

# THREE PORTRAITS OF ELAINE SHAPIRO



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## I.

ELAINE SHAPIRO VISITED New York City for the last time when she was twenty-two. She rode in from New Jersey with her boyfriend, Avi, at the wheel to attend the wedding of his cousin, a bronzed blonde with line-thin brows. Elaine had seen pictures of her at the shower: riding horses with her fiancé, sunning herself in a bikini on a cruise, posing with her sorority sisters at a fundraiser. She had just gotten a job in publishing. “Not a job,” Avi had said. “An internship.”

Avi and Elaine were supposed to be married. They had met at a JCC dance, after Avi’s first summer in Israel. Elaine thought he resembled a statue, still and chiseled. After three dates, Avi proposed and she accepted. She waited for him to finish college; she hadn’t gone herself. Instead she had taken jobs—more than one, always, because she had too much energy, her mother said. During the day she worked as a receptionist in a dentist’s office; some

evenings and weekends she worked the Guerlain counter at Bloomingdale's. When Avi took her out—to dances at the JCC or to Asbury Park—he brought her home before twelve. She went to bed wide-eyed and impatient, grateful to have someplace to go the next morning.

In the car on the way into the city, Avi cranked up the heat so her feet wouldn't get cold. The thick glossy cover of the bridal magazine rattled in the breeze from the vent. She turned sideways to face him. At first, she had been intimidated by Avi's steady lack of expression. Over time she grew to appreciate this steadiness of his; she took it as a sign of his seriousness. The world was full of clowns. She didn't want to marry one.

“Avi, don't you think you'd better tell me what kind of wedding you want?”

The expression on Avi's face didn't change. “I don't want a wedding. I just want to be married.”

“But what if you don't like—”

The corner of his mouth flicked upward, ever so slightly, and Elaine's insides fluttered. “Whatever you do,” he said, “I'll like.”

He had recently returned from another summer in Israel and had started working full-time as a civil engineer. According to Elaine's therapist mother, he was experiencing a difficult transition. Elaine agreed: everything that excited her about their new life together—the wedding, buying a house and making it homey—none of it interested Avi. They were supposed to be married in five months and so

far had not made any decisions beyond setting the date.

She tried another tack. “Tomorrow, on our way back, we could look at houses in Teaneck.”

He didn’t take his eyes off the road. “I think I’ll be tired. I have to work Monday.”

Elaine shifted so she could look out the passenger window. The leaves had just begun to turn, and the weather could go any way at any time: snow flurries could catch you without a jacket; Indian summer could roast you out of your boots. She considered what her mother had told her about college—that not going would put her at a disadvantage. She simply wouldn’t have the intellect to keep a college boy interested. “The truth is,” her mother had said, “you have no hobbies except for Avi.” She read the *Times*; she could always talk about current events, new films, books. Her high school friends who had gone to college seemed no more or less interesting than she. Most were planning weddings, if not already married. The jobs they held, Elaine felt, were place holders, something to do until kids came. They met for lunch in the city and discussed china and floor plans, baby names and reception sites. Behind the lipstick smiles and cashmere sweaters of her friends, Elaine couldn’t detect any substance very different from her own.

She was slouching again. Lately she had been catching herself hunched over, her shoulders curving in, pressing the upper half of her torso into her lower half, making it difficult to breathe. Her shallow breathing made her

drowsy, so that she often felt the urge to nap. She sighed.

“Tired?” Avi said.

“Sleepy.” She stretched. She imagined checking into a hotel with Avi, and the image of the next morning’s rumpled bed revived her momentarily. She sat up straighter.

“Why don’t you quit one of your jobs?”

“I like my jobs. I like the people.”

“At the dentist’s office? You like the screaming children?”

“At the perfume counter. I like the men who buy perfume for their wives.”

Avi gave her a small knowing smile. “I take the hint.”

“And I like the women who buy perfume for themselves. They have their own money.”

“That’s why you work two jobs,” Avi teased. “When we get married you have to give all your money to me.”

Elaine shrieked. “I think it’s the other way around.”

“It won’t matter—it’ll be ours.” He glanced at her with one of his serious, unreadable looks and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. She resisted the urge to pull away.

“You can take a nap at Aunt Carol’s before the wedding.”

The image of rumpled white hotel sheets dissolved. “We’re staying there?”

“You are. I’m staying at Tom’s studio in the Village.”

Elaine slumped in her seat and stared at the creased magazine cover. “I thought we would stay at a hotel. Together.”

Avi shook his head. “We’re not married, Laney.”

She didn't say anything until they reached Aunt Carol's in Murray Hill.

THE CEREMONY WAS held in a small art gallery in a brownstone uptown. Elaine never would have imagined such a thing. She squeezed Avi's arm as they stood by their chairs waiting for the bride to make her entrance.

"Let's have our wedding here," she said.

"We can have the reception here," Avi said, "but the ceremony has to be at synagogue."

She surveyed the guests, most of whom appeared to be friends of the bride and groom. The women wore silky dresses in jewel tones, and their manicured toes peeked out from dainty sandals. Without thinking about it, Elaine had put on her usual nude hose. She felt dowdy in her long black skirt and pumps. The older relatives kept to the back of the room, as if they believed it in poor taste to make a show of age. She and Avi had arrived slightly late and had also taken seats at the rear of the small room. Two ushers led a frail stooped man down the aisle. She asked Avi who he was; he hesitated before answering.

"Great Uncle Lawrence. He sings at everyone's wedding."

She had doubts about Uncle Lawrence's ability to sing. Even with assistance, he could barely walk. The two groomsmen led him to a chair behind the bride and groom's spot. Elaine felt someone should call an ambulance.

A swell of music announced the bride's entrance. Elaine

gasped when Avi's cousin stepped into view. She wore a short satin sheath, her legs bare, her tanned skin glowing against the white fabric. As she walked down the aisle, she made eye contact with certain friends and family members, smiling greetings to them. Her groom waited for her, also smiling and clear-eyed. This was not how Elaine had pictured herself walking down the aisle. In her mind, she was all but engulfed by her gown; she could barely make out a trace of her dark hair and pale skin amid the layers of white satin and tulle. Her head seemed bowed under the weight of hat and veil. Some force moved her down the aisle; it wasn't clear in her imagination that she even had legs. She craned her neck and stood on tippy-toes to see the bride's feet, tan and lovely in a pair of delicate high-heeled sandals. Elaine remembered her own legs and felt physical and psychic pain. Who wore No-Nonsense pantyhose? She did, that's who.

When it came time for Uncle Lawrence's part, he swayed slightly in front of his chair. Once he began to sing, his age fell away; if she closed her eyes, she could easily imagine a man of forty or so, old enough to have experienced love, pain, and disappointment, but still vital and strong. She thought she had never heard such a sad and pure voice. When he finished singing, he shrank into himself again and seemed every bit as frail as he had before. The bride and groom sat side-by-side holding hands, glowing like royalty.

