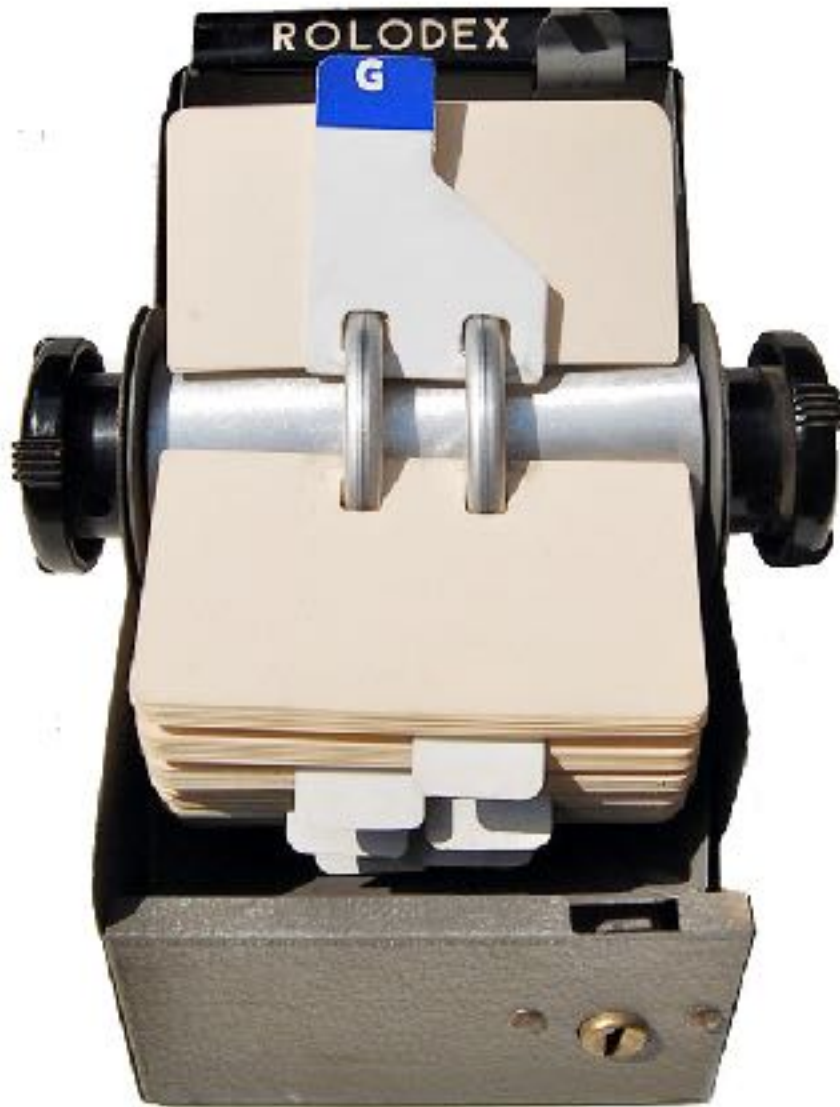


ROLODEX



**RICHMOND
BURTON**

ROLODEX

by Richmond Burton

"There is no such thing as society...."
- Margaret Thatcher, 1987

"Althea had the best parties. That's where it all began."
- Ethan Crone, 2020

The ninth of November 1990 fell on a Friday and it was meant to be a new beginning for Althea. She decided not to run that morning. Ethan and Sadie had arrived from London late and she had stayed up with them. She studied her face in the dressing room mirror. For 50, she looked good. Her hair was trimmed to shoulder length in an easy, disheveled, cut. She resisted cosmetic surgery, feeling her wrinkles proved her experience and ease with herself.

Her dressing room was her own place, full of beloved objects. Her Persian rug, dresser, and mirror were inheritances from her family in England. Two paintings hung on the wall to either side of her vanity: one, a glossy white door that many would not consider a painting at all, and the other a day-glow creation of wave patterns colliding.

This was her inner sanctum. It was important for her as she so often entertained in her main space, which resembled a minimalist gallery. She brushed her hand against the clothes in her wardrobe, mostly black. Sometimes, she came here to escape during her parties, her famous parties, to have a moment of peace. To take a breath.

On her desk was her Rolodex, a precious 9" rotary, swollen with the contact particulars of a lifetime of dealers, collectors, curators, and artists. Next to it stood a framed photograph of a handsome young man with his arm around her - a younger her. The

thought of his death still hit her hard, but after 18 months she could sense the dulling balm of time.

She pushed aside a checkbook and the stacks of bills and correspondence spilling across her desk, obscuring her Rolodex. Black tights hung from the back of her chair. She kicked aside the jumble of shoes at her feet, and found her slippers. She never walked barefoot at home--the plank floors were too rutted and gouged from their days as a manufacturing space.

Sadie sat on the windowsill in a v-neck and panties. She smiled looking at the tent Ethan made of the bed sheet. Ethan opened a bag of Cheetos he'd picked up in the airport and poured it into his mouth.

"She loves us," Sadie whispered. Ethan held up orange fingertips to Sadie, and aped a smile with orange-edged teeth.

Ethan split open the empty bag, snapped it, and tossed the silver rectangle into the air.

"Ah....America," Sadie sighed, as the metallic leaf floated to the floor. They were young, and it was their first visit to the States. "What do you think she's planning?"

Ethan sprung up off the mattress and stepped into his jeans.

"I'll be back."

Althea walked into the big space of her loft. The floor smelled sweet from decades of wax. The heating pipes knocked and hissed. Her furniture was placed in groupings that floated in the space. Her banquet table was bare. She kept things clear. As she put an empty bottle quietly into the garbage, she stopped and examined the lipstick on the rim.

The thing about having a large space is that you feel it. You have an expanded sense of self. It's always with you. The space. And it becomes a part of you. You don't want to ever let it go. That's the problem - It's not you. And there's the tension between you and the space.

Ethan watched from the hallway as Althea wiped down the banquet table. He dug his hands in his pockets and pulled out the linings. He walked quietly into the loft and angled to kiss the back of her neck. Althea jumped. She could feel his liquored breath and animal smell, and when she turned to look at him she saw the orange-crusting lips. She squeezed away to the kitchen and began to stack the dirty dishes from the night before. She knew he was following her, thinking of how to position himself for the next approach.

The morning delivery trucks started up in the echoing lot next door, like pigs snorting in a farm yard, wallowing in the distant sound of traffic on Houston.

Sadie tip-toed down Althea's hallway, staying close to the wall as she caught her reflection in Althea's dressing room mirror.

"We're the same - you and I", Ethan said. He turned and saw his reflection in the window, and Sadie in the hall. He pulled on the pocket fabric and tucked it back in, circling the sofa, and rubbing his pockets against his cock.

"Well, no, actually Ethan, you are you and I am me, and you're here, and you've invited Sadie to come along, which is fine, because I like her, and I'm going to arrange a show for you in New York." Althea said as she scrubbed plates and placed them aside.

"And I'm going to make a dinner for you tonight and invite some people. And I'm going to ask you to be very nice, and not drink too much, and to charm everyone."

Ethan looked at her with intensity, but could read no thoughts. *What's her agenda?*

Althea walked to the front door, kicked off her slippers and put on her heels.

"I'll be in the gallery."

*

The gallery was two blocks away. Althea could come back later to freshen up for a meeting with the gallery owner, which she did not wish to mention to Ethan. It was a new job for her and she was only two months into it. An art publishing house decided to open a gallery and had hired Althea to be its director, knowing what an asset she would be. The job was a God-send for Althea. She'd been independent since her previous gallery partner had gone solo, leaving her yet again to fend for herself. The wolves had been at her door, so she'd come to disguise her voice when she answered the phone.

The CEO granted her free reign to develop the gallery program. Marcus Schumacher was the centerpiece and his introductory show was scheduled for the following month. She also had her eye on Ethan and had arranged to fly him over. He had made quite a stir in London and the British press was foaming over his bold, renegade exhibitions, which introduced the artwork of his classmates from Goldsmith College of Art.

The English needed all the excitement they could get under Margaret Thatcher, that coupon-clipping prude, who had cut as much funding to the Arts as she could. She even proposed selling museum collections - as she had begun to do with the Victoria and Albert Museum. However, things were beginning to look up. Thatcher was growing terribly unpopular and she seemed to be on the way out.

Ethan was a student of Friday's father and Althea was close with both of them, so she attended the openings of the shows Ethan had organized (resourceful bugger that he was) in warehouse spaces in London. Ethan's was the first art movement (known in the press as the YBAs) to emerge from England since Pop Art. Being English herself, Althea was perfectly positioned to introduce it in New York.

She was going to have to put up with Ethan's arsey wanker side, for which he was already notorious.

*

They would come tonight. They always did. She didn't even have to call. They knew. Mind connection. Telepathy...how she hated the thought of it. It worsened her headache. Hungover, the synapses connected differently, and they pounded. Friday and Melody would help prepare for the dinner...

Althea leaned on the metal rail as she climbed the concrete stairs to the 3rd floor of her gallery building. When she turned the corner she stopped abruptly. A heavy chain threaded through the front door pulls, above which a big orange sticker read: "Closed by the IRS. It is unlawful to remove this sign or this lock. Entry to the premises is a felony."

In a fog she walked to Brahms' studio on Bowery below Houston.

*

"I had no idea it was this bad," she told Brahms. "They scheduled a meeting today to discuss finances. But this happened first."

This was the last thing Brahms needed to hear. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, first looking at the floor, then at Althea. His studio assistant feigned indifference as he squinted at Brahms' new painting from the side to see if there were any fresh marks added by Brahms.

"The dinner party for Ethan is tonight. But what am I going to tell Marcus? His exhibition is scheduled for next month."

Brahms went to a stack of aluminum flat files covered with rare sea shells and opened a lower drawer, carefully pulling out a drawing, holding it gingerly by the corners.

"I was saving this." He handed her the drawing.

Fortune smiles on those who have waited for it, sometimes for a very long time, while mountains of challenges present themselves in the meanwhile. Althea walked with her drawing portfolio south on Bowery and turned right on Spring, rehearsing this evening's toast in her head. She stopped at the Hardware store and bought a spool of rope.

In her building's elevator she considered offering Brahm's drawing for a quick sale, perhaps to Sissy Ritz.

Her loft was quiet. Ethan and Sadie seemed to be out, so she dropped her keys on the coffee table and the spool of rope on the floor and collapsed on the sofa.

She dreamed that no one responded to her invitations to the dinner party but they showed up anyway - all at the same time. In a panic she sat on the toilet and it overflowed, sending water and brown logs flooding past her guests, who stared in horror.

*

When Bernie Shore heard the morning paper hit the doormat he rushed to the apartment door. He didn't sleep much. The Weekend Section of **The News** on Friday was the one to read for contemporary art and he eagerly waited for it. He wrote for **The Paper**, which came out on Thursday, so he had already submitted. Bernie tore open the paper to the Art in Review columns. As he read, the sound of typing echoed down the hall of the East Village Apartment he shared with Felicity Frank, the chief art critic for the **The News**. He read Felicity's review of B.E. Wright's show then stopped and listened. If only he could get a look at what she was typing now. She must be writing a feature for this Sunday, he thought. The sound of typing stopped so he got up and headed down the hall, pretending he was going to the bathroom. As they crossed paths Felicity realized what he was up to.

"No. You are *not* allowed to look," she said coldly.

"But I always show you mine," he pleaded. "Your review of B.E.'s show. What a pan! *Wow*: you realize she and John are going to be at Althea's tonight."

"And you think I'm worried. Excuse me."

"Go ahead."

She froze. "On second thought, you go."

Bernie passed Felicity and headed to the bathroom, even though he didn't have to go. He closed the bathroom door and looked out the window. His view of the canopy of trees in Tompkins Square calmed him. He and Felicity were high enough in the building so they didn't hear the squabbles of drug dealers and homeless people in the park.

Bernie heard the shrill zip of Felicity ripping paper from her typewriter and sighed with disappointment.

Felicity put on her coat and placed her new review in her purse, knocked on the bathroom door and said, "I'm going to **The News** to submit this. See you tonight."

*

B.E. looked sideways toward **The News** on the dining room table of her Greenwich Village Townhouse. She slid across the polished floors and grasped the bronze oval door knob of the walnut door. As she opened it, John clinked ice cubes into a glass, his back to her, fixing his first drink of the day.

B.E. took a deep breath and pulled back her shoulders.

"You're going tonight. To Althea's."

John shifted his eye from the bar and theatrically pivoted.

"But of course, my dear. Why, I wouldn't miss it."

Outside, a black cat pawed the glass balcony door.

"Are you going to let the cat in?"

"It peed on the couch." B.E. looked at John, and he glanced in the direction of the door. "You let it in. It's your cat."

John brushed the lint off his suit, lifted his chin, and put his drink down on the marble credenza. He had grown accustomed to these exchanges. Opening the door he whispered, "Here pussy pussy, come in. We missed you."

*

The right hand door of the monumental entrance to GODD GALLERY at 136 Wooster Street was always locked. Only the left hand door opened, but you would have to know that. Inside and through an empty vestibule with a polished concrete floor, an attractive young man and woman sat behind an elbow-height white lacquer divider. They organized slides with an air of detachment. When the phone rang Friday picked up the hand piece in a gentle sweep. "Godd Gallery," she said in a neutral tone. She rarely looked up. She had been instructed not to.

The young man next to her waited until they were alone and said: "I'll quit if you quit." Friday ignored him. He irritated her. Later she would record everything in the journal that she had started during her internship at **Vanity Fair**. The sound of people struggling with the door, trying to get into the gallery, gave her a sense of strength.

Icon Brahms shoves it down their throats, she mused. He was her role model.

Without lifting her head she was able to watch visitors center themselves after finally getting in the front door. Glancing to her right she saw their reflections as they entered the space, still struggling to adjust. It amused her. It wasn't what they said. It was what they *didn't* say that she found interesting. And there was so much that was never said.

*

Sadie's face came into focus over Althea as she woke from her dream. So clear, so open, Althea thought. She seemed so wonderfully throwaway.

"Did I say anything?" Althea asked.

"No...you..."

"Where's Ethan?" Althea interrupted.

Sadie shrugged. "Out doing something." She reached behind her head and scratched her shoulders underneath her T-shirt.

"Want some tea?" Sadie asked.

"Oh...yes... thank you dear." She found Sadie sweet. She propped herself up on the sofa pillow.

Althea was still tired. She struggled to sit up. Sadie walked to the kitchen counter and poured two cups of tea. She was so slim, her hips so perfect, Althea thought.

"Look what else I made," Sadie said, nodding in the direction of the chair, as she handed Althea a cup of tea.

Two nylon stockings stuffed with potatoes dropped from the club chair. The stockings were tacked to a stack of books from Althea's library, and the straps wound around the books as if they were choking them.

"It's called 'Old People.'"

What was it with Sadie? Althea thought. She seemed really smart and totally unaware at the same time.

"Sadie, did you answer the phone while I was out?"

"No. It did ring though, quite a bit."

"Well done. It's probably not important anyway."

Althea paused. "Perhaps the ringing provided you with something, for the making of your new piece..."

Sadie moved to the sofa and put her cup next to Althea's and sat down.

"My Mum was always in the kitchen. She loved it there. She used to bread steaks while she talked on the phone. I loved being about her, my dear Mum.."

Althea sensed she had an opening.

"What about Ethan. Do you two have plans?"

Sadie thought for a moment. "I dunno" she shrugged. "But Ethan does. I don't know what they are, but he's got plans."

*

Bernie filled his days with studio visits, He quoted Felicity often. She was more known. Most had forgotten his early career as a painter. He never spoke of it. He was motivated by his desire for power, respect, and visibility, which he discovered was much easier to gain as a critic than as a painter.

Pacing the floor, he implied that the artist he visited would have to make it worthwhile for him to feature their work. The artist dropped an envelope in front of Bernie and cash fell out of it. "Oops, I didn't mean to," said the artist with fake solicitation. Bernie leaned down and picked up the envelope in one movement so that the money cascaded back in and placed it in the pocket of his corduroy coat.

*

Walking on Prince, Ethan approached a large woman dressed in a flowing purple dress and fuchsia top. He brushed against her, then leaned in and nearly knocked her over.

"Excuse YOU!" she gasped as hair fell into her face.

"So sorry Madam," Ethan said, exaggerating his accent. "I most sincerely apologize," He bowed and turned. When she was out of sight he put her wallet into his backpack. With a leap in his step he headed north on Wooster Street, pulled on both doors of Godd Gallery, and strutted up to the reception desk. Friday saw someone's arm transgress the lacquer boundary in her peripheral vision. How dare they? She prepared for a show of forceful attitude until she looked up and saw Ethan.

"Oh, it's you."

Ethan enjoyed a challenge.

"Aren't you happy to see me?"

Ethan draped his arm over.

"Actually, I was planning on seeing you tonight at Althea's. So you're nothing but a preview."

It was impossible to drop the gallery neutrality, Friday thought. She adopted a persona once she sat in that Herman Miller chair behind the lacquer barrier. Why were her words coming out as they were?

Quitter fumbled with slides in acetate folders. He got up, put the folders in a file cabinet behind the desk, and walked into the exhibition space.

"See the show," Friday waved Ethan toward the gallery.

"I've seen it"

"Oh, I see. You're here to find Godd. Is that it?"

"Yes, I'm here to discover Godd." Ethan raised his head in a transcendent expression, stroking his Adam's apple lightly.

"Well, he's busy." She slammed her journal closed but Ethan had gotten a glimpse. Ignoring Ethan she shifted her attention to the Art in Review section of **The News** on her desk.

Ethan wandered into the exhibition space and gave Quitter an enquiring look, which was returned with a look of confused curiosity. Ethan pretended to be interested.

"Who was that?" Quitter slid into his chair.

"One of my father's students from London. Don't ask."

How Friday hated Quitter with his Chiclet teeth and gelled black hair.

Purple Dress approached the desk nervously. She was afraid to touch the lacquer. "Excuse me. Excuse me." she asked in a nasal voice. "Do you accept slides?" Friday didn't look up. She had seen Purple coming.

"No."

Purple was fumbling through her purse full of disorganized slide folders that she planned on dropping off at Soho galleries. She leaned forward looking into her purse.

"My wallet. My wallet's gone."

Quitter got up to escort her to the door.

In the chaos Friday didn't see Ethan lift the velvet rope in the rear of the exhibition space and disappear into Godd's Office and Private Executive Suite.

*

Having instructed Sadie to go see shows, Althea finally had time to form a plan. Her phone had been ringing and she had not answered it. It was time to rally. She *must* rally, she thought.

Sitting next to "Old People" in the nearby chair, she focused. How could she proceed?

Thank God I have a bit of inheritance cash socked away, she thought, But I really need to get a buyer for Brahms' drawing. After all, that's why he gave it to me. I've got to go through my Rolodex.

She thought of Melody, her new assistant, who must have been trying to call her.

What could she say? She must think of something to minimize the situation.

She brushed herself off. She stood up and took a deep breath. *Relax*, she told herself. *Relax*. Then she raced to her dressing room. She glanced at her reflection. *Not one of my better looks, but I'll persevere.*

But her Rolodex was not there.

She could have sworn that it was on her dressing room counter. She dug into the Dean and De Luca bags full of receipts...*not there*. Her head was swimming and she felt adrift.

She sat down in her dressing room chair and tried to re-construct her actions from the day leading to Ethan and Sadie's arrival.

I took it into the gallery...That's where it is. She paused, frustrated. And I can't get to it. What am I supposed to do?

Thinking of collectors' whose phone numbers she had not memorized, she thought of Melody and went to the phone.

*

After John left for work, B. E. looked at the **The News** placed on the edge of her Dining Room table. Had John read it? It looked unread. Her phone had not been ringing. A bad sign. Her show was up - Dharma Paintings. John's cat had pissed on the couch again and she was floating the cushions in the bathtub in lavender oil.

A carved Moroccan Tent Pole was the centerpiece of the room.

She began to move closer to the newspaper, approaching it slowly, sliding toward it, then... the cat brushed against her leg and ran away before she could kick it.

*

Brahms was a world famous artist. Althea was someone he cared about, but why did he hand her one of his drawings? Brahms' assistant thought. Should he say something?

Brahms paced his studio considering making a mark on one of his incomplete paintings as his assistant waited, cleaning and organizing, and broke the silence:

"Certainly generous of you to give her a drawing."

*

When Harrison saw Melody through his front door window, he knew something was wrong: Her eyes opened wide as the traffic lined up behind her. She looked beautiful in a double breasted black rain coat, the belt pulled tight. The morning sun highlighted her hair.

She tried not to cry. "I'm so sorry to come here in this state, but I don't know what to do. I have been calling and calling Althea. There's a lock on the gallery door and these horrible signs."

Harrison prepared some green tea in the kitchen. "I need that job. I can't go back to where I came from." She began to get upset again.

"Let's try her again." He picked up his phone and dialed Althea's number, stretching the long cord across the studio to Melody.

Melody inspected her make up in her compact mirror, while Althea's message machine picked up again with Melody's voice on it. She hung up without leaving another message.

She smiled at Harrison. "Remind me to record a new message when I finally get through to Althea."

*

Ethan passed a Newspaper vendor on Broadway and Houston who chanted the headline: "HE'S BITING ME HARD," and repeated in a throaty voice "HE'S BITING ME HARD." The front page photo showed a Polar Bear on a pile of snow, his teeth glinting. The sub-heading: "Bronx Kid Breaks Into Polar Bear Cage at Zoo. His Last Words." Ethan paid a quarter for the paper, crammed it into his back-pack and entered a nearby market. The rows of pastries in their white boxes fascinated him. He hadn't seen anything like them in England. He bought a box of Danish covered with powdered sugar and candy coated pecans.

Eating a piece of the Danish, he spotted Althea getting into a cab on Wooster Street. He hailed a cab quickly got in and followed her.

*

Felicity started at the front desk of the gallery in Althea's loft building - the first gallery in Soho. She stayed late and made herself indispensable. Her dedication was noticed. She worked late. An artist who also wrote hired her. Felicity absorbed his opinions. "Art reviews should read like sport reviews" he told her. She edited his art critical writing for **The Paper**, then came the phone call she would never forget: She was hired by **The News**.

After submitting for Sunday, Felicity didn't see any need to stay in **The News** building. The women in the Fashion section smiled condescendingly at her outfit: a sweater set, matching skirt, and cat glasses on a pearl chain. She looked down and quickened her pace to the elevator bank.

*

Althea's taxi driver leaned forward to get a good look at her in the rear view mirror.

"You OK, Miss?" He could see Althea was tired.

Althea perked up. "How long have you been driving?" She always asked drivers that.

"Twenty five years.."

"That's when I moved here..."

Althea could see that he was a great old New Yorker. "You must have seen a lot."

"I've heard even more." They laughed. He took a left onto Houston Street.

"Do you ever write it down?"

"It's all in the ole noggin." The driver looked at her in the rear view mirror. "Sounds like you're from across the sea."

"Yes, but I'm not going back. I'm here to stay."

Althea settled into the seat. He took a right on West Side Highway.

"I don't know what to do. My gallery has been closed. I don't know what to tell my artist."

"Just make it happen." the driver said, as he took a right on Washington from 14th and stopped at the corner.

"Just make it happen." Althea repeated as she put a twenty from her purse and into his hand. The wind off the Hudson blew her hair.

