sequence of Mehdi Ionescu levitating, and another, twenty-two seconds, of Ilya Kapfelberg climbing the steps to Hasdeu. That’s the castle. Strange, but not out of the question for a notorious perfectionist. The only thing is, he was out of money.”

“The castle—”

“Oh, he tried to borrow against it. I saw the records when I was in Hungary in seventy-eight. No bank would touch him. No, when he shot the second version of *The Baroness* he was selling his family’s furniture just to

keep the lights on. So why does a man with nothing left to his name, a man who knows he's on Goebbels's blacklist, facing arrest if he sets foot in Germany or Austria again, reshoot a movie he just finished making? *How* does he do it?"

"I don't know. Maybe one of the actors—"

"Circus trash, burlesque performers, Roma with no papers, no family. They had less than Bartok did." There was a light in Feldman's eyes that Ellen didn't like. "You have it," said the critic. "The second film. I want to see it."

"What did you mean by what you said before?"

"You know what I meant," said Feldman. "I could see it on your face the moment you sat down across from me in that diner."

Ellen's hand throbbed. She felt that hot wire inside her pelvis again, the burning infection squirming through her urinary tract.

"There are things in that film we still can't reproduce," said Feldman. "The levitation sequence—contemporary reviews mention wire work, clearly visible, no way around it in thirty-two. There were no wires in the second cut. No possibility of a hydraulic lift disguised by costuming, even if Bartok had been able to afford one. What's pulling that woman into the air?"

Ellen could see it. She'd spent hours on a tramline scratch running through most of that scene. The actress, Ionescu, rising up from the floor of the castle's chapel, her toes curling as they parted with the stone. All around her, nuns lay twined together, fingers thrusting into damp, dark curls, mouths buried between clenching thighs, lapping at each other, and Ionescu rising, rising, her habit pulled taut in front by an invisible force and torn from the hemline up, revealing the soft flesh beneath, the powerful thighs, the camera tilting up—it would have been so heavy, so difficult to make the action smooth—until the shot looked down on Ionescu, flushed and panting, her dangling feet foreshortened by distance, her eyes alive with ecstasy as her lips parted, as she wrapped her arms and legs around something the viewer couldn't see. Her mouth moving, forming words.

My love. See how I have brought our
wicked delights into the very bosom of
their cursed church?

Ellen hated that scene. It had made her palms sweat, and twice during her repair of the scratch she'd had to stop work, her meditative fugue cut all to ribbons by the hideous images. It made Jews look like slaving foxes sniffing at the henhouse door, too. The whole film did. It was strange. Why would a Jew do something like that to his own people? Ellen's mother hadn't even let them watch *The Producers* when they were children.

"I can screen it for you where I work," she said, her voice a little hoarse. "Monday night, come to the Brickworks on Staten Island after seven. Do you know it?"

"I can find it," said Rachel.

A car horn blared on the street outside. Ellen spilled more of her negroni, this time mostly on the carpet and her shoes. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "Do you have any club soda? I can get it out."

"I have a girl who comes in twice a week," said Rachel. Her smirk deepened the dimple in her right cheek. "Are you staying for dinner, Ellen?"

Ellen shook her head wordlessly, thinking of her mother's voice over the phone two days before her college graduation. *We know, Ellen. This ... phase is over. It's done. It's time to stop making a spectacle of yourself and come home. If you want to waste your life like this ...* "I can't," she croaked.

She wished that she could crawl under Feldman's desk and hide. She wished she could get down on her hands and knees and lick the carpet clean while Feldman watched with all the city's beautiful queers. The faggots and their friends between revolutions. Instead, she meekly fell in behind Feldman and allowed herself to be led back to the front door. There was no sign of the handsome man in the guest bedroom.

"Why do you care so much about this movie?"

Rachel paused with her hand on the door. She looked back at Ellen. "That's our history," she said. The bell rang again, but Rachel ignored it. "Do you have any idea how many of the people involved died for it? How

many of them ended their lives staring down the barrel of a rifle, or slaving for the Nazis?”

Ellen shifted, folding her arms. “It’s just so ... ugly.”

Rachel’s look of disgust faded into an even more unbearable expression of pity. “They’ve really messed you up, haven’t they?” she asked softly.

Something snapped. “Where do you get off talking to me like that?” Ellen squealed. Her voice cracked like a teenage boy’s. She was shaking with anger. “I am *nothing* like you. I—just because we’re both Jews, you think you have the right to lecture me? To tell me what I should feel? And the other thing—the—I’m *not* like you. A *lesbian*.” The word burned her tongue.

Feldman’s eyes narrowed. “You think I don’t know why you came here tonight? You closet cases are all the same. Who broke your heart in college, princess? Still not over her?”

Ellen took a step toward the critic. “Monday,” she snarled. Her ears were ringing. “Come and see your fucking movie. Then we’re done, you ... you *pig*.”

“Rach?” a woman’s voice called from the other side of the door. “Everything okay in there?”

Feldman’s expression was a mask. She threw the deadbolt and opened the door without another word to Ellen. A tall, broad-shouldered woman in overalls and a windbreaker stood there. She was maybe forty, or a little younger, with a windburned face and short brown hair. “It’s fine, Danny,” said Feldman. “Ellen here was just leaving.”

Ellen shrank from Danny, cowed and intensely embarrassed. “I’m—yes, I’m just—um, I’m leaving. Sorry.” She darted out into the hall, grateful that she’d kept her coat on. Danny went in, pulling the door shut behind her, and Ellen heard the bolt *thunk* back into place. She leaned against the wall and tried to breathe. Her heart was racing. Her palms were damp. Her chest felt hot and tight.

What is wrong with you? She balled her fist and hit herself hard enough to make her nose sting. She did it again, open palm this time. Her right ear rang where she’d caught it with the tips of her fingers. The bright, cold sting of it brought her back to herself. *What the fuck is wrong with you?*

Ellen realized a moment later that she could hear Danny and Feldman talking. Not their words, but the tone, and the unmistakable sound of a

woman crying. She pushed off from the wall and staggered down the hall toward the elevators, starting to feel numb.

I can still make dinner at Capelli's, she thought. I can get home in time for Jesse to pick me up. That's what I should do. I'll meet him there and then later he can have intercourse with me, and we'll get married next year and I'll quit my job and have his children. We'll have three. We'll live in Long Island. He'll tell me about his day. His parents will visit on the weekends. Mine at the holidays. I'll join the PTA. Maybe we'll go to temple, but not every week. I won't miss work. We'll have a dog.

Ellen was crying by the time she reached the elevator, big, self-pitying sobs that racked her from head to toe. Snot poured over her upper lip. She wiped it off and smeared it on the leg of her slacks, sniffing as the fit wound itself down, the pitch-black misery of it draining away into garden-variety, gray nothing. She reached for the elevator button just as the doors opened with a tinny *ding*. The woman inside stared, eyes wide. She reached up to pull off the headphones to her Walkman.

"Ellen?"

It was Freddie.

"Shit," said Ellen.



Ellen felt as if someone had reached down her throat and seized hold of her heart. Freddie didn't look the same. She wasn't the girl Ellen had fallen in love with in college, that plump beauty with her nose ring and her oiled dark hair wound tight at the back of her head, her worn jean jacket with its PAINT IT BLACK patch and laminated buttons. The battered copy of *Hitchcock/Truffaut* Freddie had carried around half because she thought it would impress the other girls in the department and half because she loved Truffaut with a deep, almost embarrassing fervor. The way a child idolizes a parent.

There was nothing raw or embarrassingly earnest about the woman standing in front of Ellen now. Her hair was a mane, no longer worn tight but haloing her face, which was softer and a little lined. Her ears were heavy with studs and rings. She was so beautiful in the soft light of the elevator that Ellen briefly forgot how to speak, forgot that she'd just lost her

mind in Rachel Feldman's front hall, that she was straight now, that her relationship with Freddie—who was really just a confused man—had been a phase, just a lost and aberrant part of a normal, wholesome life. All she could picture was stepping into that elevator and taking Freddie by the throat, of forcing her back, of kissing her endlessly, hungrily, sucking and biting.

"I loved your work on *White Knight*," said Freddie, all acid.

Ellen flushed, her skin prickling with embarrassment. She was acutely conscious that she'd forgotten to apply deodorant that morning. Freddie had always loved the smell of her sweat. She'd used to put her face in Ellen's armpits and inhale, eyes closed, expression serene, before licking at the dark, oily hair, sucking the sensitive skin, pressing her nose deep into the hollow so that Ellen shivered at the feeling of cartilage deforming against muscle and bone.

Now Freddie, stepping from the elevator, looked at her like she was something someone had tracked inside on the sole of their shoe. "I thought you were better than that, El. I don't know why, but I really did."

"I didn't touch it," said Ellen. She retreated a few steps before catching herself. "It was another restorer."

Freddie sneered. "Right. You just kept your head down and took their money."

Ellen wanted to shout that Freddie wasn't being fair, that financing a restoration was complicated and wasn't there a paycheck *she'd* ever been anything less than proud to take home, and wasn't history worth preserving even if it wasn't pretty? But somehow what came out of her mouth was: "Will you have dinner with me?"

"Are you insane?" Freddie pushed past her, then rounded on her with sudden fury. "What are you even doing here? I haven't seen you in fifteen years, Ellen. You left me, remember? You picked whatever miserable straight bullshit you're doing now over me, and honestly I'm glad you did, because you would've eaten me alive from the inside out. I don't think you can help it, you're so fucked up. So, thank you so much for getting cold feet, you spoiled, spineless trust-fund *infant*."

"It's just dinner," Ellen begged. She knew how pathetic she sounded, but the words were pouring out of her. She felt feverish again. Her hips ached,

and the small of her back. “W-we could get that carrot cake you like, at B&H.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind,” said Freddie, her voice hitching. “Have a nice life.” She turned her back on Ellen and started down the hall.

“Tuesday,” Ellen called after her feebly. “Six thirty.”

Freddie stopped at Rachel’s door and knocked. A few seconds later Rachel answered and then Freddie was gone.

Ellen hugged herself. She rested her back against the wall between the elevators, buttons chiming, and sank down to the floor. This time the crying jag came over her like a tidal wave, crushing and black, and she didn’t come up for a long, long time.

The Can

“You could get a job at Waldbaum’s,” said Freddie. They were together in Ellen’s room in the little Cambridge apartment her parents paid for. Ellen lay on the bed. Freddie sat in the window seat overlooking the Commons. It was dark out. The middle of summer, and sweltering hot. They’d just gotten back from their trip to Block Island. The film shoot Ellen had thought would finally make things right had fallen apart into a fight that just wouldn’t stop coming back to life. And then, Ellen’s mother had called. “They always need stockboys and cashiers. They have a bakery, too. You like baking.”

“I don’t know how to do any of that,” Ellen squeaked into her pillow.

She could hardly breathe. There was an awful pressure in her throat. Freddie didn’t understand her. She could feel her girlfriend’s cold, imperious frustration beating against her like waves pounding the shore. How could she have ever thought they would work out? Ellen had given up so much to be with Freddie, but what had Freddie given up to be with her? Nothing.

“Well, maybe Naomi could talk to someone at her bank.”

“I can’t just be a different person,” Ellen sobbed.

“Nobody’s asking you to do that,” said Freddie. She was using her Reasonable Voice, which made Ellen wild with frustration and anger. It was the sort of voice women used to talk to children who didn’t want to eat their vegetables, or to dementia patients convinced their long-dead spouse was in the other room. It was how you spoke to someone who didn’t know any better. “There’s the recycling center, too. Rock or Dale—”

“I don’t know how. I don’t know how.” Ellen gripped her temples, her nails biting into her skin. “I want to die.”

“Most people survive without a trust fund, Ellen.”

“What about without a family?” She knew it was dishonest even as she said it, but it filled her with self-righteous venom to spit the words in Freddie’s face. It gave her something else to dig her nails into. Freddie had a family. A real family, in spite of everything she was, and everything she wasn’t.

“You hate them. You never talk to them. When you do, they make you feel like garbage. Would it be the worst thing in the world if—”

“If they never spoke to me again? If they threw me away?” Ellen reared up from the pillow, pushing herself back from Freddie and into the corner of the room, making herself as small and hunched as possible. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? If I only had you.”

Freddie closed her eyes. There were tears on her cheeks. When she raised a hand to wipe them away, Ellen saw that it was shaking. “I have never tried to take anything away from you, Ellen,” she said. “Maybe I was just kidding myself, that someone like you could ever really love someone like me.”

She stood, and Ellen flinched from her because she knew it would hurt Freddie, knew it would make her feel big and manly and feared. She regretted it as soon as it was done, as soon as she saw the hunted-animal fear in Freddie’s eyes, but to admit it felt unthinkable.

“Please, don’t leave me,” said Ellen.

“Goodbye, Ellen,” said Freddie, her voice trembling. “I love you. I hope this makes you happy.” She left.

A little while later, cried out and shivering, her voice hoarse from screaming, Ellen went to the phone and called her mother.

★ ★ ★

It was very cold in Ellen’s dream. The wind moaned through the chinks in the slanted attic walls. A man crouched naked in the corner, head bent and shoulders raised. He was eating something, snuffling and grunting as he shoveled it into his mouth. He had a hairy back and sagging breasts. He was old. Very old, his scalp hairless and liver-spotted, his skin loose and wrinkled on his bones. He sat among stacked boxes. Roaches crawled over his flesh.

He looked up. Blood ran from his lacerated lips. It dripped from his chin. He was eating film. It hung from his mouth in iridescent ribbons. It was twisted up around his bleeding fingers. He said something, spraying blood with each muffled word. She couldn't make it out, but then there was a flickering jolt of darkness and she saw the same man, decades younger, huddled naked in the corner of a dank, dark shed, a dead rat thrashing headless in his hands. He tittered to himself, chewing, blood and frothy white drool running down his chin. The rat's corpse scratched at him with frantic violence.

In the middle of the shed, surrounded by crates and boxes pushed back flush with the walls, the thinnest man Ellen had ever seen was drawing symbols on the floor in blood from the severed tips of his right hand's first two fingers. She could count his ribs, his vertebrae. The knobs of his knees, his wrists, his ankles looked like marbles lodged beneath his skin. His face was a skull, jaundiced eyes set deep in dark, bruised sockets, cheeks hollow, lips stuck to yellowed teeth. His shriveled penis dangled limp between his legs. He was muttering in German as the first man watched him, chewing rat meat.

Ellen woke staring at the alarm clock on her bedside table. It was just after 4 A.M. No street sounds yet. No jackhammering from the construction on the corner of Dean and St. Mark's. The city wouldn't wake for some time. In the hall a light flashed on her answering machine. She could almost hear Jesse's wheedling, self-pitying anger, her mother's cold rage. She threw the blankets back and sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. When she pulled the waistband of her underwear out from her belly, she found her vulva swollen and red, and a powerfully oily, metallic stink assaulted her. She was spotting. She gagged, brackish revulsion washing over her as she lurched out of bed and down the hall to vomit in the toilet.

What had she eaten last night? She couldn't remember. Fleeing Feldman's building, sniffing on the subway. Sweating through her sheets in bed, keening like an animal. Freddie, Freddie, Freddie. A thin film of bile swirled on the surface of the water in the bowl. Breaking up. Disintegrating. She groped for the flusher. A vortex. *Charybdis*, Pop-pop would have said. He'd always loved reminding people that he'd read *The Odyssey*.

The toilet seat was cool against her cheek. She kept thinking of what Feldman had said to her. *It's real*. How could that be? What did it even

mean? Movies weren't real. *The Baroness* was just a dirty picture, just a bunch of sleazy Berlin nightclub trash diddling each other in some aristocratic pervert's ruined castle. So there were things about it they couldn't explain. So what? People had learned and forgotten a million things about making movies. So she'd seen something. Heard something. She was tired. She was under stress at work.

There was no man in the alley, she told herself as her reflection swam in the toilet water. There was no one watching from the doorway when Jesse climbed on top of you. No one in the office late that night. She let her eyes drift closed. The sound of the toilet's tank filling lulled her back into an uneasy sleep.

★ ★ ★

"Garden-variety yeast infection, and a pretty nasty UTI," said the gynecologist, Dr. Chau, peeling off her gloves and dropping them in the biohazard trash can under the office's glazed window. "I'm going to prescribe a course of antibiotics, and for the yeast infection there's an antifungal cream; you're going to apply that every morning for seven days. It could clear up within three or four, but use the whole prescription, all right?"

"Okay," said Ellen. She squeezed her thighs together as hard as she could.

Dr. Chau came and sat across from Ellen. She crossed one leg over the other and put on an expression of practiced professional sympathy. "Ellen," she said. "I'm going to ask you something very personal. Is that all right?"

"Yes," said Ellen. The office seemed to shrink around her.

"You have several tears in your vaginal walls, as well as what looks to have been some pretty severe bruising." Dr. Chau pushed her glasses up her nose. She exhaled as though about to step off a high dive. "Ellen, these injuries are consistent with sexual assault."

Jesse's thing, half-hard against her leg. The dry, stretching pain as he thrust away inside her like a yappy little dog humping a shin. Ellen looked down at her hands. She felt sick to her stomach. She could still smell the stink of herself. Oily. Fishy.

“If there’s anything you’d like to tell me, I know people who can help,” said Dr. Chau. “I’m not saying something happened, and I’m not saying something didn’t. All I’m saying is that I’m here for you if there’s anything you need.”

Ellen stared at the doctor, who was tall and severe and very attractive. What would happen if she said yes? Was it rape if you never said no? Freddie’s friends in Boston had been full of talk about coerced consent and patriarchal violence, sexual entitlement and marital rape, hazy concepts that had always made Ellen feel defensive and sullen, like they were aimed at her somehow. Besides, only beautiful women got raped. Everyone knew that.

“No,” said Ellen. “There’s nothing. Thank you for asking.”



Ellen sat alone at a booth in B&H Dairy in the East Village. It had taken her close to an hour to find something to wear. Green cardigan over a ruffled pink paisley blouse and green wool skirt. She felt like a little girl. Her thoughts were fluttering. Indistinct. Everything was so clear now, and the thing that felt clearest was that it had all gone wrong when she abandoned Freddie, when she turned away from the unknown and retreated into the hard, cold arms of certainty. It had all gone wrong with the movie, with the shoot on Block Island, when Freddie had turned to her in the middle of a scene and said, *Ellie, come on, this isn’t how poor people talk. You know that.*

I should have just listened to her, thought Ellen, clutching her warm mug of coffee. *I was so fragile. I was scared.*

At the restaurant’s door, through the glass, Freddie appeared out of the darkness. Ellen’s breath caught in her throat. The bell over the door chimed, bright and clear, and Freddie was coming toward her, snow melting on the lapels of her buckskin jacket and in her dark hair. She slid into the booth and folded her arms on the table.

