



The Picture

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The lobby was filled with the rich scent of roses. For months after Ian's brief, youthful folly was over, his lease broken and his notice given and his account at the club closed, he would remember that soapy, floral smell—how it contrasted with the frenzied stench of Midtown on a warm evening, and those few mornings when, riding the elevator down from the guestrooms, dick aching pleasantly, he would catch a whiff as the polished brass doors slid open. But on that first night, strolling in with Sid—Sidney Balasubramanian, his roommate junior and senior years—the roses, arranged in a tasteful silver vase on the lobby's front counter, barely registered; on that first night, Ian was aware only of his sweat in the muggy September air, and his new brogues clicking against the marble, and the strange feeling of pride he felt each time he noticed another tony feature of the club's décor. It was his second day living in the city.

Dinner that night was to celebrate his new job—his first job out of college, actually—as a paralegal at an immigration firm on Madison. It wasn't exactly the glamorous career in finance he'd been hoping for as senior year had spooled away, but with the economy taking such a battering the past few months he'd had to settle for whatever he could get—and his new boss, J. Bob Dalton Esq., was an old friend of a golfing buddy of a parent of a classmate or something, so. Ian had tried to stay positive about it, because he was living in New York Fucking City now, after all, and he would never complain about that. But his first day had not been auspicious, his windowless cubicle a dump, filled with a wheezing old Dell and a stack of worn, abandoned Redwelds, and his three-

hour induction painful. And then, instead of the boozy welcome lunch he'd imagined, he spent twenty minutes eating a falafel alone in Bryant Park, watching two male pigeons simultaneously trying to hump a female one. If he'd had any alternative, he might not have gone back to the office.

The first case in his pile was a slow ball, Dalton had said, something easy to get him started: Darpana Saleti, an Indian climate scientist at NYU, her green card already approved and Ian's only task collecting a few extra pieces of paperwork to send away for it. That description hadn't stirred much passion for the job, either, but when he pulled out the file copy of her passport he let out a whispered *Holy Shit!* This was not the frumpy scientist he'd been imagining; she was beautiful, superlatively, her skin like coffee ice cream and her irises two sumptuous hazelnuts, above her wisp of a nose and her tiny scarlet smile. For a few minutes he just stared at the picture as if it were a color-blindness test, and for the rest of the afternoon he left it propped against his monitor to glance at as he pleased, while he sorted through her past visa approvals, and traced the exotic, Gujarati script on her birth certificate, and got lost for over an hour reading through the details of her research—some new atmospheric modelling approach that could predict Arctic ice patterns with unprecedented accuracy. He was still babbling about how fascinating it all was when he and Sid sat down at the club's bar that evening.

"Martini," said the bartender, a white-haired man with a New York-Irish accent. "Am I right? Goose, up with a twist?"

Ian stopped talking and looked uncertainly at Sid, who was giving him the same look back. Their knowledge of cocktails was mostly limited to the margaritas and Long Island iced teas they'd had premixed at campus parties.

"Trust me," said the bartender, winking, and laid out two velvety, monogrammed cocktail napkins in front of them, before sliding a small card across the counter and turning to fetch the vodka. *Members are reminded, the card read, beneath the crest of their alma mater, that cash payments for club services are not permitted. Please sign and note your account number below.* Ian smiled and pulled a pen from his pocket, giddy with pomp, remembering all the times he'd watched his father do the same thing. Not that they'd come to the club that often, living in Connecticut, two or three hours away depending on the traffic—but that had only increased the place's cachet. It was special there, a private fortress of success, a microcosm of the hum and crackle and power of New York

City, to which everyone in his high school had aspired. And that he'd managed to walk straight into it after college was an irrefutable sign, Ian was sure, of his own rising star, pokey paralegal job or not. Here he was, making it already.

He said something like that to Sid, too, once they'd moved on from Darpana, still seated at the bar and digging into steaks. But Sid, as he always did whenever Ian talked about New York, just scoffed. "You kids from the Tri-State are all the fucking same—ask anyone who grew up within a hundred miles of this city and it's like you all think *Gatsby* is still happening down here."

Ian drained his martini and motioned to the bartender for another. "I don't know—this seems pretty *Gatsby* to me. And don't pretend it's only people who grew up around here, Sid. The whole world wants to be in New York."

"Give me a fucking break. I don't want to be in New York. I'm just here because Columbia gave me the most funding."