*

Marcus Schumacher was a model for J.Crew and he knew the power of his looks. After graduating from Yale, he moved to New York to model and was an immediate success. He constructed his art career over his role as an All-American model.

"Have you heard from Bernie today?" Felicity asked Marcus. She found an excuse to be in his neighborhood - the Meat-packing district.

Wearing a strange altered football jersey, Marcus stood around athletic equipment covered in vaseline. He talked about his theories while posing seductively for Felicity, becoming more animated, even frantic.

Felicity watched with admiration, nodding and smiling. He could have been speaking in any language. How warm she felt when she was around Marcus, as if someone had turned up the temperature of her insides.

Marcus stopped, surveying Felicity's expression and body language.

"Bernie and I are going to the opera tomorrow afternoon. Why don't you come with us?" Felicity offered. "Barbara Mangold will be there. She loves the opera. She has a great gallery." Felicity stood up and walked toward the door.

"I'm going to shows this afternoon," She hoped Marcus would ask if he could join her. A piece of plastic coated with Vaseline stuck to Felicity's shoe and lodged in the door, leaving it slightly ajar.

After Felicity left, Marcus ran to a louvered closet door around the corner and opened it. Althea was genuinely surprised by what she had overheard. "I should do this more often. Amazing what one can hear. However, it's good, very good, that Felicity and Bernie have taken to you. Don't you *dare* go to that opera. I don't want you anywhere near Barbara Mangold."

Althea had introduced Marcus to Felicity and Bernie. She was pleased that the art critical power couple had immediately taken such an interest in Marcus, but wished that she had been included.

She paced around the athletic equipment, being careful not to brush against it. Even before Marcus' first solo show, she was becoming a part of the approving choir and feared losing him. *After all*, she thought, *I discovered him*.

"Something has come up with the gallery. Which is why I came by. I need to reschedule your show. My backers have run into a problem, but I have a number of ideas...and alternatives. Meanwhile, don't listen to the rumors. And don't go to the opera with Felicity and Bernie."

*

Felicity turned the corner of the dusty hallway outside of Marcus' studio. Her shoe had vaseline on it and she leaned down to clean it with a tissue from her purse. When she stood up, she thought she saw something down the hallway and hurriedly entered the elevator. Ethan returned to his previous spot behind Marcus' door, which was now slightly ajar, making his eavesdropping even easier.

Ethan passed Hogs and Heifers Saloon on the way out of Marcus' studio. It was dark and Willie Nelson was playing on the jukebox. A young woman with too much make-up poured shots for bikers on bar stools. Over the bar hung not-so-fresh-kill covered with bras piled so high they almost cupped the liquor bottles. Ethan opened his backpack and pulled out the **The Post**. He bit through the pastries and aluminum and growled as he shook his head violently. The pastries began to fall on the floor around him as he limped toward the bar, snorting, and exhaling powdered sugar as the paper floated around him, saying out of the side of his mouth: "He's biting me hard. He's biting me hard."

"YEAH!" The bartender pushed up, her breasts heaving through her black top, with a bottle of tequila in her hands. The bikers parted. Ethan dropped the pastries and headed her way. "Please Ma'am, may I have some more?" He tilted his head back and opened his mouth. She aimed the tequila toward his tongue and it shot into him a fiery golden stream.

*

Melody watched Harrison paint. Finally, she began to relax.

Her coat hung on the wall away from the paint. The Holland Tunnel traffic outside had died down. She loved the sound of Harrison's boots stamping across the wood floor, and the sound of the brush as he swept it across the canvas in arcs. She looked at Harrison's hands covered with black paint.

She looked at her hands. How she cared for them, even when she had to unfreeze her credit card from a block of ice in her freezer to pay for a manicure. She could make any task seem both effortless and glamorous. By virtue of her honesty and total lack of malice, she transcended any self-consciousness in her actions.

Harrison finished painting and washed the paint off his arms and elbows in the kitchen sink looking toward Melody. Then he lifted each leg into the sink washing the paint splatters off. The foamy black spiraled down the drain. He stood on a towel and dried his legs. The room smelled sweet with the earthy scent of linseed oil, canvas and pigment.

"I don't want to get paint on you." Harrison's shorts and shirt were crusty with long triangles of dried paint, splashed with glossier wet paint. The original fabric was barely visible.

"Why don't I change."

"You don't need to." Melody said, shaking her head. Melody brushed her hands downward across her hair and cupped her hands under her chin, creating a heart shape with her face. She sighed contentedly, letting her elbows float into the air.

Sometimes creativity can energize a space, like an electrified egg. For that fleeting moment the air seems milky, pregnant.

As a kid in a small town in Alabama Harrison had been harassed for being different. But what did they want? Would they really be happy if everyone was the same? They handed him the ticket to freedom, because no matter how he tried, he would always be ridiculed by them.

Melody grew up in a trailer park in Key West so she thought all men were gay. Only as a student at RISD and recently in New York did she realize there were exceptions to her previous assumptions about men and their desires.

In their home grown American way, Harrison and Melody had learned to share their feelings with only a trusted few, and those few had to earn their trust over time. Insistent questions about were politely avoided, and downplayed, usually by changing the subject, because they had learned that most people don't deserve to know.

They sat for a long time without speaking.

How wonderful it was, Harrison thought, that Melody didn't talk about herself.

How wonderful it was, Melody thought, that Harrison didn't talk about himself.

In their silence, their figures formed a heart, leaning slightly toward each other. Their hands lay very close to each other but not touching... yet.

"The weather is very beautiful today," Harrison said finally.

"Yes, it is," Melody responded.

"I think it's the most beautiful day I've ever seen."

And then they kissed.

*

Ethan was drunk. He returned to Althea's and found Sadie hovering around a pile of books with stockings full of potatoes tacked to them.

"What if I make the stack of books higher?" She looked at Ethan.

"Sod that," he slurred. "We've got to get out of here". He took off his shirt and threw it on the floor, kicked off his boots with two thuds, then unzipped and pushed his pants into a pile on the floor. He waved his arms about in jerky movements, collapsed on the sofa, and passed out.

Sadie thought about waking him then decided to let him sleep. He'd be rested by the Dinner Party.

She took a melon from Althea's kitchen counter and placed it over Ethan's private parts, moved his inert arms so that his hands held it in place, and took a Polaroid. With her Swiss Pocket knife she cut a slice out of the melon and took another Polaroid, then placed the wedge back. She took a baguette from the kitchen and placed Ethan's hands around it and took another.

*

Sheldon Shepherd was on a radical weight loss diet. He wore black pants, an untucked white shirt and a large unconstructed black coat. He had a beard and wore a black hat. A native New Yorker, he had returned from several years in London as the director of a gallery many regarded as the best in the world. His contribution was a major part of its success. Sheldon's advice made millions of pounds by resuscitating mid career German, English and American painters. When Sheldon was not around, his boss bragged about him, calling him "My Genius." His boss was a sadist who required his employees to submit to his twisted authority, and every time they had an argument, he ate a box of chocolates from the fancy shop around the corner. While Sheldon was working there he had gained over 150 pounds.

Finally not being to take any more abuse, Sheldon left. He was not clear on what path to take in New York, so he talked with Brahms about possibilities. He had brought Brahms' work to his London employer's attention, which had proven to be a huge success financially and critically for Brahms.

Sheldon waddled around Brahms' studio, looking at Brahms' new work. His mid section shifted like an attached flexible inner tube. "Beautiful," he exclaimed as he stroked his beard. "Just beautiful."

"I've been speaking with Harrison about working as an independent agent. What's emerging is the possibility of working with galleries without having to open a space. I could take a percentage and share with the galleries. He didn't intend to come on too

strong, knowing that Brahms had commitments which preceded Sheldon's return to New York.

Brahms stood at a distance silhouetted against the large glass windows facing Bowery. He had sent out his assistant so he and Sheldon could be alone. He was beginning to think about how it could work. He would have to somehow extract himself from Godd, as well as his current gallery.

"What about doing a work on paper show? We could propose it to the Dia Foundation." Brahms raised his eyebrows.

"That way, we could avoid showing these works in the galleries. Wouldn't it be great to steer clear of dealers?"

Brahms could commit to showing drawings without an outright conflict of interest with other galleries. They were only interested in his painting and considered his work on paper to be beneath them. Then, having tried that, he could consider changing his representation.

"I'm going to Harrison's to make a similar proposal."

Sheldon weighed every word, often punctuating his speech with "um's" but he was clearly thoughtful, perhaps brilliant. A child prodigy, he had formed his first art collection as a teenager who scoured thrift shops and discount auctions, recognizing bargains that no one else did.

*

Shopping was a way B.E. could ignore her review, and that horrible bitch who wrote it. She couldn't face her studio. It was impossible to work with a show up - exposed, ready for everyone to project their feelings all over it, sometimes in print. Her work hit tender ticklish spots - spots that Felicity didn't like having touched, causing beads of sweat to form under her buttoned up collar. The fact that the untrained eye could find B.E.'s work pleasurable, even profound, was the greatest threat of all to Felicity: It did not require her as an interpreter.

B.E. tried on a black outfit in her favorite boutique, a spare concrete double height room on Wooster. If she couldn't erase Felicity from her thoughts she could protect herself with fabric armor.

While B.E. was in the dressing room, Felicity rounded the corner. She had decided to try updating her wardrobe. She was sick of those girls in the Style Section looking down on her. Besides, she could make herself more appealing for Marcus.

As B.E. looked at her reflection in the boutique's full length mirror, another person entered the reflection from behind her, emerging from the adjoining dressing room. B.E. squinted in disbelief. It was Felicity... and she was wearing the same outfit.

First B.E., then Felicity, screamed. The staff, normally cool and collected, clutched their ears. The sound echoed off the concrete walls and floor, turning the spare boutique into a scream box.

*

Friday and Quitter heard screams down the street, but were distracted something closer - the sound of leather shoes stepping across the concrete floors, getting louder and louder and closer and closer. They sat up as if an electric shock had been run through their chairs. Friday held out a stack of messages to him, but Godd didn't stop as he headed for the door.

"Are you coming back today?" Godd didn't answer. He didn't even look at Friday.

Motivated by competition and ruthlessness, he was determined to establish himself as the King of the New York art world. He changed his last name from Godwin in a provocative strategy to intimidate.

His first job was working for a Hollywood studio as an errand boy when the movie "Shampoo" was being made. Delivering something to Warren Beatty's Suite at the Bel Air Hilton, he saw Julie Christie in a Bikini on the balcony, and decided that was what he wanted.

He opened a poster gallery in Venice which grew into a chain of poster galleries, and then sold. He took the money and opened a gallery in Beverly Hills in which he showed New York art stars. Everything was going well until he was forced to leave the State for making obscene phone calls to a woman who had recorded him and pressed charges. However, he turned this seeming setback into a huge advantage and traded his Beverly Hills home with one of his collectors for a town house in the Upper East Side and moved from LA to NYC.

Daily talk spread about his record breaking deals. The New York art world had not seen this kind of bravado. Godd began to hire experts from Auction houses who knew the provenance and locations of key art works that he sought to sell. His instincts were flawless. The only problem was when one of his staff mistook the present owner of a work for the potential buyer and offered them something they already owned at a price that they had not agreed to. This kind of slip was punished by Godd with a tantrum in his Executive Suite intended to lower his employee into even greater submission.

There was also gossip that he intended to represent the most important living artists. A rumor spread like wildfire that he had offered Brahms One Million Dollars to sign with his gallery. He started that rumor.

He imitated Cary Grant with grey suits that complimented his silver hair. He frequented The Four Seasons in the Seagrams building because of its masculine, understated design, accompanied by an endless stream of beautiful women, some of whom worked for him and some who offered him what he wanted - sex and access to money and power. He remained unmarried.

It amused him how easy it was to get what he wanted, but there was one thing he had not managed, and she sat at the front desk of his gallery at 136 Wooster.

*

Althea returned from grocery shopping to discover a sign propped on "Old People" in hand written scrawl: "WE'RE NAPPING> LATER> XO E AND S." She sighed and unwrapped the fish and vegetables and began to wash them.

Althea enjoyed giving dinner parties and hosted them often. People clamored to be invited. She was a bell-weather and people listened to her and followed her lead and yet she did not benefit financially from her advice. She always seemed near the brink. Her Soho loft was a long term sub-let and she lived in fear that the lease holder was going to ask her to leave. She depended on the generosity of others, like Brahms. By making herself central, as a host and as a catalyst, she made herself indispensable.

*

After spending the day at Harrison's, Melody went to 136 Wooster to see her best friend. Melody didn't want to tell Friday that Althea's Gallery had been closed, but Friday had heard. Word spread fast. Friday decided to leave early with Melody since Godd was not returning. Quitter could close the gallery.

Even in jaded Soho, the sight of Friday and Melody turned heads. They crossed Wooster, avoiding the street vendors. Melody, with her black rain coat and golden hair in huge curls (set with an orange juice can), was a classic American beauty; Friday with her tribal clothing, combined in unique and savvy ways - items that she had collected from her travels - was the International Beauty. If they had gone left, they may have run into Brahms and Godd - but Brahms didn't want Friday to see him meeting her boss, so he had requested another location. She was going to be part of the conversation.

They were silent as they waited for Althea's elevator and looked at the only decor on the wall of the matte green lobby - an inspection sticker framed in a battered aluminum frame. Someone had slipped it out of the sleeve and signed it 'Ronald Raygun 11/14/1989.'

In the elevator, Melody started to say something but before she could Althea opened the door.

"I'm so glad you are here. Melody, I tried you all day."

"I've tried you too."

"Anyway, it's all going to be fine. We'll set up here tomorrow." She touched Melody on the back, then Friday. How happy Althea was to see them and how much better she felt already.

"I've got a spool of rope because there's nothing like a nautical theme. Let's weave it together, or braid it ...or something...I leave it to you."

Althea opened the refrigerator, removed platters, and placed them on the counter, took the cover off one and emptied it into another, she said: "Combine and it will add."

"I like your boots, Friday."

"Mother had some like these."

"How is your Mother?" When Friday was younger, her father divorced her mother and came out as gay. Her mother was still pissed off. She became a real estate agent. Her father went back to London and became a teacher and father figure to Ethan, Sadie, and a whole generation of Young British Artists who Friday grew up knowing.

"Last time I saw her, she asked me to leave."

"Why?"

"I was putting mayonnaise in the potato salad. She doesn't like mayonnaise. 'I want you out of here. I want you out of here,' Friday imitated her mechanical voice. When I came out of my bedroom my suitcase was at the front door."

Melody hadn't heard this story and it made her sad. Her mother died when she was nine.

Friday looked in the pot on the stove. It was empty. Althea was usually not so late and disorganized. Poor Althea, Friday thought. Something was up.

"Who's coming?" Friday inquired.

"Well, let's see...Marcus...Ethan and Sadie, who you know, Brahms...well, I hope he comes...Felicity and Bernie, Sheldon and his new artist Harrison, and of course, B.E. and John.

Gasping, Friday asked, "Did you read Felicity's review of B.E.'s show?"

"We mustn't talk about that, especially in front of B.E. Now, I have to change," Althea said as she went down the hallway to her bedroom. Looking in the mirror she could see her reflection with Melody in the Dining area, like a split screen.

Intrigued, Melody whispered, "Do you have a copy?"

Friday pulled it out of her journal in her purse.

'I'll skip to the end, when she pulls out the knives.....'Dry fly-away brushstrokes form the chaotic mess of these unresolved works, titled "Dharma paintings. Once again B.E. Wright goes for easy solutions that lock the bounce out..."

Melody, covering her mouth to suppress the laugh, completed the sentence: "...but keep the mixed metaphors coming!"

"B.E. must have taken an entire bottle of pills."

"Do you really think she will come?"

"She wouldn't dare not show up."

Althea entered, changed, and Friday closed her journal and returned it to her purse.

"Oh yes, Marguerite Chopin may come also." Althea looked at Friday. "Have you spoken with Brahms today?"

"No, we haven't spoken since..." but she was interrupted by the door buzzer.

*

The sound of muffled talking woke Ethan. Sadie lay with her back to him on top of the bed-spread. Ethan grabbed the bottom of her t-shirt and attempted to pull it up her back and over her head.

"Don't" she said quietly.

"But I want to." Ethan said.

He saw the Polaroids in her back pocket in the dim light. "What are these?" He pulled them out and looked.

Sadie jumped off the bed. "Never mind." Sadie said, attempting to take them back.

"You took pictures me privates, with fruits and vegetables, and bread!"

"Yeah." Sadie said.

*

Sheldon and Harrison walked up West Broadway. Between Spring and Prince, they passed Brahms' gallery, where she was the Queen of the New York art world and Godd sought to replace her as King. Godd's strategy involved stealing her most admired artist... Brahms.

She stole Brahms from a corporate giant on 57th street - it was an easy steal - Brahms was dying to get out. She knew Brahms from her first job at the front desk of a Soho gallery that showed him and his work was a major part of her aesthetic foundation. She moved on to create her own gallery and made her name with Neo-Expressionism - a movement that linked New York, Germany, and Italy in the early to mid-1980s. At that time, Brahms' work was out of fashion. He broke the tight fields of his monochromes with gestural grids and the results were considered transitional.

As Brahms developed his new work, he introduced more gesture, forming a calligraphic field that drew upon Asian Scroll Painting but introduced a system of mark making that was undeniably his own. His new work was more harmonious with the Neo-Expressionism that she had been showing in that it too was an investigation into the renewal of painting through mark making, paying tribute to the great modernist legacy of everyone from Picasso to Picabia.

She wore Chanel Suits and she sought to intimidate, successfully. She was famous for her temper. However, she had finally met her match with Godd.

Five members of her staff stood behind the glass-front dressed in pressed white shirts and khaki pants, in front of a pristine white wall upon which was the artist's name in her trademark typeface. The artist had previously shown across West Broadway. They waited for the lady and her staff who used to show this artist's work to leave at the end of the day, so they could jeer. Clearly, she had instructed her staff to do this.

Harrison and Sheldon paused and stood mid-block on the sidewalk watching. They made an interesting pair.

"Can you believe this?" Sheldon took a cigarette out of his coat pocket, lit it, and blew smoke rings toward the gallery. "Dealers," he said with resignation. "Dealers."

Sheldon didn't see himself as a dealer. He blew another smoke ring and dropped his cigarette to the sidewalk, fanning his hands out symmetrically in a gesture to indicate his indignation.

"Dealers...Let's go. Let's find some sanity."

They took a right on Prince Street and a left on Wooster Street.

"I have an idea for showing Brahms' new paintings...not with \$he, and not with Godd, god forbid. Harrison laughed as Sheldon continued: "I've been talking with the Ritz Foundation about it. Their space is perfect, and it's not a gallery. You'd think they would jump at the chance, but they haven't." Harrison thought for a moment. He understood what people with huge egos were like.

"Have you tried letting them think they had the idea?" Harrison asked.

*

Ethan appeared framed in the doorway holding Sadie's arm behind him. Sadie wrestled free and escaped.

"Here's my guest of honor," Althea announced upon seeing him. "And of course you know Ethan, Friday."

"And how." Friday whispered in the kitchen. "Hello Ethan," her tone lifted, "and hello Sadie," she said smiling. She couldn't imagine how Sadie could be tolerating Ethan, even to get a trip to New York. Sadie went to Friday and kissed her.

"Sadie has made this wonderful piece," said Althea, pointing to 'Old People' and we must be very careful not to disturb it.

Melody stood at the table trying to figure out what do with the rope. She was thinking of braiding it, but it was going to require some major work. "Hi. I'm a little tied up at the moment." Althea walked over and Ethan followed. "What am I supposed to do?" Melody asked her.

Ethan saw Sadie's pocket knife on the coffee table and fetched it, returning to Melody and Althea.

"I can help." He took the rope that Melody was wrestling with and pulled it into a loop. "I like to make knots."

Melody was relieved. "It's so nice to meet you. "

"You see, Melody, everything always works out." Althea was relieved to see them hitting it off. She went down the hallway to her bedroom.

Ethan made a noose around his neck. "You see how this works?" He followed Althea into the hallway and the rope advanced, turning the spool over, as Melody jumped out of its way.

*

As she entered her apartment, Felicity was relieved to hear Bernie typing. She removed the key, quietly closed the door. She had covered a lot of territory - many of the Soho galleries - but that episode in the Boutique had really drained her.

She placed her glasses on the bed stand and lay down. In a moment she heard Bernie's typing stop, and the sound of his sock feet padding down the hallway toward the bedroom.

Bernie leaned against the bedroom door. "I suppose you heard the news." His shirt sleeves were rolled up and he was clenching and relaxing his right hand.

Felicity had dimmed the lights in the room. "Can't you just let me rest for a few minutes?" She found the bright light in the hallway too harsh. There were too many books out there that she wanted to forget about for a while.

"Althea's gallery is closed."

Lying still, her head propped on a pillow, Felicity responded faintly, "Yes I saw that."

"Well...is that all you can say?" Bernie turned up the dimmer to full light. "What is Marcus going to do?"

"Bernie, turn the light back down."

"You should get up. We're going to Althea's."

"I don't think I can."

"But if we don't, Althea will know that we are not on her side."

"I don't want to go." Felicity paused and finally volunteered. "Besides, I invited him to the opera so that he can meet Barbara Mangold."

"You talked to Marcus today?"

Felicity got off the bed quickly, surprising Bernie. She reached past him and dimmed the light, saying in a more insistent voice: "O.K. We'll go to Althea's tonight, even though I don't know what she's going to do," and she threw herself back on the bed.

*

"Come in. We're not ready..." Althea said to Harrison and Sheldon. "...and we could use some help."

Sheldon was shy. He didn't like parties. "I just came by for a moment." he whispered to Althea. They walked to the kitchen. "But I'll help."

"I thought you'd never ask." Friday knew Sheldon. He was her father's best friend in London. Friday and Sadie stood together behind the counter chopping the fish in grids.

"How are you Sadie?" He was uncomfortable, somehow, even though he was trying to make appearances.

"Alright. Keeping busy." Sadie knew that Sheldon didn't take her seriously.

Friday handed Sheldon some scallions and a small cutting board.

"Oh, is that it," looking down at the scallions on the cutting board. "I'm an onion chopper?"

"Scallions are more important than *onions*. Much more." Friday said. "You're a scallion master. We're depending on you." She reached out to stroke Sheldon's shoulder and he shivered. He wasn't used to being touched.

Harrison loved parties. He took in the chaos of the room. He knew that Althea's skill was to turn the tasks over to the guests.

Melody was trying to get his attention. She was mouthing the word 'Help' so Harrison quickly said "Hi" and waved to the folks at the kitchen as he headed to Melody.

"Other than the fact that the guest of honor has a noose around his neck I'd say this is really shaping up into a wonderful party. Oh yes, and I may not have a job but you know that." Melody and Harrison laughed.

Harrison looked at Melody and said melodically: "Whatever gets you through the night...."

Melody untangled the rope around her high heels, and sang: "Is alright. Is alright."

*

Ethan cornered Althea in her closet.

"So your gallery is closed?"

"No. I mean Yes. Actually it's a No made up of Yeses. I mean, a Yes made up of Nos."

"What the hell?"

"Oh, come on Ethan. As if you don't understand? You know how it is getting backers."

"Then why don't you lead me around tonight by this?" He held the end of the noose out to her.

"Why are you being this way?"

*

In Althea's elevator, B.E. hatched her latest conspiracy theory.

