

THE STARVELING

When it started, long before the woman, he lived in one room. He did not hope for improved circumstances. This was where he belonged, single window, shower, hotplate, a squat refrigerator parked in the bathroom, a makeshift closet for scant possessions. There is a kind of uneventfulness that resembles meditation. One morning he sat drinking coffee and staring into space when the lamp that extended from the wall rustled into flame. Faulty wiring, he thought calmly, and put out his cigarette. He watched the flames rise, the lampshade begin to bubble and melt. The memory ended here.

Now, decades later, he sat watching another woman, the one he lived with. She was at the kitchen sink, washing her cereal bowl, using a soapy bare hand to scour the edges. They were divorced now, after five or six years of marriage, still sharing an apartment, hers, a third-floor walk-up, sufficient space, sort of, tiny barking dog next door.

She was still lean, Flory, and a little lopsided, the soft brownish blond tones only now beginning to fade from her hair. One of her brassieres hung from the doorknob on the closet. He looked at it, wondering how long it had been there. It was a life that had slowly grown around them, unfail-

ingly familiar, and there was nothing much to see that had not been seen in previous hours, days, weeks and months. The brassiere on the doorknob was a matter of months, he thought.

He sat on his cot at the other end of the narrow flat, listening to her talk idly about her new job, temporary, doing traffic reports on the radio. She was an actor, occupationally out of work, and took what came her way. Hers was the only living voice he attended to in the course of most days, an easy sort of liquid cadence with a trace of Deep South. But her broadcast voice was a power tool, all bursts and breathless medleys, and when it was possible, when he happened to be here, which was rare, during the daylight hours, he turned on the radio and listened to the all-news station where she had a narrow slot every eleven minutes, reporting on the routine havoc out there.

She spoke fantastically fast, words and key phrases expertly compressed into coded format, the accidents, road repairs, bridges and tunnels, the delays measured in geologic time. The BQE, the FDR, always the biblical Cross Bronx, ten thousand drivers with deadened eyes waiting for the gates to open, the seas to part.

He watched her approach now, slantwise, her body language of determined inquiry, head flopped left, eyes advancing through levels of scrutiny. She stopped at a distance of five feet.

"Did you get a haircut?"

He sat thinking, then reached back to run his thumb over the back of his neck. A haircut was a hurried few moments in a well-scheduled day, submitted to in order to be forgotten.

"I think so, absolutely."

"When?"

"I don't know. Maybe three days ago."

She took a step to the side, approaching once again.

"What's wrong with me? I'm just now noticing," she said.

"What did he do to you?"

"Who?"

"The barber."

"I don't know. What did he do to me?"

"He emasculated your sideburns," she said.

She touched the side of his head, honoring the memory, it seemed, of what had been there, her hand still wet from the cereal bowl. Then she danced away, into a jacket and out the door. This is what they did, they came and went. She had to hurry to the studio, in midtown, and he had a movie to get to, ten-forty a.m., walking distance from here, and then another movie somewhere else, and somewhere else after that, and then one more time before his day was done.

It was a dense white summer day and there were men in orange vests jackhammering along the middle of the broad street, with concrete barriers rimming the raw crevice and every moving thing on either side taking defensive measures, taxis in stop-and-start pattern and pedestrians sprinting across the street in stages, in tactical bursts, cell phones welded to their heads.

He walked west, beginning to feel the flesh in his step, the width of chest and hips. He'd always been big, slow and strong and he was bigger and slower now, all those fistfuls of saturated fat that he pushed into his face, irresistibly, sitting slumped over the counter in diners or standing alongside

food carts. He didn't eat meals, he grabbed meals, he grabbed a bite and paid and fled, and the aftertaste of whatever he absorbed lingered for hours somewhere in the lower tracts.

This was his father eating, the aging son assuming the father's spacious frame, if nothing else.

He turned north on Sixth Avenue, knowing that the theater would be near empty, three or four solitary souls. Moviegoers were souls when there were only a few of them. This was almost always the case late morning or early afternoon. They would remain solitary even as they left the theater, not exchanging a word or glance, unlike souls in the course of other kinds of witness, a remote accident or threat of nature.

He paid at the booth, got his ticket, gave it to the man in the lobby and went directly to the catacomb toilets. A few minutes later he took his seat in the small theater and waited for the feature to begin. Wait now, hurry later, these were the rules of the day. Days were all the same, movies were not.

His name was Leo Zhelezniak. It took half a lifetime before he began to fit into the name. Did he think there was a resonance in the name, or a foreignness, a history, that he could never earn? Other people lived in their names. He used to wonder whether the name itself made any difference. Maybe he would feel this separation no matter what name he carried on the plastic cards in his wallet.

He had the row to himself, seated dead center as the house went dark. Whatever moons of disquiet and melancholy hovered over his experience, recent or distant, this was the place where it might all evaporate.