Afterwards, she and Avi followed the crowd to the

reception in the building's courtyard. They passed smooth dark sculptures, the forms of which Elaine couldn't identify—a curve here, a spear or pointed tail there—but something about them stirred her. Gas torches were arranged throughout the courtyard, and Elaine and Avi wove through pockets of heat. Elaine held onto Avi's arm and squeezed.

“Why does Uncle Lawrence sound so sad?” she asked. She expected something romantic—a lost love, an unfulfilled passion, a tragic accident.

Avi stared straight ahead. “He ruined his life.”

She knew Avi could be hard on people. “What happened?”

“There's not much to tell. He liked to gamble. His kids won't speak to him. His wife—my mother's aunt—is dead. She was living with us while he hid from the people he owed. Pretty pathetic.”

Avi's mother was talking to Uncle Lawrence now, leaning down to him in his chair, smiling, both of them laughing. He could still laugh. She thought about Uncle Lawrence learning of his wife's death, and her throat tightened. “He'll sing at our wedding. To remind us how lucky we are.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” Avi said.

Elaine wiped her eyes. “Blessed, then.”

“We choose how we live,” Avi said, as he steered her toward their table. “It has nothing to do with luck or blessings.” He pulled out her chair. “Uncle Lawrence

earned his sorrow.”

She sat, stunned by his vehemence. “Does every sad person deserve his sorrow?”

“I don’t know, Elaine—probably.”

She tried to joke. “I’d forgive you, if you lost all our money.”

Avi sat beside her, leaned his forearms on the table. “That won’t happen.”

She knew he was right—nothing like that would ever happen to Avi. He would always be careful never to have regrets. “Mr. Perfect,” she said, meaning to joke, but the last syllable caught.

He looked vaguely embarrassed, possibly apologetic. “I’m an engineer. I’m obligated to be correct.”

“All the time—your whole life?”

He blushed and looked down at the table. “I’m boring, Elaine, what can I say?”

Avi, she knew, would take pains never to hurt her. She slid her hand over his with genuine affection. “Boring? No.” The guests at the next table raised their glasses and Elaine noted their gleaming elegance. She had never felt as young as they looked. She thought the sooner she and Avi were settled, the better.

She excused herself to the bathroom. In the stall, she peeled off her No-Nonsense hose and stuffed them in the trash. “Better,” she sighed. The elastic had left a deep red line around her waist, and she vowed never to wear pantyhose again. On the way back to the table, she took



longer strides. The satin lining of her skirt thrilled her skin. She hoped to get Avi on the dance floor; he was naturally gifted and had been taught to dance, though she couldn't say how much he enjoyed it. Usually he humored her with a waltz or a foxtrot.

He was talking to a couple across the table about IRAs. She waited for a pause in the conversation, when she could insert a joke about the dullness of the topic. She tried to catch the eye of the woman, to exchange an exasperated glance, but she appeared just as engrossed as the men. As guests, Elaine thought they were obligated to have fun at the wedding. She thought it bad luck for the newlyweds if the guests were disagreeable or dry. Of course, Avi didn't believe in luck. She sipped her champagne, and when she finished hers, she drank his.

Avi's friend Tom sat next to her. It occurred to her that she might talk to him. He was interning as a reporter at a paper in Florida—she couldn't remember which. They all had internships, she realized, like grown-ups in training. Tom watched the band and fiddled with a crumpled straw wrapper.

“It must be very interesting, what you do.”

Tom regarded her frankly, as if surprised to hear her speak. “You'd think so,” he said, looking away again. “Turns out I'm a vulture.”

Elaine wasn't sure how to respond, and she was beginning to regret her decision to speak to him.

Tom took another sip of his drink. “What do you ask

a man whose son was just devoured by a wood chipper, or the woman whose daughter was found naked in a dumpster?”

“I never thought about it that way,” she said.

He gave her a wry smile. “Neither had I.”

“Well,” she said, “someone’s got to report on those things, right?”

“Maybe,” he said.

She looked down at her hands. “I don’t actually read those stories. I don’t want to read them.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I feel so much better now.”

She spoke quickly. “It’s just an internship. You could do anything you wanted, I’m sure.”

“I’ll find out, I guess,” he said.

“Your job is the opposite of mine. At the perfume counter, people just tell me things.”

Tom gave her another mild look of surprise. “Like what?”

“For instance, this woman the other day, buying perfume. She was going to pretend a co-worker had given it to her.”

“To make her husband jealous?”

“Exactly. Also, there’s this man who, when he buys perfume for his wife, buys the same for his girlfriend. So he smells the same no matter who he’s with.”

Tom smiled. “He told you this?”

“No, I guessed.” She finished Avi’s champagne. “Don’t you just know things sometimes?”

He sat back in his chair. “What do you know about me?”

She crossed her legs and leaned closer to him, as if to tell

a secret. “You’re different from them,” she said, gesturing to their tablemates.

“That’s true. I’m not Jewish.”

“Not like that.” She was a little embarrassed now, and she didn’t know how he would respond to what she had to say.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll tell Avi you’re a shameless flirt.”

“He won’t believe you.” In fact, she had no idea what Avi thought about her. How would he describe her? Serious? Pretty? Smart enough? She felt suddenly defensive and delivered her judgment of Tom more passionately than she’d intended. “I bet that none of the people at this table would admit they’d made a mistake about their careers. That’s how you’re different. You have guts.”

Tom smiled a little and rattled the ice in his glass. “We’ll see. Drink?”

She didn’t bother alerting Avi, who was now engaged with the couple beside him. Tom placed his hand at the small of her back and guided her to the bar. Avi never touched her this way, and she found this careless gesture of Tom’s more exciting than Avi’s goodnight kisses. At the bar, Tom surveyed the crowd while they waited for their drinks. “So, what do you think of the happy couple? Think they’ll make it?”

“No wonder people don’t want to talk to you. You’re awfully blunt.”

Tom laughed. “You like the direct approach, I can tell.”

This was the first time she thought he might be drunk.

She stared at the newlyweds: the bride in her cocktail dress, the groom in his Brooks Brothers suit. She guessed they would honeymoon in Jamaica and live on Long Island.

“They seem right for each other.”

He nodded. “Tactful. Very tactful.”

“What about you? Will they live happily ever after?”

“Yes. But she’ll have an affair.”

She slapped his arm. “That’s not very nice.”

“It’ll be a wake-up call for him. He’ll ignore her and get too involved in his work. She’ll feel lonely and neglected.”

Their drinks came. Tom placed his hand on her back and she shivered. “She’ll have an affair and get caught—on purpose.”

“He’ll divorce her,” she said, watching Avi, who leaned back in his chair and appeared to sigh. She wondered what he was so impatient to do.

“He’ll beg forgiveness and commit himself to a period of unseemly devotion,” Tom said.

“What!” She dragged her gaze back to Tom. “Why?”