"She followed me today. Do you know that? She's obsessed with me."

"Perhaps she admires your style and wants to imitate it." John had already knocked back a couple more drinks. He couldn't even tell if he was being sarcastic. How he wished she would shut up. He wondered what she would be like if she'd just let it all go, her attachments to politics and gossip.

"You don't understand." she replied. "You have no idea."

*

Harrison stood on a dining room chair dropping ropes that he'd tied to a beam, while Melody stepped on the rope-ends, pulled another rope horizontally from the spool, and weaved it through the verticals, looping it and knotting it at each intersection. Once the ropes were tied at the top, Harrison jumped off the chair and helped Melody hold the horizontals.

Ethan breathed down Melody's neck and trimmed Melody's knots with Sadie's knife.

Letting themselves in, B.E. and John immediately went in opposite directions. B.E. headed toward the Net. John joined Friday and introduced himself to Sadie and Sheldon.

Althea placed bottles of wine and mineral water on the banquet table next to a huge bowl of oranges, then she kissed B.E. on both cheeks.

"I'm sooooo glad you could make it." Althea exaggerated her English accent when she needed to. "Please meet Ethan, my guest of honor, and do you know...."

She went to the kitchen and made a drink for John - his usual - Scotch on the rocks. "John you are looking exceptionally handsome," Althea said handing him the drink. Holding the drink in his small, delicate hands, John's mid-section and double chin quivered as he laughed nervously. The cooking was going well, Althea thought, looking past John for a moment. Friday sautéed the scallions Sheldon had chopped with celery and spices. She and Sadie then pushed the cubes of fish into the pot.

"Friday, listen to this lady. You will go far." John laughed like an automatic weapon firing.

"Oh, I have and I will," Friday said raising her eyebrows. Friday always had a comeback. She thought about her diary, and the evening had only begun. There was so much more to be revealed. Friday chopped while Sadie opened the refrigerator behind her. It was a tight space and their rear ends touched for a moment. John was watching and reacted. Friday felt the photos in Sadie's pocket brush against her.

"What's in your pocket?"

Sadie showed her photos of Ethan with a melon vagina. Friday burst into laughter, nearly crying.

"Oh. Oh. You have made my evening. Thank you!" Friday exclaimed. They both looked at the melon on the counter and laughed again. Sadie grinned and returned the Polaroids to her back pocket.

Sheldon propped on a stool, steadying himself. He wished he could go. John had turned to him and was asking him about his business plans.

Turning to Althea, John clenched his lockjaw. "And you. You've got it all." He swallowed and put his hand on Althea's back.

At that moment, Althea realized something important: She could get John to back her new gallery. Oh why hadn't she thought of it before? It was so obvious. John could get her out of this mess.

*

Godd sat with Brahms in a narrow Japanese restaurant. The meeting wasn't going well. They were both silent. Godd thought of a fresh approach. He leaned forward and stared at Brahms in the eyes until Brahms looked away, pretending to be distracted by a waitress.

"I can read your mind," Godd said calmly, continuing his stare down.

Brahms cleared his throat and said nothing. He resisted the "Then what am I thinking?" hook that Godd dangled.

Brahms had made it clear that Godd couldn't come to his studio to see his new paintings. Godd was into the power more than the art - power over everyone he could pull into his web.

"You're thinking," Godd continued after the long pause, "how can you possibly repay me for my generosity."

"I am, hmmm." Brahms responded.

"And you're going to deliver your God-daughter Friday to me."

*

Turning to B.E., Harrison held up his glass, "Congratulations on your show." He could not believe he was at a party with her and Brahms, whom he had grown up studying.

"Wonderful...Heroic..." Melody gushed. "I mean your show, not our net." She actually hadn't seen the show. It was all the way uptown. One of the problems with having a gallery job is that galleries have the same hours, so how is one to see anything?

"I pull it off..." said B.E., shifting her jaw as if she had marbles in her mouth, "I pull it off."

"Do you do that often?" Harrison asked nervously. Ethan stuck his head into the conversation.

"Talking with Brahms or 'Pulling it Off?'" Ethan interjected with a sly grin.

B.E. shot Ethan a withering look and turned her back to him and addressed Harrison and Melody.

"Once a year or so I do a dialogue with another artist."

Ethan interrupted. "I curate exhibitions with lots of other artists in London."

B.E. looked around. "Excuse me." Thinking John was flirting with Friday, B.E. went and put her hand on his shoulder.

Buoyed, Althea began to float around her loft. The party was turning out. She floated to the kitchen. Friday was talking with John and B.E., Sadie was having a cigarette with Sheldon, and Melody was having a glass of wine with Ethan and Harrison.

Now, if she could just find her Rolodex.

Seeing Sadie and Sheldon looking out her window, she went to tell them: "My view is now blocked by that condo tower across the street. The people in it wear identical grey suits. The only thing on their walls is a TV. We never speak."

Althea floated toward the door as Felicity and Bernie entered. "Perfect!" she thought. B.E. was at the kitchen bar, so she could float Felicity and Bernie toward the net and let them get caught there, away from harm.

"I'm *so* glad you both could make it!" Althea was practically pushing them in the direction of the net. Felicity didn't seem comfortable. Could she know she had overheard her earlier? Marcus wouldn't have told her, would he?

"I've been so looking forward to introducing you to Ethan." In contrast to dour Felicity, Bernie lit up. He had been looking forward to meeting this new artist / curator from London he had been hearing about.

"You *must* see this wonderful net he's made with Melody and Harrison." But while Bernie remained by Althea's side, Felicity dropped back to look at "Old People," so Althea introduced Bernie to Ethan.

Melody and Harrison knew Bernie so they shook hands and joined Felicity.

"What an honor for you to have Althea's support," Bernie said to Ethan. "She's the bellwether of New York and London contemporary art. The force behind the scene."

"Oh, Bernie." Althea acted embarrassed. "What can I get you and Felicity?"

"Althea's alright," Ethan said, his accent strong. "She's a good old gal. I like her."

Felicity and Bernie couldn't help but laugh.

Melody knew that part of her role was to keep things running smoothly. Felicity had reviewed Harrison's work in **The News**; and he couldn't believe that an art critic was socializing with the very artists she wrote about. He found himself rather shy around Felicity, so Melody took the lead. "I admire you so much." She took a cue from what she just heard Bernie say. "It's such an honor to know you."

Felicity smiled, slightly. Harrison noticed a sadness in her eyes but resisted the urge to look away, as Felicity's guard dropped.

"Who made this?" Felicity looked toward "Old People."

Melody jumped in. "Sadie. She's with Ethan. She's over there." Melody was relieved at a neutral line of conversation.

Althea had told her not to bring up Felicity's critical writing.

The fish stew was ready. Friday looked up at the ceramic tureen on the top of the kitchen cabinets, but it was too high for her to reach. She didn't want to stand on the counter in front of John. She looked around the room to see who could help.

"Harrison." He seemed to need to get away from Felicity. "You're needed here."

It only took a second for Harrison to take down the tureen. Behind him, B.E. was talking with John. She seemed angry. John seemed like he was trying to placate her.

"How's it going?" Harrison asked, as he lifted up the lid of the stew. Friday faced away from B.E. and John. She handed Harrison the oven mitts and picked up the hot pot and poured it into the tureen.

"Take this to the table" Friday whispered.

"Should we move the net into the center of the room?" Harrison laughed.

"Yesss.." Friday hissed under her breath.

Althea's front door has been left open so Brahms watched the party from the foyer. He saw a strange young man with a noose around his neck talking with Althea and Bernie. Felicity must be here also, he thought. Just then, the fellow with the noose spotted him and headed toward him. He looked like a character from Dickens, like a rag-a-muffin street kid, with an ill fitting blue coat and wrinkled white shirt under which he had tucked his noose tie, and loose straggly black hair.

"I don't want to talk to him," Brahms thought. He crossed his arms.

"Hi. I'm Ethan," He reached out to shake hands.

"Brahms. Icon Brahms." Brahms didn't extend his hand. He caught Althea's eye, who started to head in their direction.

"Oh, I know who you are. Yes indeed. You're the big man around here. How 'bout if you lend me some money. Say one hundred dollars to start with."

Althea ran over saying: "I'm so glad you've introduced yourselves. Please have dinner, you two."

Bernie talked about the opera that he and Felicity were going to attend tomorrow. Melody and Harrison listened. Felicity finally started coming to life.

"You've just got to go," Bernie insisted while Felicity nodded in agreement. "You can get standing room. Often, people offer you their seats at intermission because they're leaving. Anyway, the first fifteen minutes of this opera is modulations on one note. I believe it's B flat, or is it E flat? Which one is it, Felicity?"

Harrison wondered if Bernie's humor was intentional. It had to be. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"It's E Flat Major," Felicity said flatly, pursing her lips.

Friday escorted B.E. and John to the Banquet table. There was a close call when B.E. leered in Felicity's direction so Friday quickly redirected B.E.'s attention to the net. "Don't you love it?"

Althea escorted Brahms and Ethan to the table. After they served themselves Brahms joined B.E. and Sheldon.

"Only I understand your work. Do you remember when She called your profound paintings "underwater basket weaving?" B.E. whispered to Brahms as she nodded toward Felicity.

'She should only write about pottery," Brahms said softly.

No one ever became a famous artist accidentally. Myths circulated that it was easy, but it was never easy. One had to intend it. One had to want it really, really badly. An important indication of one's intentions to be unique, special, designated... was the name one went by: A name that could be repeated infinitely, printed in leather bound volumes, and stenciled on hallowed walls. Famous artists' names had to have a hook, a ring of fame and fortune.

Jackson McCoy became Jackson Pollock.
Philip Goldstein became Philip Guston.
Lenore Krassner became Lee Krasner.
Vosdanig Atoian became Arshile Gorky.

Bruce Brahms was Bruce's father's name as well so his parents shortened his middle name - Eisenhower - to Ike, promoting the fact that they were distant relatives of the President and General at the same time. Parents tend to be ambitious for their children - an extension of their own self-importance. So it was easy for Bruce Jr. or "Ike" to become "Icon." What better name to have as an artist than Icon Brahms?

B.E. was an abbreviation of Beatrice Elizabeth which got shortened to Bea. When Bea was accepted to Cal Arts she decided to arrive with her new name - B.E., which conveniently didn't require a change of pronunciation. It could be pronounced as "Bea" was. And...she could "Be Right."

John was getting increasingly drunk. He spoke with Sheldon, who was attempting to explain his plans as an independent artists' agent. "Now, tell me: Do you really think art is a good investment?" John asked.

Sheldon was restless and didn't feel like talking about it. He sensed there was trouble brewing and it was past time for him to leave. He offered the canned response he had given so many times to this predictable question:

"Anyone I know who's collected art has told me that when down times are over, it's worth more than they could have ever possibly imagined."

Sheldon wasn't going to have dinner, so he said good-night to John and Brahms and the others, then waved to Harrison and left.

Althea sensed the danger had passed and signaled for Felicity and Bernie to serve themselves. While she did, Melody chimed in: "Are you starving? Go ahead! You two are so thin you need to go ahead of me."

While Bernie was in line, he turned to Althea and asked: "Where's Marcus? Isn't he supposed to be here?"

"He's working late in the studio," Althea said, covering for the fact that she didn't know. Felicity was listening, but she didn't say anything. Althea wondered if she had lost Marcus. Was he out finding another gallery?

Ethan stood eating at the corner of the Kitchen. He turned to Sadie: "Well, aren't you going to get something?" He inhaled his food and clanked his plate into the sink. Disgusted, Sadie joined Melody and Harrison, who welcomed Sadie to go ahead of them in line.

Across the street, Marcus looked up at the party, determined not to attend. He was jealous of Ethan. He strained to recognize who was visible through Althea's windows.

Althea tapped her glass with a spoon. She had rehearsed a toast to welcome Ethan, who stood near her. She'd planned to make his connection to Friday and Friday's father, and indirectly to Brahms. She had planned to thank Friday for always being such a help. She had planned to thank Felicity and Bernie for attending and for their continuing support. She had planned to make a special thanks to Melody and her continuing invaluable role as her assistant.

They waited expectantly.

In that suspended moment, she looked at the beauty of the banquet table, the play of the candlelight - flickers of blue - purple blue - in the flames and the way they cast vibrating shadows through the net onto the wall behind. All of this had happened because of her, but she no longer cared.

She looked at Ethan with the net behind him, like a Pirate on a Ship of Fools. Was there a hint of confusion and questioning in his look, or was it just another smirk?

The atmosphere turned gold, like they were all ancient insects encased in a huge block of amber. She looked at the net. It was wonky, weird.

Nothing Mattered.

As auction results continued to break all previous records, with painting in the forefront, it could appear that painting was just an attempt to make a lot of money. The press' endless obsession with the art market put contemporary artists in the line of fire. On the one hand, painters were accused of raking in the bucks, on the other they were being told that what they were doing was dead, meaningless, decidedly *out*.

A gallery full of detritus, a 'new strategy' or aim-and-shoot photography or video, and the dams of Felicity's praise would open up and flow. That kind of work was not a challenge. It was easy to write about. But one look at a room full of juicy paintings and her poison pen was poised to paper. What Felicity failed to see was that every generation of artists had been criticized by finger wagging critics like they were naughty children.

Poor B.E. was being driven crazy by it all. B.E. interrupted the silence and screamed, "EVERYBODY KNOWS..." She had been heating up all night and had to say it. John headed toward her but was too late. Her words came bursting out like guided missiles. She stood up and marched in front of Althea, pointing at Felicity.

"EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT YOU AND BERNIE NEVER HAVE SEX!"

Brahms turned away in embarrassment... John stopped and looked down. As B.E. moved to the table and carefully placed her glass carefully there. Althea stood in shock, not knowing what to do. John staggered to get B.E.'s coat and struggled to put it around her shoulders. B.E. reacted with a jerky mechanical motion toward the door.

When B.E. and John got to the elevator and pressed the button, the doors opened and Marguerite Chopin got out. Getting into the elevator cab with John, B.E. looked at her and said, "You're late."

"I'm never late. Everyone else is early." Marguerite responded, as the elevator doors closed behind her.

As B.E. and John left Althea's building, Marcus backed into the shadow across the street. John and B.E. were involved in a heated exchange. "But I'm just saying, how can someone hate you and want to *be* you at the same time?" John asked.

*

Althea was trapped in amber. Everything came to her in a dull thud. How is it that other insects could move and she was still stuck? Try as she may she could not seem to move. Two sanguine figures approached her through the amber and took her hands. She felt a sensation on her back. A beam of light punctured the gold and made a spectrum that mesmerized her. She wanted to ask if they'd seen it, but she couldn't speak. Her guides signaled her to move. She picked up her foot and it slowly came unglued from the floor. Her foot lifted, she felt unstable, and one of the insects held her arm, steadying her. They guided her slowly through the mass. Subtle currents moved in response. Her sanguine guides stopped her and the waves rolled forward in arcs. They turned her, and held her, and she began to descend slowly into a cloud.

"Hush little baby don't you say a word, Papa's going to buy you a Mockingbird."

Melody sat on one side of Althea and Harrison sat on the other side of her. They had taken her to her bedroom. Quietly, they were singing her a lullaby.

"If that mockingbird don't sing, Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring."

Friday watched from Althea's bedroom door after following them in. It was too much for her and she left.

*

"Some people know how to make an exit!" Marguerite announced.

Brahms searched for the most powerful person in the room and headed toward Marguerite, a long time veteran of the art wars. But Marguerite recognized in Brahms the mid-life crisis she had gotten to the other side of. After she stopped focusing on lack

of fame, greater fame came. Her greatest challenge had become limiting her exposure and turning down shows. There were simply too many offers for her to accept.

Marguerite walked past Brahms and approached "Old People" on the sofa.

"Who made this?"

"I did." Sadie sat across the room with Ethan.

"Interesting. You could cast it in bronze or in resin to express greater permanence," Marguerite had long ago become accustomed to art-speak, recognizing that if she didn't explain it, no one else would.

"I don't care about permanence," Sadie responded.

"Perhaps you are right to not care. This is interesting to me also." Marguerite stroked her chin. They were talking across the room and everyone else appeared frozen. Were the others listening or were they in some kind of trance?

"Come join me," Marguerite ordered, ignoring Felicity beside her. "Your piece has stimulated such talk."

"I'll say," said Ethan. "That was a mouthful."

"It's too late for me to stop thinking," Marguerite replied.

Sadie and Ethan walked to Marguerite as if under a spell. Marguerite pulled out a deck of Tarot cards and rapped the edge of the deck on the coffee table. "What sign are you?" she asked Sadie. Marguerite dealt a few cards in a random arrangement. "Do you mind?" she asked Felicity. Felicity barely shook her head. She was still in shock.

Ethan rolled his eyes.

"Bollocks." Ethan spit the word out like a bad taste.

Marguerite looked through Ethan as if he were an X-Ray. Ethan squirmed.

Felicity took tiny spoonfuls of her stew. Bernie stood next to her. She looked up at Bernie, put her plate down, and picked up her purse.

"Darling, I think it's time for us to go." Bernie said to Felicity.

"Oh. OK." Felicity had imploded.

"I have salons on Sunday at my place. I'd like for you to come." Marguerite offered. Felicity wasn't listening anymore.

"Can I come?" Ethan interjected.

"Yes. You were included in my invitation. I'm going to get to you." She loved to interview people, especially young ones.

Felicity squeezed past Marguerite on the sofa. Bernie turned to Ethan and Sadie.

"Take care. An artist once jumped out of the window here."

He had meant it as an edgy exit line. It didn't work. It cut too close. He wished he hadn't said it.

"And perhaps you are next," Marguerite said, her lips tight, looking up at Bernie.

*

Althea dreamed of an old woman who arrived in a silver bullet. She came through the window. Her silver hair was braided in pony tails, and she wore a cotton dress embroidered with threads of red and gold. She seemed like a Native American Elder. She held a tray with ginger bread cookies. When Althea picked one, the others came along, linked like paper doll.

In the dim bedroom light Melody and Harrison looked at each other as Althea slept. She seemed to be breathing peacefully.

Melody whispered to Harrison. "Should we stay?"

"A little longer."

Melody looked at Althea's hand and held it.

*

When Bernie and Felicity ran into Marcus, he pretended it was a coincidence.

"Where were you?" Bernie asked.

"Working on my new video," Marcus responded, still out of breath and hiding it.

"Really?" Felicity asked. She and Bernie instantly perked up.

"Still going to the opera...?"

As they drove away in the cab, leaving Marcus waving, Felicity summarized:

"At least it ended well..."

*

Friday washed plates while Brahms stood at the bar watching.

"Well. That went well," Friday said sarcastically as she ran water over the dishes. "Of course, it was planned before the review came out."

"Couldn't have worked out better." Brahms exhaled slightly.

"You enjoyed that?"

"Especially seeing Bernie not come to her rescue."

"Perhaps it's true," Friday responded flatly while thinking "Who cares?"

Friday squeezed the sponge to relieve her anger. She waited for Brahms to express any concern for Althea. How immune he was to other people's feelings. She had seen the way everyone around him internalized their anger from his neglect toward them. Couldn't this finally be an opportunity for him to think about someone else? It didn't enter his mind. He was much more aware that an artist whom he admired had snubbed him, and was instead paying attention to two unknowns.

Ethan got up to grab the bottle of scotch and three glasses on the kitchen counter, interrupting Friday and Brahms.

Marguerite was enjoying a truthful moment with Sadie.

"You are in an ideal position. You are nothing. And I am the Queen of Nothing."

Ethan meandered back, dropped glasses and bottle on the coffee table, collapsed with a thud on the sofa between Marguerite and Sadie and said:

"Let the games begin."

"Your friends seem to work their way up the ladder quickly." Brahms said, noticing them out of the corner of his eye.

"I have friends in high places." Friday retorted attempting to diffuse Brahms' edginess. It was supposed to be a compliment but he didn't catch it. She couldn't help but think that he looked like a Dr. Seuss character with his woolen skull cap and his long mouth turning downward at the ends to make a frown.

"Speaking of which, how are things with Godd?" Brahms inquired with greater interest.

Friday thought for a minute: *Oh, I see. You want me to...*

Ethan poured glasses of scotch in a clover shape on the table. His pouring technique was sloppy and it overflowed. "Don't worry about him." Sadie said to Marguerite. "He thinks if you pay attention to him you're wanting."

Marguerite decided she was going to join them in a toast, even though she seldom drank. "It's a game."

They held up their glasses and clicked the rims. Ethan and Sadie downed their drinks. Marguerite watched them and then drank hers more slowly, then licked the edge of her hand.

"But, it's not a game anymore," she said giving them a penetrating look. She opened her deck of cards and pulled out one. It was The Empress. She lay it on the table. Then she pulled out another one and lay it over it. It was The Hanged Man.

The light flickered in Althea's loft. Harrison and Melody got up and walked into Althea's hallway. The mirror reflected their matching profiles as they passed it. They stood in the doorway looking into the main space.

Friday and Brahms talked in the kitchen. An old woman talked with Ethan and Sadie wearing a navy dress and a pressed white shirt. She held her hands behind her. Backing away she turned to them. The wrinkles in her face came into focus. Her eyes had telescope of light in them, beckoning attention, even pleading for it.

"Come tomorrow."

She turned and as she did she said, "Your host will be feeling better tomorrow." Then she stopped and looked at Brahms. He tried to evade the intensity of her gaze.

"It's not too late for you. If you stop trying."

Ethan began to laugh, but it was an uncomfortable laugh. Brahms leered at him. He hated Ethan and he didn't have to hide it. Friday stole a glance at Melody and Harrison as she finished cleaning the kitchen.

"Let us walk you out," Melody offered as she and Harrison followed Marguerite toward the door.

"Not necessary. I'm a creature of the Night." Before they knew it, she was gone.

Marguerite helped lift Harrison and Melody's spirits.

"Poof!" Harrison said laughing, throwing his hands in the air.

"Poof!" Melody said laughing louder and imitating Harrison's gesture. She stopped to catch her breath. It was a relief to laugh.

Friday waved them over to the kitchen. "I don't think you've met Brahms yet have you, Melody."

"Melody" Brahms said, smokily extending his hand to her. He shifted into flirtation mode. Friday took Brahms' hand and exaggerated, pretending she could not speak.

"He won't bite." Friday said humorously.

"What if I want to be bitten?" Melody laughed, flirting back.

Even though Harrison stood next to Melody, it was as if he was invisible. Brahms had not acknowledged him so he turned toward Ethan and Sadie. They didn't seem to be getting along. Ethan said something like "the old lady who is so keen on you" to Sadie. He figured that Ethan was jealous of the attention Sadie had been getting. He knew that story well. She was supposed to stay in the background and let Ethan be the star.

Harrison clapped his hands. "Who wants a kiss?" They smiled. Harrison made a dividing gesture with his hand. Ethan and Sadie slid apart on the sofa as Harrison sat down between them. Ethan poured another round of scotch carefully. In unison they held their glasses mid-air, brought them together for a brief click, then downed them.

"Ey- Yi!" They all leaned forward like someone had belted them in the gut.

"I like your piece," Harrison said to Sadie. His southern accent came out when he drank. "Now, about that kiss."

Sadie wasn't accustomed to American behavior and Harrison didn't realize it. Harrison gave her a polite kiss on the cheek.

"I want a kiss!" Ethan yelled, holding Harrison's head and directing it toward him. They kissed on the lips.