Flory had ideas about his vocation. In those early years, between acting jobs, voice-overs, sales fairs and dogwalking,

she occasionally joined him, three movies some days, even four, the novelty of it, the sort of inspired lunacy. A film can be undermined by the person you're seeing it with, there in the dark, a ripple effect of attitude, scene by scene, shot by shot. They both knew this. They also knew that she would do nothing to compromise the integrity of his endeavor—no whispers, nudges, bags of popcorn. But she did not overplay her sense of careful forethought. She was not a trite person. She understood that he was not turning a routine diversion into some hellish obsession.

What, then, was he doing?

She advanced theories. He was an ascetic, she said. This was one theory. She found something saintly and crazed in his undertaking, an element of self-denial, an element of penance. Sit in the dark, reverse the images. Were his parents Catholic? Did his grandparents go to mass every day, before first light, in some village in the Carpathian Mountains, repeating the words of a priest with a long white beard and golden cloak? Where were the Carpathian Mountains? She spoke late at night, usually in bed, bodies at rest, and he liked listening to these ideas. They were impeccable fictions, with no attempt on her part to get his rendering of what might be the case. Maybe she knew it would have to be dredged out of his pores, a fever in the skin rather than a product of conscious mind.

Or he was a man escaping his past. He needed to dream away a grim memory of childhood, some misadventure of adolescence. Movies are waking dreams—daydreams, she said, protection against the recoil of that early curse, that bane. She seemed to be speaking lines from the misbegotten revival of a once-loved play. The tender sound of her

voice, the make-believe she was able to unfurl, sometimes distracted Leo, who'd feel an erection beginning to hum beneath the sheets.

Was he at the movies to see a movie, she said, or maybe more narrowly, more essentially, simply to be at the movies?

He thought about this.

He could stay home and watch TV, movie after movie, on cable, three hundred channels, she said, deep into the night. He wouldn't have to get from theater to theater, subways, buses, worry, rush, and he'd be far more comfortable, he'd save himself money, he'd eat half-decent meals.

He thought about this. It was obvious, wasn't it, that there were simpler alternatives. Every alternative was simpler. A job was simpler. Dying was simpler. But he understood that her question was philosophical, not practical. She was probing his deeper recesses. Being at the movies to be at the movies. He thought about this. He owed her the gesture.

The woman entered as the feature began. He hadn't seen her in a while and was surprised to realize, only now, that he'd noted her absence. She was a recent enlistee—is that the word? He wasn't sure when she'd started showing up. She seemed awkward, slightly angular, and she was far younger than the others. There were others, the floating group of four or five people who made the circuit every day, each keeping to his or her rigid schedule, crisscrossing the city, theater to theater, mornings, nights, weekends, years.

Leo did not count himself part of the group. He did not speak to the others; ever, not a word, not a look directed their way. He saw them nonetheless, now and then, here and there, one or the other. They were vague shapes with pasty

faces, planted among the lobby posters in their weary clothing, restless bearing, their postoperative posture.

He tried not to care that there were others. But how could it fail to disturb him? The sightings were unavoidable, one person at the Quad, another the next day at the Sunshine, two of them at Empire 25 in the vast rotunda or on the long steep narrow escalator that seems to lead to some high-rise form of hell.

But this was different, she was different, and he was watching her. She was seated two rows in front of him, end of the row, with the first images bringing pale light to the front of the house.

There was the long metal bar of the old police lock set into its floor niche inches from the front door. There was the tall narrow radiator, a relic, unscreened, with a pan set beneath the shutoff valve to collect the drip. At times he stared into the columns of the radiator, thinking whatever he was thinking, none of it reducible to words.

There was the cramped bathroom they shared, where his broad bottom could barely wedge itself between the tub and the wall and onto the toilet seat.

Sometimes he left his cot, by invitation, and spent the night with Flory in her bedroom, where they had wistful sex. She had a boyfriend, Avner, but said nothing about him beyond the name itself and the fact that he had a son living in Washington.

There was the photograph of her grandmother and grandfather on one wall, the kind of old family photo so drained of color and tone that it is generic, somebody's forebears, ancestors, dead relatives.

There were the notebooks crammed into the back of the closet, Leo's composition books, reminiscent of grade school, the black-and-white mottled covers, the marbled covers. These were his notes, years and miles of scrawled testimony that he'd once compiled about the movies he saw. Name of theater, title of film, starting time, running time, random thoughts on plot, principals, scenes and whatever else occurred to him—the talky teenagers seated nearby and what he said to shut them up, or the way the white subtitles disappeared into white backgrounds, stranding him with a raging argument in Korean or Farsi.

In bed with her, he sometimes flashed a thought of Avner in some dark shrouded shape-changing form, a scattered presence haunting the room.