It was a good-natured argument, really, the same kind they'd had about almost everything back when they lived together—and as the bartender continued guiding them down the cocktail list they drifted back into that ever more familiar terrain: *Die Hard* versus *Bad Boys*, Yankees versus Red Sox, tits versus ass. They were having so much fun, reunited after their summer mostly apart, that it was almost eleven when they finally stumbled back onto the sidewalk and went their separate ways, Sid hopping an uptown bus and Ian sloshing onto the subway towards Queens, where he dozed off until the end of the line—dreaming, vaguely, that Darpana might be just a few cars away.



When Ian's parents announced they were getting him a club membership as his graduation gift, he tried to refuse. It seemed like they'd done more than enough already, putting down the hefty deposit on his new walk-up, and furnishing it, and guaranteeing the lease—not to mention paying for the Ivy League education that qualified him for club membership in the first place. But when he told them as much, over his post-commencement dinner, his dad just laughed and clapped him on the back.

"You're a good kid," he said, "but look, it's your first time living in the city and you should enjoy yourself. So no arguments—your dues are on us this year, and your tab too." Across the table, Ian's mother shook her head. "What your

father means, dear, is that you should take yourself out to dinner every now and then, our treat. This isn't carte blanche to go out drinking with your friends." She shifted in her seat. "Not at the club's prices, anyway."

And that was the other thing: Ian knew his parents weren't as comfortable as they used to be. Heck, they'd even cancelled their own memberships a few months earlier. They weren't broke, by any means, but his college years had drained their savings, and with this mortgage crisis picking up speed they'd gone without pay raises and bonuses that year, Ian's dad in his middle-management job at the local CBS affiliate and his mom in the fundraising arm at Goodwill—and all of a sudden their lean new empty nest in a coveted development across town was a much bigger risk than they'd intended. That was the reason Ian hadn't applied to grad school himself, too, no matter what he'd told Sid on their post-graduation road trip (and since) about wanting to get straight into the workforce and start saving for his own place: his parents had already ruled out paying any more tuition.

So after his two-hundred dollar bender that first night, Ian felt decidedly guilty, and the next time he met up with Sid it was at some dive bar on the Upper West Side, one of those places with so much neon schlock on the walls it was just a few licks of paint and a health inspection from becoming a TGI Fridays. Sid was waiting with two Schlitzes and a corner table when Ian walked in. "Can you believe they have this stuff?" he said, holding out a can as Ian sat down. "It's both tragic and awesome."

Ian made a noncommittal noise as he took the can, draining half of it before he even said hello.

"Jesus," said Sid. "Bad day at the office?"

"More like bad month at the office." Ian shook his head. "That fucking place." He'd promised himself he wouldn't spend the whole night bitching about work, but he hadn't said anything to his parents for fear of sounding ungrateful, and of course when he'd heard from any of his old high school buddies they'd only wanted to talk about how great it must be living in the city—so it was nice to finally complain to someone. Mostly about Dalton, who'd taken only a day or two to reveal his true, cold bastard colors. He returned briefs covered in furious red annotations and sarcastic Post-its; he had loud conversations about his staff's incompetence with his office door wide open; and even in Ian's

first three weeks he'd made two surprise firings for no reason, it seemed, other than his whim and fancy. (Ian had almost been one of them, after failing to spot that Darpana's file was missing a key document.) The man was so terrifying that the rest of the office were like hamsters, cowering beneath mounds of paper in their cubicles and burrowing further at the sound of any approaching footstep—and when Ian tried to invite them out for his long-imagined after work drinks in the city, ties loosened in dimly lit bars, they all shook their heads helplessly and said they had too much work to finish.

“And that,” said Sid, polishing off his second beer, “is why grad school is far superior to the real world.”

Ian laughed, but after they ended up at some Columbia house party that night, where he and Sid met a beautiful girl named Jackie and spent the whole time trying to out-droll each other for her benefit, he couldn't help but wonder. Beyond Dalton's tyranny, he chafed at the inflexibility of his working hours, and the draconian, minute-by-minute timekeeping, and the constant, taut pressure to get everything right all the time. There were no B-minuses in “the real world,” as Sid had called it—you either fucked up or you didn't. And maybe that was why everyone at the party seemed so carefree and relaxed and well rested that night, when all Ian had to show for his salary was dark circles and some indigestion.