"Oh, I see," said Sadie and leaned over to kiss them together, then she pulled Harrison away and kissed him without Ethan.

"Wait!" Melody said from across the room. She abandoned Brahms and Friday.

"I say Hip Hop, Hip Hop, you got to Boogie to the beat."

Melody had moved into the middle of the room and started rapping.

"Now what you hear is not a test, I'm rap-ping to the beat."

Sugar Hill Gang was Melody's Picasso.

"We're going anyway," Brahms announced, looking toward Melody.

"Are we?" Friday responded, genuinely surprised. As if they hadn't discussed everything. She had gotten the picture. Please Brahms, she thought, don't do this.

Something in Melody had been unleashed. Friday had her own long-term involvement with Brahms and his family but she wasn't going to hold back who she was. She knew that Friday couldn't express who she was around Brahms. But she also knew that Althea would accept her for who she was, so she continued rapping.

"And so Me the Groove...and my friends... are gonna try to move your feet."

Melody moved like a supermodel interpreting street.

Friday said as she stood with Brahms. Brahms didn't say anything. Friday waved at them and gave up. No one noticed them leaving.

*

On the street, Friday and Brahms were silent. They took a left on Houston. The streets were empty. Downtown seemed haunted.

The way Friday walked irritated Brahms. They were not in lock step. When they approached a street sign, she held it and spiraled around it before she joined him again. It was disagreeable how agreeable she was. She got along too well with people, and she had to learn that life wasn't so easy. She had to learn to make sacrifices, to do things that she did not want to do for the sake of getting ahead.

They had walked north on Sixth Avenue. At the corner of Bleecker, Brahms was going to take a left and Friday was going to continue north. Friday had been waiting for this intersection. She knew it was their good-night.

"Why are you upset with me? I can tell you are."

Brahms was shaking. He knew it wasn't the cool weather. Something in him was frozen. He didn't respond.

"Why does he call himself Godd? It's so ridiculous." Friday continued.

"I know. Well, you're in the best place to see that."

"It's not just *my* place." But Friday knew what he meant. People were hypnotized by the facade of the Emerald City while it was really run by a little man behind a curtain.

Brahms realized that Friday had always offered a voice of reason in a world of dysfunction. It was other forces around him who swayed him against her. He began to doubt his traditional view of Friday's destiny. This shift in his own perception inspired a moment of honesty.

"I just don't know what to do."

Friday didn't know if this admission was ironic, manipulative, or just honest.

*

After she saw Brahms and Friday leave, Melody began to sing more softly. She started to whisper the words as if they were a continuation of the lullaby that she and Harrison sang to Althea.

"So far you've only heard my voice... but I've brought two friends along..."

Melody had been holding Harrison's hand and she went to Ethan and Sadie and held their hands.

Sadie felt lulled. She loved Melody's singing. There was such a clear line in it. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and lit a cigarette and played with the cellophane. The static electricity made it dance in her hand.

Melody went to Althea's bedroom door and peeped in, and returned.

"Let's go to the other sofa." Harrison said.

*

On his front stoop Brahms fumbled for the key to his Townhouse on Leroy Street. An image of Friday came into his head. He realized how she adored him. Why was he

doing this to her? Then, he located the key. His moment of remorse and self questioning was over.

*

Friday got home and opened her journal to write about the events of the day. There was a lot to record, then almost immediately there was a knock on her door. She closed her journal and considered whether she would answer it. She looked through the peephole. It was Marcus.

Saturday

Saturday morning in Soho was quiet. The factories and warehouses closed weekends. Most of the boutiques and galleries didn't bother opening until late morning, or noon. They got few visitors earlier. Metal shutters were down, including 136 Wooster, covering the inscribed glass. Cans at the corner were full of garbage wouldn't be emptied until the morning. A snorting sound came from a random truck accompanied by a chirping bird when it backed up. Neighbors talking echoed up the walls of the buildings.

Althea tried to reconstruct the previous night but at a certain point her memory went blank. She kept replaying and getting stuck at the same point - her toast.

She took a breath and exhaled. She felt refreshed and thought about how yoga was good for her, but how she loathed the attendant wind chimes. Allergic to the spiritual language of the practice, she persisted for the sake of stretching and breathing. She began to laugh imagining a yoga class in which mechanical pigs snorted when she went into up-dog and mechanical birds chirped when she went into down-dog.

Althea entered the main space of her loft. To her great surprise it was neat as a pin. There were two people asleep on the sofa. She took a closer look. It was Melody and Harrison. They must have stayed over. How sweet of them, she thought. The two of them looked so peaceful. She didn't want to wake them. She felt a surge of warmth go through her.

She went to the kitchen and starting preparing coffee. The sound of her puttering around the kitchen woke Melody who stretched and rubbed her eyes. She was still wearing last night's clothes. Seeing Althea up was like seeing a good ghost.

"I'm so glad to see you up," Melody whispered as she walked over to the kitchen. Althea's crisis had hit some tender internal notes for Melody.

"Why? You look concerned."

Melody had teared up. "I was. Something happened when you were about to make the toast."

"Oh." Althea wasn't accustomed to talking about her own frailty, nor did she wish to acknowledge it. Melody was accustomed to denial from her Mother, who suffered for years without talking about it.

Althea waved it away with her left hand as she handed a cup of coffee to Melody with her right.

Harrison was awake and he felt like he was intruding. To give them space to talk he offered to get breakfast. He took his time walking to the cafe on Prince. It was a beautiful fall morning and he drew in the fresh air. There were so many aspects of last night that moved him, above and beyond the meltdowns. They were a family to him, people who loved art. Waiting at the counter for the croissants and bagels he had ordered, he looked at the floor of the cafe. It was made of the same one inch ceramic tiles as his childhood bathroom in geometric patterns of black and white. There were wide cracks in the tiles full of dirt.

"Excuse me?" The man in a pressed white apron said to Harrison, interrupting his floor meditation, and handed him two white bags, perfectly folded closed at the top.

Harrison stood at the corner of Wooster and looked south, enjoying the beautiful cast-iron architecture of Soho. It was still quiet. People were beginning to park their cars and mill about. What a perfect day, he thought. Then a strange premonition took over. He saw the same view but everything was covered in a thick blanket of white dust. The streets were deserted and sirens sounded in the distance.

*

"Now that we're finally alone, let's discuss our plans together." Althea had shifted into business problem-solving mode. "I assume I can count you in." Melody nodded enthusiastically. They drew close around the kitchen counter.

"We're going to set up here, for now. My backers have run into tax problems, but I'm not going to let that stop me. You did go to the gallery?"

Melody nodded again, letting Althea continue.

"Do we dare cut the chain and go in? The reason I ask is because we need my Rolodex. And we're both going to have to get on the phone immediately. I will probably have another line put in. And we need to get a fax. Let's write this down."

Melody took out a notepad from her purse and began to make a list.

"By the way, are Ethan and Sadie still asleep? As much as possible, let's have these discussions when they aren't present, although I want Ethan to be involved. Are you getting along with him?"

Melody nodded again and added, "I think we need to add Scotch to the list."

"Why, what happened?"

Althea's buzzer rang and Melody went to the panel to buzz Harrison in.

"No. Don't tell me" Althea said as she made another of her waving motions.

"Now, most important of all...Can you wait for me to pay you for a week or so?"

Melody nodded again.

*

The buzzer roused Ethan. Sadie was already sitting on the window-sill looking out.

"They're already stirring."

Ethan brushed his hand up the bedspread and held his forehead. "I want Junk Food!" He held up his arm, sniffed and recoiled.

"What's wrong? Even you think you smell bad?"

"I don't have time to wash" he protested. "Too much going on."

*

"How are things with Sheldon?" Althea asked Harrison.

Melody made a spread on the banquet table while Althea moved around the room.

"His idea is to be an agent instead of having a gallery." Harrison ate a croissant with butter and jam. Melody decided to have the same.

"Oh, really?" Harrison was aware that Althea was digging for information.

He continued: "When we flew back from my opening at the Berkeley Museum he flew first class, leaving me in coach. He had upgraded without telling me."

Althea and Melody were silent. "However, he just sold one of my drawings to the ICA."

"Really? Would they be interested in other artists' drawings?"

At that point Harrison decided not to reveal anything more.

*

Ethan showered. The bar of soap felt so good in his hands, a big ovoid. He rubbed it against his cock and balls, which felt enlarged and he thought about wanking off right there, but he decided to save it. He put a foot on the tile seat and rubbed the soap against it, then the other, and watched the soap flow into the drain. He couldn't see himself in the steamy mirror as he turned off the water. There were so many fluffy white towels in the shelf. Some of them had designs in them like waffles. He picked one and started drying his hairy legs. The curved hem of the towel brushed the tile floor as he dried himself off.

Althea caught sight of Sadie leaning in the doorway. "We see you. Come on."

"This old thing has to go." Althea said looking toward the tweed sofa. "We can move into one of my bedrooms."

"This old thing has to go?" Ethan repeated. Steam was billowing out from the bathroom. He wore a towel around his waist and had another around his neck.

"Let's move it now." Melody, Harrison, and Sadie picked up the sofa and moved it on a slight diagonal in front of the door.

"Ethan, get out here." Althea had reclaimed her authority. Ethan came to attention.

"Let me dress."

"No. Besides, you should always go around like that. Fewer pockets." Ethan wondered if Althea was onto his ways. For once, he stayed quiet. He sat on the table top and dug into the butter with his hand, smeared it on the bagel and tore into it.

Althea pivoted from Ethan and looked at the sofa now blocking her entrance. "Well, that's not going to work. Put it in the library." The library was a book-lined dead-end corridor just wide enough to accommodate the sofa. Harrison and Sadie lifted it and disappeared into the niche. The space seemed so much more open without it.

"Old People" sat alone now. "Sadie, we're going to find a place for your piece. Try it in the left corner, as if it's presiding over us."

"Oh come on!" Ethan said with his mouth full.

"Old People" looked good moved into the left corner. Harrison saw that Sadie was happy with it.

Melody took the opportunity to freshen up. She wiped the foggy bathroom mirror and tied her hair back. She sprayed some of Althea's perfume around her.

"So, we have two walls if we don't move the net. And I hope to keep the net where it is, because it's the theme of the show.

"What show?" Ethan asked. Sadie and Harrison stood on both sides of "Old People" with their hands on hips.

"Yeah, what show?" Melody came out of the bathroom in time to hear the announcement.

"Ethan...Everyone...I have come to a decision. I'm going to curate a show and you are all included. It's going to be a laboratory - an evolving work. An exploration of modes of art making in the age of information."

"Not bad." Ethan raised his eyebrows. Melody jumped up and down with excitement and clapped her hands.

"And it's going to be called 'Net.'"

There was an excitement in the room.

"By the way," Althea asked, "Why isn't the phone ringing?"

Melody covered her mouth with horror. "Oh, my gosh. I am so sorry. I turned off the ringer last night and forgot to turn it back on." She ran to the kitchen and adjusted the dial on the side the phone and pulled the message machine out of the nearby cabinet. The red light was blinking rapidly. "There's 42 messages."

Althea laughed. She took it all in stride, as much as possible. She was glad there were so many messages. Perhaps Marcus had called. She had to get in touch with Marcus, but she had other commitments today.

"It's OK. After all it's the weekend."

Harrison looked tenderly at Melody. "Seems like y'all have your work cut out for you. Are you going to Marguerite's salon?"

"I want to go! I want to go!" exclaimed Melody.

"Me too," said Sadie. Ethan didn't speak up but it was clear he was going.

"I'm going to my studio. Anyone want to join me?" Harrison asked as he looked at Sadie and Ethan. "We can go to Marguerite's together from there."

"Perfect." Althea concluded. "We're on top of each other here. I may have a studio for you which belongs to a friend."

*

Sadie, Ethan, and Harrison took the elevator downstairs.

"Can we go down Broadway? I want to look for a coat," Sadie asked. The weather was getting cooler and she had only packed a few things.

They took the same path that Ethan had followed yesterday, passing the Newspaper vendor, who was chanting "Chopped to Pieces!" and repeating "Chopped to Pieces!" in his throaty voice. The three of them stopped and Ethan bought a copy. The sub-title read: "Dentist Accused of Dumping His Wife's Body Parts in a Lake."

In Canal Jeans, Sadie tried on used Pea Coats and found one she liked. Ethan found a red Windbreaker for cheap. Harrison didn't try anything. He just enjoyed hanging around with them.

"Where is Crosby Street?" Ethan asked.

"The next block. In fact, we can go out the rear. I think I know the place Althea has in mind."

Wearing their purchases, Ethan and Sadie stopped and looked at a huge graffiti mural at the back of a parking lot when Harrison said "Wow! That's Fantastic!" They passed the loft building that Althea mentioned, then headed south to Canal, turning right to go to Harrison's.

*

Melody and Althea took a left on Houston. Althea was on her way to Brahms' town house. It was a tradition to visit them Saturday for lunch. The walk helped her prepare for facing Brahms' wife, who was tough. They paused at the same corner of 6th and Bleecker where Brahms and Friday had talked, not knowing they'd retraced the same path.

"Can you join us for dinner tonight? I may not make it this afternoon."

"I'll ask Friday."

"Both of you. Otherwise, tomorrow morning, early." Althea wished Melody could join her, but Mrs. Brahms would have had a fit. They hugged and Melody headed north to Friday's.

*

Marcus had stayed over at Friday's. He kept trying fresh approaches to get information about the party but Friday did not give in. When her buzzer rang she knew that it was Melody. "Jealous much?" was all she said to him. Why were so many artists like this?

"I don't want you to be seen here. It's too complicated." She led Marcus to the kitchen pantry and closed the door. Melody arrived bubbling with enthusiasm.

"Did you stay over at Althea's?" Friday recognized that Melody was wearing last night's clothes, her hair was pulled back.

"YES! Althea had a miracle recovery. She's going to curate a show in her loft and I'm helping, and it's going to be Ethan, Sadie, and Harrison. She even...." Melody's words were gushing out like a waterfall.

Friday interrupted her. "Why don't you take a bath and tell me about it later."

"But it's so exciting."

Friday plugged the drain of the old claw-foot tub and turned the faucets. She returned to the nearby kitchen, snatched Melody's coat and led her into the bathroom.

"I'll make you some tea and we can talk." She put the kettle on and looked toward the closet door. It was a small West Village apartment with a walk through kitchen.

Marcus had overheard and was furious. He was not included in Althea's show and he had missed a good party.

"Sadie is so nice and Ethan is certainly interesting." Melody said. From the acoustics Friday could tell that Melody was in the tub so she pulled Marcus out of the closet.

"Really." she said in Melody's direction, attempting to cut short any more talk. Marcus' eyes were burning with rage.

"Go! And lighten up. We'll talk later," Friday whispered, as she pushed him out and quietly closed the door.

*

Brahms opened the front door and invited Althea in. As they descended the stairway into the kitchen, Althea prepared to face Mrs. Brahms, when she was met by an additional surprise: B.E. and John sat at the counter. They looked at Althea with exaggerated concern.

"How are you? B.E. said. "We've been SO worried about you."

*

Felicity tried not to look in Marcus' direction at the opera. Marcus was still replaying what he had overheard at Friday's. He couldn't believe it. He had been replaced by that little English twerp.

He admired the scale of the opera, the sheer ambition of it. There were giants who captured a damsel in distress, Gods who needed money, and a woman who rose out of the earth lit in Cobalt blue warning of "the end of everything." He imagined making more ambitious production videos which involved large casts and elaborate sets, moving away from solo videos. He would need major support to achieve this.

At Intermission, Felicity and Bernie guided Marcus to Barbara, who waved them over. Four glasses of champagne had already been delivered. She'd already decided she was going to represent Marcus. Telling Marcus was a formality. Her wavy black hair was gelled to her head and she wore bright red lipstick. Her nose was powdered and her eyes were heavily made up. She wore a black suit jacket and skirt and very high heels.

"Cheers everyone." With long red fingernails she handed the flutes to a hesitant Felicity, and then to Marcus and Bernie. Marcus was so pleased to be able to immediately trump Althea. They repeated cheers, but in the back of his mind Bernie

had reservations. How were they now going to get their share of credit for discovering Marcus?

*

Althea's loft was empty and quiet, except for the occasional ring of the phone. "Old People" sat in the corner between two blank walls, facing the banquet table and the net. It was the eye of the storm soon to be followed by another maelstrom of activity.

*

Harrison opened his front door, and he, Sadie and Ethan bounded up the stairs. He was excited about their upcoming show. He gave them a tour, going up and down the rickety old stairs.

"It's an old Seaman's house, built in 1829," he explained. The floors and doorways sloped. Nothing was perpendicular except Harrison's paintings.

Sadie and Ethan sat on the couch and stretched their legs out. Harrison's paintings lined the opposite wall. He picked up the painting compass and showed them how they were made.

"See, this bolts onto the sides of the paintings and holds the compass."

"What a bunch of rubbish." Ethan was taking in the room, pretending to memorize the contents. Was he testing Harrison? It didn't matter. Harrison was used to art attacks - reactions to his vulnerability by the less vulnerable.

"You don't have to like my work. Or me." Harrison said. Ethan relaxed. This expression of self-acceptance and self-possession allowed him to accept Harrison on his terms.

"So how are things with Sheldon?" Ethan interrupted, attempting to change the subject.

It always surprised Harrison how most artists didn't talk about art. They talked about Art Dealers. Ethan was no exception.

"You knew him in London, didn't you?" Harrison had heard stories about Ethan before meeting him. People loved to talk about Ethan.

"I'll say. He was hard to miss."

*

Wood carvings she collected from her travels hung on Friday's walls. A transparent pink fabric with gold embroidery hung in her window facing West 12th street. While Melody took a bath, Friday walked around her apartment in slippers that she had bought in Morocco for a song.

Melody lifted her leg out of the bathwater covered with bubbles and pointed her toes. Friday watched her and thought: "I've got to become a photographer."

"Isn't Brahms dreamy?" Melody asked. Friday sat on the edge of her bed facing Melody and her bubbles.

"Um. Forget it Babe. Forget it."

Melody sank into the light blue water and came up again a mermaid.

"Let's go to Marguerite's together. Would you like that?"

*

Althea looked out at Brahms' garden. Withered brown perennials led to a concrete Buddha behind a small pond.

"What are you going to do?" B.E. asked as she sat next to John across Brahms' granite counter. Her face twitched nervously.

Brahms had disappeared, unfortunately. How Althea wished she could send B.E. into some unseen inferno.

"Actually I have a new concept." Althea stopped herself from her temptation to fiddle with her napkin. Althea tilted her head playfully. She thought about the excitement that she had created when she spoke earlier that day in her loft.

"It's a Think Piece. It's an exploration of modes of artistic production in the age of information. It will involve artists making work in the pluralistic world that we live in. Their interconnectivity is my focus. And it will be happening in my loft."

She looked at B.E. and John. If there was only some way to split them apart.

"I wish I could include you." Althea said looking at B.E. "But this is a show for younger artists."

*

Sadie took a drag off a cigarette between Ethan and Harrison and lay back on the couch with her hand resting gently on her forehead. The heels of her boots apart.

Ethan kept taking longer and deeper drags until there was nothing left.

Harrison's paintings converged at points where the compass anchored. Others collided another section which had a different originating point.

"These remind me of the beginnings of American Cartoons." Ethan said looking at Harrison's paintings.

Harrison went to the sink to get some water.

"Let's go. She wants us to come. And Sadie, she likes your work."

*

With her big toe Melody pulled the plug. Friday handed her a towel from the cupboard.

"What are we going to wear?" Melody asked. Friday looked skeptical. "Please, this is important to me."

"O.K. But she's probably going to try to put a spell on us." Friday said laughing.

*

The exterior of Marguerite's Town House on West 17th had two tall windows guarded by wrought iron gates. Stained lace curtains hung in the windows of her front room. The wall around the fireplace was lined with shelves overflowing with decades of memorabilia. Piles of dusty books on the lower shelves had not been touched in ages. Between them were propped old game boards and occult looking objects. A weathered, eight-sided wood table in the far corner held a stack of tan, hand-made drawing papers with deckled edges, a stick of charcoal, and a tarot deck wrapped in a handkerchief. Low blue flames glowed in the old metal gas heater in the fireplace. The place smelled musty and warm.

Sadie, Ethan, and Harrison were greeted at the door by a tall, gaunt man with long hair in a dusty black suit. He nodded silently and moved out of their way. They bounded down the spongy carpet of the hallway, the wood floor creaking underneath.

Ethan continued down the hallway and was followed closely by the odd tall man.

"Just takin' a look...." Ethan said, turning slightly as he looked up the stairs. The man reached out and squeezed Ethan's butt cheek with his bony hand. Ethan was shocked. He turned around quickly.

"I think I missed my turn," Ethan said as he headed toward the front room.

Sadie and Harrison found Marguerite looking toward them as she grasped the table as if to hold it stable. Despite the oddness of the place, Sadie and Harrison felt comfortable. It reminded them of visiting relatives when they were children. Sadie's Mum had the same gas heater in her fireplace. Harrison had gone every Sunday to his great aunt's house. If she had been an art fanatic instead of a religious one, she could be Marguerite.

"You're the quiet ones," Marguerite said to Sadie and Ethan.

Ethan approached Sadie and whispered in her ear: "He grabbed me bum!"

"Serves ya' right." Sadie whispered back.

Lurch carried orange blocks of cheese on a platter. No one took any so he placed the platter on the edge of the octagonal table.

"Bring them Cokes," Marguerite demanded and Lurch disappeared down the hallway again.

"I love young people. The world hasn't turned you into monsters yet."

Wooden chairs circled Marguerite's table. She signaled to sit then she drew an oval on a paper then another and another. The ovals touched and formed a loose geometric relationship. Harrison and Sadie watched with concentration.

Ethan stood looking down. The shock was wearing off. "I see what you're doing. You're making us into your own special Olympics."

"Don't forget that we're different." Marguerite looked at Ethan. "The world wants to forget us. We have to make a space in their heads, that sometimes closes back up."

Lurch appeared with another platter holding Coca-Colas in green glass bottles.

*

Althea knew her way around Brahms' house. She excused herself from being grilled by B.E. to go to the lady's room. At the base of the stairs, she recognized a voice coming from the Living Room above - it was Sheldon's. She was surprised by his authoritative tone. The fire crackled in the fireplace. Sheldon sounded clear and insistent.

"I realize this is a difficult decision," she heard him say. What was he telling Brahms to do? By Brahms' silence she knew he was considering what he was hearing.

At the same time, she could hear B.E. saying to John: "She'll be fine. She always is. You don't have to worry about her."

That Bitch! Althea strained to hear more. She guessed that Sheldon must be making a case for Brahms to leave \$he but then what? Go with Godd? She knew Brahms wouldn't do that until Godd proved he could work with important living artists. Brahms responded too softly. The fire crackled.

She brushed her hands through her hair and straightened her blouse, then moved her purse to her other arm, so that it would appear that she had gone to the lady's room. She walked back to the kitchen.

*

Marguerite had three shows in New York: in Soho - her early wood totems, on 57th and 6th - her recent bronzes, at 57th and Madison, an installation of bulbous rubber forms hanging like hams in an accordion metal screen. The exhibit's invitation showed a blurred Marguerite advancing toward the camera making a karate chop.

Harrison sat between Marguerite and the fireplace with his back to the shelves. Sadie was having trouble not looking at the shelves. There was a row of dolls sitting there.