Flory liked to punch him in the stomach, for fun. He tried to find the humor in it. Often, late, he'd come home to find her kickboxing in her pajamas. This was part of a regimen that included diet, stylized movement and lengthy meditation, her body faceup on the floor, a dish towel over her eyes. She did summer stock, gone for weeks, and sometimes, his senses dulled down, he barely knew that he was alone in the apartment.

There was his face in the mirror, gradually becoming asymmetrical, features no longer on the same axis, brows unaligned, jaw crooked, his mouth slightly aslant.

When did this begin to happen? What happens next?

They lived on nearly nothing, his wilted savings and her occasional flurries of work. They lived on habit, occupying long silences that were never tense or self-conscious. Other times, studying a playscript, she paced the floor, trying out

voices, and he listened without comment. She used to give him haircuts but then stopped.

When she forgot something she wanted to tell him, she went to wherever the thought had originated, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and waited for it to recur.

There was a bottle of Polish vodka resting on top of the ice trays in the refrigerator. He might ignore it for three months and then, one midnight, drink sippingly and methodically from a water glass, lying back on the cot an hour later with the world all closed down, nothing left of it but a terminal throbbing ache in his forebrain.

There were the traffic reports, the sound of Flory's voice pressurized into twenty-five seconds of gridlock alerts, lane closings, emergency guardrail repairs. He sat hunched by the radio listening for hints of total global collapse in the news of a flipped vehicle on the inbound Gowanus. These reports were the Yiddish slang of everything gone wrong, reformulated in the speed diction and cool command of her delivery.

There was the fact that she'd never appeared in a movie, not as a walk-on, not in a crowd scene, and he wondered if somehow, secretly, she blamed him.

There were all the things they lived with, plain objects strangely charged with shaping their reality, things touched but not seen, or seen through.

He spent a year in college in his late twenties, working nights at the main post office on Eighth Avenue, and he took a course in philosophy that he looked forward to, week by week, page by page, mining even the footnotes in the text. Then it got hard and he stopped.

If we're not here to know what a thing is, then what is it?

There was her brassiere dangling from the doorknob on the closet.

He thought, What is it?

He left his seat while the final credits were rolling, an action he took only when the day's schedule was extremely tight. This wasn't the case today. He went out onto the avenue and stood near the curbstone. He faced the theater and waited. A man passed by, putting on lip balm, and this made Leo look up to check the position of the sun.

It wasn't long before the young woman emerged. She wore jeans tucked into dark boots and looked different in bright light, whiter, thinner, he wasn't sure. She paused for a moment, people skimming past. He thought she also looked worried and then he thought it wasn't worry but only a basic alertness to the essential details, the next showtime, the quickest way to get there. She wore a loose gray shirt and carried a shoulder bag.

Cabs went blasting past behind him.

She began to move away, long brown hair, long slow deliberate strides, tight ass in those faded jeans. He figured she was headed to the subway entrance north of here. He stood in place for an extended moment, then found himself walking in the same direction, following. Was he following? Did he need someone to tell him what he was doing? Did he need to check his position in the solar system because he'd seen a man applying sunscreen to his lips?

The next movie in his day was diagonally crosstown, up on East Eighty-sixth Street, but he could take the A train here, if the situation warranted, and then make his way

across the park by bus. Built into his code of daily travel was the conviction never to take taxis. A taxi seemed like cheating, even if he wasn't sure exactly what this meant. But he knew what money meant, the tactile fact of cash leaving the hand—folding money, rubbed coins.

He moved into a trot now, already reaching for his transit card. She was still in sight, barely, among the sidewalk swarm. He had the transit card in his breast pocket, the day's slate written on an index card in the opposite pocket. He had his loose change, wallet, house keys, handkerchief, all the ordinary items that established the vital identity of his days. There was his hunger to be considered, food, soon, to steel the sorry body. He had the old Seiko wristwatch with the frayed leather band.

He paid careful attention to rain in movies. In foreign films, set in northern or eastern Europe, it seemed, sometimes, to be raining God or raining death.

Sometimes, also, he imagined himself being foreign, walking stooped and unshaven along the sides of buildings, although he didn't know why this seemed foreign. He could see himself in another life, some nameless city in Belarus or Romania. The Romanians made impressive films. Flory read movie reviews, sometimes aloud. Foreign directors were often called masters, the Taiwanese master, the Iranian master. She said you had to be a foreigner to be a master. He saw himself walking past cafés in black-and-white cities, with trolley cars going past, and lipsticked women in pretty dresses. These visions would fade in seconds but in a curious way, a serious way, they had the density of a lifetime compressed.