“I’m glad you came,” said Ellen.

Freddie smiled at her. “I must be the dumbest dyke on God’s green Earth. Whatever it is you want to say, say it, then I’m walking out of here, and I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Ellen stared at Freddie. She felt as though she'd been stabbed in the throat. Every breath was an effort of will. *She doesn't mean it*, she told herself, digging her fingers into her leg under the table. *She's protecting herself. She has to be strong. She has to put on a hard face.*

"Are you here for that Rodney Dangerfield movie?" Ellen squeaked.

"I'm DPing," said Freddie. "It's a comedy, nobody cares what it looks like, but it's an easy paycheck."

"What's he like?"

"Fine. He's grumpy, but he keeps his hands to himself."

Ellen swallowed. She looked down at her hands, then back at Freddie, who was starting to look impatient. The silence stretched on and on until finally Ellen forced her lips to form the words she'd practiced in front of her mirror for an hour that morning. Her first attempt dissolved into a stammered whisper. Her second took.

"You were the best thing that ever happened to me," she said at last, speaking too fast, her tongue tripping over itself, but unable to stop or slow down. "I've spent f-fifteen years trying to pretend I didn't make the biggest mistake of my life letting my family scare me away from you. Trying to pretend I wasn't selfish, and a coward, and w-weak. Spineless. Idiot."

Freddie's face was unreadable. Ellen's heart raced. She felt as though she were still coiled in a knot in the corner of her bed in their apartment in Cambridge, the dirty sheets, the laundry piled on the floor, the Beatles staring down at her from the *A Hard Day's Night* poster, each in his own little frame like they were all about to guest on *Hollywood Squares*. She could smell incense and reefer and mildew. She wanted to crawl back through time's long, claustrophobic tunnel to that moment, to the phone ringing, to Freddie steeling herself to be tossed aside, and kill that selfish, stupid girl she'd been. Wring her neck and slip into her skin.

She thought of a picture one of Freddie's friends had snapped of them during their trip to Block Island to shoot their little student film, Freddie leaning over her shoulder, her hands covering Ellen's eyes, her smile so radiant, so unaffected as they leaned toward the camera together, the sky yawning huge and blue in the thrown-off frame. She wanted to go back to that moment. If a photograph could slice a little flesh from time, did the rest of the carcass remain? Could she return and suck the lingering taste off of the cracked and splintered bones?

Is that why Bartok made the movie? So he'd have somewhere to go after he died?

"Ellen?"

"I'm so sorry," she said.

They sat in silence as the waitress brought Freddie a coffee and refilled Ellen's mug. Ellen fumbled with a creamer for what felt like minutes before finally spilling half of it onto the table. Her nails were all bitten down. Her cuticles were raw. When had that happened?

"It's all right," said Freddie. "I appreciate the apology, Ellen. I'm glad you've grown up a little, but you have to understand, our breakup isn't some big tragedy to me. Until I saw you in that hallway, I hadn't thought of you in years."

"Then why were you crying?" Ellen snapped. Her face was hot. She felt as though her eyes would boil in their sockets.

Freddie looked at her with awful, intolerable pity. "That was you, Ellen."

That didn't feel right. Ellen sputtered, unable to think of a response. She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw hot coffee in Freddie's face. She'd done everything right. She'd made her decision to be a freak, to throw away all the joyless security to which she'd spent her life clinging. It wasn't fair.

"But I'm *ready*," Ellen choked, appalled to find that she'd started to cry again. "Please. Please, Freddie. Let me try again."

Freddie squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Please don't do this to me."

Ellen gulped back tears. She knew people were looking at them, but she didn't care. She felt wild. Insane. She lunged forward and seized Freddie's hand in hers. "I want you."

Freddie jerked away from her. She stood abruptly. "This was a mistake," she said, her voice wooden, and she turned and headed for the door. People were looking. Staring. Even the waitress manning the register.

"Please," Ellen whispered. She could hear the phone ringing. She could feel her mother's breath on the back of her neck. "Please, don't leave me."

The bell over the door tinkled. A cold wind swirled through the diner. Freddie was gone.

The Second Cut

Ellen met Rachel in the vacant lobby of the Brickworks on Wednesday a few hours after the receptionist left for the night. Rachel stepped through the front doors with snow swirling around her ankles and a cold wind at her back. Slowly, deliberately, she wiped her shoes on the mat while holding Ellen's gaze. Ellen felt as though the photos on the walls were judging her. Ronald Reagan. Wilford Brimley. Clint Eastwood. The Old Men, Phillip called them. The weight of their scrutiny made her feel small.

"I apologize," said Ellen. "For the other night."

"Kiss my ass," Rachel snapped back. "Shrier's puff piece is filed. Let's get this over with."

They rode the elevator to the second floor in silence. The hall was dark. To the left was the theater where the Foundation sometimes screened significant films for its backers. To the right, the test-screening room where Ellen had watched the release print of *The Baroness* a few days earlier. She'd left the door open and the lights on. The projector was threaded.

She went to kill the lights as Rachel took one of the upholstered metal chairs. It was too small for the critic, but she made it look like a throne. She lit a cigarette. Ellen started the projector. The dark ribbon of the negative ran through it. Her palm itched and ached. Light painted the vinyl test screen.

The score came in, a dark flurry of strings over the abyssal pounding of a timpani, all speckled with pops and hisses. The title card. DIE BARONIN in ornate Gothic font, white against the black outline of a forbidding castle, and beneath it, ein film von Karla Bartok. A fade from the silhouette to the castle itself, an elaborate if slightly cheesy miniature perched atop a bald hill against a painted backdrop of imposing mountains. A winding switchback stair cut into the hillside, and a little figure climbing it. Another cut. Ilya Kapfelberg now. A boy. Seventeen or eighteen at the most, and

with a nymphish beauty in his delicate bones, his pale hair blowing over the upturned collar of his coat as he labored up the steps against a stiff prevailing wind. Artifacts appeared and vanished. Black motes. Rippling lines.

The castle facade. Wood and canvas filling the shot around a backlit archway in the center of which stood a tall, bald man dressed all in black, the costume tight over the arms and unfolding from the elbows into voluminous sleeves. A strange metal half mask accentuated his lower jaw, hooking in at the corners of his mouth and banding the bridge of his nose. Two steps below, the boy stood in his shadow, looking up with trepidation. The English intertitles Ellen had mocked up for the duped print appeared.

The night is dark, traveler. What errand
carries you to the Baroness's door?

The boy, frightened, gesticulating rapidly.

I come with an urgent message from my
lord the count, her noble lover!

Ellen left the projector running and went to sit silently beside Feldman. The critic ignored her. She'd taken off her coat. Cigarette smoke swirled around her manicured red nails. Her immaculate platinum coiffure. She wore a crimson blouse and loose black slacks, and Ellen thought again of that silky inch of stretch-marked skin she'd glimpsed above the waistband of Feldman's jeans. Why had she lashed out at her?

Because she was offering you something, said the little voice in the back of her mind. *And you were scared, so you made her take it away so you wouldn't have to choose. So you couldn't admit how much you wanted it.*

The Chamberlain led Kapfelberg through Hasdeu's entryway. No painted canvas backdrops this time. No scaffolding visible at the edges of the shot. The stone archway was real, dwarfing both men. Another intertitle.

My mistress's realm is a realm of
delights, but beware, traveler! There is
peril here for the unwary ...

Something touched Ellen's hair. She jerked in her seat, looking around, but the screening room was empty except for the two of them. The projector whirred. Smoke hung in the flickering light. Without warning a heavy weight settled over Ellen's lap. She smelled sweat and olive brine. A brand of cigarette smoke she didn't recognize, acrid and venomous. A whiff of Mouchoir de Monsieur, which her grandfather had sometimes worn, its herbal warmth bright and somehow secretive, like sunshine falling through thick branches. Beneath the perfume, cum and gin. She couldn't move. She couldn't seem to find the air to scream. The weight on her thighs increased, as though someone were settling in to straddle her. A hand she couldn't see wound its fingers through her hair.

Ellen looked frantically toward Feldman, but the critic seemed not to notice. She was staring spellbound at the screen, sweat running down her face to drip from her chin, her skin damp and gray. Slowly, the invisible hand bent Ellen's neck back over the chair. Fingers tasting of nicotine and chalk pushed past her lips and stroked her tongue. Another hand between her legs, tugging at the zipper of her slacks, pulling it down with a throaty hum of metal on metal. Hot breath reeking of liquor washed over her cheek. She gagged as the fingers pushed deeper into her mouth.

Do you want it?

Kapfelberg was inside the castle now, following the Chamberlain through a yawning parlor where dandies, courtesans, grotesques, and transvestites played at cards and billiards. In a far corner, a gaunt man in an elaborate gown, his hair piled high atop his head like a Versailles courtier's, knelt in front of a bony old cardinal with his robes hiked up around his hips. A close-up of an aging man with flat gray hair and a stern set to his mouth. She recognized him from Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. He laughed, throwing back his head.

The hand slid under the waistband of Ellen's underwear. Fingernails pushed furrows through her pubic hair. That smell again. That shameful,

hateful smell. The antibiotics and the doctor's fungal cream hadn't worked their magic yet. Ellen felt sure that a molecule more of pressure and she would pop like a pimple and spurt out of herself, her mind dissolving into pus and ichor, smashed like a fly against the glass. It was impossible. She was losing her mind. Wet. Wanting.

You will bear stones, said a soft, husky voice in Ellen's ear. *Not children*. The fingers pushed up into her, hot and brutal, and suddenly she was hanging in the dark, the screen burning white before her in an endless void. *This is our lot. Our gift*.

Kapfelberg climbing into the Giantess's bed. Little things crawling out of his path, like babies, but not babies. Faceless, except for their huge, grinning mouths. Ellen screamed. The nun rose up from among her writhing sisters. The darkness opened itself. A black flame burned in the light. Bodies tangled together in a smeared and blurry haze. Sucking. Kissing. Biting. Bartok as the Baroness atop a winding stair suspended over nothingness. A great pendulum-bladed sword at rest on his shoulder. Blood on his mouth, pancake makeup mixing with the red, staining his throat and the cleavage he'd contrived with latex and cosmetics.

Kapfelberg climbed toward the Baroness. She took the letter from his trembling hand and cast it out into the black. She seized his throat in an iron grip, gauntlet digging hard into his tender skin. Ellen convulsed as an orgasm tore through her. Her injured hand screamed with white-hot agony. The cuts in her vagina throbbed and prickled as the Baroness lifted Kapfelberg into the air. They kissed, long and slow and sensuous, tongues coiling between flashing teeth, and then she flung him to the steps and unlimbered her mighty blade, as long as the beautiful boy was tall. It came down like lightning. Chips of stone flew. Blood poured over the stairs.

The Baroness knelt as Ellen's orgasm swept down to the tips of her toes, the world inverting, collapsing, inverting again in dizzying flashes, the black flame burning, burning, and the Baroness stood and raised the severed head up to the camera, laughing in silence, Kapfelberg staring dead and slack-mouthed across fifty years of time. A name written in blood on his forehead. It wasn't a prop. He couldn't be standing just outside the shot with his neck hidden by a table or a curtain. He was dead. Dead. Screaming. Ellen's toes curling. Cramps twisting her calves.

The camera pitched. For a moment Kapfelberg's headless body was visible, thrashing on the ground like a chicken's, and she saw that his shirt had torn open and that he had breasts, little breasts, and the fingers tore free of her, and then—

“Ellen!”

She was in her seat in the theater. Feldman was shaking her, and her glasses had fallen off and bounced against her chest. “Beautiful,” croaked Ellen. Her thoughts were a slurry of jumbled images and sensations. She could feel herself starting to cry as she untangled the chain of her glasses and settled them back on her nose. Feldman's face was white in the light of the projector.

“Ellen, it ran all three reels,” said Feldman. She was staring at the projector and the cans lined up on the table beside it as though they were holy relics. “How did it do that, Ellen? You were next to me the whole time. You couldn't have—it can't—”

Ellen kissed her. She seized the front of Feldman's blouse, fighting the overwhelming urge to take those magnificent breasts into her hands, to tear Feldman's clothes off and bite her like an animal, and kissed the critic as hard as she could, as deeply as she knew how. Slowly, gently, Feldman put a hand in the center of her chest and pushed her back. Ellen went willingly. “I'm sorry,” she said, and meant it. There was no cringing, twisting horror in her gut, only a twinge of sadness, and of disappointment.

“Ellen,” said Feldman, holding her at arm's length. “Do you understand what we just saw?”

“It's real.” Ellen laughed. A sob escaped her. She clasped her hands between her knees and doubled over, blood rushing to her head. “It's real.”

★ ★ ★

The two got coffee at a little all-night diner with a view of the Narrows. A tug sailed past on the dark waters, bathed in the lights of the bridge.

Ellen couldn't stop smiling. She'd thrown up twice on the walk from the Brickworks, but it had done nothing to damage the bright, sharp euphoria in which she floated. Across the table, Feldman burned with nervous energy. She drummed her fingers on the cheap Formica, red nails clicking in a

steady rhythm as she sipped her second cup of the diner's acrid, overpowering coffee. Ellen picked at a soggy slice of apple pie.

"I've never been able to find any record of Kapfelberg," said Feldman. "This would explain it. An assumed name."

"Do you think Bartok really..." Ellen let the rest of the thought trail away. It felt unthinkable, to kill someone for a movie. The whole thing was like a bad dream, but wonderful, too. The idea that art could mean so much to some madman that he would spill blood to make his vision a reality was a rush, somehow, a jolt like cocaine dripping from her sinuses down into the back of her throat.

"I don't know," said Feldman. "The ones I've been able to dig anything up on, none of them survived the Shoah."

The skin on the back of Ellen's neck crawled. "What, none of them? That's not—that can't be normal, even for people on the ... the fringe, or however you'd say it."

"It's not," said Feldman. "The composer went first. Antonin Goldner. They sent him to Drancy, I think. Then the rest, in ones and twos. Bartok got picked up last. He was the only one taken at Hasdeu, and the only one to survive Nazi internment. He died in an American prison camp a few months after the end of the war."

"What?" Ellen's fork scraped against her plate. They both winced at the sound. "How is that possible?"

"Some people weren't released afterward. Gay men, transsexuals. The Germans handed Bartok over to us after Auschwitz was liberated. He starved to death in Allied custody."

Ellen thought of the skeletal figure daubing words in blood on warped and splintered boards in her dream the night before. She thought of his sunken cheeks, his deep-set eyes alive with maddened fervor. What would it do to someone, to survive the Holocaust only to realize that the other side wasn't going to save you? To understand that you were as subhuman under the stars and stripes, or the hammer and sickle, as you had been under the swastika? That everyone else was going to the biggest celebration in the history of the world while you died of hunger because people found you uncomfortable to think about?

"Do you think he's trying to talk to us?" Ellen didn't know why she asked. It sounded right to her. *Felt* right.

Feldman took a long drink from her mug, then set it down carefully. She looked out at the tug sailing downriver to the bay, its running lights reflected in the water. "I don't know," she said softly. "When we were watching, did you feel—"

"He touched me," said Ellen. She had held the secret of it all through their walk from the Brickworks, and now it spilled from her like pus from a burst boil. "I tried to tell you, but I couldn't talk. He put his hands on me. I couldn't see him. He put ... he put his fingers in me. I could feel his breath in my ear. I could smell him, Rachel. I could smell his cologne. Bartok's."

Feldman's eyes were wide. "How do you know it was him?"

"I just know."

"You could have had a seizure," said Feldman. "This could be the start of a manic episode."

"But you felt something, too." Ellen reached across the table on impulse and seized Feldman's wrist. "I know you did. When I looked at you during the movie, you were sweating. Out of it. You were seeing something."

Feldman pulled her hand away, but gently. "I saw something," she said after a pause. "Someone was watching us from the hall. A tall man. Very pale. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't seem to move. I felt so sure that if I did, he would come into the room, and I ... I wanted him to, but I also didn't. When I was very young, my mother sometimes stood in the doorway of my bedroom like that, and I remember ... I felt the same way."

"I've seen him, too," said Ellen. The tug had cleared the bridge. It was dwindling now. "It's Varga. The Chamberlain. I had a fever, and something was happening. I saw him watching me."

These injuries are consistent with sexual assault.

Ellen lit a cigarette with fumbling fingers. Her cut palm was stiffening up again. It was going to be an ugly scar. She'd seen it, a wormlike ridge of inflamed tissue, when she changed the bandages that morning. "Do you think they're going to kill us? The ... things, in the movie."

"I don't know," said Feldman.

"What should we do?"

"I don't know that either."

Purely out of habit, Ellen rolled the smoke over her tongue and sucked it back into her nostrils before breathing it out. Ghosts didn't exist. They

didn't kill people, or haunt film reels, or avenge injustice. If they did, the world would be buried in them.

She'd called the film ugly. Pointless. Did she think that anymore? Her beliefs couldn't seem to find their footing. It was like she could see the outside of those feelings, that hard, brittle instinct to recoil from excess, from hedonism, from the gleam of spit on leather and the sight of bare flesh rippling in motion. She'd felt this way only one other time, a few nights before she and Freddie had that last horrible fight. They were in Rhode Island for the night with some of Freddie's friends, sleeping out under the stars on Block Island, shooting their movie. Freddie had shotgunned her twice as the sun went down and the weed had slowly permeated her, weighing down her limbs, pushing her thoughts deep into the cooling sand beneath her. *I'm just some dyke*, she'd thought, and the impossible freedom of it brought tears to her eyes. *It's not important who I am, or who I love, or what I do.*

I'm mine.

I'm just some dyke, she'd whispered in Freddie's ear, giggling as her girlfriend, half asleep, curled into her side. Tears streamed down Ellen's cheeks. *I'm just some dyke.*

And then her mother had called, the light had come on, and she'd scuttled back under the fridge like the cockroach she was. Not really thinking, Ellen stubbed her cigarette out on the last bite of her pie and lit another. "You know Freddie," she said.

"One of the best DPs in the industry," said Feldman. She blinked. "Oh. You're the ex. Of course. She saw you in the hall the other night."

"Yeah," said Ellen.

"That would explain her mood. You leave a little trail of destruction, don't you?"