"When you said sometime people forget about you...can you talk about that? Harrison asked.

"I didn't say that. I said sometimes the world wants to forget about you."

Ethan seemed restless. He pointed to the shelf above Marguerite. "What are those?" Ethan asked.

"They can try to forget you but you are still here." Marguerite responded ignoring Ethan's question.

"You have to be relentless!"

Sadie seemed to want to say something. Marguerite looked at Sadie and Harrison. "So..." She zeroed in on Harrison. "Where are you showing?"

"I'm working with Sheldon Shepherd."

"Ah yes. I've known him for a long time." Harrison recalled a story Sheldon told of visiting Marguerite and being hit with a huge cloud of pot smoke at the front door.

Melody and Friday waited at Marguerite's door. "O.K. babe. Here we go. You ready?" Friday whispered as she rang the bell.

*

In a booth at the Ginger Man Restaurant, Barbara Mangold entertained Marcus, Felicity, and Bernie after the Opera. Marcus seemed reticent and Barbara was worried about him. She hoped this was going to lead to results. She wasn't used to wasting her time. She wasn't going to make any empty generalizations so she thought about how she could involve Marcus in the conversation. She signaled the waiter to bring her usual hors d'oeuvres. She was a regular.

Barbara and Bernie started to talk at the same time, then stopped nervously.

"Christa Ludwig" Barbara said. She threw out the lead Soprano's name as a conversation starter. Everyone seemed to love her.

A waiter brought a tray of Charcuterie to the table.

"Wonderful." Bernie said. He slathered pate onto a piece of toast and took a big bite.

"Well..." Felicity equivocated. She thought about eating something. "But, I do love James Morris."

"James Morris." Bernie nodded and adjusted his eye-glasses. "And Siegfried Jerusalem. Wonderful."

Marcus was eating but he wasn't saying anything.

"Oh yes. Felicity and I disagree about Siegfried." Bernie sighed.

Barbara was feeling frustrated with these two twittering idiots. She turned to Marcus, ignoring Felicity and Bernie.

"What do you think?" Barbara turned to Marcus.

Marcus touched the edges of the napkin in his lap with his thumbs and index fingers. It was perfectly symmetrical underneath his torso. He presented his open hands outright on the table and looked at Barbara.

"What do I think? I think I would like to make production videos of a monumental scale, like this opera." His eyes burned like coals.

"Well, then I think we can come to an arrangement." She reached out her right hand and touched his left open hand, but it was awkward and she withdrew it and raised her hand into the air.

"Waiter, bring four more champagnes."

*

Godd had negotiated all day. Everything bored him. He had developed a strategy to get Jackson Pollock's final painting into his possession. His strategy involved playing upon the consensus that it was not good - that Pollock was a washed out drunk when he made it. He gave the owners the impression that he was doing them a favor. Once it was in his possession he bestowed upon it HIS mark of value. It was called **Scent**. When Pollock made it, he had grown tired and skeptical of his dripping method and had returned to the brush. He had layered paint onto **Scent** with renewed vigor and had also been experimenting with three dimensional studies for extending his works into space.

No one complained about the fact that Jackson Pollock lived modestly with his wife, another important artist, scraping to get by. They found it curious. They found it charming. They loved the stories about how these bohemian figures made their way on so little. They never talked about someone like Godd taking the work and making much more on it than the artist, or his wife, or their heirs.

Godd poured himself a drink and leaned against the glass stair rail in front of **Scent**. Someone could easily say that it was a bad attempt at painting by a college student. The line between great and horrible in painting, and in all art, was left to the expertise of people like him. He reveled in this fact. He was the decider. He was the signifier of importance. He was the self appointed sovereign. He laughed.

*

The atmosphere at Marguerite's started to feel oppressive to Harrison, Sadie and Ethan. In their body language they were communicating to each other that it was time to go.

Perhaps it was even the message that Marguerite was conveying to them, in its truth, that was too uncomfortable to accept. They didn't want to think about difficulties in the future. And they didn't want to think about what it was like to be old.

When the front bell rang they felt relief. They watched Lurch go to the door with anticipation.

"Let's go!" Ethan said, getting up.

Friday and Melody arrived like a cosmic breeze. Friday stopped in the doorway, sensing that this was going to be a challenge. Melody entered and they sat at Marguerite's table.

Marguerite waved her arm across a collection of cloth dolls on the shelf.

"These are of you and they are for you." Marguerite said. She handed them their miniature likenesses.

"Oh, Thank You!" Melody began to talk to it and carry it around the room like a ventriloquist dummy. The doll seemed to come to life as she twirled around in a circle with it.

"I made them last night. So, you see, you inspired me. That is what we can do for each other."

Friday laughed hysterically at Melody.

"I want to become a photographer."

"Then become a photographer. Get a camera."

Marguerite drew two more ovals on the drawing. She seemed to be taking refuge in the drawing as she was overwhelmed by the excitement in her room. Part of her wanted to rein it in and part of her loved it. She held her knee with her claw-like hand. She felt like breaking a dish to bring the attention back to her, so she did.

*

Althea sat at her kitchen counter having leftover stew that she'd warmed on the stove. The doors to her kitchen cabinets had been removed and everything was exposed. In them stacks of plates were wedged in with boxes, bottles and tins of tea, spices, rice, nuts, oil, and pasta. There wasn't enough room for everything to fit in.

Where was everybody? She wished she could have joined them at Marguerite's. She decided to bake a cake and began organizing the ingredients from her shelves.

Into the borderline neighborhoods she had gone searching for them - Bushwick and Hoxton Square, Red Hook and Peckham Rye - new and undiscovered artists. The well fed were suspect. They didn't have to try. She searched for that low guttural yearning - that aching that she recognized and respected. Once she found them, they inhabited a parallel world together. She had tried the other side. It didn't work for her.

"You're the one I know," Ethan said to Friday on Marguerite's front stoop.

"You're the one I don't want to know..." Friday said to Ethan. Friday got so sick of Ethan trying to make their acquaintanceship seem more than it was.

Melody and Harrison said good-bye to Marguerite behind Ethan and Friday. Sadie hung back. She wanted to say good-bye last.

"Just one moment." Marguerite disappeared into her house and came back carrying a camera. She handed it to Friday. "Take a photo of them." She pointed to the homeless people across the street.

Friday seemed surprised. She held the camera. "But I want to take a picture of you."

"Next time." Marguerite pointed her across the street.

*

Felicity and Bernie's cab headed down 9th making all the green lights. When they got to 17th Street, Bernie spotted a group that looked familiar.

"Driver, slow down," he requested. "Isn't that Althea's group?"

Friday picked up a silver cardboard circle and threw it like a frisbee at Ethan's neck while Melody and Harrison laughed.

"Oh You want to pick THEM up." Felicity said. She was furious with Bernie. "What are they carrying?"

"Forget it driver. Keep going to Tompkins Square." Bernie said with resignation.

Their cab turned left on West 4th. "Siegfried Jerusalem." Saying it was a way for Felicity to calm herself.

Their cab crossed the major avenues from west to east. "Siegfried Jerusalem."

Their cab took a left on Avenue A and headed to Tompkins Square North and took a right on Avenue B, arriving at their destination.

"Siegfried Jerusalem," she said with more urgency as they got out of the cab.

"Siegfried Jerusalem," she said as Bernie opened their apartment door. She yelled it this time and slammed the bedroom door in Bernie's face.

*

Harrison, Friday and Melody walked down 9th looking back for a Checker so all five could fit. Ethan tried to hold in his anger; He imagined himself creating a huge scene. Then he pushed against the cab window, trying to collapse into it. Something about that old lady pissed him off. "Where ARE we?" Ethan asked impatiently.

"Oh, I know..." Friday said, perking up. "Let's go to Hogs and Heifers. Driver, take a right on 14th and a left on Washington."

A tattooed doorman with muscles frisked them before he let them in. "I need to make sure you are not armed or something." It was hopping when they arrived. Ethan bounded ahead and disappeared into the crowd.

"I need to make sure you are not armed or something." Friday repeated, playfully, holding her doll above her. "Am I armed or something? I can't tell." The others followed.

*

Althea couldn't concentrate. She looked out the front window standing close enough to fog the glass with her breath. The wind blew and rattled the casements and the counter - weights knocked within their frames. Condensation had gathered along the base causing the paint to buckle and peel. She looked to the right of the window at the photo of Jonah hanging in the spot where The Photographer had taken it.

She exhaled and in the mist she glimpsed his apparition in the glass' reflection. When she turned around, there he was - the young man in the photograph in her dressing

room - the one she missed so much. He stood behind his Hasselblad 500 CM, a black metal cube - looking into the view finder. She had forgotten how slim he was in his bell bottom jeans and thick black belt. His delicate gold chains swung against his t-shirt when he stood to look at her.

"Are you ready?" She heard his voice within her head.

Her son Jonah was so excited he took off his clothes and ran around the loft in circles. She stood behind the photographer as he positioned his Hasselblad to take her son's portrait. She liked watching him and she liked how her son was so proud of himself.

If only she could freeze this moment.

"Am I going to be famous?" Jonah asked as he stood on the back of the sofa, spreading his arms and holding onto the window shade pull string. He was totally spontaneous and at ease in front of the camera.

The only sound was the Che-Chunk of the Hasselblad punctuating the quieter whir of the refrigerator. The Photographer looked up briefly, amused by the question and smiled.

"Oh yes. You're going to be very famous."

Flashbacks to 9

Bristol was Ethan's training grounds. He had been brought in by the constables again. "Several of us are on alert for him. He keeps coming around and pinching. I'm not alright with that. A cheeky one he is." His mother didn't know what to do. She had to leave him unsupervised while she was at work. When the fishing boats came in he ran the docks looking for handouts. Some of the fishermen took a liking to him - One of them invited Ethan onto his boat to see his maritime paintings. "You have to take what you can get," he said to Ethan. Like the Artful Dodger, Ethan complied. He excelled at stealing with charm. His mother encouraged his interest in drawing to try to keep him out of trouble.

Friday sat at her father's Parsons table in his spare modern apartment. Everything was fastidiously organized and she was afraid to upset the order. The young man who was with her father came out of the bedroom, closed the door, pulled out a chair, and sat next to her. "Would you like to be friends?" He leaned slightly toward her. He was very handsome. "OK." Her hair was braided in pony tails and she wore a scotch plaid jumper. She looked at him for cues. "What would you like to be?" Friday thought for a minute. She looked at him and then focused on the bookshelves behind him packed

with monographs. "I would like to be a writer. And I'd like to write lots of books. Lots and lots of them."

Harrison sat with his grandmother around a worn wood table in her ceramics studio surrounded by coals for the old furnace. Her kitchen smelled of rutabagas cooking in a big pot on the stove. Clay fingerprints dotted the shelves which held ceramic molds for casting. Harrison painted a blue bird on a plate. "It will look different when it's baked in the kiln." She pointed to the silver octagonal oven in the corner. "Kind of like this tea: I put it out in the sun and now it's sun tea. Would you like some?"

In front of a frayed wingback chair Sadie sat cross legged on a coil rug making drawings from the Telly. Her Mum came in from the Kitchen where she had been cooking. "Are you drawing from Benny Hill? Now you're feeling better, aren't you." She looked at her Mum's ankles in nylon and her mid-rise heels. "I'm making your favorite: Shepherd's Pie." Sadie's face was like a full moon. She started a new drawing - a close up of her Mum's stocking clad ankles and shoes.

A portable radio played "Alone Again Naturally." The bookshelves were neatly stacked with files - notes that Melody's mother had made of every event in Melody's life. Melody rose and followed the sound of her Mom's labored breathing. As Melody approached her Mom, lying motionless in her bed, she decided to sing along with the radio. "It seems to me that there are more hearts broken in the world that can't be mended...left unattended...What do we do? What do we do?" Like a marble statue her mother slowly turned her head as if it pained her to face her. She held out her hand weakly and Melody clasped it as she struggled to say: "That's why I named you Melody."

"You're just a good looking kid. Remember that. You've got that going for you." Marcus' father stood at his bedroom doorway speaking down to Marcus who lay on his blue bedspread. Marcus didn't want to hear him. His parents were separating and he didn't want them to. His bedroom walls were covered with football posters and on his shelves were trophies that he had won in track meets. Marcus wished he could beat his father with one of the carved bedposts. He crossed his arms and lay like a mummy, saying nothing.

As young people in their 20s they found it natural to travel in packs, forming alliances, comparing and competing as they transitioned into adulthood.

"He's biting me hard!" someone yelled at Ethan.

"I never want to come here but somehow I always end up here." Harrison confided to Sadie as they stood together.

"This place gives me ideas..." Sadie responded.

"Like what? Hanging from columns?" They laughed. "Just don't put any guns in your work." Harrison continued.

"Does she ever talk about herself to you?" Melody asked Friday of Althea.

"Rarely." Said Friday, leaning against the jukebox.

"Does she say anything about me?"

"You would know if she didn't like you."

"Then why didn't she talk about what happened with the gallery?"

"To protect our innocence, for as long as it lasts."

Don't change. Please don't change. Friday thought. She didn't want Melody to be ruined. *Stay innocent. Stay sweet.* She couldn't say it out loud.

"But what are we going to do? She can't find her Rolodex and there's no way to get into the gallery."

"Uh-oh." Friday sighed. "It takes a big thick one."

It was a tradition to climb the red concrete column in the back of the space and Ethan decided to climb it. His new fans encouraged him.

"Ugh, God." Friday sighed getting a glimpse. "Pretend you don't see him."

Friday turned to the window and saw Marcus walking around the corner with Barbara Mangold. What was he doing with her?

"Why don't you like him?" Melody asked. Friday followed Melody's gaze to Ethan. Melody didn't see Marcus.

"Long story, Babe."

She watched Marcus escort Barbara to a cab then head toward the doorman at the entrance. She couldn't believe it. He was coming in!

Ethan got the overview at the top of the column like he used to on the masts of boats. He was feeling better but then... he wasn't sure. The bloke - that tosser whose studio he had followed Althea to - had come in and started talking to Friday and Melody. He wanted off the column.

"Peter Pan Syndrome?" an imposing man who separated from the bar crowd asked, looking at the dolls.

"I need me Jammies." Sadie chuckled.

"Someone gave us these ...a special lady." Harrison responded.

"Must have been." He seemed nice but tough. He wore pressed clothes and his black shoes were perfectly polished.

"Are you a cop?" Harrison had learned you could tell by people's shoes.

"Taxi driver. I dropped a lady off here yesterday and decided to come back." He watched for a reaction. Sadie watched Ethan drop from the column with a flat footed slam and head to the bar. His doll was tucked into his rear waistband.

"Is he a friend of yours?" He asked Sadie.

"He's really alright..." Sadie said detecting suspicion. "once you get to know him."

"I love this song!" Melody exclaimed when the jukebox started playing "Harper Valley PTA" and sang it to her doll.

The crowd stayed separate. But their attention turned more in their direction, because the regulars knew who didn't fit in.

Marcus stopped talking and watched Melody cheer and got the idea of using cheerleaders in his new video.

Marcus wondered if Friday had seen him with Barbara. He didn't want Friday, Melody, or anyone to know that he was going with Barbara. Bernie and Felicity wouldn't tell. Barbara was going to finance his videos and he was ecstatic but he didn't show it, so Friday thought he was still pissed.

"Althea has big plans." Friday told Marcus, who appeared skeptical. "You think you are not included but you are."

Friday's head was swimming. She didn't want her relationship with Marcus to be known. Marcus and Melody began to talk and she couldn't hear what they were saying. Who was going to introduce Marcus and Ethan? It was a stand-off. Melody began reciting cheers, with the dolls as pom-poms. Where was Althea? She needed Althea. She'd know what to do.

"Oo are *you*?" Ethan asked Marcus.

Sadie looked at Ethan with her wide eyes.

"Wot?" Ethan asked.

"Who are *YOU*?" Marcus asked Ethan.

Harrison watched Sadie's face change to disappointment, and said: "Let's get out of here. Want to go back to Althea's?"

Marcus steeled himself. His posture was rigid and he was prepared for a fight. But it was Ethan who took the first swing.

"That felt good." Marcus said sarcastically.

"There's no reason..." Friday spread her arms.

"You're on *his* side."

"I'm on everyone's side, Ethan. Melody *please* tell him that he's part of the show at Althea's." Friday was insistent. Melody nodded broadly.

"You see! I know she's been trying to call you. Where have you been?"

"Out. I wasn't in the studio today."

Friday wasn't going to bring up Barbara. She didn't want to get into it. Besides, she was curious if Marcus would.

"Let's go to Althea's, *please*" Harrison repeated. Melody dropped her arms and they walked together to the front door.

*

Back at Althea's, Ethan told a story about London and Princess Diana.

"Her cousin worked for the gallery that was going to show me. I was sitting on the stairway when she came by to learn more about the art and she couldn't take her eyes off me."

Friday laughed hysterically at Ethan's story. The only one not enjoying himself was Marcus, who pretended to read one of Althea's books, blocking his face, but listening.

"Oh my God, You're saying she was smitten with you! In love was she? With you...!"

"She was. You don't believe me but you weren't there."

Sadie was trimming Ethan's hair standing behind him, rolling her eyes.

"What about you Sadie?"

"I guess he forgot to invite me." Sadie winked at Friday. It was all in fun.

"Everybody that laughed owes me a Fiver. You're all jealous because I have it in the bag. I've already won the game."

Melody and Harrison stood talking with Althea.

"Darlings, I need to get to bed." Althea drawled. It had been a big day. "We ALL have a big day tomorrow."

"Do you have any midnight visitors?" Harrison asked flirtatiously.

"I love it that you think that way, but....No, I truly am exhausted." Althea laughed.

Overhearing this exchange, Marcus threw down his book and joined Althea and Melody, touching Harrison's hair flirtatiously.

"Your turn for a trim." Marcus said, turning on the charm.

"Really, you know how to?"

"Well, yeah, I was a model."

By the way, did Marguerite Chopin give you all original art works?" Althea asked, seeing the dolls.

"Good thing I picked up Ethan's," Sadie mumbled. "It fell out of his pants."

"Good Night my sweets - See you all tomorrow." Althea said as she threw a kiss and disappeared down the hallway.

"Let's go to Odeon!" Melody said, sitting in Harrison's lap.

Was she jealous? Harrison wondered.

"As long as you are *all* here to install work tomorrow." Althea specified. She put on her sternest expression.

"What am I going to do?" Friday asked.

"You're going to photograph us." Harrison said.

Friday put the dolls together on the banquet table and took a picture of them in front of the net.

*

As they took off down West Broadway in Melody's 1971 green Chrysler Imperial that she had inherited from her dear Mom, Melody screamed: "I want *more!* Let's *gooooooo!*" as the huge car went airborne on the bump at Canal Street.

*

In the darkness, Althea paced the perimeter of her space. Was it a dream? The long shadows of the moon fell from the tall windows, across the floor and onto the banquet table. Walking the edges of the space defined her intention; it created a safe place, an arena for it all to happen...tomorrow.

Marguerite sat in the center of the table in front of the dolls shuffling her Tarot cards. She wore a dark blue shawl over her black dress and pressed white shirt. Althea touched her shawl admiring it. She took a flashlight from the table top and admired the subtlety of the weave.

"I know the most wonderful dress shop where we *must* go." She said affectionately.

"Why would I want to look at a dress? I have one already." Marguerite knocked cards on the table top. She sounded severe, but when Althea looked into her eyes, they began to melt into warm pools. She remembered that Marguerite had lost one of her children, a son, several years ago.

Marguerite laid out six cards in a row face down. Althea felt moisture in her eyes.

NO! She could not cry in front of someone.

"You're commencing a new idea." Marguerite said. Her voice was neutral.

"I had to. I'm on my own. My gallery has been closed."

"Galleries come and go." Marguerite waved her arm as if to dismiss concern. "You are meant to stay and change with the times."

"But I have no idea what I'm doing. No idea."

"Good! As if I ever have? And yet...keep saying it..." The pools in her eyes had become focused into lasers. Althea was shocked.

"Now! Say it now!" Marguerite commanded.

"I have no idea what I am doing."

"Again."

"I have no idea what I am doing."

"Again."

"I have no idea what I am doing."

"Now you are getting somewhere. In your mind, there is nowhere to go but UP!"

One by one, Marguerite turned over the six cards. Althea shined the flashlight on them. In the beam of the little spotlight she could see they weren't Tarot cards: They were photographs of Friday, Ethan, Sadie, Harrison, Melody, and Marcus.

Sunday

The sunrise glazed the tan bricks and verdigris fire escape of Althea's building in diagonal stripes slowly, slowly moving across the facade. The front door closed with a slam as Althea emerged in black running gear, pink socks, and new Nikes. Cabs zoomed by flashing geometric waves of yellow. Most of them were empty. Not many people walked around. Soho residents tended not to go to church.

Hazel arrived at the corner of Houston and Broadway every morning from the Women's Shelter on Lafayette Street. Pinned to the back of her worn tweed coat hung flaps of brown cardboard she had painted with hieroglyphs: A black equal sign, an upside down red question mark, and red and black arrows pointing outward. While the F train clanked below, her right arm shot up toward the stop light. "STAR WARS! STAR WARS! WE DON'T NEED NO STAR WARS!" An army of small foam blocks danced on the street grating.

Althea jogged by as she did almost every day and saluted Hazel, smiling, as she headed east.

*

Felicity applied lipstick and rouge and admired her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Bernie had fumbled to Barbara, but all was not lost. How could she insert herself into the negotiations?

The Sunday Edition of **The News** arrived with a thud and Bernie shuffled past as he removed the Arts Section and stacked the rest of the paper on his desk.

"Felicity, I thought you had something in today." There was no response. He knocked on the bathroom door and she opened it suddenly. "Let's see." Felicity followed him to his desk.

"No looking. Isn't that the rule?" Bernie held his hand over his writing, but didn't notice her new look. "Did they push your piece off 'til next week?" Felicity didn't answer as she walked down the hallway and picked up the phone.

*

Friday inserted her key into the gate of 136 Wooster. She knew the gallery was closed Sunday. With a clank the metal gate rose into its box as she leaned under and unlocked the gallery's door. She rushed to the back office but she couldn't find the gallery's master mailing list in the cabinets. She took a deep breath and opened the heavy door to Godd's Executive Suite. She stepped from polished concrete to carpet, and ran to Godd's walnut desk and picked up his Rolodex. She had decided to copy it for Althea without telling anyone, even Melody.

As she pulled the leaves out of his Rolodex and placed them on the screen of the copier, an image hit her: Ethan had done the same thing with Althea's! She knew him and she knew he had done it. Something he said last night kept repeating in her head, echoing back in his insufferable voice: "You're all jealous because I have it in the bag. I've already won the game."

For once, he was being honest. He did have it in the bag: He had stolen Althea's Rolodex. *The Bastard!*

However, Friday didn't realize surveillance cameras were triggered when someone entered Godd's office. They were wired to Godd's Townhouse. After 30 minutes had passed she heard the front door being unlocked. Rainy came in Sundays to balance the books.

"Hi Rainy. It's Friday." The copy machine drowned out the footsteps.

It wasn't Rainy. It was Godd.

*

When Bernie heard Felicity slam the front door he ran to the trash can next to Felicity's desk and rifled through her discarded notes. His lips moved as he read a page. He froze. It took a second to process. He put the page back in the can as he had found it and ran back to his desk to pound out more gibberish on his Smith-Corona.