Flory thought he did not have to imagine an alternative life as a foreigner. He was actually leading an alternative life. In the real life, she said, he is a schoolteacher in one of the outer boroughs, a run-down neighborhood. Late one afternoon he and his colleagues get together in a local bar and describe the lives they might be living under different circumstances. Fake lives, joke lives, but on the margins of plausibility. After several drinks it is a bleary Leo who proposes the most reckless life. It is this life, his life, the movies. The others wave him off. Leo least of all, they say. The man is too earthbound, pragmatic, the most literal-minded of the bunch.

She brought the story around to their third-floor walk-up, the sight of him at the other end of the flat, seated on his cot, lacing his shoes. This is why they were still living together, she said. His stolid nature was her bedrock. She needed only what there was in plain sight, this man in body, in careless bulk, his gravitational force keeping her in balance.

Otherwise she was windblown, unfixed, eating and sleeping sporadically, never getting around to things. The rent, the phone bill, the leak, the rot, all the things you have to get around to, all the time, before they find you dead in your grandmother's nightgown. Leo did not go to the doctor but she went to the doctor because he did not. She filled prescriptions because he was here, sweeping the floor and taking out the garbage. He was not springloaded, he was safe. There was no explosion in that crouched form.

Years later people can't remember why they got married. Leo couldn't remember why they divorced. It had something to do with Flory's worldview. She dropped out of the neighborhood association, the local acting company, the volunteers for the homeless. Then she stopped voting, stopped eating meat

and stopped being married. She devoted more time to her stabilization exercises, training herself to maintain difficult body positions, draped over a chair, rolled into a dense mass on the floor, a bolus, motionless for long periods, seemingly unaware of anything beyond her abdominal muscles, her vertebrae. To Leo she seemed nearly swallowed by her surroundings, on the verge of melting out of sight, dematerializing.

He watched her and thought of something he'd heard or read years earlier, in philosophy class.

All human existence is a trick of light.

He tried to recall the context of the remark. Was it about the universe and our remote and fleeting place as earthlings? Or was it something much more intimate, people in rooms, what we see and what we miss, how we pass through each other, year by year, second by second?

They'd stopped speaking to each other in meaningful ways, she said, and they'd stopped having meaningful sex.

But they needed to be here, each with the other, and he finished lacing his shoes and then stood and turned and raised the shade. The slat juttet slightly from its hem and he tried to decide whether to nudge it back into place or leave it as it was, at least for now. He remained a moment, facing the window, scarcely aware of the noise of traffic from the street.

This is where he spent part of nearly every day, ordinary rider, standing man, the subway, his back to the door. He and others, lives at pause, faces emptied out, and she as well, seated near the end of the car. He didn't have to look directly at her. There she was, head down, knees tight, upper body swiveled toward the bulkhead.

This was the midday lull between the breathless edges of

the rush hours but she sat as if enclosed by others and he thought she was still getting used to the subway. He thought a number of things. He thought she was a person who lived within herself, remote, elusive, whatever else. Her gaze was down and away, into nothing. He scanned the ad panels above the windows, reading the Spanish copy over and over. She had no friends, one friend. This is how he chose to define her, for now, in the early stages.

The train pulled into a station, Forty-second Street, Port Authority, and he stood away from the door and waited. She didn't move, didn't budge, and he began to imagine a crowded car, both of them standing, his body jammed against hers, pressed into her. Which way is she facing? She is facing away from him, they are front to back, bodies guided by the swerves and changing speeds, train racing past stations now, an unscheduled express.

He needed to stop thinking for a while. Or is this what everybody needed? Everybody here with eyes averted thinking about everybody else in whatever unknowable way, a total crosscurrent of feelings, wishes, dim imaginings, one second to the next.

There was a word he wanted to apply to her. It was a medical or psychological term and it took a long moment before he was able to think of it, *anorexic*, one of those words that carries its meaning with a vengeance. But it was too extreme for her. She wasn't that thin, she wasn't gaunt; she wasn't even young enough to be one, an anorectic. Did he know why he was doing this, any of it, from the instant he decided to take the wrong train, her train? There was nothing to know. It was minute-to-minute, see what's next.

Soon he was following her along the street and out of the

heat and noise of this stretch of Broadway into the cool columned lobby of a major multiplex. She went past the automated ticket machines and approached the counter at the far end of the lobby. Posters everywhere, a bare scatter of people. She stepped onto the escalator and he understood that he could not lose sight of her now. He rode up toward the huge Hollywood mural and onto the carpeted second floor. There was a man on a sofa reading a book. She went past the video-game consoles and handed her ticket to the woman stationed at the entrance to the theaters.

All these elements, seemingly connected, here to there, step by step, but with no thought in his mind of a purposeful end—just the unfixed rhythm of his need.

He stood at the access point, able to see her enter theater 6. He went back to the lobby and asked for a ticket to whatever was showing there. The ticket seller tapped it out, deadpan, and he headed to the escalator, walking past the security guard whose nonchalance was probably genuine. On the second floor again he handed the ticket to the uniformed woman and walked past the long food counter, veering into theater 6. Roughly two dozen heads in the semidark. He scanned the seats and found her, fifth row, far end.