He slid his hand to her shoulder and squeezed. “You are so lovely and naïve,” he murmured. “Avi’s a lucky bastard.”

Elaine blushed.

“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s dance.”

The reception ended too soon. Elaine and Tom were left panting and sweating in the middle of the courtyard. The last song had been “Shout” and Tom had gotten down on his back and Elaine had stood over him, resting her foot on his chest as if to hold him there. When he rose, the gray

silhouette of her shoe showed on his white shirt-front. He said exactly what she was thinking.

“We’re not finished dancing.”

He swept her back to the table where Avi was shrugging into his jacket. He gave every appearance of wanting to call it a night.

“Have fun?” he asked Elaine.

“Lots. I missed you on the dance floor.”

“No, she didn’t,” Tom said to Avi. He turned to Elaine and she marveled at how green his eyes were, now that their rims were so red. “You shouldn’t lie to him.”

Avi smiled a little but Elaine blushed.

Tom talked Avi into going to a jazz club in the Village. Elaine clomped along in her heels, hanging on Tom’s big arm. He was meatier than Avi, and seemed made for holding on to. Avi was more like smoke, Elaine thought. You could sense his presence, but you could never be sure just how much of him was really there. He walked slightly apart from them, his hands in his pockets. He answered questions when asked, and talked to Tom, but Elaine found him curiously unresponsive to her. Tom, on the other hand, encouraged her every conversational whim. They talked easily about nothing much. During the first lull in conversation, Tom put his arm around Elaine and drew her close to his side.

“Avi, I have a confession to make.”

Elaine shivered, the coolness of the night finally penetrating.

Avi turned toward them. She wondered what he thought of Tom's handling of her. She wished some of his manner would rub off on Avi. "Oh?" Avi said. "What's that?"

"It's a two-part confession." He looked at Elaine and pulled her closer with every word, so that her feet barely skimmed the sidewalk. "One, I adore your bride."

Avi murmured, "Oh, you do, do you?" She thought he sounded slightly sinister, and she understood Tom's compliment was for Avi, not for her.

"Two: your bride has inspired me to make good on my threat to join the Peace Corps. I'm going to Africa."

Avi's amusement evaporated, and he gave Tom a look—stern and disapproving—that she recognized and dreaded. Despite his disapproval, she couldn't help exclaiming over the news. "What will you do there?"

"Teach, observe, write. After two years, I should have enough material for a book. If I don't, well, I could have done worse things with my life."

Avi shook his head. "Better to get it out of your system now, before you start a family."

Tom laughed. Elaine said, "You talk like it's a disease. It sounds exciting."

"Romantic notions are a disease," Avi said.

Elaine looked at Tom pleadingly.

"Don't you know who you're marrying?" Tom said. "This is classic Avi." It seemed funny to her in the moment, and she and Tom laughed.

At the entrance to the club, Avi held the door open

for them. The place was full and Elaine had to squeeze between two tables to take her seat on the banquette. An older man sat very near to her. Tom had to pull the table out so he could squeeze beside her.

“I hope you don’t mind, Avi, but you’ll have her the rest of your life, right?”

“Right,” Avi said.

Two bourbon and cokes arrived for Elaine, who was already drunk. “What’s this?”

“It’s called a double,” Tom said. “Cheers.”

Avi watched the band. Elaine drank her first cocktail quickly, to get rid of it. She was sipping her second when she started to feel not well. As she made her way to the bathroom, the floor buckled in jagged hunks, rising and falling beneath her feet. The bathroom wobbled and heaved. She stood at the sink gripping its cool sides, hoping to vomit. Her eyes watered, and her belches echoed off the tiles. Feeling no better, she lurched back to the table, keeping her eyes on the violently shifting floor. Tom wouldn’t let her sit. He tried to dance with her, but she bounced off his chest like a doll. By the time he led her back to their seats, most of her vision had blackened, save for small portholes of wavering amber. When she squeezed between the two tables, her legs became liquid rushing to the floor, and she collapsed into the lap of the elderly man next to them, bracing herself on his crotch. Startled, he jumped, and Elaine slid between his legs to the floor beneath the table.

For a moment, she rested her cheek against the cool pedestal of the table. If she could just rest and breathe some cool air. Tom flipped the tablecloth up and beckoned, "Come. This way." She crawled out, and once Tom had lifted her to her feet, she marched stiff-legged to the door. Avi was already hailing a cab. She had hit her head and scraped her arm, and now she clutched herself in a shamed embrace on the sidewalk. "Ow, ow, ow," she said.

Tom came out with their coats over his arm. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I scraped my arm. I feel sick."

She threw up twice out the window of the cab on the way to Aunt Carol's. Tom spoke loudly and continuously to the driver, to cover the sound of her retching. When they arrived at Aunt Carol's brownstone, Avi held her elbow and led her upstairs. Sick and humiliated, she pulled away and wobbled ahead of him. In the bedroom, half undressed, she turned to look at her arm where Avi had held her. No trace of him.

She awoke in the morning with what felt like a mortal head wound. She heard, as if from a great depth, Aunt Carol say, "She's still sleeping." Later, she woke to pounding on the door. The pounding wouldn't stop. Aunt Carol, apparently, was out. Elaine wove through the rooms toward the sound, bumping into doorframes and occasional tables, upsetting photographs and rattling candy dishes. She answered the door wearing only her slip. It was Tom, and he held her purse.



“You left it at the club. I’m not sure if anything’s missing. I didn’t want to look.”

Heat rose to her cheeks. She took her purse and waved him in. He stepped into the small warm kitchen, his hands shoved into his pockets. She smelled alcohol and hoped the smell wasn’t coming from her.

“Avi noticed so we went back. The old guy you fell on must have turned it in to the bartender.”

Elaine looked inside. Everything was there, but her wallet had been emptied of cash.

“Where’s Avi?” She imagined him waiting in the car outside. Would he be blank-faced or disapproving? Her mouth felt suddenly juicy.

Tom looked pained. “He went back to Jersey. He asked me to put you on a train. He said to call when you get to the station.”

Now her eyes stung and she looked down into her purse again. Tom would have to give her money for the train and for the phone, too. Why couldn’t Avi have waited—or at least left her money for the train? She clicked her purse shut. “I’m not going.”

Tom nodded, as if that were the only thing to do—the thing he could have predicted and in fact wanted her to do. He waited while she showered and dressed, brought her a glass of ginger ale after a fit of vomiting. When they said good-bye, he kissed her cheek. “Good luck in Africa,” she said, “and with your book.” Her engagement to Avi already felt like a mostly forgotten dream.

With the money she had been saving for the wedding, she sublet Tom's studio in the Village, on West 11th. At first her mother had been pleased about her change of plans. She thought Avi too old-fashioned, too conservative, too Jewish. When she finally understood Elaine's plans—that they didn't include college—she became disturbed once again. Elaine found it easy to ignore her mother's misgivings.