*

Holding shopping bags, Melody closed Althea's front door with her foot and ran to pick up the ringing phone. After a pause she interjected:

"Hi Felicity. It's Melody. We met the other night." She wore a skirt and low v-neck sweater with a t-shirt underneath. Her hair was pulled back.

"She runs in the morning so I'm sure she'll be back soon." She quietly placed the bags from Uncle Steve's Electronics on the table.

"This is now the office *and* the gallery." With the cordless hand-piece propped between her shoulder and her ear, Melody started removing the fax from the box. Melody wanted to inject some good feeling and hint at Althea's plans, so she spoke with a lift in her voice.

"Come by. OK. Soon. Bye." Then Melody removed the cellophane from blocks of Rolodex leaves and a new rotary she had taken from the other bag.

*

Althea knew which unmarked buzzer to press for Brahm's studio. She also knew he liked to work on Sunday, when his assistant had a day off, and when confidential conversations could happen. Althea was sweaty and out of breath after running to the East River and back, but she didn't care. He owed her. She didn't have his attention yesterday.

"There's a persistent rumor that Godd's advanced you \$1M."

Brahms leaned against the flat files and adjusted his posture. He wanted to change the subject. He was flexible but he moved slowly, deliberately. He wore his usual worn jeans and white shirt.

Brahms began to go astray at around Althea's age. He separated from his wife and began dating younger women. The lifestyle, the parties...his work from that time was not dismissible but even his staunchest defenders referred to it as his "slick period."

"I'm talking too much." Althea interrupted the silence. "Please come this evening for the preview. It would mean so much."

A drawing behind Brahms in a trapezoid of sunlight showed a trunk of ink leading to smaller multiplying rivulets, like an upside-down tree. Each branch showed signs of hesitation - staccato marks or slashes. *It's impossible to go back*, he thought.

He considered his words carefully as he looked at Althea. "The Hanged Man has something of yours."

*

Bernie walked through Tompkins Square with his new review entitled: "Necrophilia," reciting lines of it to himself:

"Painting is dead. Everyone knows that. But there's lots you can do with the dead. You don't have to bury them. I guess some people can't help but fool around with corpses - Dressing them up, putting make - up on them, propping them up on the wall, talking to them as if they were alive, perhaps even trying to re-animate them....Which brings me to the work of B.E. Wright and her current exhibition. It is a testament to her brilliance as a conceptual artist that she approaches painting from the acceptance that the medium is officially dead."

But painting wasn't dead. It was just difficult to write about. Bernie felt he didn't need to see B.E.'s show. It was easier to review if he didn't see it.

Bernie navigated the rabbit warren of **The Paper** headquarters on Cooper Square. With his thumb and index finger he held his new review up like a freshly laundered sheet.

"I found an interesting angle." He said as his editor speed-read the review and began to laugh and scratch his head.

"Yeah - yeah. Ha - Do more like this." The springs of the Editor's wooden chair squeaked as he leaned forward. He ran his fingers through his greying beard. "But do more on young artists. I want you to get there first."

*

"I'm with *the* Felicity Frank." Melody sang. "Althea will be back soon," she said as she stacked empty pages into the Rolodex. "May I ask you something? What's it like when you write?"

Felicity thought for a moment and confided: "They sometimes come out differently than I expect. Once I sit down...." She stopped abruptly when she heard Althea arrive, out of breath.

"Look who dropped by!" Melody exclaimed.

"I would have gotten here sooner had I known." Althea said, wondering what Felicity's agenda must be. Was this about B.E?

"It's good you came by: Better to speak in person about what happened at the party."

Felicity pinched her nose and her lips as if they would converge to a single point. "I didn't come here for that. I came here to talk about your plans." She pulled out her pen and pad.

As Althea explained her plans, she realized she could play Bernie and Felicity against each other to get coverage.

Althea turned to Melody and asked: "Are Ethan and Sadie here?"

"I'll find out." Melody called Harrison while Althea saw Felicity out. After the door was closed Melody said: "They'll be here in an hour."

Althea looked at her. "Call Bernie and invite him over tonight for the preview. I want to make sure he feels included." She cocked her chin and gave Melody a conspiratorial sideways glance.

*

Godd and Friday stood in front of **Scent** in his townhouse. Now she was under his control...or so he thought.

"Do you know who painted this?" Godd asked, anxious to impress Friday.

"Of course, Jackson Pollock." said Friday casually as Godd's doorman slid toes first up the carpeted stairs. Following him was Brahms.

"Brahms, come in. There's something here I'd like you to see."

*

Ethan and Sadie stretched on the Turkish carpets in Harrison's library and flipped through a picture book on Marguerite Chopin. They had been there since early morning. Ethan rattled the plastic package of the Oreos he popped into his mouth. He talked with his mouth full.

"Here's the old Coot we visited yesterday...blimey she's made a lot. Not bad."

"Let me see...."

Are you kidding, Harrison thought, hiding his reaction that it was all new to them. "Are you into this guy?" he asked as he handed them a book about an artist who re-made all of Jackson Pollock's paintings like a method actor taking on his role. "He's an appropriation artist."

"So, appropriation is when you steal something but you can get away with it because it's art." Ethan summarized.

Harrison answered the ringing phone and nodded as he said "Melody wants to know when we're coming over."

He checked for their reactions and answered "We're going to make a stop on the way, so an hour or so."

"Althea is asking us to buy supplies on Canal Street so we can get started today."

*

John sat in the hotel room until she arrived. She embraced him and his face was overtaken with relief. He put both hands on her hips. Her new fine wool dress fitted her figure as if it was custom made. John put an envelope in her purse while she was in the hotel bathroom. The sound of water running didn't drown out his words through the door.

"Everything OK in there?"

The door opened and with her arms crossed, she stated: "This is the only time."

"Oh, come on Felicity, you know you love it. Trust me, look at yourself." Felicity glanced in the bathroom mirror. She did have more color; even an evil glow. And she loved the dress John bought her.

*

Canal Street was a shopping center for Artists. Harrison knew it well so he led Sadie and Ethan to Canal Plastics where they purchased a small clear vitrine and got enamel house paint from the home improvement department of Pearl Paint. Sadie found discount stockings at another place and potatoes at a Chinese grocer. As they headed up Greene, they made a hilarious threesome, like they were off to see the Wizard: Sadie carrying bags of potatoes and plexiglass box and Ethan and Harrison sharing the crates of enamel. Harrison also carried his painting compass, which took on the appearance of a black staff.

*

B.E. took a cab uptown to her favorite bookstore where she was pleased to see Sheldon across the room. He seemed to be looking at the space more than the books. The bookstore was having a final closing sale. Everything was half off.

"Wonderful space for a gallery." B.E. mumbled as they stood in line. A cashier added up her bill by hand.

Sheldon was accustomed to the hints and inquiries. People were curious about his plans.

Holding their book bags they walked down Madison together. B.E. threaded her arm through Sheldon's. He resisted the impulse to pull away from her as she led him toward her gallery. She hoped someone from the gallery would spot them together. She wanted her gallery to worry that they could lose her.

*

Felicity returned to Marcus' studio to change his mind about Barbara.

"I would proceed carefully. Bernie may seem more excited but I've known Barbara a long time. And I've seen artists come and go from her stable." Was she implying that Marcus was a race-horse? Felicity waited for this to sink in and continued. "If you include Althea then you could have the best of both worlds." Any pretense of neutrality had been dropped. It had come to that point. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," she emphasized, mixing her metaphors again.

"But you were....You heard her offer. She's going to finance my new video." Marcus was surprised and his voice shook.

"Just because they offer you something doesn't mean it's true."

*

Melody put together a new Rolodex on Althea's table while Althea talked on the phone to Sissy Ritz, an important collector whom she invited to preview the show. Sissy had a private exhibition space in Tribeca for her collection.

"I'm unveiling several new artists and a new showing concept." Althea knew Sissy would rush over. She was competitive, loaded, and always wanted to be first. "Yes, I know it's fast, but I don't have any time to waste, and frankly my dear, none of us do."

*

Godd had his staff serve lunch as he presided over Friday and Brahms. A maid with a starched pressed apron embroidered with "Godd's House" in red threads held a platter for Godd to serve himself from. Friday held back the impulse to laugh when she saw the embroidery and looked down. Godd served Friday's plate saying:

"You could get used to this couldn't you?" He glanced at Brahms with taunting disdain. It was uncomfortable, like a stiff family dinner.

An early Brahms' hung on the wall. Its chalky grey matched the metal edge of the Breuer Dining table. Brahms stood and looked across it. It was in perfect shape. He knew where Godd had gotten it but he wondered when.

Next to the doorway to the dining room hung **Scent**, which Godd had his curator reinstall there for this luncheon.

"Your work looks nice with the Pollock, doesn't it?" Godd was in hard sell mode. "Sit down, Brahms. Both of you - consider yourselves family here." As Brahms pulled back

the Hoffman Fledermaus chair he caught Friday's baffled reaction to Godd's statement. Then, he saw what was hanging behind Friday and it was his turn to swallow his reaction. It was his new drawing - the one that \$he told him Sissy Ritz had purchased. How did Godd get it?

Godd knew Brahms knew what he was doing. That was where Friday came in. He hired her to facilitate Brahms' acceptance of his offer. But Brahms knew that a 1M\$ advance was becoming standard and other galleries were making similar offers knowing all they had to do was pre-sell work to collectors eager to purchase in advance. With the right Rolodex, the galleries just collected the advance from their collectors. The paintings in Brahms's studio could easily raise such a sum, which is why Brahms wouldn't allow Godd to visit and instead met him in other locations, like his townhouse.

"Do you have a Rolodex?" Godd asked Brahms. He knew he did. He had to.

Godd chose his words carefully. Brahms represented his check-mate in which he would win the game against \$he and ascend to the throne and throw \$he to the gutter. \$he had already been hemorrhaging less important artists and losing Brahms would be the official end of her reign.

"I found Friday this morning photo-copying the gallery's Rolodex. I assume for Althea because hers is missing. That little twerp stole hers..." Godd looked at Brahms as if Friday was not sitting there. "...and he's trying to get into my gallery by offering it to me."

Friday dropped her fork. *Oooooooh. That Bastard.* She slumped in her chair, wishing to disappear, and imagined writing this all in her diary. She already had her first sentence: "Unintended self - parody is the highest form of human suffering."

"The little twerp, Ethan, is at Althea's now. I'm supposed to go by there." Brahms offered.

Friday perked up. "So am I. I'm supposed to be there now." She thought for a second and finally looked at Godd. "But Althea didn't know what I was doing. I *promise*. She thinks her Rolodex is locked in her old gallery."

"Well, then let's get it back." Brahms said. He was already standing.

*

"Pull down the shades." Althea said as she pulled one herself and Melody and Harrison pulled the others.

"And now, let the show begin." Althea offered out her hands as if she was turning over her space to the artists. She was totally relaxed in her element. She pointed to the three walls as she said: "Harrison left, Ethan center, and Marcus right."

Closing the shades unified the spaces and created a symmetry with the library on the left and the corridor formed by the Net on the right.

"Would you like to take the wall on the left?"

"I sure would." Harrison drawled.

"Then welcome to the Sure-would forest!"

Harrison bolted the compass into a center point of the wall so it was anchored by the stud behind the plaster, while Melody spread newspapers on the floor to catch any paint that might drip on Althea's floor. He mixed the paint on a wax paper palette on the newspaper as Melody put newspaper under Ethan's wall.

Holding a tape measure, Ethan measured up the center wall as Sadie held the other end, making four inch increments with pencils. Then they stretched tape across the distance to make the horizontals of the grid. Sadie had helped him with this procedure before in London. Sadie and Ethan chattered as they worked. Harrison didn't bother listening.

*

John napped in his favorite wing-back leather chair in his office. It was his safe haven: the B.E. free zone on the top floor, under the roof line. B.E. rarely interrupted him there but she was haunting the townhouse and avoiding going to her studio.

Sheldon told her earlier that Althea was having everyone over, not knowing that B.E. was in the dog house. Sheldon had left before her meltdown.

John roused with a loud snort and B.E.'s figure slowly came into focus beyond his footstool looking down on him.

"I hear that Althea is having people over tonight."

John felt an invigorating pang of guilt. "Yes, I know, dear."

"How do YOU know?"

"I'm considering investing in Althea's new gallery." He knew that would get her.

B.E. blinked several times like she was in a bad scene that needed to be swiped away with her eyelids. She was jealous in several ways at the same time.

All those years of taking it from her, John thought. Revenge really was a dish best served cold.

"She's invited me over to preview the show."

"Only you? You can't go without me."

"*You-know-who* will be there. Why put yourself through it? We know how much she hates you."

Later, John closed the front door of the townhouse as quietly as he could. He waited until he heard B.E. go to the kitchen. But B.E. saw him passing by on the sidewalk from the downstairs window, so she put on her coat and trailed him at a distance.

*

Going west on Houston in a cab with Marcus, Felicity spotted John walking in the same direction. She thought she had seen B.E. about half a block back, but assumed she was hallucinating. She dropped Marcus off at Althea's and kept going to meet Bernie at their apartment.

Before she met Bernie, Felicity dated a high profile New York painter. No one questioned their relationship, because she was a chief critic of contemporary art at **The News**. All they cared about was getting a review from her, and a good one at that. However, they were deluded if they thought Felicity would review them favorably if they were nice to her. It was much deeper than that, and if a guy was to date her, he risked being trashed by her later when it ended. Somehow, her ex had evaded this fate, even though Felicity made a public spectacle of being upset. She continued to review him favorably at **The News**.

And where did they meet? At Althea's.

And where did the relationship develop? At Althea's.

Where did everything seem to happen? At Althea's. All roads led to Althea's famous parties. Everyone wanted an invite.

Marcus knew all of this. These nuggets of wisdom - jewels to be shared with only a special few - were imparted in moments of intimacy with Althea.

"I thought I wasn't included." Marcus said to Althea when he arrived. He carried a gym bag like a trainer. He was in amazing physical shape but he was terribly insecure.

"What would give you that idea?" Althea asked, flabbergasted...or who? Felicity? As Althea showed Marcus his installation space, she considered silently and realized that Felicity had conspired against her but she didn't realize Felicity regretted the conspiracy, because it had blown up in her face.

Melody noticed Marcus' brooding presence. She approached him and held his fore-arm. She couldn't help admiring his bicep. "You're her favorite." She confided whispering and nodding toward Althea, "But don't tell her I said." Marcus perked up. But Ethan and Harrison had overheard.

Silently Marcus made rhythmic marks across the ceiling and down the wall. He moved behind the net with a pencil he held in a wrist brace he'd customized for himself. He walked briskly, then ran down the makeshift corridor, establishing a rhythm. At the end of each approach he would make a mark. He continued this process.

*

Felicity rushed into the apartment. "Bernie?...*Bernie!*" she called as she walked through. She stopped briefly at his desk and glanced at the papers stacked next to his typewriter. "Bernie?" This time she whimpered. But Bernie wasn't there. He had left for Althea's without her.

Without dropping her purse or shedding her coat, Felicity spun around and left with a slam of the door. Was she losing control of everyone at the same time? This was an emergency.

*

The installation was taking form. Colored brushes lay atop open cans of bright enamel. Ethan slathered orange into a taped rectangle. He threw down one brush and picked up another, eventually holding several simultaneously. "I can't wait to sell people some really bad art that I don't have to make."

Harrison stood on a chair and rendered the upper arcs of circular forms with the compass. It looked like a black rainbow over a white sunrise. "Why pay someone to paint for you? Painting's the fun part." He feathered the ends of his brush strokes so that the breaks would not be visible. "Besides, keep your egomania to yourself."

"Then who would know?" Ethan shrugged theatrically.

"Know which part?"

"That I'm gonna take 'em for all they're worth. HA! Hey!" Ethan strutted backwards with open arms.

"Althea, you've created a monster." Harrison said.

"Let's have some cake." Althea pulled out the cake she had made last night.

*

B.E. peeped around the corner of Althea's building to check if the coast was clear. John had gone in already. She waited until two tall athletic-looking men walked by.

"Excuse me. I've locked myself out and...I need to get back in. I can't reach the ladder by myself." They looked at the fifty dollar bill she held out to them. "I'll pay you to lift me."

B.E.'s shoe fell as she climbed.

"Hey Lady.." He threw it up to her.

The ladder raised below as she climbed the stairs up to Althea's.

*

"John where's B.E.?" Althea asked as she handed him his scotch.

"Pinched nerve, I'm afraid." He said gulping.

"Oh, how terrible." Althea sighed with relief.

When Bernie arrived he kissed Althea on both cheeks and shook hands with John. He had a mission: to get an *in* before Felicity arrived. Bernie wondered if Althea was having an affair with John.

When Bernie was a painter he worked as a chauffeur. An art collector who owned a car service hired him. It was a good arrangement, for a while. He drove around gallery directors, curators, and successful artists when they needed a car and driver. He got to hear everything. Everything.

"Don't tell me because I know already." Bernie said. That got their attention. Althea and John stared silently holding drinks. "John, you're going to back Althea's new gallery. And I can't think of a better investment. I'd like to be the first to congratulate you both." He saw from their reaction that he was onto them. He was doing better without Felicity.

"My editor asked me to get there first so here I am." Bernie held out his open hands and put his arms around Althea and John. "Take me around. I want to know everything."

Althea felt triumphant. Everything was working out.

*

Sadie moved "Old People" into the library after hanging stockings from the rafters and book-shelves.

Once things were going Marcus felt like participating. He could have just plugged a video into the VCR of an earlier performance. However, he had another idea: to scale the Net.

Sadie had walked around the corner and stopped before Harrison and Ethan. "Why do you call perspex plexiglass?"

"Because it begins the word perspective, as opposed to plexiglass, which ends with ass." As he said this, Ethan mounted a perspex box to the wall centered over his color grid.

"It's brilliant because it pulls people *in*, but keeps them *out* at the same time. The illusion of untouchability. Ego unaccountability."

Sissy Ritz arrived with her purse open. The clasp had come unlatched and the contents were visible to anyone who looked in. Sissy didn't seem to notice. Ethan did. He sidled up to her.

"Has anyone ever told you you look like a million bucks?"

"They have now." Sissy had only one working eye. The other was glassy and blue. It made her look like a junk yard dog. Expensive clothes and hair styles were no remedy.

"*Ethan.*" Althea said sternly, "You haven't completed your mural."

"What if I said it's done as it is?"

"Then I'd say that it's not for sale." Ethan returned to the mural and picked up a brush.

"Sissy, it's so nice of you to come at such short notice." Althea said, greeting her warmly. "I'll introduce you later."

Sissy ignored Ethan and looked at the art. She turned towards Marcus, not knowing what to think of any of it. Her collector friends usually travelled in packs. Ideally, they purchased an entire show in which the works were essentially identical. They would then compare and compete. But being on her own was tough for her, so when Felicity arrived, Sissy watched her closely with her one working eye.

"Don't you think Painting is dead?" Sissy asked as she looked at Harrison's and Ethan's murals. She seemed skeptical.

"No" Althea said, pursing her lips as she leaned into Sissy's ear. "That's something people say who never have sex."

Sissy thought. "Oh I love painting."

*

Once in Althea's elevator, Felicity thought about how symbolic this building was of her life. She had started on the ground floor as a receptionist and now was on her way to the top.

Felicity was horrified when she saw Bernie ensconced in conversation with Althea...*and John*. She felt ill. At least B.E. didn't seem to be there.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Bernie asked Felicity once she stood next to him. They watched the work progress around them.

"Yes, I know. I've already been here taking notes." She gave him a shriveling look. And yet, Felicity felt she was not here first this time, and that pissed her off. If it wasn't about her, she didn't support it.

"Darling, we can both write about this, from our own points of view," Bernie offered.

"Bernie." Felicity sighed under her breath. *Bernie, Bernie, Bernie.*

To Felicity, the work seemed like a repackaging of Modernism, strongly related to artists present, and *they* seemed to be enjoying themselves. She hated them too. She didn't want anyone to succeed. She just wanted to control them.

"Hey, Felicity - looks like they've found a wonderful use for **The News**," said John, pointing to the lines of paper on the floor. The more familiar he became, the more he showed contempt. Felicity hated the whole thing, even Marcus' part. Where was he? She looked around and saw him pacing and marking the wall. He didn't acknowledge her. He was "in character." If he dumped her, she would massacre him in print later.

*

Sissy's driver sat in her limo in front of Althea's building in a no parking zone reserved for fire trucks. If a traffic cop pulled up, her driver could circle the block and return. This was one of the advantages of having a car and driver. Besides, if she got a ticket, Sissy would just have her book-keeper Rainy pay it.

Godd's car and driver parked behind Sissy's limo. When Friday, Brahms, and Godd entered the loft, Marcus looked distraught to see Friday with Godd. Thinking he would coast through this, for Felicity's sake, Marcus continued making token marks on the wall. But when Friday arrived with Godd, Marcus decided to take his part in this installation much more seriously. He stopped marking and watched them through the Net while they spoke with Althea and slipped into the bathroom with his gym bag to change into his climbing outfit. He was going to scale the wall and the Net.

*

Two blocks away on West Broadway, She had called a special session in her gallery. All of her employees sat, petrified, while She lectured them, pacing the gallery clinching her fists and screaming:

"Icon Brahms has made this gallery what it is and I am not going to lose him." Brahms' accountant had called requesting a full accounting, which was a strong warning sign that Brahms was going to leave. The staff began to cook the books to make their past and future work appear as lucrative as possible.

*

While Godd talked with Brahms and Althea, Friday slipped away to find Melody.

"Babe, I want to show you something." Friday whispered as she pulled on Melody's arm.

Marcus was just coming out of the bathroom wearing a tight fitting black climbing outfit, with straps with hooks, and even a leather cap and carrying his gym bag.

"Hi!" Friday said but Marcus ignored them and went back to his space.

Friday and Melody entered the guest bedroom and found Ethan's backpack in the closet surrounded by discarded junk food wrappers: Spicy Nachos, Cheetos, Honey Buns, Mozart Balls, and Ding Dongs. Friday unzipped the backpack and emptied its contents onto the bed. Out fell wallets and billfolds of many different shapes, colors and designs, including a purple one. Friday knew exactly where that one had come from. Like a Raven gathering shiny objects and bits of food, Ethan hid his treasures in his backpack. They looked at each other. Friday wasn't surprised. Melody was.

"See. See why?" Friday said.

"You don't feel sorry for him?" Melody responded sweetly.

"God, No. Let's leave it. He can try to figure out who found him out."

*

Felicity sat knock-kneed in a chair near Marcus. She looked vulnerable without her glasses on. She glanced at Godd and Brahms but didn't dare join them. Brahms had already given her a dirty look. Besides, Godd scared her. The rumor that had been circulating so furiously must be true, she surmised. She tried to get Marcus' attention but he just kept looking at Friday.

*

Bernie looked across the way at Felicity panting after Marcus. *How pathetic*, he thought. *I'm going to show you, bitch.*

Out of Felicity's view, Bernie talked to Sadie in the sideways library. Looking at her installation then back at her he asked: "What do you call it?"

"I call it 'Bangers and Mash.'" Sadie shifted her weight from one leg to another. She felt glad to finally not be an appendage to Ethan. A strand of hair hung in her face. She didn't brush it away, but Bernie wanted to.