There was no satisfaction in this, having tracked her from the end of one movie to the start of another. He felt only that a requirement had been met, the easing of an indistinct tension. He was halfway down the side aisle when he decided to sit directly behind her. The impulse took him by surprise and he moved into the seat tentatively, needing to adjust to the blatant fact of being there. Then the screen lit up and the previews came at them like forms of laboratory torture, in swift image and high pitch.

Their bodies were aligned, eyes aligned, his and hers. But the movie was hers, her film, her theater, and he wasn't prepared for the confusion. The movie seemed stillborn. He could not absorb what was happening. He sat with legs spread, knees braced against the seat in front of him. He was practically breathing on her and this proximity helped him work his way into things that hadn't been clear up to now. She was a woman alone. This had to be the case. She lives alone, in one room, as he did. Those were years that still gathered force in his memory, and the choice he would make, the fact of this life, scratched-out, gouged-out, first became a vision in that room. She looks down at warped floorboards. There is no bathtub, only a shower with tinny sides that rattle if you lean on them. She forgets to bathe, forgets to eat. She lies in bed, eyes open, and replays scenes from the day's films, shot by shot. She has the capacity to do this. It is natural, it is innate. She doesn't care about the actors, only the characters. They are the ones who speak, and look sadly out of windows, and die violently.

He took his eyes off the screen. Her head and shoulders, this is what he looked at, a woman who avoids contact with others, sometimes sits in her room staring at a wall. He thinks of her as a true soul, not knowing exactly what that means. Is he sure that she doesn't live with her parents? Can she manage alone? She sees certain movies many times, unlike him. She will hunt down mythical movies, those once-in-a-decade screenings. Leo saw such films only when they drifted into view. She will devote her energies to finding and seeing the elusive masterwork, damaged print, missing footage, running time eleven hours, twelve hours, nobody seems sure, a privileged act, a blessing—you travel

to London, Lisbon, Prague or maybe just Brooklyn, and you sit in a crowded room and feel transformed.

Okay, he understood this. She steps away from her own shadow. She is a scant being trying to find a place to be. But there was something she had to understand. This is everyday life, this is the job, day to day. Your head is folded into a newspaper or plugged into a telephone so you can measure movie times against estimated travel times. You make the slate, keep the hours, remain true to the plan. This is what we do, he thought.

He closed his eyes for a time. He tried to see her standing naked in body profile before a mirror. She looked frail, undernourished, watching herself, half wondering who that person is. He thought about her name. He needed a name, a way to claim her, something to know her by. When he opened his eyes a house stood onscreen, alone in a wintry field. He thought of her as the Starveling. That was her name.

There was the day in Philadelphia, the day it opened, *Apocalypse Now*, over thirty years ago, the nine-twenty a.m. show, the Goldman, on Fifteenth Street. He was in town because his father had just died and he was at the movies because he could not stay away, arriving at nine sharp with a criminal's conscience, his father's death and imminent funeral serving as bookends for Brando in the jungle. His father left property to a couple of loyal friends and the money went to Leo, pretty serious money, meatpacker's money, union head's money, heavy drinker, gambler, widower, a master of graft and other amenities.

Then there was the day, decades later, when Brando died. The news came over the radio. Marlon Brando dead

at eighty. It didn't make sense to Leo. Brando eighty. Brando dead made more sense than Brando eighty. It was the guy in the T-shirt or tank top who was dead, the leather jacket, not the old man with the bulging cheeks and raspy voice. Later, at the supermarket, before the first screening of the day, he expected to hear people talking about it in the checkout lines but they had other matters in mind. Do I want the olive oil spray or the canola spray? Debit or credit? He stood there thinking of his father. Two deaths forever linked, and the money, his father's bequest, was the thing that allowed him eventually to leave his job at the post office and take up the life, full-time, with Flory's encouragement.

They were just getting to know each other then. He'd already started filling notebooks with facts and commentaries, personal interpretations, and she found this fascinating. Already stacks of those schoolroom notebooks, his handwriting unreadable, half a million words, a million words, film by film, day by day, building into a cultural chronicle to be discovered a hundred years from now, one man's eccentric history of an entire era. He was a serious man. This is what she loved about Leo, she said, seated on the floor smoking dope in her underwear, with black goggles wrapped around her head. The man was gripped by a passion, a total immersion that was uncompromising, and the notebooks were solid evidence of this, objects you could clutch in your hands, words you could count, the tangible truth of a monkish dedication, and the murky handwriting only added to the wonder of the enterprise, like ancient script in a lost language.

Then he stopped.

Movies of every kind, from everywhere, maps of world imagery, and then you stop?

He stopped, he said, because the notebooks had become the reason for what he was doing. What he was doing was going to the movies. The notebooks were beginning to replace the movies. The movies didn't need the movie notes. They only needed him to be there.