Ellen could feel the call of that brittle shell now. The hard, bare place inside herself where she knew she could retreat again, which might, she sensed instinctually, afford some sort of protection from the things she and Rachel had seen in the Foundation theater. The things she'd seen in her dreams. She would need her own hardness if she wanted to remain in Feldman's world. A world of women. A world of pain and knowing and the slick, gliding warmth of sweating skin against her own. Was that what she

wanted? The memory of her mother's voice over the phone still made her blood run cold.

You're going to have to choose, she realized. You've been choosing all your life. You just didn't want to think about it.

"Yes," she said at last. "I have." She inhaled, letting cigarette smoke roll over her tongue. "I really am sorry for what I said to you. I was frightened. You frighten me."

Rachel finished her coffee and pushed the mug away. She stood. Ellen thought how graceful she was, how poised. She wanted Rachel very badly in that moment, wanted to belong to her, to own her, to bury her face between the pillars of the critic's thighs and use her tongue to write the golem's sigil on the wet red heat she found there.

Slave.

"Thank you, Ellen," said Rachel, shrugging into her coat. "Will you finish restoring it, do you think? I'd guess that there's still time to run."

"No," said Ellen. She felt very certain. "I don't think there is. I'm going to finish what I started."

★ ★ ★

Mrs. Weintraub, Ellen's landlady, was waiting for her on the stoop in curlers and a housecoat when Ellen walked up the street just after midnight. Mrs. Weintraub held an unfiltered Camel in her hand, her toy terrier, Murray, sitting vigilant beside her.

"I've tortured you these past four years, maybe?" she called out, squinting at Ellen and pushing her reading glasses up onto her forehead. "Have I raised your rent—a little bit, a little bit I raised it, but not highway robbery—that you should go around destroying my property? Artie says, you should call the police, let them handle it, and I said, Ellen's a good girl, maybe there was a break-in, maybe she's not well, I don't like the look of that man she's bringing home. Well? Are you here to make a fool of me?"

"Mrs. Weintraub," said Ellen, stopping at the base of the steps. Just the sight of her landlady exhausted her. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Mrs. Weintraub made an exasperated sound and threw up her hands. "It's easier I just show you."

Turning, she led Ellen through the drafty front hall and up the steps to her apartment. The front door stood open. A long finger of dirty water crept over the floorboards from beneath the bathroom door. "I took pictures," said Mrs. Weintraub. She picked her way along the hall as though it were an active minefield and opened the door. Ellen put a hand over her mouth. Broken glass covered the floor, and the corner of the sink had been broken off and lay in the quarter inch of murky water that had overflowed the bathtub. The mirror was shattered, only a few shards still clinging to the frame. The bath stood full, its surface tranquil.

"Water coming through the ceiling, damage to the baseboard, the flooring, and God forbid there's mold after this, we'll have to rip out the linoleum." The landlady rounded on Ellen. At her side, Murray let out a warning growl. "Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know," said Ellen. She felt like she'd been jerked out of a dream and back into the world of expiration dates and heating bills, her coach dissolving back into a heap of scrabbling, squeaking rats at the stroke of midnight. "Mrs. Weintraub, my door is always locked, and I have the only key. Aside from yours."

Mrs. Weintraub raised the key in question and shook it in Ellen's face. "I had to use it to get in. And the kitchen's worse, so you know." She brushed past Ellen. "I'll have Artie bring up the shop vac from the basement tomorrow, it's not easy with his knees, but I know my state requirements, nobody's taking me to court over negligence. Nobody's saying I don't do things the right way. All this red tape, you could strangle just trying to pay the electric!"

Halfway down the hall, Ellen stopped dead. Her bedroom door stood open, and through it she could see her bed was soaked in blood. It was pooled in the valleys of the rumpled blanket. It dripped from the sodden sheets. There were footprints in the crimson slick at the bed's edge. Bloody tracks led to the left and out of sight.

"Oh my God," Ellen whispered, advancing step by dreamlike step until she stood on the threshold, gripping the doorjamb tight. "The bedroom."

"They left it alone, yeah," said Mrs. Weintraub from the kitchen. "Usually these crazies, they break into the place, the bedroom gets the worst of it. I could straighten your hair, the things I've seen. Lucky break for you, I guess."

Ellen stared at her landlady. Mrs. Weintraub was talking about the kitchen, gesturing toward the broken cabinets, Murray trotting primly after her as she shuffled around the shattered jars. After a little while, she left, still talking and gesturing, and her voice faded down the steps until silence fell over the apartment.

Ellen turned back to her bedroom.

The Baroness stood in the doorway, smiling pale and bloody.

Artifact

Ellen's parents lived in a three-story brownstone on East Nineteenth by Gramercy Park, the acquisition of which had been the culmination of Janet's father's ambitions in real estate. She could still see Pop-pop, her mother's stepfather, behind his desk in the study, smoking like a chimney as he growled orders into the phone, signed checks, rifled through papers with fingertips yellowed by nicotine. He'd died behind the wheel of his Cadillac a few days after Ellen's sixth birthday, a massive coronary. They'd moved in with Bubbe later that same month, and when Bubbe died in '74, Janet inherited. Within a month the whole place had been stripped, scrubbed, repainted, and redecorated from the carpets to the lighting fixtures.

There was nothing left of the cramped and kitschy warren Ellen's Bubbe had so carefully cultivated, no trace of her overflowing pantry, her gilt-framed reproductions of Monet's water lilies, her little clay figurines and vases of dried flowers. In their place were Janet's triangular side tables and stainless steel vase lamps, her abstract art, her white carpeting and African masks. Only the smell of cigarettes was the same, clinging to every surface like an oily film.

"Things happen at school," Ellen's aunt Frieda was saying.

They were sitting on the couch together in the second-floor living room, drinking martinis while Frieda's sons Levi and Noah smoked cigars with Jacob, who had driven down for Janet's party-planning luncheon for Brad's retirement. It was only two weeks away now. So far they'd mostly been drinking while Janet and Mallory fought in the dining room and the rest of the family pretended not to hear.

It felt surreal to be here after what Ellen had seen in the Foundation's screening room. Could that really have been five days ago? Her family felt like cardboard cutouts dancing in front of a candle flame, not people but the idea of people, hungry to exist, to be seen, but with nothing worth seeing.

“My first summer in Connecticut—Miss Porter’s—I had such a crush on an older girl. Violet Sturm. I followed her around like a puppy. I used to write her love letters. I never sent them.”

“I think you told me about her,” said Ellen, who had heard her aunt recount the story while drunk on at least three separate occasions.

“Well, it was all a long time ago,” said Frieda, deflating a little. She was tall and bony, her gray hair cut short and feathered at the temples. Ellen had never liked to be alone with her. It felt like being sucked down a drain, the way she’d been afraid of as a little girl at bathtime. Shrinking, shrinking, and the guttural, slurping moan of that dark hole pulling her in.

“I should check on Dad,” said Ellen, getting up.

“Because you look obese,” came Janet’s voice from the dining room. “I can’t worry about you anymore? I’m a bad mother for caring about my daughter’s health?”

“I just meant, it goes away,” continued Frieda. “It’s a phase, honey. You’ll forget all about her.”

“I know,” said Ellen, forcing a smile that made her face feel as if it might crack. She felt like two people stuffed inside one skin. “I had therapy, Aunt Frieda. It helped a lot.”

“Mom, that’s not what I’m saying.” Mallory, exasperated and a little tearful. “This is normal for the second trimester. My doctor said—”

“Oh, well, did he carry you for nine months? Did he dry your tears when those girls wrote ‘Calorie’ on your nametag at debate camp?”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Good,” said Frieda. “That’s so good. You know we’re all very proud of you, don’t you, honey?”

“Thank you.”

Mallory’s sons Daniel and Noah tore through the room, the kitchen door swinging behind them. “No running inside,” their father, Abe, called after them half-heartedly as he poured himself a scotch from the sideboard.

Ellen slid past him and into the back hall. The powder room stood open. The door to her father’s study was closed. At the head of the stairs Mallory’s oldest, Zachary, sat hunched with his nose in a book. Ellen thought about going to sit next to him, about telling him she’d always hated these get-togethers, that she’d used to hide under the table with her paperbacks while the grown-ups bickered and drank. She hesitated. She had

held him as a baby only once. She could remember the milky, faintly sour smell of the crown of his head. His fat little fingers grabbing at her face, pulling off her glasses. What could she say to him now?

After a short while, she crossed the hall and opened the door to her father's study. Her breath caught in her throat. Instead of the familiar desk and bookshelves, the mullioned windows overlooking the park, there was a hallway she'd never seen. It was dark and very long and a cold draft came whispering down it, stirring the cobwebs that hung from the stone arches of the ceiling. At the hall's far end, a distant doorway, light spilling through onto the flagstones. A hundred feet away, perhaps a little more.

"Ellen," Janet shouted from the dining room, "tell your father lunch is on the table."

Her mother's voice drove Ellen into the hall like a slap from a riding crop before she could think twice. Her breath fogged in the air. She could feel the cold of the stones through her shoes as she stumbled to a halt and looked back over her shoulder. The upstairs hallway was a very long way off, the whitewashed wall stark against the blackness. "Mom?" she whispered. "Are you there?"

A figure appeared in the hall doorway. A silhouette so tall that its head and shoulders were lost to view. It gripped the lintel and ducked under it. Ellen saw a flash of pale gray eyes in the light from the hall. She took an unsteady step backward. "Who's there?" she said, her voice a pitiful squeak.

The figure lurched toward her. Behind it, little things toddled unsteadily into view. Mouths full of crowded yellow teeth gaped and drooled. Ellen ran. There was no euphoria here, no sense of magic, no certainty or revelation. She had seen something in that dark room with Rachel Feldman, and she had thought she understood it. Perhaps she'd only made it mean what she wanted it to mean. Perhaps the magic of the negative was only a hunger so deep that it had reached across time, had endured the fires of the Shoah and the cruel, lonely deaths of its cast and crew and architects until the day that it could gorge itself on her. She'd been stupid to think that her little glimpse of madness would free her from anything.

Ellen's lungs burned as she ran. The light through the door ahead didn't seem any closer. Heavy footfalls echoed from the walls, the slap of callused feet on stone growing louder, coming faster. She passed a narrow window.

A glimpse of night sky, a few stars seen through swirling clouds. A windswept mountainside, and then she was past. A narrow passage yawned black on her left. Another. A third. A vaulted ballroom where a pale bullock leaped and bucked and tossed its bloodied horns. A woman lay dead on the floor, her ribs crushed, her face a horror, slashed from chin to eye so that her teeth glistened through the awful wound.

Huge fingers brushed the back of Ellen's blouse. She screamed, jerking away from her pursuer, and looked back for a fleeting instant. It was the Giantess, Ilya's inhuman lover. Her beauty was disturbing seen so close, her sheer size distorting perspective, her face tremendous, eyes so vast that Ellen felt the same crawling terror she'd always associated with swimming out past where she could stand, the water dark and secret all around her. In the depths of those eyes, a black flame burned.

"Ellen?"

She stood breathing hard in her father's study, the afternoon sun streaming through the leaded glass so that she had to squint to see him sitting at his desk. He looked rattled. Pale.

"Are you all right, El? You're covered in sweat. And who was that with you?"

She stared at him. "Who?"

He took off his reading glasses and stood, coming around the desk and guiding her to Pop-pop's armchair by the fireplace. He crouched beside her and took her hand with a look of earnest fear. "Are you on something?"

Ellen let out a nervous bark of laughter. She looked back at the empty doorway. Beyond it, the second-story hall with its plain white walls above dark wood paneling and cream-colored carpet. A picture of her Pop-pop and Bubbe at the Florida house's tiny private beach, Bubbe's gray hair windblown, Pop-pop expressionless in his mirrored sunglasses and Hawaiian shirt. They looked like *Far Side* characters.

"No, I'm—I'm not on anything, Dad. It was probably the boys. They're running around."

"Hm," said her father. She watched disbelief turn slowly into acceptance on his broad, familiar features. Color returned to his cheeks. He forgot. He stood, knees popping, and went back to his chair. "I ran into Cathy Seward at the club." Absently, he clinked his Harvard ring against his glass. "She

said they're shooting something with that Rodney Dangerfield on Staten Island. Streets blocked off, extras everywhere. A mess."

"Yes," said Ellen.

She kept looking at the study door. Had it happened? If it hadn't, it meant she was losing her mind. She had seen the Baroness in her apartment, but then, she'd been upset, and after what she'd experienced with Rachel, wasn't it possible that her mind had simply been filling in blanks? Perhaps, an ugly little voice suggested, Feldman had drugged her somehow. Put acid or pills or something in her water. The idea of a bad trip was enticing. It called to her, numbing and seductive, that hard thing in her heart splitting open to let her wriggle back inside, to enwomb her again in suffocating darkness, to let parts of her asphyxiate little by little until the built-up plaques of lifeless tissue came to look much like a woman who was normal and valued and, if not loved, at least not actively despised. Except when would Rachel have done it? There'd been no chance.

"She told me she saw that woman. Your ... friend, from school."

Ellen's blood ran cold. "What?"

Her father looked uncomfortable. He turned a page in the brief he was reading. "She must be working on the production. Didn't you say she did something like that? Photography or lighting or effects? I told Cathy, it's a small industry. People come through New York and LA." He turned another page.

Ellen had a sudden, vivid memory of her father, his hair not yet retreating, his frame still lean and spare, getting into a station wagon with a man she didn't know in the driveway of the house where she'd grown up. A camping trip, he'd said. Her mother smoking in the doorway, smoking and smoking all weekend long until the air inside the house was hazed with gray. The man in the passenger seat, his beard, his big belly and broad shoulders.

"You have to be careful," said her father. He was silent for a long time, reading and rereading, making notes in the margins. His pen scratched against the thin, fragile mimeograph paper. Ellen remembered an old photograph she'd found in a box in the basement once. Two boys, perhaps twelve or thirteen years of age, in an alley, arms around each other's shoulders. Their smiles. Pigeons roosting on the laundry lines behind them.

"Dad, who was Benjamin?"

The pen stopped. “No one,” he said. It started again. “Unless—do you mean Benny Lovitz? Who owns the snow plow business out in Newark?”

She shook her head. “Mom said it was what you wanted to name me, if I’d been a boy.”

“I’m surprised she remembers,” he said. He rose and went to the bar cart. “She wanted to name you Henry. We had an awful fight about it. I can’t ... can’t remember why.” He poured himself another drink. Ellen could tell by the sound of glass rattling against glass that his hands were shaking.

“It’s a good name. I like it.”

He didn’t turn.

“I’m supposed to get you for lunch,” said Ellen. “Mom says we’re sitting down soon.”

Her father looked at her then, and in a flash she understood that he was feeling everything she’d felt as she stared at her nephew at the head of the staircase, that whatever part of him might want to open up to her, might want to shake off its own dead and crusted husk and taste the air again, it was too late. This was all he had left for her.

You have to be careful.



Ellen leaned her cheek against the phone booth’s glass side, the ringing receiver nestled between her ear and shoulder. Outside the booth people trudged past with heads lowered and hats pulled down. The snow had given way to freezing rain. The gutters ran swift under plates of ice as thin as spun sugar. Ellen’s breath frosted the glass. A man on a corner looked toward the booth, his coat’s collar up around his ears.

Is he watching me?

The call connected. Rachel’s voice fuzzed and crackled over the line. “Feldman speaking.”

“Rachel, it’s Ellen. Ellen Kramer. Something just happened to me. I saw one of them. Not in the movie. In real life.”

Silence for a moment. “What happened?”

“I was at my parents’ house. I went to get my father for lunch, and when I opened the door to his office, there was a hall I’d never seen before. Stone. Like in a castle. There were windows looking out over a forest. And the

Giantess was there. Those ... things were with her. They chased me, Rachel. They were real. I could feel their breath. I could smell them. My father saw something, too. Just for a moment, and then he forgot.”

Rachel said nothing. The line hissed with quiet static.

“Are you there?” Ellen whispered. The man at the corner was still looking at her. A gust of wind battered the booth with sleet, the noise of it shockingly loud in the enclosed space. “Have you seen anything?”

A pause. “No.”

“You have.”

“Get some sleep, Ellen. You’re upset.”

A voice in the background, faint but unmistakable. *Who is that, baby?*

A click. The line went dead. Ellen fell silent. Rain drummed against the glass for what felt like minutes before the connection crackled back to life and someone on the other end cleared their throat. “*Der shteyn vakst, mame,*” rasped a deep, hoarse voice. “*Es vakst shnel.*”

Ellen slammed the receiver back into place, breathing hard. Someone was rapping on the phone booth’s door with a gloved fist. She shoved it open and pushed past them, not seeing, the cold instant and overwhelming.

The man on the corner smiled at her as she hailed a cab, and metal gleamed at the corners of his mouth.

★ ★ ★

At work on Monday all Ellen could think of was Freddie. Freddie yelling at her. Freddie trying not to cry in their college apartment. Freddie in her bright yellow bikini on the beach at Block Island, the week they’d shot the movie. Freddie staying with Rachel Feldman. *Who is that, baby?* Freddie walking out of B&H. Leaving her again.

A black mood crept over her as she cut and taped. She was nearly finished now. A few more days and the print would be ready for the ultrasonic cleaner. She could have run the first and second reels, *should* have run them already, but she felt strangely reluctant to part them from each other. They belonged together. They belonged with her.

Phillip came in late, wandering down the hall sometime after noon. He handed her his copy of the *Times*, jabbing his finger at an article. “Isn’t this your man?”

There were two photos, one of a handsome young SS officer standing outside a Parisian café, his hat under his arm and his full, pouty lips curled in a triumphant grin; the other of the same man, now heavysset and old, lying slack-faced in a hospital bed, a cannula in his nostrils, his hooded eyes closed and his mouth, that same mouth, but covered with cuts and scabs, lined at the corners with age, hanging open. She had seen that face in her dreams. She had seen him, young and old. She ran her thumb over the column's header.

SS OFFICER REVEALED: TREASURE TROVE OF NAZI-ERA CONTRABAND RECOVERED.

Ernst Harald Schlemecher, 82, Lt. SS einsatzgruppen 1941–1945, was found injured and unresponsive in his West Berlin apartment early this month by a concerned neighbor. “[Ernst] always brought me my mail after his walk,” said Wilhelm Dreyer, 41. “I thought, something must really be wrong.” Mr. Schlemecher, who lived for nearly forty years under an assumed name, was not identified until several days after he succumbed to infection at the Viktoria Klinikum in the wake of the hospital's surgical removal of a foreign object, a reel of film, from his throat and stomach. Doctors believe—

“He tried to eat it,” said Phillip, excited. “That's what happened to the end of the reel, the bubbling on the print. Stomach acid. It's like I said, a queer Nazi—no wonder the guy went cuckoo.”