Worse, that salary wasn't giving much of the financial independence he'd been planning on, either. Oh, thirty-five grand had sounded like a lot in his offer letter, and he thought he'd made a reasonable budget that would let him pocket five thousand a year—but even with all the overtime he was working it was clear how badly he'd miscalculated. He simply hadn't realized how expensive it was just to live in New York, at least not the way he'd lived in college. Back then, with his parents paying his bills and his part-time job at the campus bookstore supplying beer money, he never gave much thought to the \$3 Starbucks coffees every morning—which were \$4 in Manhattan, anyway—or the frequent take-out dinners, or even modest luxuries like the cab he took home from Columbia that night. But now he was making his own coffee at home—badly—and eating ramen every night, and still he'd have only a hundred bucks left at the end of the month.

It wasn't as if he was blowing it all on a society pages nightlife, either; with Sid so far away in Morningside Heights, and no friends at the office, his eve-

nings and weekends (when he got them) mostly consisted of an occasional trip to the movies, or dicking around on the internet, or watching baseball alone over a few sports bar Budweisers. And so it was hard not to come back to Sid's formulation in the coming weeks, as he lost whole hours to a daylight-deprived, depressive haze, clocking out around six-thirty, alone, to the whisper of invisible keyboards behind so many cubicle walls: grad school is far superior to the real world. Ian would keep on returning to those words for months, in fact, long after he'd stopped living in the real world himself.



Ian's birthday fell on a weekend that year, a beautifully still, mid-October Saturday, the washed out fall light revealing the countless empty spaces left by summer. The day didn't start well; the night before, he'd lugged home a far from finished case due Monday—another green card application, this one for some Chinese engineer whose ESL e-mails read like brusque, officious koans—but instead of powering through it as he'd planned, he watched TV for two hours, and then got angry with himself for wasting time, and then got angry that he was angry with himself, because it was a Friday fucking night and he shouldn't have to be working anyway. Finally he drank himself into a despondent stupor on the bottle of single malt his parents had sent him for his birthday, and woke up Saturday morning to the receipt screen for an on-demand porno still showing on his TV. After that, he spent most of the day feeling hungover and sorry for himself as he struggled through his work, double- and triple-checking everything because he knew, after the mix-up with Darpana's documents, that he had to get this one right. He was going cross-eyed by the time he left the house that evening.

All he'd planned was dinner with Sid at some pizza place in the Village and then "playing it by ear," which he suspected would mean more Schlitz in Sid's dive of the week uptown. But if that was a shadow of what he'd envisioned for his first birthday in the city, he'd been looking forward to it anyway—because Sid was also bringing Jackie, that cute brunette from the previous month's house party, as well as some old high school friend of hers to round out the foursome. It would be the closest Ian had been to a date in six months—and he would forgive all the Schlitz in the world for that.

Dinner itself was mediocre, the pizza soggy and Ian's chair constantly being bumped by passing waiters, yet he quickly found his mood improving. Jackie's friend was nothing special, some dull Chelsea princess who mostly talked about everything she'd bought or wanted to buy that week—but Jackie herself, seated between Ian and Sid, was just as enthralling as he remembered, conversation mellifluous and skin like a sunrise, and still hugely entertained, it seemed, by the banter he and Sid were keeping up. "Sid's been wearing those same shoes since I met him. You know in *The Inferno* where all the misers are stuck pushing rocks around? Sid's going to end up there—and he'll still be wearing those fucking shoes." Giggle. "Ian's been making that same joke since I met him, too. He's obsessed with *The Inferno* I don't know what's worse, that he read it in middle school or that he used it as a yearbook quote."

It was going so well that by the time they were out on the street again, Jackie's hand passing fleetingly over Ian's, he'd forgotten all about the day's awful start, about his money worries and his soul-sucking job and his future, and was instead focused entirely on how to escape somewhere with her, just the two of them. Okay, yes, he knew Sid had invited her only because he had a thing for her—but she was clearly more interested in Ian, anyway, and didn't he deserve a little birthday action after how lonely he'd been the past few months? She was everything he'd always wanted in a girl: stylish and funny and best of all, just like his college girlfriend, from the city—a way into those exclusive Upper East Side social circles that Ian so yearned to be a part of.