Is this when she stopped cutting his hair? He wasn't sure.

He'd known from the beginning that he was advancing toward a future without paydays, holidays, birthdays, new moons, full moons, real meals or very much in the way of world news. He wanted the native act, clean, free of extraneous sensation.

He never looked at ticket sellers or ticket takers. Someone handed him a ticket, he handed it back to someone else. This stayed the same, almost everything stayed the same. But now days seemed to end an hour after they started. It was always the end of the day. The days had no names and this should not have mattered. But there was something unsettling in the anonymous week, not a sense of elemental time but of time emptied out. He walked up the stairs, near midnight, and it was here and now, night after night, that he became intensely conscious of the moment, approaching the third floor, slowing his pace, wary of rousing the neighbor's rat-faced barking dog. Another end of another day. The previous day had just ended, it seemed, at this precise place on the stairway, with the same cautious footstep, and he could see himself clearly, then and now, in midstep.

All forgotten until the following night, when the same feeling occurred, at the same place, one step from the landing.

First there was the crosstown bus and then the subway, 6 train, uptown. He thought they were headed to a theater

on the Upper East Side. He also thought there had to be another word, beyond *anorexic*, that would help him see her clearly, a word invented for certain individuals to aspire to, as if they were born and raised to wrap themselves inside it.

He watched her, half a car away.

She almost never speaks. When she speaks, is there a stutter, an accent? An accent might be interesting, somewhere Scandinavian, but he decided he didn't want one. She has no telephone. She forgets to shop—food, shoes, toiletries—or simply rejects the notion. She hears voices, she hears dialogue from movies she saw as a child.

She remained in her seat when they reached Eighty-sixth Street. This made him nervous and he began to count the stops now. When he reached an even dozen the train made a leap into daylight and he found himself scanning a scene of tenements, housing projects, jagged streaks of rooftop graffiti and a river or inlet he could not identify.

She is also erratic, possibly self-destructive. There are times when she flings herself against the wall. It occurred to him that what he was doing made complete sense, to define her as someone who has taken this life, *their life*, to its predetermined limit. She has no recourse to sensible measures. She is pure, he is not. Does she forget her name? Is it possible for her to imagine the slightest semblance of well-being?

He checked the street names on the electronic route map across the aisle, dots blinking off, one by one, Whitlock, Elder, Morrison, and he began to understand where he was. He was in the Bronx, which meant he'd strayed outside the known borders. Sunlight filled the car, making him feel exposed, deprived of the cover, the protective aura he'd experienced beneath street level.

Across from him a tiny brown woman held a half-smoked cigarette, unlit. On the platform, finally, he followed the other woman, the one he was following, down to street level and along a broad avenue lined with shops, storefront offices, a Bangladeshi grocery, a Chino-Latino restaurant. He stopped noticing things and watched her walk. She seemed to be thinking each stride into physical being. They crossed the overpass of an expressway and she turned into a street of row houses with aluminum awnings. He stopped and waited for her to enter one of the houses and now the street was empty except for him.

He walked slowly back toward the train station, not knowing what to make of this. Did it contradict everything he'd come to believe about her? This street, these family homes, the difficulty she faced in getting to theaters clustered in Manhattan. In a way it made her a more compelling figure. It confirmed her determination, the depth of her calling.

She lived here because she had to live somewhere. She could not manage alone. She is staying with an older sister and her family. They are the only white family left on the block. She is the strange one, the one who never says where she is going, who rarely takes meals with the others, the one who will never marry.

Maybe there was no technical term or medical name for what she did or what she was. She just wandered on past, free of all that.

He felt the heat, Bangladeshi heat, West Indian heat. He read the names on the windows of local enterprises. This is what she sees every day, Tattoo Mayhem, Metropolitan Brace and Limb. He decided to wait within sight of the stairway to the elevated tracks. If there was a movie to come, she

would show up eventually to get on the train. He ate something in Kabir's Bakery and waited, then went to Dunkin' Donuts and ate something else and waited, looking out the window. Was this the first food he'd eaten all day? Was she eating while he was eating? Did the Starveling eat?

He stood in the shadows on the corner, under the el, trains arriving and leaving, people everywhere, and he watched them, he so seldom did this, evening slowly unfolding. There was nothing here that was not ordinary but he felt compelled to examine the scene, searching for something he could not identify. Then he saw her, across the street. She was born to be unseen, he thought, except by him. She willed it, she carried it with her, the wary look and taut body, the inwardness, the void of touch. Who touched her, ever?

She wore a dark sweater now, V-neck, and there was an umbrella handle jutting from the shoulder bag.

Take the umbrella, her sister had said. Just in case.