Ellen's injured hand throbbed without warning, the pain so sharp and sudden that she nearly cried out. She folded the paper and handed it back to Phillip. “It's sad,” she said. “I don't want to see it.”

“Don't tell me you feel bad for the old queen,” Phillip scoffed. “He probably sent half your family to the showers.”

Ellen looked at him. She must have let her disgust show, because he turned his back on her with a snort and stomped back to his chair, muttering to himself.

“*Breng im tsum mizbeyekh,*” said a voice in Ellen's ear. Gin-smelling breath wafted over her neck. “*A khazer darf a meser.*”

Bring him to the altar. A pig needs a knife.

Trembling, Ellen returned to the print. The images seemed to wriggle and dart before her eyes. Little figures danced between the cells. She picked at her bandage until the gummy adhesive separated from her skin, little white threads stretching between flesh and fabric. The cut was scabbed over, fibers stuck in the flakes of dead, dried skin that covered it, the skin around it swollen and mottled red and purple. *A pig needs a knife*, she thought nonsensically. She trembled as she pressed her forefinger against the wound. It felt like gripping a dying coal, like the moment before the pain of the burn registers. Pus bubbled up around her fingertip. She hunched forward, breathing hard and gripping her injured hand tight.

A pig needs a knife needs a knife needs a pig needs a knife.

Ellen rewrapped her hand, her head swimming, and tried not to think of that strip of film in Schlemecher's mouth, cutting his lips, perhaps coiled like a snake around his uvula. He must have known. He'd known, and been afraid. And what about the dream? She'd seen him there, eyes vacant and mad, watching the skeletal man draw in blood on the floor of a shack. Ellen's hand throbbed again.

Do you want it?

Why had he eaten it? Blood pouring from his mouth. His eyes alight with madness. Trying to destroy it seemed the obvious answer, but then why not just set it on fire or cut it into shreds? Perhaps it was only that he'd gone insane. Maybe he'd wanted it inside him, to take it into himself—or to hide it.

Did it talk to you, too?

"Why didn't they tell us?" Phillip asked, a dog with a bone. "It's not exactly a minor detail. We oughta call the Krauts and see if they left out anything else. Maybe Hans tried to stick it up his ass, too, for all we know."

Ellen laid her injured hand against the film. It was cool to the touch. She imagined its edge cutting quick through the corner of her mouth, slicing through her cheek like butter, sawing at the ligament of her jaw.

What did it say?



Ellen was putting on her coat when the phone rang. It was dark outside. A little green light on the cradle; an outside call, transferred from the switchboard to the lab. She answered, receiver sandwiched between her cheek and her shoulder, as she pulled on her gloves. "This is Ellen Kramer."

"Mrs. Kramer, this is Dawn Fontaine, Staten Island University Hospital. Do you know a Mary Coolidge?"

Ellen paused, racking her brain. "I don't think—do you mean Molly? I don't, um, I don't know her last name."

"Yes, that's right. Listen, she's okay now, but we admitted her yesterday with a pretty severe case of pneumonia," Dawn said. "Her next of kin won't provide support, and you're the only other person she mentioned. I know this is a lot, Mrs. Kramer, but we can't find her a shelter bed and we can't keep her here. If we put her back onto the street, I just don't think—"

"All right," said Ellen. She was surprised at how certain she sounded. "I'll come get her. She can stay with me for a while."



It was dawn on Tuesday when the hospital finally let Molly go. Midmorning by the time they got back to Ellen's apartment. Ellen helped Molly slowly and carefully out of the cab, tipping the disgruntled driver, and up the stairs—hurrying to avoid Mrs. Weintraub and any awkward explanations—past the half-demolished kitchen, into the bedroom. Once she had settled Molly in bed at the end of the hall, she held her up and gave her the first dose of antibiotics. Molly looked so small in the cotton smock the hospital had given her. Her thin white hair was hopelessly tangled. Ellen eased her down and pulled the blankets up, suddenly stricken by bone-deep exhaustion.

"I'm sorry," Molly wheezed. She wasn't quite all there. Ellen could see it in her clouded stare, her frightened, lost expression. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Molly," said Ellen. "Your inhaler's right here on the side table. The nurse said two more puffs in about an hour."

Ellen rose. She passed a hand over her face, wiping sweat from her grimy skin. *What am I doing?* She was exhausted. Wrung out. How long would Molly need to stay with her? Would she be able to use the toilet on her own? Feed herself? *They're like cats. Feed them and they'll never stop*

coming back. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath; when she opened them, the Baroness stood in the doorway. Ellen's breath caught in her throat.

The Baroness took a step into the room. She was dragging her sword after her, its pendulum blade leaving a crazed, pale scar across the hardwood. Splinters twisted from the varnished boards against its edge like a boat's wake forming in torturous slow motion.

"Not her," said Ellen. Her voice cracked like a child's. She took a step back and her thighs found the edge of the mattress. Her heart hammered. "Please, don't."

The Baroness smiled. Ellen remembered snatches of their conversation the night she'd returned to find the apartment wrecked. Dogs barking. Film sliding like a blade through flesh. Words written in blood on a warped wooden floor, and a debt that demanded payment. Her injured hand throbbed with a white-hot pulse of agony, the world burning, the lips against her throat and the voices soft and heated just beyond the restroom door.

Do you want it?

"I'll bring you someone else," Ellen whispered. "Just give me a few days. A little time. I'll ... I'll find someone for you."

Another step. The spurs on the Baroness's plate-mail riding boots jingled, bright and musical. The train of her gown slithered over the floor like dead snakeskin, the fabric catching and tearing on the splinters and on loose, protruding nails. She was close enough now that Ellen could smell her. Latex and petroleum jelly. Semen and blood.

Ellen covered her face, sinking into an involuntary crouch as the strength went out of her knees. "Go away," she sobbed. "Please, just go away. I can't give you what you want."

Another footfall. Armored gauntlets shifting. A hand brushing her hair, gathering it tight at the nape of her neck. *I'm insane*, she thought. *I lost my mind. Is this happening? Is it really happening?* Lips soft against her cheek. Fingers cupping her jaw, tilting her face up toward—

"Who was that, doll?" Molly croaked. "That woman."

Ellen opened her eyes. She sat on the edge of Molly's bed. Early morning sunlight streamed in through the window. Molly's color was a little better. Her lined face had relaxed at last, that wild incomprehension gone.

“Nobody,” said Ellen. “You must have been dreaming.”

The Reel

“*The National Review*,” said Mr. Shrier. It was Wednesday morning, and the sky outside his office window was crisp and empty. He flung the paper down on the desk, as though Ellen might need a visual aid to follow his tirade. He stabbed a thick forefinger at the article in question. “She put her article in the fucking *Review*. Do you have any idea the *shitstorm* I’ve been fielding from this office? I just had Limbaugh pissing in my ear half the goddamn morning. Thurmond’s people are saying he’s going to pull out of our endowment, that he can’t be connected to pornographers.

“What did you do to get that fat-ass snob bitch so riled up? What the *hell* did you say to her, Kramer? I swear, you send a Christ-killer to do a man’s job.” He caught himself, squeezing his eyes shut and making a fist with his right hand. A vein jumped at his temple. When he opened his eyes again, he looked a little more human. “I apologize, Ms. Kramer. That was untoward.”

Ellen stared at him. She’d come in early only to be told at the front desk that she was needed upstairs *immediately*. How had she ever felt anything but disgust for this man? How had she sat under his roof for fifteen years, cashing his checks, attending his Christmas parties? Film meant nothing to him. He had no interest in people. He was an insect, a beetle rolling a ball of shit through an endless wasteland in hopes of finding more shit along the way. In the same heartbeat, she knew her real disgust was with herself. She’d become so empty, so void of thought or principle. She’d run so far and so fast from her mother’s voice on the other end of that call, from happiness in Freddie’s arms, from her fear of being made to take any kind of stand, that she’d become nothing at all.

Mr. Shrier ran a hand over his face and sighed. “We’ll dump the film,” he said. “We’ll take a hit, a bad quarter. Bad year. Tighten our belts.” He pushed his intercom. “Mrs. Overbrook, get me Dan Tate at the *Post*.”

“Mr. Shrier,” said Ellen. “Do you remember that archival work we did for the Graham Ministry a few years ago?” He looked at her as though surprised to find her still there.

“What?” Mrs. Overbrook shouted from outside the office.

“What about it?” Mr. Shrier asked Ellen.

“He did that traveling speech series, about Satanic cults and black magic and all that, um, dirty stuff. You said it seemed like a good racket, and I guess that makes me wonder ... what if for the board screening we had him or someone like him come here and introduce the movie?”

Mr. Shrier stared at her, his broad brow furrowing. She could almost see the gears turning under his thinning, colorless hair. “We’ll make an event out of it,” said Mr. Shrier slowly. “Get a Holy Roller up there to get everyone in the mood. Make it clear what we think of this sick trash. Give them all a chance to bust a gut. Couple of nights in the city.”

The intercom buzzed. “I’ve got Stan Clay on line two,” said Mrs. Overbrook.

Mr. Shrier sighed heavily. He composed himself, tugging his tie straight, and buzzed back. “Get rid of him. I want to talk to Silas Graham.”



Ellen stayed late that day, losing herself in the print. Phillip wasn’t in, and she didn’t feel ready to go home to Molly. She wanted to savor outsmarting Mr. Shrier for just a little longer, and she didn’t want to leave the film. The three reels blurred together as she advanced the pedals. She’d been putting off the cleaning long enough. The reels spooled cleanly back into their cans, the desk’s treadles running with a steady *click-clack*. When it was done she opened up the cleaning room and turned on the ventilation, which boomed hollowly in the stillness of the empty building, and the ultrasonic cleaning cabinet. Watery shadows danced on the walls.

She set the first can in the clamps and threaded the reel into the cabinet. The work made sense. The gloom was comforting. No one could see her here. No one knew how naked she’d made herself in front of Freddie, in front of everyone at B&H. Sobbing into her fists on the subway, sweaty hair in her face. A crazy person.

The film jerked in her hand. She leaped back with a yelp, but the reel came with her, adhered to her skin. It coiled itself around the cabinet's exposed cams as its loose end slid between her bandages, wriggling like a worm. She screamed. There was a moment of excruciating pain, so bright and sickening she could hardly think, her body twisting up like burning straw. Drops of bloody pus fell to the floor. Her skin on fire. The film cutting between the fine bones of her hand, wrapping itself tight around them, the slow slither of its black and glossy length hypnotic.

Do you want it?

Her skin stretched. Ellen dry-heaved as the film reemerged, pushing through the dry, cracked skin of her scab. It ran through her, spooling itself tight around her wrist, winding inch by inch up the length of her arm. The pain was like nothing she'd ever felt, wave after wave of dirty, feverish agony crashing over her in such swift succession she couldn't manage a full breath. It felt as though insects were tunneling through her flesh, as though someone had slit her open and packed her full of red-hot coals. She fell, clawing at the desk with her good hand, and the can twisted in its rack, the reel spilling from its open mouth with a reverberating whisper, a muted echo of stage thunder. Ellen writhed on the floor. Her head struck something. The leg of her chair, maybe. Blood in her eyes.

On the strip of film she saw the Baroness mount Ilya Kapfelberg's beautiful corpse, grinding against the still-twitching pelvis, gripping the neck with manicured hands as it spurted and drooled blood. His head stared at her from a higher step, that name written on its brow, its lips moving, shaping words.

You will have no children, said a voice in her head. You will give birth to stones, and to sorrow.

The Baroness rolling the corpse. Hiking up her skirts. Spit glistening on a long, trembling palm. The film slid into Ellen. It spooled up tight inside her skin, frame by frame, slicking itself in her blood and lymph. She stared up into the eerie glow of the cleaning cabinet, thinking of that nameless man in the Kodak lab who'd died in a puddle of his own cold piss while Chip and Dale played endlessly, silently in the murk of the cabinet looming over him, their little mouths gaping in wordless terror.

The world burned bleach white. Ellen's skin glowed black in the colorless void. She fell.



She is Bartok, sipping a gin and tonic at a gloomy hotel bar while rain beats hard against the windows looking out onto the street. A man sits down beside her. He signals for the bartender, then gives her a sidelong glance. Handsome. Salt-and-pepper mustache over a stern mouth and stubborn jaw. Later. Grappling in the washroom, tearing at each other's clothes, but careful. Careful. The taste of aftershave burning his lips. In the streets the brownshirts throwing art and books out of a second-story window. Pages clinging wet, translucent, to the stones.

A horse beneath her. The man riding ahead. Hills and fields laid out below the trail, and above on a stony ridge the crumbling glory of the castle. The sun was black. Rolling in the grass, breeches around his ankles, his penis so hard it hurt even to touch it, to let his lover take it in his mouth, his teeth grazing the translucent skin, his tongue enfolding, licking, coiling like an angry serpent.

Bartok's mother was dying, a hateful old shadow dirtying the bedclothes in her ancient, rotten chamber. At night she would whisper to her son of the secrets hidden in her books. Not ledgers, nor the cheap philosophies of Frazer or Crowley, nor even the Kabbalah with its labyrinths of numerology and layered symbols, open across millennia for an infinity of interpretations.

The old woman's books were many and one, and all bore on their iron covers a single title in a language all but lost to time, a tongue that was old before the first mud brick was laid in Babylon. They are called together *The Black Flame*. He has read them. As a boy he pored over the fragile onionskin and sounded out the strange, cold syllables recorded there, his father's hand gripping his shoulder tight. The pages cut his fingers. The paper drank of him. It tasted him. *The Black Flame* had made them rich. It had made them feared. In town, in the Jewish quarter, the old men had always called his father a *makher* with an air of wary respect. They did not pray in the temple like the other Jews, though Karla found it beautiful and had asked many times to be taken there. The music. The smells. The boys.

A train compartment. The old woman dying somewhere else. Out of mind. Countryside unfurling outside the window. Thoughts of Friedrich, sweet and nervous, dead across the ocean before he could ever see the

movie. *What a gas*, the Americans would say. A body calved through a windscreen's glass. Hurling through the air to strike a rock and die the next day, lonely, silent. Lover weeping at his bedside. What a gas.

Berlin. Berlin. Republic on a knife's edge. Fascist riots in the streets. Gangs of teenagers kicking queers to death in alleyways. Smashing up the clubs and cabarets. On stage, amphetamines burning through him, their flat chemical taste dripping down the back of his throat, makeup glistening under the house lights. János crying backstage. Sandbags dangling like sleeping bats up in the rigging. A year of misery. Of fear. Of paranoia.

The Jews, the Jews, the Jews, is all he hears when he breakfasts at the corner shop near his apartment in Schöneberg. He watches their mouths move, these men, these women, and sees in them a bottomless stupidity, a sexual excitement at the thought of mindless violence meted out against the human vermin who are simultaneously so wretched as to beggar belief and so influential, so powerful that their schemes hold all of Europe like the tentacles of some mythic sea creature.

In the spring, as Hirschfeld's institute is sacked and its library burns on a rainy night, he meets the boy. They're backstage at the Eldorado, listening to Mehdi warm up for her number. The boy steps out of the dancers' dressing room. He is delicate, you can see it at a glance, long legs and graceful collarbone, a face like one of Michelangelo's seraphim, blond curls tumbling around his shoulders, eyes like fog over the quiet sea. Beautiful. Beautiful boy. Corset and garters look like ermine on his perfect body. Eyeliner, and he wishing he could have been the pen, could have drawn those flawless lines with his kohl-blackened tongue like the slave of some ancient god-king of Egypt. He lights the boy's cigarette with a trembling hand. Ilya. His star. His love.

Other things will come later. The flight from the city in the dead of night, first by boat down the river Spree, meeting János at the Czech border, where he'd bribed the customs agents. Cold eyes watching. Guns catching the moonlight. A car, a cart through the Carpathians, a car again, looking back over their shoulders, beautiful Ilya sleeping against him, secret safe. Hasdeu, his family's house. The crypt. Mother. Father. The empty rooms. Veiled furniture. Others arriving by car and wagon. The castle full of laughter. Sex. He goes to temple in the village. The sound of Hebrew like sweet honey in his ears. Old men ask after his health. Their wives pinch his

cheeks, tell him *too thin, too thin*. Children in their best clothes fidget. Whisper. Pinch each other when nobody's looking. He might have been one of them.

The movie. *The Baroness*. A silly little thing. A way to pass the time, to distract from the headlines, worse and worse every day. He made one years ago with Friedrich, but he really doesn't know what he's doing. No script. No plan. Sets of cardboard. Canvas. Silly blasphemous vignettes. Snatches of Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie* and Christensen's *Häxan*. Shameless copying. Making love while film hisses through the camera. Bodies writhing upside down in the flickering haze of the lens. Sweating with his eye against the glass. They live on wine and cocaine. Morphine. Amphetamines. Everything they could scrape together before they left Berlin.

At night they tumble into dusty beds in new configurations, but Ilya is his, always his, no matter the arms into which his beautiful boy falls, the tongues that taste the sour tang between his legs. Some queers find it revolting, that dark and dripping cleft. They draw lines in the sand and bicker endlessly about who is this or that and what it means to stick this in there. Noise. A waste. Taste Ilya once, subsume yourself into that coarse blond hair, those velvet lips, and there can be no doubt he is a man. Lazy as a housecat. Pleased to be fucked and struck and bitten, passed around from hand to hand to hand. A golden thing, and perfect. Bartok loves to sully him.

One day, when he goes into town, he senses it. The end is coming. Eyes follow him as he climbs out of his automobile. There is a hardness in the air. No old men playing chess outside the café. No children rolling hoops in the streets. He realizes he knows few of them by name. When his mother came to town, a rare occasion, the silence was that of sheep watching a wolf. Now he is the sheep, and the wolves are all around him. They watch in silence from their windows. Their gardens. It will come soon. Perhaps it is already here.

Ilya leaves him in the night a week later. There is no sign of the beautiful boy in town. None of the others know where Ilya went, or if they do, they aren't saying. He has made a fool of himself. Aging queen pining after that angel. That beauty. How many of them had he sneered at, laughed at, cut with some catty remark in his time? But he thinks of Friedrich on his

deathbed, his young lover at his side. Of the smooth hand gripping the worn and wrinkled one. He feels weak with jealousy for that sad comfort. He wants to slit his wrists, to drink rat poison, and wake to Ilya's tearstained face.

I'll never do it again, Daddy.