So when Sid suggested they head to another Columbia house party, eyes on Jackie, Ian was a little curter than he'd intended. "Jesus, Sid, no—not tonight. I don't want to spend my birthday talking about artisanal Renaissance economies." ("Amen to that," muttered Jackie's friend.)

Sid glanced at him, amused, and then back to Jackie, who shrugged and said she could probably use a night off from the department. "Okay," he said, turning slowly back to Ian. "I thought you wanted to do something cheap, that's all. But if you'd rather go pack into some overpriced Manhattan meat market, say the word."

"This is New York, Sid—overpriced nightclubs and Columbia house parties are not the only two options. And it wasn't so long ago that you would have done anything to get out of a history party on a Saturday night, so you can drop the holier-than-thou act."

For a few seconds, maybe, some larger response seemed to flit around beneath Sid expression, but in the end he only sighed. “So what, then? You want to go spend more of mommy and daddy’s money at the club?”

Ian bristled. “No, I just—”

“The club?” said Jackie.

Smirking, Sid explained, and Jackie’s friend immediately smacked his arm. “You guys are members of an alumni club? Why didn’t you tell us earlier? Those places are lush. Remember when we went to that one in Boston with those lacrosse guys, J?”

“It was a pretty fun night,” said Jackie, nodding slowly, staring at Ian. And that was all he needed to brush away his misgivings. If his parents could handle monthly dinners they could surely cover one night of drinking instead, and even if they were annoyed it would be worth it to flip around Sid’s attempt to embarrass him, to show some largesse in front of Jackie—signing that account card with a dismissive flourish, and winking at the staff like he was there every night. He flagged down a passing cab before anyone could say another word.

It was only once they got there, along with some other people Sid passive-aggressively invited from the taxi, all of them drinking sixteen-dollar cocktails as if they were apple juice, that Ian realized just quite how expensive the night might turn out. But by that point, waist-deep in gin and Jackie hanging off him, he couldn’t muster much concern. The club’s bills came quarterly and his next wouldn’t be ‘til January, so he had plenty of time to butter up his parents and work out a way to pay them back. For the time being he might as well enjoy himself—which he did, until around eleven, when the taproom closed and the bartender slipped away, leaving the house manager to kick them out. Or, actually, to suggest that they pay for a room upstairs and continue drinking there, which Ian considered for a few drunken seconds. But Sid was already ushering everyone onto the street, all of them frantically smartphoning for a new destination, so Ian spilled out after them and fell back with Jackie as the group lurched off towards Times Square. He took her arm.

“Hi.”

She beamed back at him. “Hi.”

And suddenly they were stopped, kissing, on the corner. When Ian pulled away a few seconds later he saw Sid, already across the avenue, watching them with his fists clenched, another girl pulling on his shoulder. Jackie began to say

something, but Ian cut her off. “I could get that room, you know.” He nodded back the way they’d come. “You heard the guy. Just you and me.”

She laughed and said he was terrible, but she didn’t break eye contact, not even for a second.

“Come on,” he said, peppering a few light kisses on the crook of her neck, pretending not to see Sid just as pointedly as Sid had pretended not to notice them flirting all night. “It’s my birthday.” He felt her nails digging into his hip, as she tilted her head back and murmured that, well, if it was his birthday... They were halfway down the block again before Ian finally looked back, to where Sid, and the rest of them, had already disappeared.



Ian came into work on Monday, after a Sunday of lazy, hungover sex, feeling pretty good about life—which was just as well because Dalton was on the warpath. Over the weekend some workaholic at the Texas Service Center had denied about a dozen of the firm’s filings, for no apparent reason other than spite or incompetence, or probably both, as Dalton put it, fuming to anyone who asked, in between fielding endless calls from clients and firing off e-mails to his contacts in Washington. Today would be another surprise firing day, Ian was sure of it.

So when he saw Sid’s name come up on his phone halfway through the morning, he sent it straight to voicemail rather than risk being caught on a personal call, and didn’t phone back until he’d clocked out for his brief lunch break, standing outside his building beside a woman smoking a cigarette.

“Nice of you to call,” said Sid. “I thought you might be avoiding me.”

“For fuck’s sake, Sid, I’m at work. You know—work? That place where people perform menial tasks in exchange for money?” The woman with the cigarette smirked; Ian shook his head, rolling his eyes at her.

“Yeah, ha-ha, grad school’s not real work. I get it. So are you going to apologize or what?”

“Apologize?” Ian swallowed. “Apologize for what?”