"That's Pub Food in England, isn't it? Sausage and potatoes?" Bernie also noticed how bitten-down her fingernails were. High-strung, Bernie thought. He could get into

that. He saw a feature article - the introduction of a hot young artist. The header was coming into focus: "The Girl Who Wasn't Afraid of God."

*

The place filled with the sweet, intoxicating smell of paint. While the young artists finished their work, Marguerite did a flashlight dance. Striking a diagonal she skipped back and forth gaining speed and making noises - like isolated syllables, sound effects - capturing the energy, the excitement of the production. Melody skipped around her in a circle.

On one side of the space was "Old People" and "Bangers and Mash," Sadie's sideways library. On the other Marcus' engaged in athletic mark-making. On the left wall was Harrison's black and white target. On the right was Ethan's crazy quilt of color, in the absolute center of which was a vitrine.

Godd's arrival created a wave of excitement. "Here comes Godd" Ethan said as he headed to the guest bedroom to change out of his paint-covered clothes.

When he saw what was waiting for him on his bed, he froze. Ethan looked at the colorful display of wallets as an explosion of the color rectangles of his mural. Who had done this? His anger modulated to curiosity, even respect. Checkmate. But there was too much on his mind and he couldn't hold it all in.

When Marguerite glimpsed a shadow outside the window, she raised the shade. There was B.E. kneeling down between flower pots full of Althea's herbs. No one noticed.

"You're late." Marguerite said to her through the glass. B.E. now had a clear view and she strained to see who was attending. Not only did she see John, but also Brahms and Godd. How she wished she could get inside. She had to admit it...she'd screwed up. John seemed to be leaving. He shook hands and headed for the door.

"I thought this was only for younger artists." B.E. spoke through the glass.

"It is." Marguerite said coldly as she pulled the shade back down.

B.E. turned and descended, letting the fire escape drop her to the sidewalk. She spotted John ahead of her and followed him home.

Althea admired Ethan's wall. Brilliant. What guts to make such a move. A perfect next step to Richter, etc.

"I have one thing to add." Ethan opened the perspex box on his mural, put a Rolodex in it, and closed it.

"But wait..." Althea stepped closer to inspect it. "That's *my* Rolodex... You stole my Rolodex!!" She reached for the box.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Ethan pulled at her arm. "It's appropriation. It's mine now. Isn't that right?" He looked toward Harrison.

Try as she may to be "the force behind the scene," she kept being put right smack in the center. Her Rolodex *was* the center, and she wanted it out.

"Hello Althea. I've been looking forward to visiting you." Godd said to Althea.

"You know each other?" Sissy said.

"Mmmm. I even knew him before he was Godd." He narrowed his eyes as she revealed this. They knew each other long ago in Beverly Hills when Althea had a brief career in the movie industry. Godd usually didn't have to worry about his past being brought up. No one seemed to remember anything. It was better that way. They could imagine that he had descended from Heaven, not Beverly Hills.

"You all know Marguerite Chopin." Marguerite left the window view and joined them.

"Anytime you are interested you can come over. You're always welcome at Godd's house." Godd said to Marguerite.

"That could be very nice but, you see, I'll be dead."

"Death can be such an inconvenience, can't it?"

"Sometimes, however, the communication is so much better."

So Godd was reminded that he had to go with the young and emerging artists. There simply wasn't enough by the dead and the near-dead to go around.

"Althea, I'd like to bring this to my gallery." Godd had decided.

"I think that's an excellent idea," said Marguerite, and she disappeared.

Godd looked at Althea. "I'd like you to come as well."

Sissy was listening from behind, her eyes on Marcus. "I'll take it. All of it."

"Just one more thing..." Godd opened the perspex vitrine in the center of Ethan's mural and removed the Rolodex. "I believe this is yours." He handed the Rolodex to Althea.

Godd was happy. He had gotten what he wanted - or at least was much closer to getting it. He could release Friday; she had served her purpose. He could also begin to gain her trust because he would need her help again. And, it was just a matter of time before Brahms signed with his gallery. Frankly he would have shared his list with Friday had she asked him.

"I wonder who could take some photos? No one seems to be documenting this." Althea asked.

"I could," Friday said.

"As long as I get the copies," Godd said. So... not only had Friday been forgiven, she'd been promoted. Thrilled, Friday went over to tell Melody and Harrison the great news.

Godd was ready to leave. It was time to go. He had gotten what he needed, so he said his good-bye's and Sissy followed him out

Brahms was right behind them, determined to discover how Godd had gotten his drawing from Sissy. He was relieved; he wouldn't admit it ever, but he was. It would work out for him now. He and Althea looked at each other. He wanted her to be happy. He didn't care about the artists. He just cared about her.

Seeing movement was afoot, Bernie abruptly interrupted Sadie and walked toward Felicity.

"Stop squeezing my arm." Felicity hissed as they walked toward the door. They didn't bother to say good-bye to anyone.

Actually, Althea wanted them to go. This was a preview, not an opening. An opening was open season for the gallery and the artists, especially if the show was successful. The truth was she hated openings. What a relief that she wasn't facing the obligatory monthly spanking machine. This was more protected and she liked it.

Melody poured two glasses of wine and gave one to Harrison, who had surprisingly little paint on him. When she leaned down, Harrison got a glimpse of her as a Goddess. She had put on a gold scarf and her eyes sparkled. She didn't say anything for a moment. Words become cliches.

"Keep an eye on your wallet. I have something to tell you about Ethan - he's a pickpocket."

Althea pulled Ethan to the side trying to appear cool, trying not to show that she was about to explode with happiness and excitement. Ethan didn't seem happy. But he

had heard everything. Ethan wanted to go to Godd Gallery, but he didn't want to follow Althea there. He wanted to be on his own this time.

Ethan pointed at Althea. "You're not really who you say you are."

Althea gasped. "Well neither are you. Get over it Ethan, we're all inventing ourselves as we go. Everyone wants to have someone come along and say 'everything is going to be perfect forever and ever.' But that's not how it works. Do you get that? We're alike. Do you see that?"

Althea didn't ask for this but she got it anyway. How glib the formulation. How stupid. She was the parent and how she didn't want to be. She just wanted to be an art lover. She didn't want to be a parent again.

"Don't worry I never thought it would be perfect forever and ever. Someone abandoned me when I was too young to remember, back in England, 25 years ago. Isn't that when you came here? Forget to bring something with you? Forget to bring your Baby Boy?"

Shaking her head, Althea wandered away from him in a daze. Ethan dropped his arms and leered at her.

"Why did you do that?" Friday leered at Ethan. "*You owe her!*"

*

They hadn't talked all the way home. Bernie finally broke the silence:

"Felicity, we don't *have* to agree on *everything*."

"Don't....Don't..."

"Look, if it's so important, let's divide it up."

"Oh...No...."

"I don't want to have to think that what I'm writing is a response to yours, and vice versa. You take Marcus. I'll take the others."

The mention of Marcus' name provoked a stronger reaction from Felicity. She began to convulse, like the dam of feeling was finally breaking open.

"Oh my God, Felicity, what is it?"

"I think I've lost him."

"Who?"

"Marcus." Her facade had crumbled and Bernie could see her frailty, without her armor. He embraced her and they held each other close. He felt the accelerated beat of her heart and the warmth of her cheek against his.

"It's OK. I love him too." He pulled his neck back to look her in the eye for just a brief moment. Their lips touched and they kissed passionately.

*

John watched B.E. spray the stone kitchen counter with cleaner and wipe it again. Suddenly she stopped. His heart sank.

"How could you go without me?" B.E. said, forcing back the tears. John leaned against the desk nearby. He had nothing left to say. He looked at the blinking light of the answering machine on the edge of the breakfast table. Without thinking, he reflexively pressed the Play button. The familiar voice of Harley, the director of B.E.'s gallery began to speak:

"B.E., I'm calling with splendid news." B.E. stopped.

"The Museum of Modern Art has purchased a Dharma Painting from our exhibition. They finalized it today. I wish I could tell you in person, but perhaps you will wish to keep this recording. And...they mentioned something I find interesting: the review in **The News** helped solidify their decision. I guess it's true what they say: "any press is good press."

*

Marguerite was tired. She didn't get out much anymore. They didn't pay enough attention to her. What was the point? Then...she thought about a vortex. She could weave it in colored braids like a giant finger trap.

*

Althea picked up a knife from the table and rang her glass. The afternoon sun lit warm patches of a gold river beneath them. The tiger lilies on the table looked like clusters of six exhausted flames emerging from a fiery explosion.

"Thank you *all so* much for coming." The words were coming out sideways. Something was wrong.

"First of all I'd like to thank Ethan. And Friday my wonderful friend and god-daughter and Brahms and my lovely Melody and Harrison and Oh Sheldon and of course Felicity and Bernie and...." Something was off. She was making the toast that she had meant to make two nights ago.

Melody's eyes misted as she listened. She knew the toast was delayed from last night and yet it seemed like a life-time. Her eyes felt sore and swollen and she knew her make up would start to run. She tried to hold it in but she couldn't, and her chest heaved. She dare not look around, not even at Harrison there next to her. She cried.

The lights flickered. It was happening again.

It was just the seven of them. They divided into pairs. Harrison put his arm around Melody. Friday stood next to Marcus. It was obvious they were a couple. Sadie stood closer to Ethan than she ever had. The three pairs formed a triangle around Althea.

Althea stopped talking. Her lips moved slightly but no sound emerged. Her skin glowed like iridescent ivory, as flickers pulsed over goose bump flesh. She was trapped in amber again.

They stood around her: Marcus Friday...Harrison Melody...Sadie Ethan. The floor started to emit fractured colors and a shape opened up on the ceiling that appeared like an illuminated vortex. At certain angles the atmosphere revealed fractured misty spectrums running through it that shifted in the currents, like a foggy mirror.

The three couples stood at the geometric center of the space around Althea. They held hands and looked up expectantly. A current of electricity ran between them.

The River of Light came down.

Monday

By ducking, Althea was able to lessen the sharp throb In her head. She got out of bed but let her head hang. Actually, she shouldn't have a migraine. It was wonderful last night: she had a new job, and she was going to work for Godd. Then, she remembered

Ethan. There was no reason for her to feel bad...she did the best she could. Still did. And what a bitch it was. Life was actually really really tough to take sometimes.

Metal mesh garbage cans at the street corners had a bulge round them from being dropped over and over. Full. Overflowing. The paper and plastic. Thrown away by the throngs flocking to Soho. The New York City Department of Sanitation was not prepared for the huge increase in tourists and shoppers coming in. Little garbage bag mountains rested in front of building entrances with morning dew beaded up on glossy black plastic. Household and studio garbage from residents of Soho: the loft dwellers. They were like the cliff dwellers except their caves were vast. Their secret was out. Loft dwelling was the best...everyone wanted to move in. Everyone wanted to replace them. Friday's mother had become a Soho real estate agent, and had begun to recite statistics when she walked the neighborhood with Althea. Million dollar figures were whispered. It was disgusting to Althea. Disgusting. Out of a garbage Matterhorn a huge rat emerged and scampered into a sewer drain.

Her hair hung in her eyes and brushed her cheek. She squinted. The infernal buzzing in her right ear was excruciating, but the neck pain had disappeared. Or was the ear buzz overshadowing it? Once again she felt the oxygen come into her system and float away the pain. Crystal blue washed down her back, like a pain-killer ad. But now the base of her back felt sore. And the aching eyelids: dehydration?

The reason she decided to open the door and peep into her guest bedroom was because she knew they were passed out. Still, she turned the doorknob so carefully. Ethan's arm lay across Sadie, his hand resting on her opposite shoulder, and his leg lay across Sadie's leg. Were they trying to reenact Annie's photo of John and Yoko? She wished she could watch them but they might rouse, so she implanted the image in her head and softly closed the door.

Godd moved gracefully. Everything about him was choreographed, studied. Few words. He didn't have a lot to say. Andy never did either. If ever there was proof that saying little was effective, it was Andy's success. Andy was a human projection screen, but he couldn't imitate Andy. He wanted Andy's estate and he wanted it bad. He would even use sex to get it. He had his wish list of artists. Once they were dead it got a lot more expensive and complicated to get them.

He wore his dove grey wool suit that he had custom made on Bond Street. It had the slightest charcoal grey stripes. He decided to wear a tie especially for Althea. It was apricot, a color he usually did not wear. But Althea had given it to him. His black wing tips came from Weston. They were slightly worn. He sat in the club chair that "Old People" used to be in. He centered it in Althea's big space. He had his hair trimmed every week with shears. It was combed back and gelled.

Althea had learned to hide her shocked reactions. When she entered her big space and saw Godd, she didn't react. However, she opened her mouth too soon and asked the wrong question:

"How did you..."

"You still don't know who you're dealing with?" He was always cool.

"So, say that and it comes true. Is that the way it works?"

"For me."

"Anyway, nice tie."

"You're going with me now. Shall we cross the street together?"

You must really want something, she thought.

*

Mangold Gallery specialized in conceptual art. A new show was up which Felicity wished to see - a respected conceptual artist who had once sent \$100 checks to museum curators and art critics to see if they would cash them. Some did.

When Felicity pulled out her notepad the gallerina tried to press the page button on her phone to alert Ms. Mangold without Felicity noticing. But Felicity noticed.

The show was a web of ropes hand-tied into an irregular network. It was suspended two feet above the floor and anchored to wall bolts. Walking through the gallery required hop-scotching through openings in the web, like walking through a two-foot snow drift.

With sadistic pleasure, Felicity watched Barbara Mangold negotiate her way through the web to greet her.

"Every time I do this, it has more meaning." Barbara said between steps.

Felicity decided to step toward her.

"There's one in Vienna also." Barbara added.

"Oh, Vienna..." Felicity stopped to write that down. "Is it a series?"

"Well, each one is unique. He installs them himself."

Felicity took a left. Most of the openings were trapezoids with 2 - 3 - foot openings. Luckily she wore her flats. When she got within closer range she delivered her torpedo:

"It's interesting. Althea's show has a rope net..."

Althea?

"I thought her gallery was closed."

"It is. Yes. She's doing something new in her loft. Nothing stops her."

Felicity watched Barbara's face turn crimson, almost matching her nail color. She let it sink in. She considered whether she would bring up Godd. In order to remain in the game she had to make clear her influence with Marcus and Althea.

"I might review them as a pair."

Barbara stroked her lower lip and stepped toward Felicity. She appeared vulnerable, even conciliatory. Felicity hadn't seen this side of her.

"Can I get you anything? What can I get you? Would you like a press release? Regina...bring me a catalog." Barbara stepped toward the front desk as Regina held out the catalog. "Who's in the show?"

There were only two more ropes to step over and home free. To the front door past the desk, open the door, and....

"Four new artists: Ethan and Sadie, from London, Harrison, and ...Marcus."

Barbara was livid but she tried to hide it. She wanted to be the one to introduce Marcus.

"But why not wait until Marcus can have a solo show?"

Felicity pushed the front door open as she said: "Why wait?"

It was happening so fast that it left little time for subterfuge and sabotage. Barbara stepped slowly through the ropes back to her office. It didn't have more meaning for her this time.

*

Three students walked on Wooster as one of them sang:

"Art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art art..."

Althea and Godd walked across Wooster and were greeted by Friday. She was happy to see them together. The three students followed. They stared at Godd with stars in

their eyes. Godd had been getting a lot of press to bolster his reputation. In New York Magazine he was shown leaning against a Le Corbusier sofa, arms casually crossed, in his Gwathmey - designed Hamptons home. Behind him hung a black and white Franz Kline.

Godd was oblivious of them as they tripped over each other exiting, looking backwards. Friday watched Althea and Godd as they entered the skylit exhibition space several feet apart. Althea cut a striking silhouette, like she had popped out of Robert Longo's "People in the City." Knowing her as long as she had, Friday could see the signs of stress. Althea's movements were not fluid. On each wall hung one painting, slightly off center. A Twombly, a Warhol Rohrshach, a Schnabel dish painting, and a Brahms. Godd had purchased them from himself. In his previous space in Chelsea he had curated shows of each artists' early works.

They walked into the Executive Suite. Althea was nervous. There was Godd's huge desk and two smaller chairs facing it.

"Where am I going to sit?" Althea asked.

"Here." Godd pointed to the leather high back swivel chair behind his desk.

"That's your chair."

"I'll be uptown mostly."

"And when you're here?"

"You can sit on my lap." Uh-oh.

Althea looked down. "Tired of models?" Godd nodded.

"Me too."

"Althea...Let's get the show here."

"What about your scheduled show?"

Godd picked up the phone and dialed. After a moment he said into the receiver:

"I've rescheduled your show to April."

Althea could hear screaming coming from the other end, yet Godd remained calm.

"Then I'll purchase your work and resell it later." Godd hung up.

"What about the ads?"

"No one reads them."

"I'll need Melody."

"What's her number?" Good picked up the phone again. The entire time he had his eyes locked on Althea's.

*

Melody's loft mate answered the phone, thinking it was a joke that the caller said he was God. So, Godd buzzed Friday on the intercom and Friday called Melody at Harrison's. "Get over here babe."

Harrison dropped Melody off on the way uptown to meet Sheldon.

*

Sadie made coffee as Ethan raided Althea's refrigerator while the phone rang. The message played. "Sh...Shhh. SHHHH!"

"It's John. I'll be in Boston. Call me tomorrow at the office." Beep. Ethan raised his eyebrows.

"Sheldon here. Sorry I couldn't make it yesterday. Had a meeting." Beep.

"Get dressed and come to the gallery, you slob. Not you Sadie." It was Friday's voice.

"Oy." Ethan picked up.

"You're meant to be over here right away." Friday told him.

"What's in it for me?"

"Oh, come on. A show with Godd? Fine, don't come. Just send Sadie." She knew that would get him.

Melody was in the back meeting with Godd. Quitter listened intently. Friday's intercom rang again and she picked up, nodded, and turned to Quitter:

"As it turns out, you don't need to quit. You're fired." She hung up.

*

Bernie started seeing galleries in his neighborhood, but there weren't many left. The East Village landlords had gotten too greedy so the galleries had moved back to Soho. Who would keep an east village storefront with 10 - foot ceilings when you could have a 14 - foot Soho space with cast iron columns for the same rent?

Bernie looked at a show of celebrity photos nibbled by mice in a small gallery on Avenue A.

In a gallery on Avenue C were tile boxes with toilet seats in them.

Geometric paintings made of dry noodles were in a small gallery on East 10th.

Corporate logos rendered in poured plastics so that they became smeared and hallucinogenic were on East 9th.

That was it for the East Village. He walked to Soho.

He took the elevator to the second floor of a new gallery on Mercer. In the front room sat a giant tape ball 40 inches wide. In the back was a wall of Budweiser 6-Packs with an opening too small to enter. *Get it?*

On the third floor, lit wall - mounted boxes played sounds as he approached.

"Scatter art" was a term Bernie invented. It was a hot new art movement. There was an example of it on the next block south. Discarded make - up containers, yarn, and hair nets had been strewn across the concrete floor. Headless, discarded Barbies lay around like an angry teenager had abandoned them.

A skid mark bisected the walls and ceiling of the gallery next door. The offending tire was removed.

He wandered to Greene to Barbara Mangold. He decided not to step through the web.

On Broadway, above Dean and Deluca, were large framed photographs of wealthy dysfunctional families.

He liked Carol, so he walked south on Broadway to the gallery where she worked. She sat in front of a plate glass window overlooking Broadway wearing a sweater dress. Neither of them acknowledged the paintings hanging - tiny frescoes floating on the vast walls like postage stamps.

Like a bee pollinating, Bernie took nectar from one gallery to the next. He described the other shows since the gallery staff rarely got to see them. He got Carol's interest by mentioning Althea's party and preview that he and Felicity attended..

"You were there? I love her. She's my role model."

The sound of their conversation echoed through the empty white space.

"Can you invite me sometime. Please?" Carol pleaded as Bernie left. No one else was around.

Primed, Bernie was ready for his favorite stop. He headed north on Broadway and crossed Prince to 136 Wooster. Godd Gallery. When he walked in he was startled to see Melody sitting next to Friday where the guy usually sat.

"Should I ask where he went?"

"Terminated. He turned into silver and melted into the wall."

Bernie's internal Rolodex scrolled in a blur through all the topics he could not bring up. What he really wanted to do was make a good impression on these lovely young ladies. But, wait, he couldn't say that either. He kept focusing on the colors blurring past, like a speed background.

A kind of blindness ensues. The beauty is too much. It was as if they were giving off light.

"Can I just move in here? Bernie said. "I can put a lounge chair in the corner. I just want to bask in your light."

*

Marguerite bought an old light bulb factory in Brooklyn and turned it into her studio. When she felt like it she got Lurch to drive her there in her Cadillac. She had that urge. She had a new idea.

Marguerite walked through the white washed corridors and stopped at a room full of clothing. The world was her oyster. A figure set on top of the mound of clothing. He looked so annoying. He had a striped head. She ignored him and starting pulling clothing out of the pile.

"You're an asshole." said the figure on the pile of clothing.

"I'm a famous artist. You're the asshole." Marguerite had been expecting this. "Besides," she said looking behind her, "you're a hallucination. So shut up."

The colors were falling out as she pulled clothing down the hall to her sewing room. Her colorful trail was bigger than her. She separated the clothing into piles of color. She liked working in fabric. It didn't require any help. She didn't like people in her studio. Her bronze casting kept an entire foundry employed and busy.

By the morning she had them assembled. She pulled them up by cables and they floated into the air. Each one in a prismatic color: Her family beyond family. The failure of the parents is everywhere, she thought. It is epic: the grand disaster behind all other disasters. Usually, the parents are the children, leaving the children to make it up as they go along. This is not a world for the weak. It's best when we help each other...help the ones who matter to us.

She walked down the hallway to find Lurch in the furniture room. He was arranging worn wood tables into stacked towers. The room resembled an ancient tiered city.

"Come look what I made." Marguerite said, startling him. He crossed the long hall with her.

Above them hung six life-size figures made of patched fabric in yellow, orange, red, pink, blue and green hung from their mid section.

"Put them in the Cadillac." She unbound the cables holding them and lowered them to the floor. She handed him the yellow, pink, and green ones.

"You take the girls in the front seat." She picked up the others. "I'll have the boys in back with me."

Traffic was backed up on the Williamsburg Bridge. A generic car full of ordinary people pulled up beside Marguerite. They couldn't help but stare at the old woman in the back sitting between life size color dolls. There were more dolls in the front next to the strange driver.

Human filler, taking up oxygen. Marguerite thought as she stared them down until they looked away. Her Cadillac took off ahead of them with her colorful family.

*

"Always have a confident stance," Marcus' coach had taught him. Marcus stood with his legs shoulder width apart and feet firmly planted. His chest protruded and his chin was slightly dropped so that his spine was perfectly aligned. His arms hung relaxed by his side while he talked to Barbara Mangold and the visitors she had brought to his

studio. He wore a black microfiber vest, nylon pants, and motorcycle boots. On his work table were collections of photos and clippings which did not include his modeling shots, but old photos from his high school when he was a star quarterback. He also had photos of his favorite player, Jim Otto, who he talked about:

"He was number 00 with the Oakland Rangers. The AFL. They say his number was a play on his name: 'Aught - Oh' but I don't think so."

On a black board he drew diagrams in chalk of formations: plans for a video as if he was the coach and the X's and O's representing defense and offense players with lines and arrows representing their movements.