He learns later that year that Ilya was killed trying to cross the Swiss border. Shot in the back, then sodomized by Hungarian fascists. They'd carved a swastika into his face. For weeks he is inconsolable. Drunk. Howling like an animal. Wiping his semen on the photos of Ilya he kept and treasured.

One by one the others make their plans, or tire of him, and leave the castle. By winter it stands empty, as he rattles through the house, a drunken ghost, thinner every day. He covers the mirrors, though he has never sat shiva. He prays, though he has never prayed. At night he dreams of his mother, of her pale hands and jaundiced eyes. He knows what he has to do.

It is the first day of the new year when he wraps his grief around him like a cloak and descends at last into the basement, where the books are kept. He takes the reels with him. He unlocks the chains that bind the volumes in their shelves. He pricks his fingertips with a sewing needle and glides them up and down the first book's spine, the rough iron drinking his blood until it is ready and, with a lover's sigh, its soft pages part for him.

It speaks in words of fire that burn his mind and boil his thoughts, and the fire is black, and he can see it, he is swimming down into its heart, and the fire is black, and he is kicking, breathless, and the film is sliding through his hands and he sees the men who soon, very soon, will break down his door and drag him out into night, and a mountain made of the burning dead, and within the flame another, darker.

Black.

★ ★ ★

Ellen awoke with a gasp on the cleaning room floor. The cabinet's rollers rose up, dripping from the solution, the faint hum of hydraulics the only sound in the cold, bare room. Her body ached as though she'd been trampled. She could still taste gin and acrid European cigarettes.

She pushed herself up on her elbow and wiped her upper lip. Her wrist came away streaked with blood. Slowly, knees unsteady, she got to her feet and tottered toward the cleaning cabinet. The film ran sluggishly between the cams and over the abrasive woolen buffers. Solvent dripped from its iridescent length. A glistening black python coiled tight around the machine's innards, slithering inch by inch into the waiting can. She looked down at the palm of her hand. Dead skin hung in rags from the wound, which had not healed but instead puckered like a pair of lips, as though it were holding itself shut. She retrieved her soiled, filthy bandage from the floor and rewrapped it around her hand. The wound blinked up at her. A dark pupil swam in filmy sclera.

"No," Ellen wailed, clawing at her own palm. "No, no, no!"

And then it was gone. The film was in the cabinet, of course, streaking through its reservoir of solvents as the ultrasonic brushes whirled. Dirt and oil floated in the tank. Ellen teased her bandages apart and found only the scabby cut, the dead skin flaking all around it. She breathed a sigh of relief. A dream. A hallucination.

She turned toward the door and found Phillip standing in it, his hands over his eyes. He was shaking. It was hard to make out his expression in the dark.

"Phillip." She sighed. "You scared me half to death. I haven't been sleeping, I guess I got a little overexcited. I—"

He smiled, and as her voice died in her throat she noticed a little rivulet of blood that had run from between two of his fingers. A ghastly smile. Lips trembling. "I didn't see," he hissed. His voice cracked like a little boy's.

She'd never thought of him as a child before, as an acne-pocked fourteen-year-old racked by hormonal tides, as a child running barefoot and carefree along a stony shore. He took a step back, his hip bumping his work table. He knocked the phone from its stand in his deliberate, stumbling retreat and its dead, vacuous tone swelled into the silence of the dark and empty Brickworks. "Don't tell them. Don't tell them I saw, Ellen. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. What I said about you. I just wanted them to like me."

She started after him. "Phillip, wait. Let me explain."

He giggled, shying away from her again. More blood ran over the backs of his hands. In the gloom it was hard to make out what was gore and what was shadow, but as he neared the window the yellow glare of the streetlight

washed over him and Ellen saw the sticky red mess of his fingers, and she knew even before he lowered those gnarled hands that he had clawed his eyes out. The gouged-out pits stared back at her. Glistening furrows in his cheeks. He fumbled at the window, streaking the panes with blood and little flecks of skin. The light flickered outside and in the momentary dark she saw a silhouette behind him, tall and thin, arms draped around Phillip's neck, scarred lips whispering in his ear. Closer than a lover.

"I didn't see," he giggled. Pale fingers slid over his chest. Metal glinted in the moonlight. "I didn't look. Don't tell them."

He found the latch and threw himself against it, paint cracking as the window opened. He raised the screen, the rusted metal runners squealing in their tracks. Cold wind howled through the lab. Phillip's print, *Bedtime for Bonzo*, flapped and writhed at his desk where he'd secured it incorrectly. Ellen thought of the chimpanzee standing upright like a hunched, stoop-shouldered parody of a human child, its face wizened and sly. It was the ape's rictus grin Phillip gave her as he swung his leg over the sill. She took a step toward him, her outstretched hand throbbing, her heart pounding like a drum, and he tucked his chin against his chest and pitched himself into the dark. The light flickered one last time. Fabric catching the wind. A flailing arm.

And black.

Editing

Ellen woke up early the next morning, exhausted and cold. The cops had asked her all kinds of questions at the office. *Did he seem suicidal to you? Was he on anything? Did he ever talk to you, about gambling debts, maybe? A bad breakup?* It had washed over her. She felt numb and stiff from sleeping on the couch in her dark, narrow living room. She had fallen asleep watching a rerun of Carson, and the television was still on. She got up and turned it off, trying to work some feeling back into her neck. It was the last day of Hanukkah. She had forgotten about it completely. When was the last time her family had celebrated it together?

Twenty minutes later, coming back from the bodega with Molly's breakfast and a paper, Ellen ran into Mrs. Weintraub in the front hall taking out the trash, her hair in curlers, her eyes hugely magnified by her reading glasses. "Here she is," said her landlady. "All morning I'm hearing someone thumping around upstairs, I'm thinking, she has an elephant up there maybe?"

Ellen stared at Mrs. Weintraub. *Invite her upstairs, she thought with a flicker of malice. Bring her to them. You promised them someone. Another life, for Molly's.*

"Twenty-four hours' notice for guests," said Mrs. Weintraub. "I don't ask much, but you have to be firm, or else the Blacks and the Hispanics just walk all over you. Property in the city, such a nightmare. Tell me next time, okay?"

Come upstairs with me. Come into the closet, Mrs. Weintraub. Meet the people waiting there. I'll show you a real nightmare.

Ellen forced a smile. "Of course."

Molly was sitting on the edge of the bed when Ellen let herself back into the apartment. "I got breakfast," said Ellen, holding up the paper bag. "And your *Post*."

Molly offered a weak smile as she took her bagel. “Thank you, doll. I’m sorry if I said anything the past few days. You’re a sweet girl to bring me here. Jesus loves you. You know that?”

“Mmm,” said Ellen, sitting down beside Molly. The other woman’s smell was overwhelming in the enclosed room. Urine. Cigarettes. Rotten breath. Unwashed skin. “Did you take your inhaler this morning?”

“Yep,” said Molly. She bit into her bagel and smoothed her *Post* across her lap. She was so small without her coat. Skinny and wrinkled. Used up. “I’ll be out of your hair by tonight.”

“What? Molly, no, you’ll just get sick again. I’d like for you to stay until you’re feeling better. Please.”

“Doll...”

What are you trying to prove?

Ellen glanced at the open closet. Is that why she’d brought Molly home? Had she sensed she’d need a heartbeat close to hand? No. That was absurd. This wasn’t a fairy tale. It wasn’t Abraham dragging Isaac to the altar. She was doing what she could for someone who’d been kind to her. Someone she cared about. That was all. She was choosing something else.

“Just a few more days,” said Ellen. “For me.”

“You’ve got some messages,” said Molly. “A man. Kind of whiny, if you ask me. Is that your fella?”

God gave Abraham a ram. He had the knife in his hand. His son bound on the altar, and God sent a ram, shit on its haunches, flies swarming around its tear ducts, bleating and bleating, never shutting up, trying to hump all the sheep and ramming anyone who gets too close, and that bleating, bleating, like he’s the first thing that ever suffered in the world. It must have felt so good. It must have felt like being born again to see that stupid thing trotting toward him.

Slowly, haltingly, a smile curled Ellen’s lips. She wiped tears from her cheeks, looking back at the closet, at the darkness of the open door. “I’ll call him back later.”

★ ★ ★

Wind howled through Beth Olam Cemetery on the border of Queens and Brooklyn. It had been a week since Phillip jumped, and two days since the

funeral. His pale, thin mother screaming herself raw, Mr. Shrier holding her arm. His wife silent and expressionless. The tree was all lit up in Rockefeller Plaza and the Salvation Army Santas were ringing their bells on every other corner. Molly's wheeze was almost gone.

Growing up, Ellen had always felt most Jewish when she saw the way the goys reacted to death. There was a horror to it, a kind of hysterical denial. Their lives ground to a halt. Even in her family, sucked dry of all but the last vestiges of culture, death was weather. A guest. A friend of the family. It happened, and you went on with your life. What else were you going to do? "I want to die," Phillip's mother had said as the mourners filed out of the crypt. Her daughter-in-law, his widow, was trying to steer her back toward the cars. "I want to be with him. Please, let me die. My baby. My baby."

Bare trees spread their limbs over markers carved in Yiddish. Hebrew. English. Ellen wandered among the markers. The last time she'd visited had been Pop-pop's funeral. Phillip's had made her want to come back and see him again. She remembered sulking in the shade on a hot summer day while her mother and Aunt Frieda gave their eulogies and the coffin sank into the earth, lowered by gravediggers paying out lengths of heavy rope. It took her a while to find the grave again, and by the time she did her face was windburned, her nostrils raw and stinging from the cold. Over almost thirty years, the elements had weathered the headstone's Star of David and effaced its Hebrew inscription. Ellen took off a glove and ran her fingers over the letters cut into the freezing stone. The Hebrew, then the English.

Here is buried Jakob Kowalewski. 1889–1964.

To Pop-pop's left was his only son, her uncle Saul, who had died of cancer before Ellen was born, and beyond him the markers for Jakob's sisters, Maria and Wanda, and Maria's eldest, Hilary, all of whom had been shot trying to cross the border into Switzerland in the spring of 1940. Ellen had seen a picture of them once, in a slender gray album in Pop-pop's study. Dark-haired women in their late twenties or early thirties laughing in the back of an old-fashioned truck, their hair in kerchiefs, Maria's hand raised to hide her smile. A handsome man, Wanda's husband, Chaim, leaning against the truck's side with a cigarette in his hand, Hilary, maybe four years old, clinging to his trouser leg and looking fearfully into the camera's lens.

Chaim had gone to Israel after the war to join the IDF and come home nine years later with his right leg blown off just above the knee and his face all scarred and pockmarked. “We’ve turned around and done it to the Arabs,” Ellen remembered him saying one night in his broken tar-and-gravel voice as he and Ellen’s father sat up drinking in the library. “We’re pissing on their memory. All of them.”

She’d been maybe eight, watching through the keyhole as her father, face in shadow, smoked his cigarette in silence. Chaim died of liver failure two years later. He’d made Janet promise to have him cremated. Ellen didn’t know where his ashes had been scattered. She knew next to nothing about Israel. Freddie had never brought it up after their one stilted, nasty argument over Palestine.

She remembered Bubbe’s obsession, though. Her fundraisers for settlement-building; her friends in the Misrad Hahutz; dinners with huge, bland Midwestern men from Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman and handsome gentiles from the big Madison Avenue agencies. She remembered the clouds of smoke that had filled the brownstone during the Six-Day War, and her feelings of unease at the pictures of ragged, wide-eyed Arab children standing amid fields of rubble on the news.

“It’s about survival,” Bubbe had told her. “The goyim want you to feel sorry for these murderers. Who knows where they get their photos. You’re going to believe everything you see on the news? The Arabs want us dead. All of us. They’re animals. Use your head.”

Why wasn’t Bubbe buried with the rest of the family? Ellen had been away at college when she died, and she hadn’t come home for the funeral. That had been just before the phone call with her mother. Ellen pushed thoughts of Freddie from her mind. She didn’t know why she’d come here, except that she had no one left to talk to. She stood, wiping snow from the knees of her slacks.

A short way off, the Chamberlain knelt in the snow before a stone worn blank by time and weather, his black robe pooled around him, his sleeves trailing in the slush. The Baroness stood at his side. Beyond them stood another stone, and another, and another—rows of nameless markers covering the snowy hills, and among them stood a throng of countless people. More people than Ellen had ever seen. Children. Old men in fur hats. Bearded rabbis. Grizzled gray Hasidim. Mothers with babies in their

arms. Butchers and tailors and photographers. Soldiers, scarred and unsmiling. Starving men and women, thin as skeletons, gaunt as mummies. An ocean of people, staring at her in silence.

The weight of it drove Ellen back a step, and then another. Her foot slid out from under her and she fell on her rear in the slush, biting her tongue. She tasted blood. There was no one, just an empty cemetery.

Only the silent stones.

Nostromo

Rachel answered the door of her apartment in sweatpants and a tank top speckled with dried red paint. She let Ellen in without a word and led her to the living room, warmly lit and furnished in scholarly green and polished oak, where she left her for several peaceful minutes before returning with tea and Melba crackers. She poured Ellen a cup and sat down beside her on the sofa, blowing out a long, slow breath. She swiped a stray lock of hair from her forehead with a chipped cherry-red nail.

“I heard about that man,” Rachel said. “You worked with him, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Ellen. She sipped her tea. It was good. Raspberry, with honey stirred in. It melted a little of the day’s ice from her veins. “I was there when it happened. I came in late, to clean the film. I saw him jump.”

“I’m sorry,” said Rachel.

The rest hung unspoken between them. The film was hungry. Had it started to nibble at Rachel’s people yet, too? Ellen’s thoughts flashed to the room where they had watched it together. She remembered the smells of gin and strong cologne, but now in her mind’s eye she saw Rachel straddling her lap, burying her face in the soft spill of her breasts, crushing her against the hard metal frame and cheap upholstery. Rachel’s coral-red lips at her ear, whispering.

“Will you cut my hair?” Ellen blurted.

Rachel blinked, looking surprised. “All right,” she said.

★ ★ ★

Wet brown curls covered Rachel’s bathroom floor, stark against the tile. Ellen felt a breathless lightness in her chest. She had gone for a haircut like this once, just after she’d started dating Freddie, but fear of what her mother might say had driven her from the salon. Now, looking at herself in the

mirror over Rachel's sink, she stared in wonder at her own reflection. She'd coaxed Rachel into cutting it down to just a few inches, wetted to her scalp in delicate cowlicks. She looked ... sharp. Like a knife, or the edge of a hatchet.

"I love it," said Ellen. She couldn't stop smiling.

"It suits you," said Rachel, offering a hand towel. Ellen took it and wiped most of the excess hair from her shirt and collarbone. By the time she was finished sweeping the tiles and depositing the trimmings in the little metal trash can under the sink, the feeling of air on the back of her neck had gone from freeing to mildly disorienting, and thoughts of what her mother might say began to creep into her mind. Could she buy a wig before her father's retirement party next week? No, her mother would see through it immediately. Could she wriggle out of seeing them until it grew back? In five months it might be long enough to play off as a stylist's mistake. Suddenly, clear as a bell, she remembered Freddie's words from fifteen years ago.

You hate them. You never talk to them. When you do, they make you feel like garbage.

Why was she so afraid of what her mother might say? Janet didn't even like her. She didn't even like Mallory or Jacob, and they were exactly what she expected of them. She straightened, brushing stray hairs from her slacks, and found Rachel standing in the doorway in her beautiful blue winter coat, her purse hanging from her wrist.

"It's Christmas Eve," said Rachel. "Get your coat. I'm not going to be the only Jew at the movies."

★ ★ ★

The theater was dark when they arrived. Ellen marveled at the feeling of the cold air on her ears. Her head felt light, as though it might float away at any moment. There were only a few other people at the screening, little more than silhouettes in the gloom, and Rachel guided Ellen to seats near the back, far away from the others. Ellen's pulse raced. She helped Rachel out of her coat, feeling so gallant she could hardly contain herself. They sat as the projector whirled to life above them, haloing the dust that hung in the

air and casting a glimmer of silver through the cigarette smoke rising from the people in the front of the theater.

Ellen wished she could have taken Freddie to the movies one last time. She'd loved to take Freddie's arm and strut across the lobby, pride burning in her chest like a hot coal. She'd been afraid, too. Afraid to be seen. Afraid to be *caught*, as if some hungry animal were sniffing around for dykes at the concession stand. Freddie must have felt it. Ellen blinked back tears and pushed those memories away. It was over. She'd missed her chance. She glanced over at Rachel as *Let's All Go to the Lobby* began, the sound jumping the image for a few ghostly seconds. In the pale silvery light Rachel looked like the moon hanging low in the last light of day, soft and round and otherworldly. Powerful and distant. Ellen saw the armrest between them digging into Rachel's side and wondered, as she reached with trembling fingers to lift it out of the way, how often Rachel endured discomfort like that without protest.

With the arm up there was nothing separating them but air. Ellen clasped her sweaty hands between her knees. She looked at the backs of the other theatergoers' heads, longing for a cigarette. She'd forgotten to buy a new pack at the bodega that morning. The days were slipping away from her. She'd helped Molly to the bathroom after breakfast without knowing how she got there. She'd found herself on the phone with her father without remembering she'd called.

Ellie, I'm sure there was nothing you could have done. You know what Phillip's father was like. He always had a hard time.

Oh, but there *had* been something she could have done. Something very special. When Ellen closed her eyes she saw the clawed-out pits of Phillip's, the dark thing coiled tight around him, arms draped around his neck. The 20th Century Fox fanfare drew her out of her thoughts. She blinked her tears away and took off her glasses, cleaning them on the front of her shirt. How long had she been this way? Nausea clinging to her bones. Thoughts sticky with self-loathing residue. She never thought about her body. She never felt anything but a vague, sucking sense of dread and wrongness, unless she was with a woman. Freddie. Oh, Freddie. She could see how much she'd put on the other woman now, how unfair it had been of her to drag fifteen years of suffering in out of the cold and drop it at her feet.

The movie started. A field of stars. A spaceship hanging in the fathomless dark like a Gothic castle plucked from its foundation. A camera gliding down white, silent halls, past the crew, asleep in their glazed coffins, to a computer deep in the ship's guts. Lines of text unspooling in the dark of the screen.

"Have you seen it yet?" Rachel whispered. She was very close. Ellen could smell her perfume. Citrus and sandalwood.