Silence.

“Okay, fine. I’m sorry. I know you like her.” He rolled his eyes at the smoker again, though she suddenly seemed less interested. “But she was all over me,

Sid! What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have said no for a start, jackass.”

“Sid,” said Ian, rubbing the bridge of his nose, eyes shut. “We met her at the same time. I liked her too. And it’s not like this was some totally random drunk hook-up—I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t think it might go somewhere.”

More silence.

“Sid?”

“You really think it might go somewhere?”

“I really do,” Ian told him, glad Sid wasn’t there to see his involuntary shrug. “It already reminds me of when Clare and I first got together.” Clare, the two-year college girlfriend—his only girlfriend so far, really, if you didn’t count the few month-long flings that followed their break-up. “So is that it?” He kicked at a blackened piece of gum at his feet. “Are we cool?”

A long sigh. “Yeah. Sure. See you later.”

Ian mulled it over some more once he was back at his desk, but he still couldn’t find much wrong with what he’d done. He needed this far more than Sid anyway—as far as he could tell, grad school was pretty much a glorified dating service, whereas how else would Ian ever meet someone? It was nearly two months now that he’d been at the firm, and he hadn’t even made a friend. If anything he felt less contrite, considering it sober, than he had on Saturday night—as if the feeling had passed away already, and he was incapable of repeating it.

His reverie was interrupted, just then, by an e-mail appearing at the top of his inbox: Darpana. *Dear Mr. Silver*, she began, with that formal greeting so many of his clients insisted upon, no matter how many times Dalton assured them first names were fine. *Attached please find the requested scan of my missing employment card. My apologies that it has taken so long to find—when you move as often as I do, old papers tend to go walkabouts!* Ian smiled; he was always charmed by the faintly British tone to her e-mails. He could almost hear the old school-marm back in Delhi, rapping her across the knuckles.

Dear Darpana, he wrote back. *Thanks very much. Now that we have everything I’ll finish your forms and give everything to Bob for review, and then we’ll send the packet out for your signature. As soon as you return everything, plus the filing fee checks and passport-sized photographs for the green card, we can send it off to the government. Almost there now!* He was skirting the level of chumminess Dalton

would tolerate—and indeed, he instantly got a single line reply reading *Get a room*—but his messages to Darpana had always been nicer than most. Something about her being his first case, he supposed.

When he clicked open the scan of her employment card, he let out another whispered *Holy shit!* The photo there showed her maybe six or seven years after that hypnotic passport picture, and the intervening time had not been kind: her skin was darker, blotchy, and those heart-stopping eyes were disappearing into fuller, fatter cheeks. Ian could hardly believe it was the same person, when he pulled out her file and looked at the two pictures side by side. Even her expression seemed different, a vile curl to her lips in place of that open, youthful smile. He began flipping through the rest of her file now, stopping on her resume, and seeing in it a few hints of the life that had left her so destroyed. The Ph.D. from MIT, undertaken alongside three teaching and research assistantships, plus a night job supervising experiments at another university—and then the dozens of conference credits and publications to her name on top of that! It was no wonder she'd aged so much. Yet still she was only a postdoc, scraping by on a salary smaller than even Ian's junior paralegal one; still she was living in what Ian assumed was a rented apartment in the Bronx, in a neighborhood he wouldn't dare go near. Probably she was going into debt, too, given what Dalton charged, just so the government couldn't deport her when her visa maxed out. And how was that right? Wasn't the American promise, the one that had no doubt lured her here in the first place, that if you worked hard and followed the rules you were rewarded? If Ian hadn't been terrified it would get him fired, he would have gone down to her office that afternoon, just to ask her why she still wanted to stay.

He went to the club again after work. When he'd finally arrived home again on Sunday, after his debauched morning in that spur-of-the-moment guest-room, he'd seen his parents' half-empty bottle of scotch on his kitchen table and been hit all at once by the guilt he'd managed to quash the night before—so he'd resolved to stop in and see if he could pay off at least some of the tab himself before the next bill went out. But after Dalton's torrents of abuse that day, after the shock of Darpana's new picture and brooding over her situation all afternoon, he felt like he needed a drink, and before he went to the front desk he headed for the bar. What was another sixteen bucks, he figured, after however many hundreds he must have run up that weekend?