He followed her up the stairs to the platform, same track as before, uptown, and this was another reality to absorb, that they were not headed back to Manhattan. They rode five stops to the end of the line and she went to street level and boarded a waiting bus. He felt lost and dumb, wandering blind, a passive victim of some shadowy manipulation. He also felt close to the point of breaking off contact. The bus sat there, marked Bx29. People kept boarding and after a while he followed, taking a seat near the front. Nothing happened but time seemed to be rushing past. He could see it out the window, sky darkening, things in motion. A man and woman behind him were speaking Greek. He thought the Greeks were in Queens.

Then they were moving past a landscape of parkways,

thruways, loops and interchanges, and the bus entered an enormous shopping complex, several malls, more or less contiguous, national names everywhere, franchises and megastores, a hundred soaring logos, and out there, beyond, he saw the lights and regimented shapes of a great sweep of high-rise buildings.

She nearly brushed his shoulder when she got off the bus. It wasn't until he stepped out onto the sidewalk that he realized he was standing in front of a movie theater. He stared into the transparent facade. He was ready to believe all over again. There she was inside the lobby, her sketchy body moving along the winding ticket line. He was ready to trust the moment, be himself, like a man bracingly awake after a panic dream.

He checked the display of features and starting times and bought a ticket to the film about to screen. He rode the escalator to the second level and entered theater 3. There she was at the end of a row near the front. He took a seat where he could in a crowded house and tried to think along with her, to feel what she was feeling.

Always the sense of anticipation. To look forward to, invariably, whatever the title, the story, the director, and to be able to elude the specter of disappointment. There were no disappointments, ever, not for him, not for her. They were here to be enveloped, to be transcended. Something would fly past them, reaching back to take them with it.

That was the innocent surface, on loan from childhood. There was more but what was it? It was something he'd never tried to penetrate until now, the crux of being who he was and understanding why he needed this. He sensed it in her, knew it was there, the same half life. They had no other

self. They had no fake self, no veneer. They could only be the one embedded thing they were, stripped of the faces that come naturally to others. They were bare-faced, bare-souled, and maybe this is why they were here, to be safe. The world was up there, framed, on the screen, edited and corrected and bound tight, and they were here, where they belonged, in the isolated dark, being what they were, being safe.

Movies take place in the dark. This seemed an obscure truth, just now stumbled upon.

It took him a moment to realize that this was the same movie he'd seen the day before, way downtown, in Battery Park. He didn't know how to feel about this. He decided not to feel stupid. What would happen when the movie ended? This is what he ought to be thinking about.

He watched it end the same way it had ended twenty-four hours ago. She remained in her seat with people shuffling past. He did the same, waiting for her to move, a full fifteen minutes. He recognized the meaning. Movie over, no wish to leave, nothing out there but heat rising from the pavement. This is where they belonged, in a tier of empty seats, no false choices. Did he want to own her, or just touch her once, hear her speak a few words? One touch might ease the need. The place smelled of seat cushions, the dust of warm bodies.

The restrooms were at the end of a corridor. The area was clearing out when she went in that direction. He stood at the head of the corridor, thinking, trying to think. There was nothing to trust but the blank mind. Maybe he felt that he was standing watch, waiting for the other women, if there were any, to come out of the restroom. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do next and then he walked down the hall and

pushed open the door. She was at the washbasin farthest from the door, splashing water in her face. The shoulder bag was at her feet. She looked up and saw him. Nothing happened, neither person moved. He drifted toward a state of neutral observation. *Neither person moved*, he thought. Then he glanced at the row of stalls, all apparently empty, doors unlatched. This was a motivated act, stark and telling, and she moved away, toward the far wall.

There were gaps in the silence, a feeling of stop and go. She was looking past him. She had the face and eyes of someone distant in time, a woman in a painting, curtains hanging in loose folds. He wanted one of them to say something.

He said, "The faucets in the men's toilet aren't working."

This seemed incomplete.

"I came in here," he said, "to wash my hands."

He didn't know what would happen next. The white glare of the toilet was deathly. He felt sweat working along his shoulders and down his back. Even if she wasn't facing him directly, he was in her sightline. What would happen if she looked at him straight on, eye to eye? Is this the contact she feared, the look that triggers the action?

Neither person moved, he thought.

He nodded to her, absurdly. Her face and hands were still wet. She stood with one arm bent in front of her but it didn't seem defensive to him. She was not fending, staving off. She was just caught in midmotion, the other arm at her side, palm of hand flat against the wall.

He tried to imagine what he looked like to her, man of some size, some years, but what did he look like to anyone? He had no idea.

He felt a kind of tremor in his right arm. He thought it might begin shaking. He clenched his fist, just to see if he could do it. The thing to do was to make himself known, tell her who he was, for both of them to hear.