"No," Ellen whispered back. She glanced sidelong at Rachel. The soft light of the screen made the critic look as though she'd just stepped out of a Billy Wilder movie, her features limned in pale silver, her pale hair touched with starlight. Ellen found herself leaning in. Rachel's lips were so soft. Her tongue flicked against Ellen's teeth. Her mouth tasted like the tea she'd made them earlier. Raspberries and honey. Ellen pressed the heel of her hand between her legs. Her clitoris was stiff and aching.

Film rippling through the solvent. Her bed, soaked through with blood. A headless rat scratching at a trembling arm. *He bound it to them*, she thought as Rachel bit her lower lip and pulled at it until it burned with feverish, desperate tension. *Again and again, in the camps, obsessing over what they did to him, to Ilya, to the others.*

Ellen leaned into Rachel's yielding warmth. She reached around the curve of her soft belly to fumble at the waistband of her slacks. "Not here," Rachel murmured. On the screen, slender, nymphish John Hurt sat numbly on the edge of his sleeping pod, staring at nothing at all. *He's so beautiful*, Ellen thought as Rachel's fingers curled through her hair, and then, with a sudden, devastating clarity, so sharp it made her heart hurt: *I want to look like that.*



The stall door banged open as Rachel backed through it, pulling Ellen after her by the collar of her shirt. It was a tight fit getting it closed again, the two of them crushed together in the grimy cell of lacquered steel. Soft rolls of flesh filled Ellen's hands as she untucked Rachel's blouse and knelt on the filthy floor, the smell of bleach and urine mingling with the bright tang of Rachel's arousal. She unbuttoned Rachel's slacks as the critic sank back onto the toilet, spreading her legs. She looked like fresh-risen dough.

Silvery stretch marks curled up and outward from her navel. Ellen pressed her face against it, inhaling the smell of Rachel's skin, her sweat.

"You're so soft." Ellen breathed. She looked up at the critic, who was leaning back against the graffitied tiles, eyes half-lidded, blond hair falling across her face.

"Do you want it?" Rachel asked.

Ellen's breath caught in her throat. "Yes."

"Then beg for it."

Ellen traced the swell of Rachel's inner thighs to cup the plump mound of her pussy, wet spots already forming on the front of her mint-colored panties. "Please," she breathed. "Please."

"You can do better than that," said Rachel. She pulled her shirt up. Her breasts, overflowing the cups of her bra. Milk and honey. Ice cream, just beginning to melt. Land of plenty.

"Let me touch you," Ellen begged. She was crying, hot tears sliding down her cheeks. "I've never wanted anything so badly. Let me kiss you down there, Rachel. Please ... please..."

"You're pathetic," Rachel whispered. She flipped up her bra's left cup and scooped her heavy breast into her palm, kneading and twisting her stiff pink nipple. "On your knees in a public restroom, begging some dyke you hardly know to let you lick her pussy. Aren't you ashamed?"

"N-no," Ellen stammered. She felt on the verge of coming, hot and feverish. She squeezed her eyes shut, pressing her cheek against Rachel's belly. "I'll do anything. Anything."

"Good boy," Rachel purred, and it lifted the hairs on the back of Ellen's neck.

Manicured nails stroked the back of her neck, guiding her down inch by gentle inch until she tasted salt and sugar, sour and tang, soft velvet folds beneath her tongue and the slick bud of Rachel's clitoris pressed to her nose. Her thoughts dissolved into a marbled slurry, white and pink and red, desire swirled like oil in water. Soft thighs squeezed Ellen's head, an enveloping and overwhelming pressure, a leg slung over her shoulder, a heel stroking her spine, so much to lick and bite, losing herself in the smothering heat until—

There was nothing. Ellen opened her eyes, breathing hard. She was alone. Her reflection stared back at her from the murky toilet water, flushed

and disheveled, chin slick with clear discharge. “Rachel?” she whispered. She stood, her knees popping in the sudden quiet, and left the stall. The bathroom was empty. The lights buzzed. In the mirror over the sinks, the stall doors stood mute and cold as headstones.

Wealth and Secret Knowledge

Silas Graham had made a fortune in the early seventies traveling the revival circuit with his tales of Satanic cabals and blood sacrifice, sexual slavery and black magic. In echoing arenas he'd held crowds of thousands spellbound with three-hour rants recounting in lurid detail his exploits with the Brotherhood of the Morning Star and the warlocks of Aleister Crowley's coven. Blood-drenched orgies at which naked women crawled among the brethren with platters weighed down with severed fingers and aborted fetuses balanced on their backs. Witch doctors from the bayou copulating with boar and snakes and alligators who then spoke with the voices of men, granting wealth and secret knowledge to their followers. Graham shed huge, shining tears as he confessed to adultery, to cocaine use, to torture and kidnapping.

Ellen had edited a reel for his ministry when she was still new at the Foundation. In '72 he'd been the kind of man who made church husbands uncomfortable, lean and muscular with a mop of sandy hair and piercing gray eyes that looked like they belonged on the cover of a bodice ripper. Eleven years later the man had hardened like cheese, his hair receding, his cheeks gaunt, his complexion jaundiced. He'd developed a taut, round pot belly. Only the eyes were the same.

"So it's some Jew thing?" he rasped. His voice was a deep, hoarse purr, still bewitching.

"Silas," Mr. Shrier warned, handing Graham a glass of rye whiskey and clinking his own against it. He sank into his seat.

"She knows it's all in fun," said Graham, waving a long-fingered hand at Ellen. "Anyway, they love comedy. Don't you?"

"Yes," said Ellen, because it seemed like the response that stood the best chance of ending the conversation immediately. "So, the film is called *The*

Baroness. It's seventy-five minutes, very much in your vein. Black magic, human sacrifice, orgies, torture. There's not much of a plot."

She leaned forward and handed him the rough script she'd typed up and timed out. "We'd like narration for a single screening for our board and investors. Kabbalah, Talmudic cult horrors, however you want to frame it, of course. What's important is that we make it clear the filmmaker and cast are trying to spread a Satanic agenda."

She and Mr. Shrier had roughed it all out earlier that morning, the office quiet around them in the wake of Christmas the day before. Two days until her father's party. She was the office's only Jew, and so attached unspoken to her summons was the expectation that she identify those elements of *The Baroness* that Graham could target most easily, and the specifics he could use to do it. It made Ellen feel as though she were chewing glass to repeat it all now with matter-of-fact professionalism, but the screening was important. She still owed Bartok his pound of flesh.

Graham produced a pair of bifocals from his breast pocket and held the script out low and at arm's length to read. His mouth moved as he scanned the first few pages. "So, we bang together a routine, I charm your bigwigs at this thing, and you get to stop eating shit from all your friends who read the *Review*. That about right, Billy?"

Mr. Shrier nodded stiffly. Ellen had never heard anyone call him Billy before. "Ten grand," he bit out. "It's an hour of work, Silas."

"An hour and fifteen minutes," said Graham, smirking. "I don't know, Billy. Taxi cabs, hotel room, New York dining, all my ... other expenses ... It adds up."

"I was clear with your man over the phone," said Mr. Shrier. "We're footing the bill. Within reason."

"Oh, I know," said Graham. "I just wanted to hear it from your lips. You New York fellas got a habit of Jewing decent people out of what's theirs. No offense, sweetheart."

"No," said Ellen. "Of course not. Mr. Shrier, do you need anything else from me?"

Mr. Shrier smiled tightly, his eyes absolutely devoid of warmth. "I think we can manage from here, Ms. Kramer."

In the hall outside the conference room, Ellen stopped to listen to them talk.

“I’ve seen some good-looking kikes in my time,” said Graham. “That ain’t one of ’em.”

“That fucking hair.” Mr. Shrier now. The clink of ice against cut glass. “She looks like someone left Marlene Dietrich dead on the side of the road.”

Graham barked out a hoarse laugh. Ellen smiled, her cheek against the door. Let them laugh at her. It felt good, truthfully, to have gone beyond even their cursory leering. Now she was nothing to them. Vermin scuttling underfoot as they planned their little folly, their penny-dreadful dirty pleasure in the guise of moralistic outrage.

They would never see it coming.

★ ★ ★

“Thank God you’re here,” said Mallory, letting Ellen into the Kramer house on East Nineteenth.

It was Saturday the twenty-eighth, the day of their father’s retirement party, and Christmas had come and gone unremarked. Mallory had baby Aaron on her hip and a streak of chocolate across her forehead, and her apron was covered in flour.

“Mom’s in full Son of Sam mode. She’s going to start shooting the caterers any minute.” Her eyes widened. “Oh my God, Ellen—your hair. She’s going to go ballistic. She’ll kill you. Here, take him.” She transferred Aaron to Ellen’s arms. The eight-month-old was heavier than he looked. “Go find Dad, he can break it to her and talk her down before people start getting here. You have great timing, El. Really incredible.”

“I just wanted to try something new,” said Ellen, blushing. Aaron made a grab for her glasses. “Like, um, Audrey Hepburn.”

“Mm,” said Mallory. She looked suspicious, but shouting from the direction of the kitchen drew her attention. “Don’t let her see you,” she cautioned Ellen, gripping her arm tightly. “Find Dad, I’ll handle everything else.”

Ellen watched her sister jog back toward a harried-looking man in a waiter’s uniform emerging from the dining room. She sighed and turned away. Her mother would be in the kitchen, her private Heart of Darkness. “How about we go find your Pop-pop?” she asked Aaron. The baby fussed

and wriggled, trying to get a grip on her blazer. It felt strange to hold him. Mallory never asked her to watch the boys.

She took Aaron back through the first-floor living room and into the narrow back hall, up the whitewashed servants' stairs to the upstairs hallway where her cousin Levi, smoking by the bathroom door, nodded to her, then blinked in shock and started to cough. "Nice haircut," he said after he'd caught his breath.

"Thanks," said Ellen flatly. "Have you seen my dad?"

"Uncle Brad's up on the roof," said Levi, coughing against his wrist. "I guess he didn't sleep much last night. Fresh air."

"Levi!" shouted his wife, Grace—who everyone else just called the shiksa—from behind the bathroom door. She sounded frantic. "Who are you talking to?"

"My cousin Ellen!" Levi shouted back.

"Which one's Ellen?"

Ellen left them to sort that out. She was puffing by the time she reached the roof, which in her childhood had always been forbidden territory. Jacob and Mallory had lured her up there and locked her outside for an afternoon when she was eight years old. She'd gotten a terrible sunburn and their mother had fired their Polish nanny, Alina, the next day. Ellen could still remember Alina's strong fingers smoothing a bandage over her scraped knee. Her brisk, firm kisses on the cheek at bedtime, as though Ellen were a loaf of bread she was setting out to proof overnight. She couldn't remember her face, though, or the sound of her voice. Had Ellen's mother ever kissed her? She didn't think so.

The rooftop had been transformed, a canvas tent with its entry flaps pinned back taking up most of the open space. Aaron looked up wide-eyed at the cold, clear sky. Ellen wondered if Mallory kissed him good night at bedtime. She pressed her lips to his forehead, breathing in his smell. Buttermilk. Vanilla. Sour and sweet. He grabbed at her lip and babbled. She sniffed. Inside the tent, the gloom interrupted by the glowing red grilles of space heaters set among the struts and tables, Ellen found her father making himself a gin and tonic at the open bar near the retaining wall. His tie was undone, his eyes faintly bleary, but his hands were steady as he cut a wedge of lime and split it with the rim of his glass. He caught sight of her and blinked.

“El,” he said, surprised. “Do you want a G and T?” He blinked again. “What have you done to your hair?”

“I cut it,” said Ellen. “I thought it looked more modern. Mallory told me to come talk to you, so you can break it to Mom. She’s...”

“Mmm,” said her father. He knocked back half his drink and made his way, choosing each step with care, to the nearest table, where he sat and gestured for her to do the same. She joined him. Her father didn’t drink like this. She’d seen him come home drunk a few times when she was younger, but even then he’d just looked faintly gray and shaky. Now his face was a mask, his tie loose. There was a stain on the lapel of his plaid suit jacket. He burped into his fist, then let his arm fall limp. “It’s short.”

“Are you all right, Dad?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” he said with a tight smile. “I just haven’t been sleeping well. This party, all this fuss, it’s your mother’s idea. I’d rather see a show and have an early dinner.”

The air in the tent was hot and dry, even with the cold wind gusting in at intervals. Aaron whimpered in Ellen’s arms. How many times had Ellen come groveling to her father to head off her mother’s temper? Would Aaron do it for Mallory when he grew up? Would he become another strange little denizen of their family labyrinth, memorizing the layout of its endless, joyless corridors while his schoolmates traded baseball cards and snuck into R-rated movies?

A thought occurred to her. “Dad, why isn’t Bubbe buried with Pop-pop and the rest of the family?”

He sipped his drink. “Your mother always wondered when one of you would put that together,” he said. He fumbled a cigarette from his pack and lit it, the cherry bobbing as he talked. “Your grandmother was with the Judenrat in Łódź.”

“I don’t know w—what is that?”

“A council in the city’s ghetto, set up by the Nazis. She informed on other Jews. Their crimes. Their movements. They were despised, of course.” He drained his gin and tonic. “In the end she was sent to a camp anyway. She spent four months in Kulmhof before it was liberated.” He waved a hand. “Your mother doesn’t like to talk about it.”

I’ll bring you someone else, she’d begged the Baroness. Bartering lives like they were records she’d found at a flea market.

“That can’t be true.”

“The war ended the next year. Bubbe met your grandfather Jakob a little while after, and once they married she became a very private person. They came here through Ellis Island, with your mother and Aunt Frieda. She didn’t want to be recognized at synagogue, or in town. Some people knew who she was, what she’d done, but your grandfather was a rich man, and the talk never went far.”

Ellen thought of Bartok’s family in their castle, and of the temple in the little town below. *I’m sitting in the castle now*, she thought suddenly. She cleared her throat. “I didn’t know.”

Her father nodded. “Hmm,” he replied. He rose, the barest hint of unsteadiness in his step, and returned to the bar, snagging the bottle of gin. He refilled his glass, not bothering with tonic water. She noticed a sharp, bitter smell as he came back to their table. Acetone, maybe? Had he been vomiting? She felt lightheaded. Her grandmother had sent people to the camps. She’d ratted them out to save herself. It felt unspeakable.

“I’ll talk to your mother,” her father said. He sipped his drink and grimaced.

“Okay, Daddy,” said Ellen. She stood, hefting Aaron. He was dozing in the warmth of the tent. “Maybe stop after that one, okay?”

He nodded again, not really listening, his eyes focused on something far away. Ellen waited a moment for him to say something, but he didn’t. After a little longer, she left.

★ ★ ★

Ellen was halfway down the back stairs when she heard the front door open. She paused, hugging the sleeping Aaron close. Her mother’s voice, and then a man’s. It was Jesse. His syrupy sweet voice made her skin crawl, and a sudden fury choked her throat. She hated these people. She hated everything she’d done to herself to try to be one of them. All it had done was rot her heart out and leave her starving, dull, and brittle. Another year and she would’ve just dried up and blown away. Jesse wasn’t the worst of them, but he’d put himself inside her, shoved his miserable prick between her legs while she lay feverish, hardly able to sit up. He’d *raped* her. Her injured palm itched and burned.

“... for inviting me,” he said. “You know what it’s like trying to make plans with Ellen.”

They laughed. Ellen drew a deep, shuddering breath. She sat down on the steps, willing her pulse to slow, her breathing to even out. Aaron made a small sound in his sleep and she thought how incredible it was to love someone so small and helpless, and how certain she was that she could never do it. She would never have a child, never subject someone to the ordeal of being mothered. That water was full of broken glass.

Time passed. Other guests arrived, a trickle of voices stomping in out of the cold, exchanging hellos with Mallory or Janet.

“Where’s El?” she heard her brother, Jacob, ask in his deep, resonant voice. He’d sung in a choir when they were young, not at their Pop-pop’s temple, but in a local church. He’d given it up in high school when their mother told him his recital robe made him look hefty.

The thought of going down to join them all became more and more unbearable with each passing minute. Her father’s colleagues from the studio, her mother’s friends from the country club—where until a few decades earlier Jews hadn’t been permitted to join—and her family, all closely watching one another, policing the boundaries of their own self-loathing dysfunction to ensure that no one escaped.

“Hey there, stranger.” Jesse’s voice from the top of the stairs made Ellen start. Aaron stirred in her arms and started screaming. Ellen watched over her shoulder as Jesse came toward them. It made her sick to look at him.

“Who’s this little guy?” Jesse asked, crouching down and poking a finger at the squalling baby.

“Aaron,” said Ellen. She stood abruptly, shielding Aaron from Jesse with her body. “My sister Mallory’s youngest. What are you doing here?”

“Well, we need to talk,” said Jesse. He sighed. “I don’t think you can argue that, Ellen. I haven’t heard from you in over a week. I’ve been patient. Your mother told me what happened to that man at your work, and I know it must have been awful for you, but it’s not like you were in love with him.”

Ellen could feel the insecurity seething just beneath the question. She realized how easy it would be for him to push her down the stairs, standing a few steps above her as he was. Part of her longed to reach out and grip his balls as tightly as she could, to squeeze and squeeze until he screamed like

Fay Wray in *King Kong*, but another part thought of the Baroness standing bloody in her doorway. *I'll find you someone else.* She forced herself to smile.

"You're right," she said. "I'm sorry, everything's been so hectic. I should have let you in. I know I can rely on you."

Jesse's expression curdled, his nose wrinkling in revulsion. "Jesus," he said. "What did you do to your hair?"

"The stylist talked me into it," she said, affecting a rueful grimace as she bounced the still-wailing Aaron on her hip. "You know how they are. Do you hate it? I knew it was too much."

His look of disgust thawed ever so slightly. "No, of course not," he said. "It's just, I don't think it's *you*." He descended another step and touched her face, his thumb gently stroking along her cheekbone. "You look different. Not just the hair."

"We should go and join everyone on the roof," said Ellen. "Daddy's going to wonder where I am."

Jesse stood aside and let her pass. She could feel him following close behind her, dogging her steps back down the hall and up onto the roof along with a few late arrivals. Mallory met her at the bulkhead door, taking Aaron and making cooing sounds at him as he continued to wail. She gave Jesse a quick smile and nod before disappearing back into the flow of party guests. Jesse offered his arm, and Ellen took it, the hair on the back of her neck standing up. They went into the tent.

Little white Christmas lights made a constellation of the dark blue canvas overhead. Ellen's father's coworkers milled on the open dance floor and chatted at the tables. A line had formed at the bar where Bradley was making negronis for the studio's CEO, Don Montclair, and their marketing VP, Lewis Prince.