When the bartender saw Ian pull up a stool, he gave a long whistle and a small show of applause. He was surprised to see Ian back so soon, he said, after such a pickled Saturday night—and before Ian knew it he and Henry, the man introduced himself, were shooting the breeze like old friends, and Ian was on his second gimlet, and then his third, and then cutting into another steak. He was back in Astoria and weaving along the sidewalk before he remembered that he'd wanted to talk to someone about his tab—so it wasn't until the next evening that he steadfastly marched to the front desk, avoiding even glancing towards the taproom, and was told that his charges currently stood a little short of a grand. ("Is that all!" he said, plastering a smile to his face even as the blood drained out behind it.)

He put a hundred or so on his debit card—about what he could spare that month, he'd worked out the day before, if he didn't go out again before his next paycheck—and then he took the subway home, dully imagining the bowl of ramen awaiting him for dinner. He just wouldn't go back before January's bill hit, he told himself, and would pay it down a little more in November and December, and then hopefully he could convince his parents that the remaining \$700 or so was equivalent to a few months of slightly overindulgent dinners. Even when Jackie intimated, in a series of increasingly coquettish text messages, that another visit to the club would lead to more copious wild lovemaking, he resisted, instead inaugurating the credit card he'd been talked into by his bank's campus rep the year before, and taking her to a swanky bistro between the subway and his office that he'd always thought looked like a good date place. It was, and copious wild lovemaking did follow, and the next week Jackie invited him out again, this time to a lounge in SoHo with some friends of hers, who'd somehow landed the post-college finance jobs that Ian had struck out on. More charged to the credit card.

Meanwhile he was still living on ramen at home, and as soon as his next paycheck came in it went straight out again to rent and utilities and his cell phone bill; a week into November and his groceries were going on the credit card too, along with all the hip things, finally, that he'd fantasized about on moving to the city. Thanks to Jackie he was going to trendy restaurants three nights a week, and plays and concerts and comedy shows on the others, and starting or finishing every evening at cocktail lounges with her finance friends. He was also enjoying all of it less than he would ever have thought possible,

grimly totting up the bills with each new purchase—but the alternative was Columbia house parties, where Sid, though civil enough, inevitably made things uncomfortable whenever Ian and Jackie turned up together.

Eventually, after a rare night at home about a month past his birthday, and a long, dispiriting look at his budget, Ian suggested to Jackie that they spend their next date at his place, home cooking and a movie on the couch. But she dithered—“I don’t know, Ian, that train ride to Astoria is brutal”—and out of desperation, at last, he gave in and invited her back to the club. Even if Henry’s attentive drink-mixing and habit of calling Ian Mr. Silver hadn’t been the aphrodisiac they so clearly were, Ian would have had little choice; after that week’s groceries and cable bill, his MasterCard was at its upper limit and his bank balance at its lower one. The club, quite simply, was the only place he still had credit.

Now he had his tab there to worry about again, of course, and he supposed it wasn’t strictly necessary to pay more for rooms, on the nights when Jackie pooh-poohed the subway ride back to his or hers, whispering in his ear that she wanted him there and then. But compared to his own, dismal bank accounts and the monthly bills piling up on his kitchen table, the club balance began to feel less and less like real money. And if occasionally he thought about it too closely, if the guilt metastasized after a weekend phonecall with his parents—whose retirement funds had now followed Lehman into the gutter—he just retreated further into his comforting rationalization: it was still nearly two months ‘til the next bill arrived. Plenty of time to figure something out.



Jackie was spending Thanksgiving at her family’s holiday house on Long Island, but Ian wasn’t invited and didn’t think he could face his own parents for four days straight, not without his conscience overwhelming him, not when he still didn’t have any plan to pay them back. Instead he told them that Dalton wouldn’t give him Black Friday off, and on Thanksgiving itself he ended up at an orphan’s dinner at Columbia, to which Sid—whose own parents were on a fortieth anniversary cruise—begrudgingly invited him.

The night started out well enough; after so long without seeing each other, and without Jackie around to remind them why, their weeks of silent resent-

ment remained just below the surface, trapped like dark mottles beneath a frozen pond. Sid told Ian about the new research he was doing, into the economies of Armenian communities during the genocide, (“you know it’s bad when even the Holocaust scholars think you’re getting bleak”); Ian told Sid about the weird new case he was working on, a special kind of visa reserved for the victims of violent crime, (“could have taken that *Green Card* movie in a whole different direction, huh?”). But slowly the booze kicked in, and the cracks began to open. “So I hear you’ve been living quite the Capitalist wet dream, lately,” said Sid, brushing a speck of pumpkin pie from his mouth. “You should hear the department gossip about the shit you and Jackie do. Did you really take her to that restaurant in Trump Tower?”