## II.

NINE YEARS AFTER she had moved to the Village, she was robbed on a Saturday in early June. She woke slowly that morning, sipping her coffee on the balcony. Her legs were bare and she wore nothing but a large white button-down and panties. A beer truck pulled up to the liquor store across the street and a man unloaded cases onto a hand truck. This was her Saturday routine: a date with the beer man. She liked to air-dry her hair, it was too hot for much clothing, and the skirts girls wore were shorter than her shirt. The beer man didn't seem to mind.

She'd been blond now for five years. She'd grown her hair out and bleached it, her eyebrows too. Sometimes she tanned.

"Blondie," the man called. "You got a sandwich for me?"

"I'll give you a sandwich."

"I'll get in trouble with my wife."

"Just for a sandwich?"

“See you next week.” He got in his truck and drove away.

She did laundry that morning. After putting on a pair of jeans, she got her basket and detergent and set out for the laundry room. She thought about keys, but her jeans were too tight and she was afraid she'd lose them, so she left the door unlocked. When she came back to her apartment, she sat at the table and called her mother. Mrs. Shapiro was dating someone new, and Elaine enjoyed calling weekend mornings to talk to Ernie while he made breakfast for her mother.

“Ma, put Ernie on.”

Her mother sighed. “Ernie, it's your girlfriend.”

Ernie said, “Alice, I tell her it's over. She keeps calling. I don't know why.”

“Listen, Ernie, I need a favor,” Elaine said.

Ernie wheezed into the phone. “Anything, doll.”

Elaine liked asking her mother's boyfriends for favors. She had never been resentful of her mother's dating; in fact, she had always considered her mother's beau's potential resources for all sorts of things. The trick was figuring out what they were good for and asking for the right favor. Most were grateful for the interest, and Elaine discovered they liked doing favors and being appreciated. She never thought much about what she brought to the table, other than gratitude. She hit Ernie up for a workshop on networking for the young professionals of the JCC. He was flattered and agreed.

Her mother got on the phone. Elaine worried vaguely about her laundry. A peach silk camisole had disappeared recently when she'd forgotten her clothes overnight. "Hi, Mommy. What's up?"

"Are you nervous about your big night?"

Elaine answered firmly. "It'll run itself. And Daniel will be there for moral support."

She could almost hear her mother's tight-lipped frown. "There's someone I want you to meet—a dermatologist, just your age and so handsome! He knows about art, too—he's not just some, you know, stethoscope."

Elaine closed her eyes. "Daniel will be there, Mom."

"What—you can't meet someone? Is Daniel that insecure? Sometimes young men are, you know."

The eggs and butter in her mother's kitchen sizzled over the line.

"Mommy, I love you, but I have to check my laundry."

She raced down to the basement to move her clothes to the dryer, again leaving the door unlocked. When she returned she called Daniel, who worked at the JCC with her. They talked for sixty minutes, flirting and making plans to meet that night before the fundraiser. Daniel had been waging an elaborate campaign to persuade Elaine to six months in the Catskills at his uncle's cabin. He had received a grant to pursue a new photography project.

"Remind me," Elaine said, "what I would be doing in the Catskills for six months."

On the other end of the line, Daniel inhaled sharply.

There was a long pause before he spoke. “Nature,” he said. “You’d be part of nature.” He exhaled.

“We went camping once, with some neighbors. Nightmare! Burrs in my socks, ticks in every crevice.”

Daniel moaned drowsily. “I will personally—”

He inhaled again.

“Yes?”

“—attend to—”

“Uh-huh—”

“—every inch,” he exhaled, “of Elaine Shapiro. No terrain unexplored. Meticulous mapping. Don’t. You. Worry.”

Elaine giggled madly. “I’ll visit weekends. You’ll have to do all the map-making then.”

“You’ll try to leave,” Daniel said, “but you will stay, stay, stay.”

After their good-byes, feeling sultry, Elaine rescued her over-heated laundry from the dryer.

That evening, she shimmied into a bronze satin slip dress and matching sandals. She opened her vanity to find her pearl earrings missing. The gold bracelet Avi had given her long ago was also gone. After rummaging through all the drawers, she straightened up and looked around the room. The little box of change and stamps on the shelf had been opened—the lid was off, the change gone. The box of photographs and old cards that she kept on the coffee table had also been opened. Nothing seemed missing aside from the change and her jewelry. She realized someone

must have come into the apartment while she had been in the basement doing her laundry. The main entrance to the building could only be opened with a key, and she wondered which of her neighbors could have been in her apartment. She imagined Mrs. Otseke in her flowery kimono opening the fridge to examine the leftovers and Mr. Safransky mashing the white bathmat in his street shoes. Maybe the guest of another tenant had robbed her—the stringy-haired saxophone player hosted a stream of giggling musicians, and the librarian was putting up his teen-aged sister whom Elaine thought of as “Cornfield,” because she was from Ohio, even though she had been introduced to the girl at least twice. She imagined the raven-haired girl, watchful, waiting for her moment, slipping in and rustling through Elaine’s things. Elaine stepped into the hallway and peered down both ends, gazing at each green door as if she could note a sign of guilt or spy her missing items through the door. She didn’t bother calling the police.

Daniel arrived, as always, with a camera.

“This is a Brownie,” he told Elaine, holding up the small box camera. He snapped her picture after she’d turned away from locking the door—which she made a show of doing, noisily rattling her keys and throwing all the bolts. She felt stupid about the loss of her jewelry—it was her fault for leaving the door unlocked—and she didn’t feel like mentioning it. She was afraid she might cry if he showed sympathy, and she felt bereft enough as it was. She wore her everyday earrings—gold filigree studs that her

mother had given her for her sixteenth birthday.

“You have enough pictures of me. Let me take yours.”

Daniel handed over the odd box of a camera.

“Turn sideways.”

She looked through the viewfinder and marveled at his unlined skin, his fine nose and hazel eyes. She, Elaine Shapiro, was dating a god—a god who lusted for her. She snapped the picture. They kissed long and hard, Elaine pressing Daniel into Mrs. Otseke’s door.

On the way to the train, she held onto Daniel’s forearm, kneading it. “Tell me more about the Catskills,” she said, tossing her hair.

Daniel glanced at her. “Wait—you’re actually considering?”

“Were you not serious about the invitation?”

He stopped in front of her, held both of her hands. “I’m completely serious. Take a leave of absence—that’s what I’m doing.” He paused. “This could be a trial run for us.”

Elaine’s heart lurched and she felt her eyes widen. “Or not,” Daniel said.

“Ha,” she said. “You can’t have it both ways.”

They started walking again. “Why can it only be two ways?” he said.

“Because,” Elaine said, “I only went to high school. They only teach two ways.”

“My god, my parents would probably pay you to go back to school, they love you so much.”

“They love the idea of me,” Elaine said. “Your father

does, anyway. Well, maybe your mother.”