"We'll miss you, Brad," said Don, gesturing expansively with his half-empty drink. "Place'll be a crypt without you. Hell, maybe I'll give AJ the keys, let him wreck it like he wrecked the damn boat last summer when we were up on the Cape. Did I tell you about that? Gina just about shit a brick."

The men laughed. Ellen let Jesse lead her past them. *I'm never coming back here again,* she thought, and to her surprise the thought felt true. It felt real.

She saw her mother gliding through the crowd in her blue-and-red Hermès scarf and a white cocktail dress that made her look like an expensive designer chair, sharp and uncomfortable. She caught sight of Ellen and a paroxysm of rage seized her for the briefest instant. Whatever Daddy had said to her, it hadn't worked. Ellen gave Jesse's arm a squeeze.

"I should talk to her," she whispered. "Why don't you get us some drinks?"

He smiled at her as though she were a dog who'd just done a particularly clever trick, then left her in her mother's path.

"I suppose it was too much to ask that you not make a celebration of your father's achievements into another chance for you to humiliate this family," said Janet, her voice just low enough that only Ellen could hear her. "What were you thinking, Ellen? Do you want these people to think you're ... that you're doing that again? This is so tremendously selfish, I can't understand it."

"Mom, no, it was just the stylist, he wanted—"

Janet pulled her closer, a dazzling fake smile splitting her features as a waiter passed by with a tray of salmon puffs. "I don't want to hear it," she hissed. "I should take you downstairs and shave you bald, if that's what you want."

"Let go of me," said Ellen. She felt fear, an old and deeply ingrained terror of her mother's temper, but much more acutely she felt pity for the sad, frantic, ugly little person in front of her, a woman who had never really lived, who had made it her life's work to ensure no one disrupted the brittle rhythm of her own small, personal misery.

"What did you say to me?" Janet gasped.

Before Ellen could answer, her father banged his palm down flat on the bar. The whole tent turned as one, the clamor of a dozen conversations petering out into scattered whispers. Bradley hadn't stopped drinking. His eyes were unfocused. Sweat stood out on his broad forehead. "Thank you all for join—for joining me to celebrate the end of my career," he said. He was leaning against the bar for support. He smiled, swaying a little, and held up his glass. "To the end of my life!"

Light laughter. A few cries of "Here, here!" and "Give 'em hell, tiger!" Ellen's mother shook her finger at him in mock warning, adopting an expression of exaggerated disapproval.

“Time to play golf!” Bradley declared loudly. “Time to stop flying to L.A. Wear plaid pants. Charity silent auctions. Country club, drunk before noon. Come home to this woman, this house. Children I don’t know. Grandchildren...”

Jacob pushed free of the crowd and went to their father’s side. “Dad,” he said softly, putting a hand on Bradley’s arm. “I think that’s enough. Why don’t you go sleep it off?”

“Because I’ll still have to wake up tomorrow,” said Bradley, and all the manic energy went out of him. He looked *old*, suddenly. “Because it keeps happening, like waking up from a nightmare and you’re still inside it. Kicking for the surface but there is no surface. Let go of me.” He jerked his arm out of Jacob’s grip. “Let go of me, damn it! I want my say!”

Jacob turned away, face burning with embarrassment.

“That’s enough, Bradley,” said Janet. She was on her feet, nostrils flared. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“I saw something,” he said. There were tears in his eyes. “I can’t stop seeing it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I asked you—asked you here. I’m sorry. It’s just that I couldn’t do it alone.” He took a container of lighter fluid from behind the bar. He had pried off the pour spout. The party fell suddenly and terribly silent except for a single hysterical giggle, quickly smothered. Ellen’s father smiled. He upended the steel container over his head, lighter fluid pouring over him, soaking his shirt, his hair. He dropped it.

“Bradley!” Janet screamed.

He took his lighter from his pocket. It was silver. Engraved with something Ellen couldn’t remember. He flipped it open and thumbed the wheel. White fire raced over his skin with a hissing roar, billowing up in wild sheets, spreading to his clothes, his hair. He began to wail. It made Ellen think of pigs squealing in the runs of a slaughterhouse, pushing and biting one another in their panic at the smell of blood, some dropping dead of fear before they even reached the man at the end of the line and his little pneumatic gun. For a moment, as she staggered back in horror, the flame was black as pitch, her father caught in twisting photo negative.

The tent caught fire. Guests flooded back toward the stairs, pushing and shoving.

Ellen found herself in the library with her mother as the clock struck four in the morning. Mallory and her family were asleep in the guest rooms. Jacob had gone home. The others had fled as soon as manners permitted, not wanting to see the charred ruin of Bradley Kramer zipped inside a black plastic bag and carried to its final rest. It was raining, sleet pounding the tall windows. The paramedics, the fireman, and the police had come and gone.

Ellen shifted in her chair, trying to dislodge the image of her father's twisted face from her mind's eye. *I saw something*, he'd said. She passed a hand over her face and yawned. "Mom, don't you think you should try to get some sleep?"

Janet didn't look at her. "Thirty-eight years of marriage, he never once looked at another woman."

"He was gay, Mom."

Her mother sniffed. "That's ridiculous. Why would you say something so horrible? Haven't I been through enough?"

"We've all been through enough," said Ellen. Anger was bubbling up from somewhere deep inside her, caustic and hot. She knew her father had made his own choices, had chosen his own living hell, but that thought was huge and ugly and too personal. It was so much easier to hate her mother's fussy, contrived denial. "You really can't admit it, can you? Everyone knows."

"Why should I admit it, Ellen? So I can feel as humiliated as you seem to think I deserve? So that my friends can pity me to my face instead of behind my back? What is this brave admission of yours going to do for me, or for your father, or for you? I am *alone*, Ellen. I am widowed. Please, do me the courtesy of letting me manage the end of my own life with some shred of dignity still intact."

"Why didn't you tell us the truth about Bubbe?"

Janet grew pale. Her jaw tightened. "Why are you doing this to me?" she whispered. "Was I such a horrible mother?"

"Yes," said Ellen. A strange peace was settling over her. "You were a nightmare, actually, when you could be bothered to talk to us. You ruined our lives."

"Well, excuse me for trying my best, for giving you everything," Janet shrieked, spittle flying with each word. "You're going back to that *thing*," she continued, her puffy eyes narrowing. "Aren't you? That's what this is

all about. After everything I did to help you last time. Everything you put us through. Your father would be disgusted, Ellen. Disgusted.”

Ellen laughed out loud. She stood up, laughter shaking her, bending her over, and nearly fell. She braced her hands against her thighs and howled with mirth, tears pouring down her cheeks, until finally it faded and she found herself able to straighten up again. “I wish I could go back to her,” she said hoarsely. “I wish I was a person who could be loved, who was worth loving, but I’m not. I’m garbage. Just like Bubbe. Just like you.” She wiped tears from her eyes, still laughing. “Goodbye, Mom.”

Janet’s face was a mask. A skull, fleshless and empty. “Get out,” she said. “Don’t come here again. You’re not my daughter. You’re not welcome at the funeral. You’ll get nothing from me. You’re dead to me. Do you understand?”

Ellen turned her back on her mother and started toward the door.

“You won’t get anything, Ellen,” Janet called after her. “Do you hear me, Ellen? You’re dead to me. You selfish, awful child. You horrible, horrible girl. Nothing. Nothing!”

Ellen pulled the library door shut behind her.

In the hall, a dark figure stood at the head of the stairs. It turned toward her and beneath its wimple, creamy white against the black of its habit, she saw a woman’s face and eyes the color of a storm at sea. Beneath the eyes, beneath the long, aquiline nose and the perfect red bow of the upper lip, an insect’s glistening limbs worked busily between the habit’s parted folds. She moved in silence toward Ellen, and then past her, a terrible cold going with her, and on into the library.

Ellen stood there for a moment, not daring to look back. There was no sound.

She left.



Jesse was waiting for her downstairs in the foyer, slumped in the narrow wingback chair beside the shoehorn and the umbrella tree. “Are you all right?” he asked, blinking and straightening up as she came down the stairs.

“No,” she said shortly. “I’m going to call a cab home.”

Riding in the taxi's back seat, he held her hand and told her it would be all right, that he was there for her, that he'd take care of everything. "I think we should get married," he said softly. Ellen stared at the back of their driver's head. "I love you, Ellen. You can leave that job. You can stop worrying so much. We'll have kids. In a few years I'll be on the city council, by forty I'll be mayor, maybe AG, or even governor. You'll be comfortable. We'll be together."

"Yes," said Ellen. "You're right."

He squeezed her hand. A moment later she felt his lips against her neck. His hand snaked into her lap. She thought of Rachel, and wondered where she was right now. She turned to kiss him. His mouth still had that bitter taste to it. She sucked on his tongue until he moaned, then caught his lip between her teeth. It felt so good to bite him. She was filled with a desire to tear his face apart, to make him an ugly, mewling thing, noseless and drooling, lips peeled away to show his broken teeth. She bit down harder and he stiffened, squirming in discomfort. She let go, breathing hard. She imagined breaking his nose with the heel of her hand, imagined pushing him down against the seat, unbuckling his belt and tearing off his underwear. Forcing herself inside him as he screamed and slobbered, clawing at the worn upholstery as blood and liquid feces bubbled up around the root of her cock. She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around him from behind. *Hold still, insect.*

Shoes splashing in the freezing gutters. In through the front doors and up the stairs to Ellen's apartment, kissing on the landing, tearing at each other's clothes. Ellen felt a white heat in her chest. She could still see her father burning. She could smell the meat of him, crisp and crackling, fat dripping from the cracks in his flesh. Jacob had been the one to finally smother the flames, throwing bundled tablecloths over their father's curled, dead frame. Their mother screaming, screaming, and the boys clustered tight around Mallory.

She led Jesse down the front hall. It was coming. It was close.

"It's so cold," said Ellen, pulling away from Jesse. "There are blankets in the closet. Can you get one?"

Jesse raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. He smiled and, turning, opened the closet door. A cold wind sighed out of the stone passageway beyond it. Lightning flickered through old-fashioned windows, smeared and

bubbled. Jesse stared, his mouth hanging open. He hardly made a sound when Ellen pushed him, hard, planting her palms between his shoulders and shoving with all her strength. He stumbled into the hall. She slammed the door behind him and threw her back against it, sinking to the floor and bracing her legs against the far wall. He beat on the painted oak from the other side.

“Ellen!” screamed Jesse. “Let me out, Ellen! Let me *out*! This isn’t funny!” She felt him kick the door, the reverberation thrumming through her back. He resumed pounding. There was another sound beneath it. Footsteps, faint and dragging, growing closer. Jesse threw himself against the door. Ellen let out a nervous giggle. She covered her mouth and pushed hard against the baseboard, the door jumping in its frame again, the heavy oak digging into her back.

“What is this?” Jesse shrieked. “What is this? Did you drug me? Ellen, what is this thing? It’s coming closer, Ellen! What’s wrong with it? Where am I? Is this about the apartment? I’m sorry, all right? The guys at work dared me. They said it would soften you up, make you want me, but I didn’t want to do it! *Let me out!*”

The dragging footsteps drew closer, picking up speed. Ellen could hear its labored, phlegmy breathing. The door shook again. Her knees ached with the strain of holding it.

“LET ME OUT, YOU UGLY CUNT!”

“Ellen?” Molly shouted from the bedroom. She sounded half asleep. “What’s going on?”

The pounding stopped. There was a final thud, hard enough to bruise Ellen’s back where the doorframe dug into it, and then a low, soft whimper from the far side of the door. Something crooned in a low, ululating tone. The door flexed in its frame, and then relaxed. The slow, halting footsteps withdrew, accompanied by the sound of something heavy dragged over stone. The crooning grew quiet, fading from hearing.

“Ellen?” Molly cried. “Are you there? Is that you?”

Ellen couldn’t help herself. She began to laugh. She rolled onto her side, hugging herself as a shriek of mirth burst out of her. The muscles in her face ached with the force of it. She didn’t stop for a very long time, not when Molly lurched into the hall on her crutches, or when she lowered herself painstakingly down beside Ellen and shook her.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Molly asked again and again. “Tell me what’s wrong. You can tell me.”

Ellen laughed, and laughed, and said nothing at all.

Final Cut

Molly was gone when Ellen awoke the next morning. The bedclothes were folded neatly on the mattress and there was a battered pack of Camels on the nightstand. Ellen pocketed them.

In the kitchen she made herself coffee and toast. She sniffed her milk, but the carton had gone sour. She could smell it even over the festering stink of her injured hand. She changed the bandage over the sink, wrapping it tight, and drank her coffee black. She got her checkbook from the side table in the hall, pausing at the closet door to listen to the thing that whispered there, cooing and crooning, and wrote a check, then dressed and went downstairs.

Mrs. Weintraub answered her door in a garish kimono patterned with butterflies and orchids. She blinked owlishly. "Good morning, honey. What's going on?" Murray appeared between her legs, growling, his ears flat and his tail sticking straight out.

"Good morning," said Ellen, smiling. "My friend Molly's going to be house-sitting for me for a few months. She should be here tonight or tomorrow. I wanted to let you know."

"A subletter? Hon, we're not—"

"Here's four months in advance," said Ellen. She tore the check she'd written out of her slim leather checkbook and handed it to Mrs. Weintraub, who took it with a look of deep suspicion. "She's on crutches, so you'll hear her going up and down the stairs, but she's quiet otherwise."

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Weintraub asked.

"Work," said Ellen, shrugging. "Duty calls."

★ ★ ★

Ellen stepped out of her cab a block from the Brickworks. It was a clear day, the sky bright and empty, the air biting cold. A man stood under the

awning of the newsstand on the corner, shielding his cigarette from the wind as he lit it. He had huge, bulging eyes and a hangdog face, as recognizable as if he'd been cut out of a magazine. It was Rodney Dangerfield.

He glanced up as she approached. "If you ask me to say it," he said, "I'll kill myself."

"Can I bum one?" Ellen asked.

"Oh," said Dangerfield, nonplussed. He knocked a cigarette loose and handed it to her. They smoked in silence for a while. "Sorry," he said. He blew a smoke ring, which drifted, wavering, through the air before dissolving in the wind. "You get known for something, people won't stop coming after you trying to get you to do it. Like you're one of those plastic wheels they give little kids, you know, *the cow says: moo*. Jesus, it never stops."

"You're making a movie here," said Ellen. "Do you know the DP? Freddie Fernandes?"

"Freddie? Sure." Another smoke ring. "Good kid. Sharp."

"We used to date," said Ellen. She lifted her heel and stubbed out her cigarette on the sole of her shoe. "Do me a favor?"

He shot her a bemused look. "What'd you have in mind?"

Ellen coughed into her fist. She took off her glasses and cleaned them on her blouse. "Tell her Ellen says goodbye, and thanks for everything."

Dangerfield shrugged. "Whatever it is, you get some flowers, you tell her, I made a lesbian mistake, or maybe you just call it a mistake. Not my department. Anyway, those are the rules. That doesn't work, get down on your knees and beg."

Ellen laughed. She lit another cigarette. It felt funny, meeting this man now. Today of all days. "Just let her know," she said, and walked away toward the Brickworks.

"I get no respect," Dangerfield called after her. "No respect!"

★ ★ ★

On the sidewalk outside the MacNeil, the little theater the Foundation had rented out for the screening of *The Baroness*, Ellen stood and watched a teenager in a sweatshirt and windbreaker change the letters on the marquee.

THE BARONESS, and beneath that, SILAS GR. She'd already stopped by the Brickworks to leave her keys with Mrs. Overbrook. She felt light. Free.

"You heard of this guy?" the teenager called down to Ellen.

"No," said Ellen. Her palm was itching again. There were wet spots forming on her bandages. "Who is he?"

"Some born-again fascist," he said. "They bought us out for the night. I told the manager not to do it. This whole thing's so anti-Semitic."

Ellen nodded, staring at her reflection in the dark glass of the theater doors. Posters for *Amadeus* flanked it. A black silhouette in a headdress and robe, only the eyes visible, holding up gloved hands over the sketchy outline of a city. "Someone ought to do something about it," she said.

"Huh?"

She looked up at the kid. "Nothing," she said, and she smiled. "Just excited to go to the movies."

"We're closed," said the kid, exasperated. "Private event, I *just* told you."

Ellen ignored him. The lobby was empty, the popcorn tanks bare and gleaming, the red carpet freshly vacuumed and shampooed. She found Mr. Shrier in the projection booth with the theater's manager, a balding, chinless man with a massive mole between his upper lip and left nostril. They were smoking in the dingy little space. Behind them lay the theater, empty beyond the smudged and water-spotted glass. Peeling movie posters covered the walls. *Kiss of Death*. *Vertigo*. *Compulsion*. More buried beneath them. How many movies had she seen in her life?

"Ellen," said Mr. Shrier. "What are you doing here? My God, when Stephanie heard what happened last night she almost fainted right there on the phone. Your aunt called while we were watching *60 Minutes*."

"I think it's better for me to stay busy," said Ellen. In her mind's eye she could see her father burning in the endless cemetery, thrashing in among the snow-covered headstones while the masses looked on in silence. How many of them had her grandmother sent to their deaths? They looked back at her now, judging, standing all around Mr. Shrier in his brown suit and loafers, the manager in his red vest. "I can't be at home."

Mr. Shrier looked doubtful. He glanced at the manager. "Brendan, would you excuse us for a moment?"

The manager nodded and scuttled out, avoiding Ellen's gaze. She shut the door behind him. As she did, she caught sight of the fire ax behind a pane of glass to Mr. Shrier's left. Her fingers twitched. "It really is for the best," she said. "My mother, she's very upset. She needs to be alone right now."

The nun stepping through the library door.

"Stephanie told me Janet wouldn't come to the door this morning," said Mr. Shrier, sinking back into the projectionist's chair with a sigh. The projector loomed behind him, the cams bare. "Your father was a good man. I knew him twenty years, since we were both at Paramount with Leslie Sternin. What a loss."

"I can be of more use here, I think," said Ellen. "The funeral won't be for a few days. Would you let them know I'll run the projector? I want to make sure the print holds up. It's been a long process."

Mr. Shrier nodded. "It's good of you, Ms. Kramer," he said. "I've got my hands full with Graham, to tell the truth. The man's a lush. Had to drag him out of that hotel this morning." He stood with a grunt, brushing ashes from his lapels. "You've been a real asset to the Foundation."

Ellen smiled. "Thank you, sir."



"Well, it's not exactly Grauman's, is it?" Senator Thurmond drawled as an usher took his coat. He had tiny eyes, piggish and deep-set, and skin like leather left out and forgotten in the sun.