“Only for lunch,” said Ian, quietly, remembering his dull shock as each new thirty-five dollar glass of wine arrived.

“How economical.” Sid laughed. “You’ve heard we’re in a recession, right? Do you know how many people you could feed with what you probably tipped on that meal?”

Ian gave him a sour stare. “Do you know how many people you could feed with what you spend on fucking tuition? *The Modern State in Theory and in Practice* cost more than any meal I’ve ever had—and while you’re dicking around reading Marx every day I’m actually out there working a job that helps real people.”

“Helps real people! Ha!” Sid picked up the chipped I Dig Archaeology mug he’d been drinking from and drained the last of the wine from it. “If you’re so noble how come you charge—what? Two hundred an hour?—to prepare these cases that might not even get them a visa in the end? Or fucking anything, for that matter, other than a giant legal bill?” Ian noticed a few heads begin to turn, the room hushing as Sid went on. “Meanwhile, precisely because people like you sit there working loopholes for a living, it’s impossible for real immigration reform to get any kind of traction. Hey, Paul—top me up, will you?”

“I’m so sorry,” said Ian, as another guy, presumably Paul, began to cross the room with a bottle. “And I suppose your Ph.D. in history is going to magically solve all society’s problems, is it? Have you ever donated to a charity, Sid? Done volunteer work? Or were you planning to change the world with a few scathing term papers and your Tumblr?”

“For your information,” said Paul-with-the-wine, leaning between them,

“we’re all signing up for a letter-writing campaign with Amnesty this month.”

“Of course you are,” said Ian. “And I’m sure Tibet will fucking thank you for it.”

“Jesus,” said Sid.

“Maybe you should leave,” said Paul-with-the-wine.

“Fine,” said Ian, and wobbled to his feet.

Out on the sidewalk, he yelled *fuck!* at the top of his voice, startling a passing dog-walker. He kicked a mailbox, tried calling Jackie but got no answer, tried getting cash for a cab but got declined. As he walked the ten blocks to the subway, it started to snow, and he spent his ride home with the flakes melting in his hair.

The rest of the weekend was no better. Jackie still wasn’t returning his calls, and when finally they met for their pre-arranged dinner at the club on Sunday night, she told him she’d reconnected with some old flame from summer camp while she’d been home, and wanted to give it another chance. Ian stared at her for a second, then told her she was a heartless bitch and walked out, appreciating the convenience of not having to stop and settle up, and went straight home to punch his pillows, trying not to cry.

The next day, desperate to do anything but another lonely ramen, he tried calling Sid, and when he got no answer made a hasty pass at one of the girls at work as she waited for him to finish with the fax machine. (It was not successful.) So the club it was, and Henry’s ministrations, that night and nearly every other night thereafter. He hadn’t paid down the balance at all since that day in October, but the money hardly seemed relevant anymore—he was just relieved to put off going home after work, to its dirty dishes and past due notices and pube-encrusted toilet, and to have some human interaction that wasn’t with his angry boss, or his many baffled clients, or Sid’s and Jackie’s voicemails.

On the last Monday before Christmas, however, he didn’t get as far as Henry or the taproom, because the woman at the front desk flagged him down as soon as he walked in. She said she was very sorry to bother him, but their finance department had asked that someone speak to him about his charges; would he be able to step into the office for a moment? He nodded, numbly, and followed her behind the counter, past another vase of fragrant pink roses and into a small, white-walled room, where the house manager was waiting at a neat desk. Normally they were happy to let balances stand until a bill had been issued, he

explained, but Ian's was unusually high, and as a new member they'd thought it prudent to discuss.

"I see," said Ian. He straightened in his seat. "And what is the balance?"

The house manager turned to his computer and tapped a few keys. "Seven thousand, eight hundred and twelve dollars." He nodded, as if he'd finally solved a difficult equation. "Plus some cents, of course."

Ian felt like his chair was tipping backward, but outwardly he put on his best smile. "I guess I've been going a little overboard, huh?"

The manager smiled back politely.