She thought of playing cards with Daniel’s mother, how they’d gotten drunk and Mrs. Eisenman had shown her the gowns she’d worn to yesterday’s formals, insisting that Elaine model them. She had beamed—warm nostalgia!—and Elaine had cooked up an idea for a fundraiser on the spot: for the ladies of the JCC to pay to see their idealized pasts floating down the runway toward them. Now, she entertained the possibility once again of being taken care of; she liked the idea of being rich in resources—Mr. and Mrs. Eisenman, Daniel’s uncle, people who enjoyed the idea of a young couple’s potential. She imagined waking up to Daniel gathering his cameras and preparing for the day. She could keep working part-time, cook meals for them, make a home, find clever ways to throw dinner parties on a budget, something she was already good at, on a much larger scale—with other people’s money. They would vacation in the off-season, at other people’s cottages. Or maybe she would become someone entirely new, a person she could not now imagine. College. The Catskills, spring and summer. Why say no?

She matched Daniel’s long stride, her heart pounding. “What do you see in the forest?”

“Trees, mostly,” he said. He stopped again and faced her. “You can do whatever you want. Come and go as you please. Okay?”

She nodded and they walked again, Elaine pressing to keep up with him. She was beginning to feel harried



by the pace, so she tried to focus on the people passing by, tried to see inside them for some clue: Whimsical or serious? Depressed or fulfilled? Grateful or bitter? Steadfast or uncertain? Finally, she stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “You’re running me off my feet here.”

Daniel whirled around to retrieve her. “Hiking boots,” he said.

A woman passing by smiled at them. Elaine wondered what she saw.

At the dinner dance, Daniel moved among the crowd snapping pictures for future brochures and fund-raising campaigns. Elaine liked this arrangement; she could mingle without having to worry about entertaining him, but he was there and he was hers. As she talked to the partygoers, she found herself distracted by the women’s jewelry. She felt a pang every time she saw a pair of earrings like her stolen pair, or even very unlike them. The bracelet she had felt guilty about keeping, but her mother had assured her that returning it to Avi would seem strange and spiteful. If this were some kind of karmic pay-back, well then, time to move on, but every woman outfitted in pearls or diamonds or weighted down with gold had a man nearby, and each one held on to the arm of her man like an anchor. Elaine, in her slip of a dress and her miniscule earrings, felt in danger of floating away.

She shook away the feeling and turned to find Daniel. She scanned the room and saw again the many women in their dark gowns, glimmering in the low light. Faint panic

fluttered against her ribs as she slowly turned. Scanning the room again she saw him behind the serving table, squatting amid the black-clad legs of the caterers, photographing the milk crates filled with dirty plates, cups, and utensils.

At this moment, her mother swept into the room, leading a tuxedo-clad Ernie by the hand. At fifty-five, Mrs. Shapiro had what Elaine liked to consider substance. It wasn't entirely looks; it had something to do with presence and the way her mother carried herself. Elaine could never carry off the things her mother wore. The cappuccino-colored gown this evening, for instance, with the matching stole. On her mother the gown was regal; in it, Elaine would have looked like a girl playing dress-up. Mrs. Shapiro spotted her and glided over with Ernie. They kissed each other in greeting, and her mother frowned.

"You look flushed. What's wrong?"

Ernie went to get drinks and Mrs. Shapiro dabbed at Elaine's forehead with a tissue. Maybe her mother would decide not to introduce her to the doctor if she were sweating too much. She considered telling her mother about the robbery, and in fact, she wanted to, but she knew her mother would worry about her safety and might even insist that Elaine come live with her in Chatham. Elaine feared she might agree.

"I'm fine." She took her mother's hand and squeezed. "Now, where's this art-loving doctor?"

Mrs. Shapiro led Elaine across the dance floor to meet Paul, the dermatologist. Ernie sailed toward them with

their drinks on a tray commandeered from one of the staff. After the introductions and preliminary chit-chat, he and Mrs. Shapiro excused themselves. Elaine liked Paul's dark looks, and she liked his cool light fingers in her hand when they were introduced. They talked about their jobs and while they talked, Elaine imagined his enormous loft apartment, how dim and expensive it would be. She saw herself sitting on a butter-soft leather sofa, tastefully dressed and flipping through a magazine. She wanted to say, "I'm sure you're very nice," but she didn't know how to finish the thought.

"You're really very lovely," he said. Elaine gave him a sharp look. She agreed to meet him for drinks the following Tuesday. On the one hand, what was the harm? On the other, what was the point? After they parted company, she eyed the people around her. As she had predicted, the party ran itself. People showed up, the caterers served food and the guests ate, drank, talked, and laughed. Daniel had switched cameras and used the telephoto lens to snap pictures of the party guests. His blue sharkskin suit glimmered. Two women in black cocktail dresses watched him from the edge of the room. The women exchanged glances, then burst out laughing. Elaine wanted to throw her soda water in their faces, though she knew that their laughter could have been innocent. She made her rounds, checking that the food stations were stocked and the tables reasonably cleared. Along the way, she chatted with guests and discussed plans for renovation of the community

center and the new art classes being offered in the fall.

Paul interrupted her rounds and asked her to dance. “Nice party,” he said. “I’m impressed.”

Elaine shrugged off the compliment, though she was pleased. “Once you’ve thrown one party for 200, you’ve done it.”

“But you’re so young.”

Elaine laughed. “We’re the same age. What did my mother tell you?”

“She was completely discreet,” he said. “She’s very proud of you.”

“That’s generous of you,” Elaine said. “And I’m really sorry.”

“I’m not,” he said.

She preferred to let a good dancer lead, and Paul could dance—nothing flashy, but he knew what he was doing, and he wasn’t timid about holding her. When she complimented him, he insisted that she was the good dancer.

“I don’t want to fight about it,” she said. He pulled her closer.

The same two women who had been watching Daniel now watched her. Elaine squinted at them. When the song finished and Paul escorted her off the dance floor, she made a point of talking to them.

“I hope you’re enjoying the party.”

The tall one regarded her frankly. “Not as much as you are, kid. Two men. I should be so lucky.”

The plump one arched her brow. “Who wants trouble? I can’t keep up.” The women scanned the crowd behind her. Elaine knew these women were her age—it was true they both had families and households to run, as she had once planned, if not with Avi then around him. Somehow they thought themselves much older. She thought this a fault of theirs and not a result necessarily of being married and having children. Look at her mother, after all: wasn’t she still vital and gorgeous?

She took up the hand of the tall woman, whose features were very sharp. “Let me read your palm. I’m practicing for the next fundraiser—it’s a carnival.” The woman’s hand felt heavy with rings and bracelets. She tapped the woman’s palm. “Here—the love line. You’re going to meet someone who will change your life forever.”