He said, "I keep thinking of a Japanese movie I saw about ten years ago. It was sepia tone, like grayish brown, three and a half hours plus, an afternoon screening in Times Square, theater gone now, and I can't remember the title of the movie. This should drive me crazy but it doesn't. Something happened to my memory somewhere along the way. It's because I don't sleep well. Sleep and memory are intertwined. There's a bus being hijacked, people dead, I was the only person in the theater. The theater was located down under a monster store selling CDs, DVDs, headsets, video-cassettes, all kinds of audio equipment, and you go into the store and down some stairs and there's a movie theater and you buy a ticket and go in. I used to know everything about every movie I ever saw but it's all fading away. It embarrasses me to say three and a half hours. I should be talking about minutes, the exact number of minutes that make up the running time."

His voice sounded peculiar. He could hear it as though he were listening to someone else speaking. It was a steady voice, without inflection, a flat low drone.

"The lobby and theater were both deserted. Nobody anywhere. Was there a refreshment stand? This much I remember, the experience itself, alone in this place watching a movie in a language I don't understand, with subtitles, down under the street, eerie and tomblike, passengers dead, hijacker dead, driver survives, some kids survive. I used to know every title of every foreign film in English

plus the original language. But my memory's shot. One thing doesn't change for you and me. We arrange the day, don't we? It's all compiled, it's organized, we make sense of it. And once we're in our seats and the feature begins, it's like something we always knew, over and over, but we can't really share it with others. Stanley Kubrick grew up in the Bronx but nowhere near where you live. Tony Curtis, the Bronx, Bernard Schwartz. I'm from Philadelphia, myself, originally. I saw *The Passenger* at Cinema Nineteen. The old memories outlive the new ones, Nineteenth Street and Chestnut. There was a huge fat man in the lobby, the one-ten show, wearing shoes with the toe caps cut away and no socks. I don't think people looked at his toes. Nobody wanted to do that. Then I came to New York and the lampshade in my room started burning. Out of nowhere, flames. I have no idea how I put out the fire. Did I throw a wet towel over the burning shade? I have no idea. Sleep and memory, these things are intertwined. But what I started to say at the beginning, the Japanese movie, I went into the men's room when it was over and the faucets didn't work. There was no water to wash my hands. That's what got me started on this whole subject: The faucets in that men's room and the faucets in this men's room. But there it made sense, there it was unreal like everything else. No people, empty refreshment stand, perfectly clean toilet, no running water. So I came in here, to wash my hands," he said.

The door behind him opened. He didn't turn to see who it was. Someone standing there, watching, witness to whatever it was that was happening here. A man in the women's toilet, that's all the witness needed to see, a man standing near the row of washbasins, a woman against the far wall.

Was the man threatening the woman against the wall? Did the man intend to approach the woman and press her to the hard tile surface, in the glaring light? The witness would also be a woman, he thought. No need to turn and look. *What would the man do to them. Witness and Starveling?* This was not a thought but a blur of mingled images, but it was also a thought, and he nearly closed his eyes to see it more clearly.

Then she was away from the wall. She took two tentative steps toward him, snatched her shoulder bag from the floor and edged quickly along the stalls and past him, around him. They were gone, both women, with Leo feeling he had a desperate second left before he went to his knees, hands to chest, everything from everywhere, a billion living minutes, all converging at this still point.

But he remained where he was, standing. He turned toward the washbasin and stared into it for a time. He ran the water and tapped the soap dispenser, washing his hands thoroughly and methodically, as if to comply with regulations. He paused again, remembering what came next, and then reached for a paper towel, and another, and one more.

The corridor was empty. There were people coming up on the escalator, a late feature about to start. He stood and watched them, trying to decide whether to stay or go.

He came in rain-soaked, climbing the stairs slowly. One step from the third landing he recalled the matching moment of the previous night, seeing himself take the step, one day's end collapsing into the other.

He entered the flat quietly and sat on the cot unlacing his shoes. Then he looked up, shoes still on, thinking something was not right. The pale fluorescent light over the

kitchen sink was on, flickering, always, and he saw a shape against the far window, someone, Flory, standing motionless. He began to speak, then stopped. She wore tights and a tank top and stood with legs together, arms raised over her head, straight up, hands clasped, palms upward. He wasn't sure whether she was looking at him. If she was looking at him, he wasn't sure whether she saw him.

He didn't move a muscle, just sat and watched. It seemed the simplest thing, a person standing in a room, a matter of stillness and balance. But as time passed the position she held began to assume a meaning, even a history, although not one he could interpret. Bare feet together, legs lightly touching at knees and thighs, the raised arms permitting a fraction of an inch of open space on either side of her head. The way the hands were entwined, the stretched body, a symmetry, a discipline that made him believe he was seeing something in her that he'd never recognized, a truth or depth that showed him who she was. He lost all sense of time, determined to remain dead still for as long as she did, watching steadily, breathing evenly, never lapsing.

If he blinked an eye, she would disappear.