"Well," said Ian, still beaming, "why don't I make a payment now to keep your finance guys from worrying, and then I'll come back after the holidays to take care of the remainder." He coughed. "I may have to move some money around."

The manager told him that would be much appreciated, though judging by the twitch in his eyebrow he was not even marginally reassured when Ian handed over his credit card and told him to charge \$100—as much as he could safely manage, he figured, without hitting its limit.

After that, he abandoned his planned trip to Henry and took the subway home, staring vacantly at an ad for a dermatology clinic the whole ride, the taste of bile in his mouth. Eight thousand dollars! His hands were shaking as he closed his front door behind him; he nearly called his parents then and there to come clean and beg for help. But at the last minute, phone wedged against his chin, he thought better of it. First he needed some way to temper the news, a better-rehearsed excuse or a plan for paying it back—though, Jesus, he didn't know where he might begin to squeeze any extra money from his monthly budget, because with his credit card's astronomical minimum payments now eating into it he'd already been thinking he might need to ask his parents for a loan anyway. His only hope was that if he told them in person next week, at Christmastime, they couldn't get too mad.



He put off going home as late as possible, booking a train for Christmas Eve, after the office's early close that day—the same day, it turned out, that Darpana's filing fees and photographs finally arrived. He recognized the elegant

cursive handwriting on the envelope as soon as the office manager set it on his desk that morning, and as he shook out its contents it was exactly as he feared: these new pictures showed a more hideous face again, even compared to the more recent one on her employment card. It was still her, certainly—whatever she'd endured had not entirely spoiled that marvellous beauty. There was still some sheen to that scraggly, thinning hair, some scarlet on that sensuous mouth; her sodden eyes had kept something of their mahogany loveliness, and her noble cheekbones had not yet completely disappeared behind her gathering jowls.

Yet still the picture seemed to show another person, somehow, an awful caricature of the woman in the passport. He looked at that original photo again, checked the dates: nine years apart. It didn't seem possible that one person could go through such monstrous change in so little time. He wondered if she had the same thought, too, when she looked in the mirror these days, because surely she could see it herself—surely the depth of her transformation put it beyond denial or oblivion. Ian found himself asking, again, exactly what he'd asked when he first saw her employment card: why carry on? Why keep investing so much time and money to stay in this life that seemed so intent on ruining her?

He would come back to that last question on his train ride home that day, too, and later, once he was sitting in his parents' living room confessing all, his father would ask Ian the same thing about his own, sclerotic descent. He couldn't come up with a good answer for himself, either—just stuttered through his apologies, all careful rehearsal for nought, and promised to do whatever it took to pay them back, which in the end meant moving home the next month and taking a minimum wage contract doing data entry at the TV station, under his father's watchful eye. Gone, like that, was his life in the city; gone, after he'd paid his own credit card every month, was the rest of his paycheck, straight to his parents. And as the months passed and the balances slowly dwindled, Ian would still ask himself that same question: how had he let things get so bad? What had compelled him to keep going, even as the city ruined him?

Sometimes he blamed Jackie; her expensive tastes, after all, had been the catalyst for all his problems. But increasingly that struck him as too facile an explanation, because he could have walked away, could have held out for a girlfriend who didn't care about eating at trendy restaurants and drinking at fancy bars, who didn't care that he lived at the last subway stop in the ass-end of Queens—even supposing she had cared, and Ian hadn't just been projecting

his own hopes and insecurities. No: he'd been to blame, too, had felt something deeper spurring him on, even on those nights when his guilty conscience had been its most acute. Had long ago learned, on some level, that his constant wanting more was perfectly normal. And didn't that explain Darpana, too? Didn't that explain Sid—who helped Ian move but otherwise lost touch—and all those other Ph.D. candidates? They were all enjoined too, unthinkingly, to that life of perpetual aspiration. To some endless checklist of things they didn't have but were positive they needed.

That clarity came to him only years later, though, after he'd finally moved into an apartment of his own again, this time by his own means, in a different Connecticut exurb with a girl he'd met online; on that grey Christmas Eve, scrutinizing Darpana's photographs, all he could think was that she'd be better off if she didn't get her green card—if she had to leave this awful fucking city and awful fucking country behind. So his last act that day, glancing over his shoulder, was to gather her pictures together, and square them in a neat pile, and tear them clean in two—sealing his own fate as surely as he'd sealed hers, a cold knife to the heart.