The woman turned to her companion. “She must be talking about Mike’s mistress.” The two of them laughed so sharply that Elaine flinched. They picked their way through the crowd, settling in another corner from which they could eye the scene without being disturbed. Elaine continued to circulate through the party, and the women’s laughter seemed to follow her. She became more and more animated, told louder, funnier stories, flirted with everyone, male and female. She plastered a smile on her face, helped people on with their coats, and made appointments for coffee, lunch, planning.

After the last patrons had slipped into cabs, Mrs. Shapiro invited Elaine and Daniel out for breakfast before heading

home. Elaine and her mother walked arm in arm while Daniel walked backwards in front of them, taking pictures. Ernie had gone ahead for the car. Elaine's feet felt bruised, and her face ached from smiling. "It's late, Mommy. Don't you need to get home to the suburbs?"

"I like to spend time with you kids. You make me feel young."

"I feel like Methuselah."

"Which is why," Daniel said, "you need to come to the Catskills with me. Tell her, Alice."

To Daniel, Mrs. Shapiro said, "I believe in the restorative powers of a change of scenery."

Daniel smiled at Elaine as if to say, See?

At Lox Around the Clock, all of the things Daniel did when they were alone together made her wince in public. The way he sang to himself, the way he couldn't stop fiddling with his cameras: Elaine said silent prayers that he would be still for just a moment. Ernie was visibly distressed. He looked around the diner, trying to focus his attention away from the table, while Mrs. Shapiro kept up a veiled conversation about Paul the dermatologist.

"Paul was telling me about real estate in Montana. Wonderful place for a second home."

"Are you thinking of buying there?" Elaine asked.

Mrs. Shapiro shrugged elaborately. "Who knows? We could end up anywhere. We all could." She settled her gaze on Daniel who was tying a straw wrapper in a knot.

"Alice," Daniel said, "maybe you could provide some

insight.”

Elaine turned to face Daniel. His eyes were red-rimmed. When had he? In the bathroom at the party probably, and her annoyance, an ever-renewable source, flared.

Mrs. Shapiro folded her hands in front of her on the table. “I’m always happy to help.”

Elaine could have supplied her mother’s thoughts: I’m always happy to help an inappropriate young man pack his bags. She leaned back against the booth to watch the scene play out.

“How can I get your daughter to come away with me to the Catskills?”

Mrs. Shapiro turned her gaze to Elaine, who thought her mother was doing a passable job of suppressing a great deal of mirthful malevolence. “Well,” she said. “What would she do for six months in the country?”

“That’s exactly what she said.” Daniel nudged Elaine. “Like mother like daughter. I’m beginning to think I should disinvite you. No offense,” he said to Alice.

Elaine’s mother continued to smile serenely at Daniel. “We’re long past the days of girls following boys wherever they may go,” she said.

“Women,” Daniel said. “We call them women now.”

“See!” Mrs. Shapiro exclaimed.

By the time the food came, Elaine was exhausted and cranky. Beside her, Daniel jiggled his leg in time to the 1950s rock and roll on the juke box. She placed her hand on his upper thigh and stroked, lazily, lightly, as if a pleasant

afterthought; this kept him still for the rest of the meal, and they ate in relative peace.

He hung on her all the way from Lincoln Center. They stood in the middle of the subway car, Elaine holding on to a pole, Daniel holding on to Elaine. He ran his hands all over her, sliding the satiny fabric of her dress as he fondled her belly and the underside of her breasts. Every once in a while he'd press into her and she'd feel him against her, hard.

Back at her apartment, he sat naked on the ottoman; Elaine, who had forgotten his annoying habits, straddled him. He held her tight against his hairless body, so tight that she could barely move. At first this excited her. After a time she found she couldn't get a breath of air that hadn't just been exhaled by Daniel. The more she tried to pull away or change position, the more closely he held her. Finally, she couldn't take a breath, or at least she thought she couldn't breathe; later he told her that was impossible—he couldn't have been holding her that tight. But she had passed out—right in the middle of things.

### III.

AT FORTY-TWO, she still felt like a girl. When she walked home from the subway, she felt the energy of the city. It shot up her legs, suffusing her muscles, sending tingling waves through her torso. The energy of the city crackled through her and out of her—through her smile, through



the spark in her eyes.

She had settled into a routine: weekdays fundraising for WNYC and weekends at Hudson Flowers at the corner of Hudson and W. 11th. She had been dating comfortably, for three years, a married man named Joe, with whom she worked at WNYC. She had moved into a larger apartment on Thompson Street. Her balcony, on the third floor, faced a jazz club and sometimes at night she stood outside in her silk robe with a glass of white wine and watched the musicians load in. Weekends, she often had brunch at the Hudson Café, across the street from the flower shop.

This morning, she could not get past the picture of the Kennedy wedding in the *Times*. It was the ten-year anniversary of the crash, so all the papers were running pictures of the couple. She sat at the café sipping coffee before opening the shop. Rain dripped from the vinyl awning and blew underneath, spattering the paper. She drummed her fingers on the table. The two were framed by the doorway of the small church on Cumberland Island where they had been married. They were so young and so impossibly well groomed. What had her mother said? “A well-bred couple.” She shifted her gaze to the cuffs of her black jeans, which were starting to fray. Then she looked at the picture again. “Such fluid grace! Such simplicity!” Her mother had practically broken into song. Elaine rolled her eyes and folded the paper. She and Joe would go out tonight—an oddity. Normally she had him during the week and his family got him on the weekends. This

was a special exception—their three-year anniversary. She had splurged and bought a new dress—a new old dress at a vintage shop in the Village. It was sleek and black and reminded her of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

She paid her check and made her way across the street to the shop. One of the owners might stop by for a few hours on either day, but for the rest of the time she worked alone. She enjoyed the quiet closeness of the shop. It was small and subterranean, with steps leading down to the entrance. She unlocked the iron gate and then the door. During nicer weather, she set buckets of flowers out on the walk. Mostly she stayed indoors and drank coffee, opened her mail, caught up on her correspondence and phone calls, and paid bills. Occasionally, she made up bouquets and wrapped them in lavender tissue paper for customers. Joe sometimes came to visit her with breakfast or lunch, but not so often since he had moved his family to Summit.

Before she left the flower shop Saturdays, she made up a bouquet for herself, which she never paid for. At first she used the slightly old flowers, the ones no one would buy. After a short while she felt no compunction about using the freshest flowers for her own bouquets: sweet pea, oriental lilies, lily of the valley, Johnny jump-ups, Gerbera daisy, Bird of Paradise. Hal, one of the owners, had taught her how to open the Bird of Paradise, to slit the green sheath with a knife and pull out the orange and purple blossoms within. She had thought, like most, that the flowers burst out on their own, in their own time. Actually,

they had to be coaxed. If left to their devices, the flowers would burst forth at the last possible moment; they would start to fade immediately. She took great pleasure in her bouquets; she felt rich and extravagant having fresh flowers in her apartment every week. She never took carnations. They depressed her. Too common.