A string of handsome young men in suits followed him like ducklings, and hulking security in sunglasses had taken up residence by the doors. From the doorway of the projectionist's booth on the theater's mezzanine, Ellen watched Thurmond shake Mr. Shrier's hand. Mr. Shrier leaned in to say something in the senator's ear. Ellen had been shut up in the projection booth all afternoon. It was dark outside, and her head was pounding.

"New Year's in the city," Thurmond said, laughing as he and Mr. Shrier broke apart. "Damn! This Yankee pot roast knows he's on the fire!"

The other guests laughed. They'd been arriving for the past half hour or so. The board. Old, withered men and their dead-eyed wives, twenty and

thirty years younger, dresses hanging limp from bony shoulders, bleached smiles fixed in place.

“It’s close,” said a voice from the doorway at Ellen’s back. Gloria Swanson with a pack-a-day habit, and ... fuzzy, somehow, as though the speaker were a TV tuned to a dead station. “Do you want it?”

Do you want it?

Rachel’s nails caressing her face. Freddie dozing naked in the dappled sunlight at the beach’s edge. The cool steel against her cheek as she listened to the women in the bathroom stall, just inches from the heat and flesh of them. Breathing their smell. Ellen touched two fingers to the hollow of her throat, feeling her pulse race beneath the skin.

“Yes.”

★ ★ ★

From the booth Ellen watched as the ushers seated the guests and Mr. Shrier climbed the steps to the low presenter’s stage beneath the screen. He turned to face the murmuring audience. He looked nervous, sweat beading on his broad forehead. No applause. Ellen opened the first reel’s can. The print within glistened slick and black. It rose from the reel and coiled tenderly around her fingers, wending over and under them, cool against her skin. She transferred it to the projector’s cams.

“There you go,” she whispered. “Aren’t you beautiful?”

“... thirty-three years of stewardship, protecting the legacy of conservative film in an industry eaten through by the cancer of bleeding-heart liberalism, by communism, by socialism, dominated by globalist oligarchs intent on corrupting our great American experiment...”

The film slid through the projector’s innards. It caught the booth’s dim light so that reflected squares and flecks of radiance blurred over Ellen’s arm and the front of her blouse. She could barely hear what Mr. Shrier was saying, but she heard the applause as he finished, which grew to a roar as Silas Graham came out from the wings, moving with sprightly vigor. He waved to the audience.

“Some of you already know me,” he said, his low, rasping voice filling the theater effortlessly as the crowd fell silent. “You know the places I’ve

been, the things I've seen. The things I've done. Satan's followers are real, my friends, and they're among us. Closer than we'd like to think."

"Amen," someone called from the audience.

"Pornographers," said Graham, drawing out the word like he was sucking venom from a snakebite. His wild eyes darted from face to face. Behind him, the red velvet curtains parted with a groan of uncoiled chain in motion, revealing the screen. "Pimps and pushers, bloodthirsty acolytes of sin, eager to share their perverse appetites with a public all too easy to lead from Christ's light and into the wilderness. You think they aren't out there, preying on our children? Our women? You think their tentacles aren't wrapped around everything we hold sacred, squeezing the life out of the Western world?"

Ellen's palm itched fiercely. She scratched at it through her bandages as the film continued to wind itself into place.

Graham clapped his hands together, the sound echoing in the rapt stillness. "What you're going to see tonight is the recorded work of a circle of degenerate Jewish performers from the end of the Weimar Republic. Transvestites. Prostitutes. Common criminals and alchemists communing with demonic powers, all festering in the heart of that decadent Sodom. For forty years the film was lost. Now, recovered from the lair of a twisted deviant, we present it to you here as a warning, and as a reminder of the Adversary's power and cunning."

Ellen threw the projector's switch. Its little motor whirred to life, white light bathing Graham. He spread his arms, the gaunt lines of his face etched deep by shadow. "The Path Foundation presents, for your edification, Karla Bartok's ... *The Baroness*."

The opening credits warped and shifted over Graham as he paced the stage. "Bartok was a cabaret performer who dabbled in film. He was known to dress in women's clothes, and to frequent Berlin's gay bars, dens of sin that would make the Whore of Babylon herself blush red."

The stair in the side of the hill. Hasdeu looming against a storm-racked sky, Ilya climbing up into its shadow. The audience gasped. The shot was so clear, so vast, that for a moment even Ellen paused, her heart caught in her throat. With shaking fingers she unwrapped her bandaged arm as Graham ranted and raved about the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The stained and

discolored gauze fell away, revealing ulcerated flesh and patches of translucent, flaking skin. Filth drooled from her infected palm.

The film emerged from the oozing wound like a snake leaving its burrow. It lashed about, smearing the projector with blood and pus and other discharge, and coiled tight around the threaded copy. Ellen screamed as it dragged her fingers into the projector's workings, small bones breaking, skin torn away in ragged strips. People turned in their seats at the sound. Graham fell silent.

The image on the screen split and wavered, an inverted echo of Ilya and the castle burning over it. Ellen let out a protracted groan. She sagged against the speckled glass of the booth as the film came out of her. It felt like shitting, her whole body stretching around the excretion, muscles convulsing, forcing it out of her. The sharp edges tore her palm. Her thumb flopped loose. Her fingers seized, crushed between the cams. The pain went on and on, huge and impossible, splitting her with its relentless force.

The doubled picture curled in on itself, the edges of the cells burning and warping, holes opening up like wounds in the print. The screen was random noise. Ellen screamed again, her glasses sliding from her nose, the world blurring as blood poured from her ruined hand. She could see something yellow-white glistening in all the gore. People were shouting down below. The score cut out. Graham stood flummoxed on the stage, looking up at the scribbled artifacts and scratches reeling across the screen.

And then, from the darkness, her face emerged.

The Baroness, her countenance hanging in the void and lit from below like something out of a von Stroheim movie. A smile spread across her brutal features, and she began to laugh, not the frenetic stage laugh of a silent performer, but a real laugh, raw and wild, booming from the theater's speakers in a storm of static.

"Look upon me!" she cried, and the light shining on her from below flared bright with a flourish of organs. "Look upon your doom!"

"What is this, Billy?" Thurmond shouted, turning from the front row. "Some kinda sick joke?"

With her free hand Ellen fumbled her glasses back into place. The film had coiled itself around her good arm. It hung in swinging loops, moving, slick with her blood. Soft as a lover's touch it wrapped itself around her neck, and she thought of Schlemmecher gagging on film, red sheeting down

his chest as it opened up his cheek. A point of white-hot fire appeared bottom-center on the screen as Mr. Shrier stumbled openmouthed into the aisle. Melted vinyl dripped onto the carpeting as the flames began to climb, bisecting the screen so that it sagged to either side of the cut until it looked almost vaginal, its folds whispering in the fire's updraft, the Baroness's laughing visage stretched and smeared. Clear discharge dribbled from the tear, and then all at once the wall behind the screen split open with a thunderclap and a huge shape burst out from it, draped in blazing vinyl.

A dead horse, skeletal and rotten, and astride its back a headless figure in a hussar's uniform, fur half cape flying, rusted saber drawn. It trampled Silas Graham. Ellen watched his skull implode beneath the piston of its hoof. As the horse wheeled around, she saw that there was a deformed man's face nestled between its buttocks, an evil grin stretching its lips, its features twisted by cauliflower growths and hairy cysts. It laughed aloud.

A gun went off. Once. Twice. Incredibly loud in the enclosed space of the theater, and the headless hussar jerked twice, but did not fall. People scrambled over seats. They stepped on one another, fighting, clawing toward the theater doors that wouldn't open, that held against the pressure of six dozen desperate bodies as from the rift in the screen behind them came the Giantess in her veils and bracelets, her children crawling after her, teeth bared. Naked men, starved skeletal and running on all fours, their eyes put out, their teeth capped with sharpened steel. Nuns crawled out over the bare wall, clinging like insects, mandibles moving in slow synchrony beneath the shadows of their coifs.

The Chamberlain came next. A young man from the senator's staff staggered into his path, bloodied and disoriented, and Varga seized his throat and shoulder and buried his teeth in the man's face. Screaming. Flailing. Blood flew.

The dead horse danced on the fallen, trampling hands, shattering spines. It plunged through the surging audience. Someone fell from the left balcony with a blood-curdling shriek, striking a seat's back and splintering it. A figure in black sprang after them and pinned them to the floor between dark rows of seats, sucking and slurping, insectile limbs uncoiling from within its habit. In the center of the theater Mr. Shrier rose up from the carpet like a boat cut loose from its pier, spinning unmoored through the air until some unseen force arrested him. He trembled, eyes bulging, mouth puckered,

moving silently. His suit tore at the armpits, cloth flattening against his flesh as something pulled at it invisibly. The fabric ripped. Panel by panel it peeled away from him as he writhed helpless and wild, and beneath it his skin was covered in raw cuts at the shoulder, at the elbow, just below his ribs and on his inner thighs, loose skin gathered as though by ghostly fists and pulled away from the fat and muscle beneath.

Ellen started to laugh. The glass of the booth was melting, the insulation and soundproofing catching fire. Panes tumbled from their sagging frames and shattered below. The floor pitched under Ellen's feet, the projector swinging with it so that light flowed over the theater walls. Something tore in her arm, the rest of the film ripped out in a spray of red, and she tottered free, staring in ecstatic terror at the carnage below.

Mr. Shrier revolved slowly, convulsing as his skin was flayed from him in careful sections. A haunch. A shoulder. Long, straight strips cut from his sides. Blood poured from him. Next came the fat, glistening yellow, steaming when it touched the air, sloughing from the skeins of muscle bound about his bones. His eyelids, plucked away like bits of dried facial mask. Muck and wet flesh slapped the seats beneath him. He kicked feebly at the air. Muscle unfurled from him. His guts poured through their failing lattice. His bones shifted, ligaments unpicked, ribs jangling together. His digits separated. Dangled. Fell like rotten fruit. His liver slipping fat and bloody from his belly.

The dead horse wheeled about, teeth gaping through its rotted cheeks, and as Ellen slid slowly down the slope of the projector room's collapsing floor she saw beneath the hussar's arm the severed head of Ilya Kapfelberg, marked on its brow with a word of fire. With a secret name. His saber flashed. A man cried out and fell against the wall, one eye dangling from its ruined socket, a grisly cut across his face. Ellen stepped over a dead man lying face down on the floor, cradling her ruined arm against her chest as she stared up at what was left of Mr. Shrier turning slowly in midair. His pelvis hung askew from the slick knobs of his spine.

Across the theater, the Baroness stepped through the burning screen, swags of melted vinyl slithering over her bare shoulders. Blood dripped from her gauntlet and her chin, and from the fingernails of her bloodstained bare right arm. White flames billowed from the corners of her eyes. A pair of headless, wrinkly little things like uncooked geese came scuttling after

her on nubby legs, her pendulum-bladed sword balanced precariously on their narrow shoulders. A little way off, the Giantess seized a woman by the head and crushed her skull with a single squeeze of her hand, blood and brain squirting between her fingers. Her children fell on the corpse like jackals.

“Jesus Christ,” someone screamed.

The Baroness paused, her lips curling to reveal crooked yellow teeth. Her gaze darted back and forth like a Kit-Cat Klock’s, sweeping the whole of the theater. She cupped a hand beside her ear, then sucked in a breath and offered an exaggerated grimace, tapping a manicured nail against her painted lower lip. “He isn’t here,” she said, and smiled again. Blood dripped from her chin. She held out her hand and the wretches cowering in her shadow lifted up her sword. She grasped the hilt, and Ellen saw her gaze dart toward the senator, who was crawling like a rat between two rows of seating.

Thurmond scrambled a few feet before the Baroness smashed through the seats and brought her sword down between his neck and shoulder, splitting him nearly to his breastbone. She planted her boot on his back and tore it free of him with a wet, meaty sucking sound. Her second blow sent his head rolling into the aisle. She stood there, breathing hard. Part of the far wall collapsed in a shower of sparks, smoke and dust rolling out, the light from the projector swinging wildly, throwing the Baroness’s shadow vast against the concrete.

“I did it,” Ellen rasped. She swayed on her feet.

The Baroness turned toward her. Smoke swirled around her, the light dancing through it. “You did,” she agreed.

Ellen staggered toward her. She fell to her knees, blood dripping to soak the carpet. Her vision was blurry. She wanted Freddie. She wanted Rachel. She wanted her father, and the man he’d loved, and baby Aaron snug and safe in her arms. She wanted to snatch it all back from the flames, all her wasted years, her cowardice, her blind allegiance to her own misery. To dive through time and undo what Janet had done to them, what her mother, their Bubbe, had done in the ruins of Łódź, what the Nazis had done to Bartok and Ilya and all the rest of them. To make it right.

“Can we go?” Ellen asked. Her voice cracked like a child’s.

The Baroness came toward her. She crouched and cupped Ellen's face in her bloody, armored palm. Ellen closed her eyes, breathing hard. In her mind's eye she could see the movie. Ilya still climbing those stairs. All the little tears, scratches, and artifacts she'd noted so painstakingly came and went. The doors of Hasdeu opened, and she felt the wind on her face.

Ellen opened her eyes. The world burned black and white. The castle loomed above her, the Chamberlain standing in the doorway with his arms spread in welcome. The Baroness helped her to her feet. Ellen's body was whole, her hands unblemished, blazing white in the light of a black sun. Thunder rumbled in the shadow of the massing clouds.

Ellen looked back down the steps. Ilya was climbing toward them, and people covered the slope of the hill. Those she'd seen in the cemetery. The film's performers. The men in prison suits, little triangles sewn to their breasts. A river of faces staring up at her, and through the mass of them came a dozen figures in skintight leotards of slick black rubber, their faces hidden by tall, conical penitents' hoods. Between them, they carried a naked Jesse toward her. As they drew closer she saw that his legs had been sewn together, the stitches catching the black light, his arms sewn folded across his chest and held down with metal staples. Blood slicked his skin as he wriggled like a worm, wailing at the top of his lungs.

"Here," said the Baroness. She placed a knife in Ellen's hand, her bloody fingers leaving trails of red across Ellen's palm. There was no wound, only a pale, faded scar that ran from the base of Ellen's index finger to the heel of her hand. "It's almost over."

The bearers brought Jesse to the step below Ellen's. They knelt and lowered him to the cunningly set and mortared stones. A light rain had begun to fall, and Ellen could hear her own heart thundering. She squatted down by Jesse's side, bending close to his ear.

"A pig needs a knife," she whispered.

A cheer went up from the crowd gathered there on the windswept hillside, loud enough that no one heard what Jesse Cavill screamed with his last breath. Ellen dragged the Baroness's knife across his throat, sawing at his sinews and his veins, and his blood ran black down the crooked steps, pooling between the bricks and soaking slowly into the splintered gray wood of their frames. Ellen watched him die in silence, hating her, his eyes

mad with rage. Powerless. She laughed at him. Her heart thundered in her breast.

The Baroness gripped Ellen's wrist and thrust up her bloodstained hand for all to see, and somehow the screaming grew louder, the sheer force of the sound pressing against Ellen's eardrums until the stamping and baying felt as though it were pulsing through her skeleton. Others bent to wet their fingers in the blood as the Baroness let Jesse's body fall limp to the ground. They smeared their faces, sucked their digits, danced in the gore and muck of him. They fell upon the corpse like wolves, tearing and ripping at its still-warm flesh. He came apart in wet black strings that gleamed about the slick knobs of his bones. Someone pressed part of his tongue into Ellen's palm. She sank her teeth into the tough flesh.

A hand gripped Ellen's wrist and then Rachel was with her, pulling her close and kissing her with ravenous heat. Bite and suck, lick and nuzzle, hot and heavy as teenagers at a drive-in. Rachel's mouth slick with Jesse's hot blood. Taste of iron and copper. Her breast overflowing the palm of Ellen's hand. Her lips pressing a kiss to Ellen's forehead, a kiss that burned like a brand, that drew something out from deep within her, that boiled the air with ancient script. A name of fire written on her skin. Ellen screamed, but the pain was good. Dead things fell away from her. They burned into gray cinders.

"Benjamin!" the crowd thundered. "Benjamin!"

So much at once. The flame alive within her. The cries of the multitude ringing in her ears.

"Benjamin!"

Her father climbing into that long-ago car with the bearded man. His friend. His lover. Her mother, expressionless, smoking on the porch. Ellen had a little bit of Jesse in her teeth.

What would you have named me if I'd been a boy?

Ellen drew her last breath, and Benjamin his first.

He threw back his head and laughed, the black sun shining down on all of them there on the hillside, damned and victorious, dead and eternal, and he held tight to Rachel's hand as the crowd surged around them. Lightning split the sky.

"Benjamin!"

He closed his eyes and smiled, blood running down his chin, and the thunder rolled over him, echoing his name.

“Benjamin!”

The theater was empty, except for the dead. Cinders danced through the air over their hacked and mutilated bodies. Pools of melted vinyl smoked at the base of the ruined wall. Runnels of it were adhered to the felting, and to the concrete beneath. Little fires still guttered on the flapping edges of the movie screen. A man lay burning in the front row, run through with a spear while trying to climb over the back of his seat. Flames chewed at his sport coat, a powerful smell of cooking pork and the rank chemical stink of burnt polyester rising from his body.

In the projection booth, half-collapsed into the theater below, the projector rattled on, teetering on an exposed beam. The fires in the walls had all gone out. The film slithered darkly from the reel. The can snapped shut, its latches clicking into place.

The lights went out.

Black Flame

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From the river to the sea, Palestine can, will, and *must* be free.

Also by

Gretchen Felker-Martin

Manhunt

Cuckoo

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



[GRETCHEN FELKER-MARTIN](#) is a Massachusetts-based bestselling horror author and film critic. Her debut novel, *Manhunt*, was named the #1 Best Book of 2022 by *Vulture*, and was named one of the Best Horror Novels of 2022 by *Esquire*, *Library Journal*, and *Paste*. Her sophomore novel, *Cuckoo*, debuted on the *USA Today* bestseller list. You can read her fiction and film criticism on Patreon and in *TIME*, *The Outline*, *Nylon*, and more. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[The Baroness](#)

[Technical Selection](#)

[The Negative](#)

[Emulsion](#)

[Duplication](#)

[Nitrate](#)

[The Can](#)

[The Second Cut](#)

[Artifact](#)

[The Reel](#)

[Editing](#)

[Nostromo](#)

[Wealth and Secret Knowledge](#)

[Final Cut](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Gretchen Felker-Martin](#)

[About the Author](#)

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