This particular Saturday she was somewhat disturbed, though she was more interested in elevating her mood than determining what bothered her. The air smelled somewhat fresher than usual. It had been a moist spring and now the humidity of summer crept in, weighing down the air, until in late July to go outside would feel like being wrapped from head to foot in a wet wool blanket. For now, though, the air was still fresh, and she wished she were meeting Joe for champagne breakfast at Hudson Café—or anywhere. Yes, why not someplace different? She sighed harshly as she bent to lift a bucket of miniature pink carnations. She felt tired—a little draggy—and her knees ached, though she couldn't say why. She had the usual bills to pay and mail to sort, which she saved all week for this mostly idle time. Today she was particularly grateful for the quiet.

She was facing two neat stacks of bills and catalogs, when the bell over the shop door rang. She looked up to see a young couple enter. The woman was blonde and athletic looking—no make-up, but bright skin and light eyes. They held hands as they came down the shop steps, both of them giggling and flushed as they fit themselves through the narrow passage side by side. The young man

smoothed his dark hair from his forehead.

“We need some flowers,” he said, “for a wedding.”

She smiled at them, though she felt a persistent tug somewhere behind her eyes.

“When’s the date?”

The blonde looked up at the young man. “Today,” she said. “In a few minutes.”

Elaine looked at the young man for confirmation. He raised his eyebrows at her. “We’re tying the knot and hitting the trail.”

The girl laughed. “Then we’ll speak to each other in clichés for the rest of our lives.”

Elaine noted that they both wore backpacks—how could she have missed that? She fixed a boutonniere of sweet pea for the groom and a small bouquet of sweet pea and Gerbera daisies for the bride. The girl excused herself to use the bathroom, and Elaine asked the groom about the honeymoon. They were hiking the Appalachian Trail, which would take a good six months, the young man told her. After that, they were moving to Africa. “I never would have thought of such a thing,” she admitted. She pinned the boutonniere to the man’s backpack strap. “Nice touch,” he said. She looked into his face and thought he looked vaguely underdone—a cake pulled from the oven too soon—and she had to laugh at herself.

The girl, meanwhile, seemed to be having difficulties in the bathroom. Elaine thought she might have forgotten to replace the paper, so she went to check. She knocked on

the door just as the girl opened it. The girl flashed a big smile.

“Hey,” she said. “Had to shoot up for the big day.”

Elaine gave her a quizzical look.

“I’m diabetic,” the girl said.

Elaine imagined the trail littered with hypodermics. She thought it must be juvenile diabetes, and she wondered how it would affect the girl’s life; she’d heard that they couldn’t have children. She had never seen a person look so young and healthy. She watched as they fit themselves through the narrow stairwell to the door, their packs bumping against each other.

THAT NIGHT, DINNER took close to three hours: raw oysters, champagne, spring pea soup, beef Wellington, fruit, cheese, more champagne, and chocolate soufflé. They went dancing afterwards, though both of them were so full and drowsy they didn’t last long. Elaine shivered in her sleeveless gown and Joe draped his jacket over her shoulders. She tilted her head so she could smell his cologne. Elaine loved Joe’s clothes. They smelled expensive. She clasped his hand as they walked and rested her head for a moment on his big arm. When she straightened herself up again, he was looking at her strangely, she thought, as if he’d realized she was much drunker than he was.

They took a carriage to the Plaza. Elaine wanted to order room service. She wanted to use the giant tub and

rub her face in all the towels.

“Tomorrow,” Joe said.

“You have to go home tomorrow,” she said.

So they ordered more champagne. They crammed themselves into the tub, which wasn't as big as it had appeared. While lolling there, Elaine started to speak several times but stopped. Joe didn't speak either. Normally they chatted about people at work, or Elaine reported details from the fund-raising parties she'd been to. Generally they laughed and made fun. Tonight, though, Elaine felt they should talk of weightier matters, it being their anniversary. She felt dull and heavy from all the food and champagne. She set her glass down on the tile floor. “I'm going to get my hair wet.” She slid down until her head was covered. Joe shifted while she was underwater and for a panicky second she thought he might try to hold her there. But then he shifted again and she realized he was probably uncomfortable. She raised herself up and smoothed her wet hair away from her face. Joe was getting out of the tub.

“Where are you going?”

“Out. I'm pruning.” He wrapped a thick white towel around his waist.

The water felt suddenly too warm. Elaine leaned back against the cool porcelain. Joe sat on the edge of the tub and she noted for the first time the few white hairs that had crept into his moustache. “Well,” he said. “Enjoying your anniversary?”

She smiled at him and nodded. “You?”

He palmed her cheek. “Come out of the water. You’re falling asleep.”

When she came out of the bathroom, the room was dark. She tip-toed around the bed, felt for her side as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. “Joe?” His breathing was slow. She could just make out the lump of him. Naked, she sat on the edge of the bed. The sheets felt cool. She slid under the covers, rested her head on the pillow, then jerked upright. Something cold and hard was on her pillow. She turned on the bedside lamp. A necklace of ivory-colored pearls with a diamond clasp snaked across her pillow. She put it around her neck—a choker—and curled into Joe’s warm body.

The next morning they awoke hung-over, tired, and cranky. Elaine wore her new necklace with a wrap dress she had bought at a consignment shop. She appraised her reflection in the mirror, and touched her fingers to the pearls. Before she could stop herself, she squinted. The pearls felt heavy against her collarbone. Behind her, Joe pushed his hairy belly against her back. “Move it, lady. It’s my turn in here.”

She thought of the young couple hiking the Appalachian Trail. They probably wore only simple wedding bands as they slipped through the woods. She turned away from the mirror, patting Joe’s hairy gut.

“You’re very hairy, and I’m afraid I have to leave you.”

“Don’t let the door hit you—”

“We’re not married—you can’t speak to me in clichés.”

She peered over her shoulder at herself in the mirror. “Is it appropriate to wear a pearl choker during the daytime?”

“Pearls are for any time, pearls are for always. You go to the bathroom in them. You get married in them. You visit your coke dealer in them.”

“But a choker? I know preps wear pearls 24/7, but a choker is so . . .”

“Slutty?”

“That’s not the word I was looking for. When you wear a choker, it’s like you have something to prove.”

Joe combed his hair in the mirror. “Are you trying to tell me you don’t want the necklace? Don’t wear it if you don’t want it, but I won’t take it back.”

Elaine folded her arms over her chest. “Maybe I’d prefer something else.”

Joe combed his mustache. He replied without moving his upper lip. “Prefer all you want.”

Elaine laughed loudly. “You are such an asshole.”

“You’ve been talking to Marianne.”

She hugged him and pressed her cheek into his furry shoulder. “I don’t need to compare notes with your wife. You were a lousy date last night.”

He stopped combing. “I know.”

She patted his shoulder, and gave him a soft kiss on the lips. “Bye-bye,” she said.

In the elevator, she caught sight of her reflection in the polished metal of the closed doors. The plunging neckline of the dark purple sundress contrasted nicely with her pale



skin. The India-print fabric was so light she imagined that if a breeze caught it, the dress would unwrap itself and be carried off by the wind. She had bobbed her hair and dyed it a deep auburn. She lifted her chin at her reflection. Not bad, she thought. Something about the necklace still irked her, the way it made itself known—felt—the clammy weight of it at the base of her throat. She slipped her finger beneath the strand, as if to stretch it out. She undid the clasp and held the necklace loosely in her fist. She had told her mother she would come by for brunch with Ernie, who was recently home after his bypass. As she walked to the subway, she imagined letting the heavy strand slip through her fingers. What would she do with such a thing? And why had Joe given it to her? It was hard for her to imagine the wardrobe that would complement this particular piece of jewelry. A fur coat? With nothing but implants and a fake tan beneath. She dropped the necklace into the depths of her oversized bag. Her cell phone rang. It was Joe.

“For god’s sake, what?” she said.

“I’m an ass,” he said.

“You dialed the phone for that?”

“It was a stupid present. So not you.”

“I gave it to a homeless woman.”

“Serves me right.” He paused, and she waited. “I wanted to show you, to tell you—”

“Show and tell, hm?”

“Okay. Enough. We both know it was a mistake.”

“These things happen to rich people who are spread too thin,” Elaine said.

“Some sympathy, please, for a mortal man.”

“That was it,” Elaine said. “You missed it.”

She was smiling now, poised at the stairs leading down to the subway. “I have to go,” she said. “I’m at the train. I’ll lose you.”

She took the PATH train out of the city and walked the five blocks from the station to the house her mother shared with Ernie. She felt the walk would do her good, work the last of the champagne out of her system, and clear her head. The morning felt bright and sharp. She started to call ahead, then hung up. Of course the coffee would be on.

She let herself in through the back door, which opened into a vestibule through which one walked to the kitchen. The room had been a tiny sun porch and was now a laundry room with a view, as her mother described it. Through the French doors to the kitchen, Elaine watched her mother settling Ernie at the table. She heard the tones of their conversation, but not the words. She didn’t want to interrupt. Ernie spoke, and he gazed up at his wife from his seat at the table, waiting to be delighted by her reply. Elaine recognized her mother’s tone—sassy, jokingly disrespectful. Ernie had willingly provided the setup, so that she could dazzle him with the punch line. He laughed and grabbed her hand, swinging. His tone said, “You are something, kid.” Elaine’s mother smiled and took Ernie’s

chin in her hand. They kissed, and she gave his cheek a playful slap. Elaine reached up to her neck to touch the pearls. Then she remembered she'd put them in her bag.

She pushed through the door, and cleared her throat elaborately, making a low bow. Ernie and her mother shouted out to her.

"Now we can open the champagne," Ernie said.

Elaine made a sour face. She couldn't stop it coming. "Welcome home," she said. "How was the hospital?"

"Eh," Ernie said, "I'm alive. I can't complain."

"He'll insist that we drink mimosas," her mother said.

Ernie lifted his arms from the table, the maroon bells of his bathrobe sleeves sliding down his arms. Green and yellow bruises marked his skin. "I do insist. Someone's got to have a good time for me."

"I'll do my best," Elaine said, swallowing carefully.

Ernie clasped his hands in front of him on the table and said, "So, kid—tell me, what's new?"

She hadn't told them about Joe and couldn't begin to now. The last three years of assignments she had presented to Ernie and her mother as a series of mostly unrelated vignettes, featuring subjects at times who were mythical or legendary, antagonists or anti-heroes. Ernie would shake his head or cluck his tongue. "Chin up, kid," he'd say. "You can have whatever you want." She'd nod, and the three of them would bow their heads, as if beholding on the tabletop the very installation of these events, unified only by their inconclusiveness. Joe didn't exist for them,

and there was nothing to discuss anyway; the relationship would never be anything more than it was.

Elaine picked a piece of orange pulp from her lower lip. "I'm thinking of going camping."

Ernie leaned forward. "Uh-oh, she's dating an outdoorsman."

Elaine let herself be teased. "He wants to go to Cumberland Island."

Her mother squinted at her. "Really," she said.

"Yup. That's what he said."

"Which one is this?" her mother asked.

"Joe," she said. "This one's Joe." But not her Joe. Her Joe didn't know from camping, and if he thought she did he never would have hooked up with her.

Ernie looked at her expectantly. "There's nothing new, really," she said. For a moment she considered telling Ernie and her mother about Joe. "I've got a guy who gives me pearls," but that sounded like the opening to a bad Jewish blues song.

"Camping, huh?" Ernie raised his arms again. "Amazing, isn't it, Alice?"

Alice's eyebrows lifted. "I'll say. My daughter was no Girl Scout."

Elaine excused herself to the bathroom. Inside she turned on the fan to block out Alice and Ernie's conversation. The butter-yellow ceramic tiles gleamed in the soft light. In the mirror, in her mother's bathroom in Chatham, her India-print dress reflected dully. Her collarbones protruded and

her neck looked strained. Horizontal lines made their grim necklaces across her throat, and the skin there was papery, fragile. The short bob—so chunky and bright—looked perverse. The vintage dress and the dismal jute sandals—she squeezed her eyes shut and shoved her fists into the sockets. “Don’t be stupid,” she muttered. “Drink your drink. Be happy.”

She returned to the table, her eyes throbbing. A muscle jumped in her right eyelid. Ernie regarded her closely. He pressed his lips together, and his face began to quiver. Alice placed her hand over his and spoke to Elaine. “It’s the operation—and the drugs. He gets weepy.”

Ernie wept openly and Elaine gasped. “Ernie, what is it?”

“You never ask me favors anymore.” He bawled into his lap. Alice knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around him.

“He’s okay,” she said. “You’re okay—it’s the drugs.”

Elaine wracked her brain, trying to think of some favor. Turn back the clock. Make me young again. That would be in poor taste. She thought of Paul the dermatologist, of their dancing and subsequent dating. She had been fond of him.

Ernie managed to get control of himself. “But you have what you want.” He wiped his eyes. “It’s amazing, really, how you kids can imagine any kind of life for yourselves.” He looked at Alice. “Not that I would want anything different.”

“Of course not,” Alice said. She put her head in his lap.

He turned to Elaine, his eyes filling again. “But you,” he said, his voice husky, “you can have whatever you want.”

Elaine touched the base of her throat and felt her cool fingers there. She realized she wouldn’t cry. “I have,” she said, “I have what I want.” ☺☺



MARGARET LUONGO's stories have appeared in *Tin House*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *FENCE*, *Memorious*, *Consequence Magazine*, *Fiction Southeast*, the Pushcart Prize anthology, and elsewhere. In 2008, LSU Press published her first story collection, *If the Heart is Lean*. She lives in Southwest Ohio with her husband and two cats, and she teaches creative writing at Miami University.