In his performance art, 00 represented Marcus' beginning. The core of his project. Double Nothing. Oh Oh....Ooh. Double goose eggs. Shooting the mOOn. Balls. 2 balls. "It takes balls to make it." Right, Coach! Big balls...He had them, and he wasn't afraid to use them. And he had a title - "Meatus" which referred to the opening in the glans of the male reproductive organ. He was making a project which obliquely referred to his private parts.

He described his video project: "Meatus Americanus" to the rapt group: Opposing football teams, cheerleaders marching on a field, as blimps fly above lit with the numbers 00 flashing. It could be filmed in the midwest on a high school football field like the one he played on.

Melody came into his mind. He saw her cheering with her pom-poms and dropping to her knees in adulation. She cheered him on as Marcus' audience applauded.

Marcus had his funding.

*

Godd Gallery curatorial staff de-installed the paintings in the exhibition space and crated them to go to their buyers.

The gallery was closed. The shutter was down. Friday and Melody sat at the front desk answering the phone.

*

Success is when being short of money changes to being short of time. The constriction in Althea's chest was starting to dissipate. At its worst it was like a vice grip around the heart and solar plexus. The grip had tightened again after the gallery was locked up. If

there are dry heaves, then there must be dry sweats. Invisible beads. The constant numbing. Everything sounded like an echo chamber. Every blink of the lights, every ring of the phone could signal another emergency and trigger another panic.

Inhale...Mrs. Wallace calling from American Express. The other bill collectors. They didn't care and didn't pretend to. They sounded like her second grade teacher, and spoke as if she had been a naughty girl.

"I will pay you. I assure you. As soon as I can. You have my word." Exhale.

It didn't matter. They wanted it now. So, she stopped answering the phone and screened her calls.

Her financial dilemmas didn't seem fair. Or right. It certainly didn't line up with "abundance thinking." She was doing her best, always, and she contributed and shared. Her generosity seemed to be her liability... No one else gave dinner parties. Rarely, if ever. If only she could be stingy and parse out every penny like they did. She hated negotiating, preferring to be on the creative side of things - thinking naively that the rest would work out fairly.

They told her how much *they* were doing for *her*. And rarely if ever did they thank her. The conviction that every one could be happy with a business arrangement eluded them. They wanted as much as they could take for themselves. Clear the smorgasbord! They wanted to walk away feeling they had gotten the better of someone. They liked putting people in a difficult spot. They liked seeing people suffer.

Had she finally improved her situation? Or was this just another chapter of false hope? When she confided her situation to someone slap-able, they replied: "Stop trying." But she could see the glint of fear in their eye. Everyone feared being in her position and they were usually just one step away. They were loath to admit that the game was rigged. And the people who rigged it liked it that way. They kept it that way. It was said that New York was the only place you could work as hard as possible year after year, decade after decade, and still be struggling.

Althea sat at da Silvano Restaurant with Godd systematically cutting bits of her Pasta with truffles (the \$90 house specialty which Godd had ordered for her) while Godd negotiated a deal on the phone he had brought to his table. Godd ate between bids increasing in \$10,000 increments. Holding the phone, he left the table with the wireless hand-piece to complete the bidding in private. It was a crisp autumn day and the front door was open.

A black sedan pulled up and an arriving group were greeted enthusiastically by the maitre de. The business men spotted Godd standing out front and nodded. The Japanese one also bowed. Barbara Mangold caught sight of Althea, sitting alone, and pretended not to see her. They sat at the next table and noisily scraped their chairs on the tile floor. Behind the group was someone else....Marcus. What was he doing with

them? Marcus looked down. He must want to disappear, Althea thought. Guess he hasn't worked that skill out yet. Barbara made a toast and Marcus lifted his glass. Wasn't that the Belgian guy who headed up the Cartier Foundation? Had Barbara arranged something for Marcus with him? Althea's mental Rolodex flipped through possibilities. The Japanese man looked familiar. Where had she seen him? As she searched her memory, Marcus stood and came over. He looked at Althea like he pitied her. Barbara's ears were perked up to overhear every word. Then her jaw dropped when Godd re-entered and sat down with Althea, picked up his napkin and put it in his lap. He didn't acknowledge Marcus.

"I just purchased a Brahms drawing from your dead photographer friend's collection. I thought you would enjoy it." Godd whispered to Althea.

"Oh...that's so kind...isn't that wonderful?" Althea looked at Marcus. It gave her immense pleasure to see Barbara squirming in the background. "You haven't met Marcus yet, have you?"

Godd shook his head and didn't extend his hand. Marcus was busy marking the wall in an athletic suit when he saw him last.

"We're remounting the show you're in at my gallery. You're familiar with my space, aren't you?"

Marcus winced and nodded. Of course he was. There was a slight patronizing tone to Godd's delivery.

"I trust you're going to be installing your piece?" Godd continued.

"Um..." Marcus was caught off guard. And he was in the hot seat. "Ah....I..." It was like he was caught between words.

Godd pre-empted him. "If not, we'll include your videos...and photos of your performance...which I already own."

Althea didn't want to see Marcus squirm. Always the artists' advocate, she was willing to give the benefit of a doubt. She decided not to say anything. It was better that way. She tried to get through to him with eye contact. He saw her. There was still a connection. Don't throw it all away, she thought.

"Let's go." Godd and Althea got up, leaving Marcus standing, in shock. Godd signaled the waiter to put it on his account as they walked out to his limo.

*

In the MOMA Print Department Sheldon and Harrison pored over a stack of prints that had been neatly placed on a viewing table. Sheldon had made the appointment in advance with the staff.

"We were talking about this print." Sheldon nodded toward the staff members who hovered in the background. It was a densely rendered etching including signature Picasso subjects - a girl, a horned animal, and an illuminating light bulb.

"Minotauromachy.' One of them just sold at auction for over one million."

Sheldon signaled the staff and one of them picked it up by the corners with gloved hands and removed it. Below it was an abstraction inked with several colors.

"In this Miro, he hand - painted the plate with various tones, which is called "a la poupee." There were red dots within the black ink. He nodded again and the gloved hands removed the print, revealing a grid made of hand drawn lines on tan paper below it.

"And this...this...is one of Brahms' signature early prints, made in 1974. Soho. Early Soho. Isn't it magnificent." It was spare, reductive, and resonant. Harrison thought about Brahms making it. Smoky grandeur. Brahms was his hero. It was hard to say anything without sounding cliché.

*

John suffered from lower jaw tension - a condition that caused him to grind his teeth and clench his jaw. He took frequent trips to Boston to the clinic that specialized in Temporomandibular joint conditions. He liked to stay overnight so he could explore the local landscape for potential investments.

While he waited in the carpeted waiting room for his appointment he started talking to the only other person waiting, a slim well dressed young man.

"You're too young to be under stress." John said, breaking the ice. "Why aren't you out picking up girls?"

"I do sometime." He was charming, confident. John liked him. "But if you want to have romance, you've got to have finance."

"Ha! So true." Images of Althea, Friday, and Melody flickered through John's mind. "And may I ask what you do?"

"I'm starting a company with three of my classmates in California."

"You came here from California?"

"I went to school there. MIT. That's where we met."

"Oh..." John was impressed. "What's your product?"

"Well, actually, it's more like a service. A search engine."

"A service engine! I love it." John laughed in his ratcheting way. "I'll take several!"

"Search engine. You'll only need one with your computer."

"You honestly think people will be into computers?"

The young man nodded. The door opened and a nurse said: "Mr. McBain, the doctor is ready to see you."

John jumped up and reached into his wallet. "Tell you what, call me. I'm interested in your idea. Can you come to New York for a meeting?" He handed him his card.

*

Ronald Penn Warren, director of Godd Gallery uptown, came downtown to supervise. Wearing a pen striped vest and suit, pastel shirt and tie, and hand made boots, he appeared like the dandy professor he had once been, before Godd hired him away for his encyclopedic knowledge of art. Melody answered the bell and let him in, lowering the gate after him.

"Oh, hi." Friday looked up.

"Hello, Friday. I'm organizing the artworks."

Introductions. "Melody will take you over. Ethan and Friday will be there, I think. Or they'll join you."

"They're in the show?"

"Yes. We're organizing the other two."

Friday leaned in and whispered to Melody. "If I told Ethan not to come over he would have been here."

"Harrison is uptown. He'll be here this afternoon." Melody interjected.

"Marcus will be here. We're working on it."

"Marcus Schumacher? I bet you are." Ronald gave them a wry smile.

*

Althea was uptown with Godd.

"How are you for money?" Godd handed Althea something. Althea squeezed it. It was hard. It was hundreds, an inch and a half thick.

"Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but I just got a rush." Althea looked away.

"Then I wouldn't say it." Godd replied looking in the other direction.

*

"I want the center wall." Ethan stood with Ronald and Sadie in the center of Althea's loft.

Sadie scowled at Ethan. "Balls."

"Actually," Ronald said pausing, "I could see a secondary wall to hold the library. So you get your wish."

"You're moving the whole library?" Sadie was gobsmacked.

"Oh yes, we're bringing everything. This place will be empty."

"What about the phone?" Even Ethan was surprised. The buzzer rang. Ronald clicked his heels together with his arms clasped behind his back. He arched his eyebrows.

"That must be the photographer and movers now." Ronald reached into his right pocket and pulled out a key with a tag on it. "I understand you need a space. You'll find this one adequate, I think, at the very least. The address is written on the tag."

"Off you go." As Sadie and Ethan stumbled toward the door, in shock.

Ronald spoke after them: "I've been following you both. I expect great things from you so don't disappoint."

*

Marguerite stood in her salon with her back to B.E. "Are you finally going to enjoy your success?"

"I thought I was." B.E. was already seated, facing Marguerite's back.

"Absurd. You know this is not true." Marguerite sat down opposite B.E. and gave her the hairy eyeball. "Do you really think anyone is out to get you? They have better things to do."

B.E.'s hands were shaking. She touched her throat and stroked her Adam's apple.

Marguerite continued: "We are consumed by our own concerns. As if any of us are doing it for the money? By the time the money comes we're nearly dead. Or the glamour...Where's my glamour? I want my glamour!"

"Two hours every year."

"The rest is like swimming underwater for a long time."

B.E. looked at the different color figures sitting around.

"Don't be jealous of the young." Marguerite continued. "They need you. Remember what it was like?" Marguerite waited for a memory to come into focus.

B.E. began to laugh. "I had no money and I thought no one saw me put the little candle stick in my purse at the Mexican Restaurant. The cops swooped in like it was a major bust. We had no money so I called Godd to bail us out. Even though he wasn't Godd yet."

Marguerite thought of Felicity. "Now, isn't there someone you owe an apology?"

*

Sheldon talked to Harrison as they sped up Madison in a cab.

"The more I looked into it, the more necessary it seemed to have a space. And once I have a space, let's face it, I have a gallery. The minute I mention this to Brahms, he lights up, especially if the space is uptown."

Harrison had been looking for the right gallery. His work was in demand and people were lining up to buy his work. The director of the space where he showed did not represent artists so he didn't compete with galleries. In fact, he partnered with them on shows with Harrison and a Los Angeles gallery. He fanned the flames and built the excitement. However, he was not good at collecting payment and Harrison was owed a lot.

Harrison's phone kept ringing. Gallery directors plopped down on Harrison's studio couch and started talking about themselves. It was as if the art was something to be ignored. World-weary, self-involved, entitled, worn out, vain, bored, lacking. Rarely, if ever, did they state what they could do.

One guy brushed his hands, asking: "What do you do when you're blocked?"

"Umm. I don't get blocked." Accentuating the negative, Harrison thought.

"I can't sell that color." Another one said, looking at a painting.

"Don't make any more green paintings. There's enough green in nature already."

"Red doesn't sell. It's too bright."

"Blue is bad luck. Blue doesn't sell."

"I like orange but it doesn't sell."

What a parade of losers. Crammed into unflattering overpriced designer clothes and shoes, they launched into boring diatribes about what had happened to them on the way: the traffic, the heat, their cancelled hair appointment, the run in their stocking, the stock market was down, the stock market was up. Clueless. Harrison had to laugh. Clearly they thought there was nothing more interesting than themselves.

"Seriously?" Sheldon asked.

"I wish they were joking."

"Dealers." Sheldon always sighed as he and Harrison climbed the marble stairs and entered an empty square space on the second floor. Generous, yet intimate.

"Well?" Sheldon looked as he walked into the center.

"Perfect," Harrison said. It was. He was ecstatic.

*

"Godd Gallery..." Melody said after she picked up the phone. A plastic dust curtain offered Melody and Friday some privacy and protection. Althea's furniture was being moved in through an opening in the curtain, through which blurred figures moved around the sun-drenched space.

"B.E. just asked us to dinner." Melody looked at Friday, surprised.

Four men strained as they walked by carrying Althea's dining room table wrapped in plastic. "How did they do that?" Friday marveled. The moving crew brought in boxes, book, shelves and the sofa. A messenger delivered photos from the lab on Broadway.

"That must be my photos!" Friday exclaimed.

Ronald grabbed the package out of her hand, ripped it open, and flipped through the photos.

"I know it seems rushed but this is good. And I know I can count on you." Ronald said. "Now, how can we get the murals re-installed?"

"Why bother with us young folks? Shouldn't you be uptown making more million dollar deals?" Friday asked.

"My dear, we're running out of art." Ronald curated the show of Gorky that was hanging uptown. "There's simply not enough to go around. Once it's all in museums we have to move on to the next thing."

"That's what we are: the next thing." Friday laughed.

"And the thing after that, too?" Ronald said.

"Well if you put it that way..." Melody chimed in.

"Let's pretend this is all going to be perfect. Then, it will. Better yet, let's pretend it's already happened." Ronald had a way with words.

A well dressed woman came through the curtain. "These should be helpful." He handed her the photos. "Study them while you answer the phone and I am going to take these charming ladies to lunch."

*

"Ridiculous." Althea thought. "I'm trapped uptown in corporate hell."

She had been led to an empty office, really an alcove, and told to write something for the catalog the gallery was putting together. There was no phone. Otherwise, she

would call downtown. She didn't want to write. Writing about herself was impossible. Best to leave the critical end of perception to Felicity and Bernie.

It was rescue time. She needed to be saved. But by who? Brahms? This was the last place he wanted to be, apparently. She was beginning to understand his wisdom in side-stepping Godd's advances. Just past the secretary, yet another secretary, was a set of glass doors that led to the hallway. Her getaway. A moving crew had propped the doors open and carried in paintings. The one in charge nodded at her.

"Over there?" He asked as if he knew her.

"Oh...um. Yes." They leaned them against the walls in the empty space. This was her chance. She dashed for the open door. The secretary looked up at her. Why did they always look identical, interchangeable?

"Is this the way to the lady's room?" The words caught in her throat. Secretary nodded but seemed suspicious. Onto her. Althea slowed her pace and calmly walked through the threshold.

"Althea?" Secretary called.

Uh oh, she thought. Busted.

"You're going to need this." Secretary held up a key on a large ring. "It's locked."

"Oh, of course. Thank you ever so much."

The windowless hallway was carpeted in green geometric carpet. Science fiction, she thought. Doors held strange names like ORB Capital in gold cursive. Who were they? What did they do? Was this all a set? A chase scene could take place in one of those storage warehouses with endless corridors of numbered doors. Turning and turning with no end in sight. No daylight. She passed the men's room door with a plaque in the same gold print, so the ladies' room must be past the elevators. She pressed the elevator button. Ding! She got on. She looked down. A man stood next to her, wearing fancy shoes and suit pants. She hid the key ring behind her purse.

"Why look who's here..." the man exclaimed. It was her old boss, who had been out of touch since the gallery was closed. He seemed to be overcompensating for embarrassment with excessive enthusiasm.

"Fate has brought us together again!"

"And how." Althea tried to smile. "I'm not going to ask where you've been."

"I wanted to call. Times are tough. You know..." He shifted into official mode. "I've just been interviewing with the big guy upstairs."

"Oh really?"

"Any chance you could help get Marcus in the stable here?" Interesting. Godd was playing him. Good. He deserved it.

The doorman held the door as they walked out of the building side by side and turned right. He stopped at the corner and hailed a cab on 79th.

"Downtown? I can put in a good word for you. We could be together again...with Marcus." He opened the cab door. "Coming?"

"No. I'm seeing more shows. But thanks." The cab sped off. "And good luck." But he didn't hear her. Althea stood at the corner laughing. Then, she turned around and headed back to Godd's.

*

Brahms thought all of Godd's interest in Althea was calculated to lure him in. But that was too simple. It was an overlapping network of agendas that converged at Althea; Godd's chess game with human players.

Brahms answered the studio phone himself and regretted it immediately. It was \$he calling from her gallery, screaming that Godd had outbid her for one of Brahms' drawings at auction. A record price.

He had to hold the receiver away from his ear as \$he screamed a stream of expletives.

*

Harrison couldn't wait to tell Melody about Sheldon's gallery space, so he had the cab drop him off at Wooster. It was chaos there and a woman in a plaid suit and lacquered hair sent him to Jerry's around the corner, where she said Melody was having lunch. Harrison found Melody with Ronald and Friday. He shared the good news.

"Before making any firm commitments, speak to me first. We're interested in what Sheldon's offering you." Ronald said as he took a sip from his Martini. "But first, we are all very excited to have you in our show."

Melody and Felicity smiled.

"So, that takes care of everyone except Marcus. Who is going to go find him for me and bring him here?"

"Me." Friday volunteered.

*

Ethan and Sadie's new digs on Howard with a view up Crosby was vast and beautiful. So, of course, they began to argue.

"I'm going into major production." Ethan announced, holding up his arms.

"Oh are you? Big plans. All worked out." Sadie was getting tired of him.

"You're sure gettin' uppity. Ever since that old lady liked your shite."

"It wasn't just her."

"Well, first you're helpin' me. It's cos' of me you're here."

"We'll see about that."

"Oh, missy prissy, all high and mighty."

"Talkin' about yourself again?" Sadie's tone shifted from accusatory to playful, seductive. She took a banana from the table and handed her camera to Ethan. She sat down and spread her legs and peeled the banana.

"Take a picture."

Ethan aimed the camera at her and pressed the button. The flash caught her biting into the banana looking up with contempt and flirtation.

*

"What are you doing here?" Marcus asked Friday standing in his studio doorway.

"I'm here to photograph you." Friday dreamed this excuse up in the cab.

Success is an aphrodisiac. The beginnings even more - first signs of fame and fortune were enough to put anyone in the mood. Friday looked beautiful, like a ripe, dangling fruit ready to be picked.

"Mmmm. It's for the catalog." She tossed her hair. Her camera hung around her neck and she touched it.

Marcus leaned against the doorframe. He hadn't let her in, yet.

"There's a catalog now? This thing keeps growing." He touched his crotch, which tingled.

Friday looked at the floor then back up, flirtatiously. "Can I come in now?"

Friday had learned how to be in artists' studios. She had grown up being in them - not just her father's, and Brahms', but also many of their friends' -- a who's who of recent art history: women and men who graced the pages of *Vanity Fair* and who were well on their way to being household names. One of them had the words: "I want to be a household name" written on his bulletin board above his work desk.

To be quiet, thoughtful, respectful was the way to be. After all it was the place where they made the work and it was a privilege to be invited in. Her father, a thoughtful and literary man who grew up in Ireland became the role model for his students, particularly Ethan, Sade and their class. There was a lovely symmetry in that this class was close to Friday's age. But there the symmetry ended. Marcus was not one of her father's students. He went to Yale. And Ethan....well, she had complicated feeling about him. The others were great.

Art movers had come earlier to take away the athletic equipment covered with Vaseline to Mangold Gallery. Marcus walked behind his conference table and faced Friday who stood on the other side. Friday glanced at the stacks of photos on the table and his chalkboard diagrams, his sketches, and the new 3-D clear plastic models.

Always let *them* speak first. She knew that. Don't offer your opinions until they ask for them. She appreciated the delicacy of her position. She looped her handbag behind her to bring the camera in front.

"You want to take pictures of me?" Marcus asked. He was testing her. "What do I get in return?"

Oh, I see, Friday thought. Tit for tat. "Happiness." Friday had also learned to diffuse tension with her wry sense of humor.

"Then read from your journal and we have a deal."

Hmmm. Interesting. Friday pulled her journal from her purse, wondering how she was going to avoid the parts about Marcus, then in a split second realized it wasn't a problem to read about him. He would love the attention.

She started at the front and read the title. It was a new volume. She wrote in slim composition books.

"The profound realizations of a Gallerina." She read. Marcus leaned against the massive round concrete column behind him and propped one leg up, letting the other take his weight.

"Keep going." Friday moved around the table to get the right point of view.

"The truth is becoming painfully apparent: The grunge look is never going to go away." She put her journal down on the table, unsnapped the camera case, and took the first shot. These were going to be good.

"Every time you read a sentence, I'll let you take a photo." Fair enough, Friday thought.

"People who resemble angry trouts: One approached today saying in a guttural tone: 'nice frames.' There is no follow up to such brilliance."

Marcus fingered the zipper of his vest and lowered it mid way, to reveal his well formed chest. Friday snapped another.

"I will not be photographing the people who come into the gallery. I'm not Diane Arbus."

Marcus responded to this one by removing his vest and stood shirtless, the sun highlighted his musculature, which Friday caught at a closer distance. She was moving in on him. At this rate, it was going to be easy to get him to take off all of his clothes.

*

When Brahms was in college, he waited until the other students went home. Then, he went through their studios, emptying the sediment from their paintbrush jars. He made paintings from their leftover paint. What came out usually was some kind of grey blue or green. He liked having nothing to do with the choice of color.

When he broke free of his monochromes he began to paint the invisible net that had fallen around him. The Mrs. demanded a painting from every show. He had pushed her down a staircase once and she never let him forget it.

Brahms painted slowly. Sometimes, he would only make one mark in a day. Sometimes none at all. He paced so much that the floor showed his path. It was time for another breakthrough. Even on his schedule it was overdue. He pulled out the primary color tubes and centered them on his table. Red, yellow, and blue.

*

The east side of Mercer and Broome was roped off. A cab dropped B.E. between the orange cones. Her studio building was dusty and covered with scaffolding. Her navy shawl brushed her hand as she pulled out her key. Her studio seemed abandoned, haunted. She liked that. A huge rolodex the size of a Ferris wheel sat on her desk. She tapped the button of her answering machine. She threw her shawl over a chair. Finally, B.E. could get back to work. The answering machine echoed through the space as she looked at a dark unfinished canvas on the far wall and the stretchers to the side that had not yet been started.

"Darling. It's that time of year again. The annual Ritz Foundation benefit tomorrow night. I'm hoping you will join the gallery at our table. We're celebrating *our MOMA* purchase."

*

John flew back to NYC. He took a cab downtown to the Exchange.

The sign at the security desk read: "Please unload your weapons." The guards nodded as he passed. "Welcome back Mr. McBain." Streams of young men in yellow and blue jackets and goggles ran up and down stairs into a vast trading hall. As he descended into the pit, a louder voice above the deafening din yelled: "The Bitch is back!" John entered the fracas, a huge mass of traders yelling bids and throwing cards, and headed into one of the trading booths. It was littered with porn and trading cards. He poured some Jack Black into his coffee and laughed at them.

"That's right boys, the vacation is over."

*

While Friday was out, Melody sat at the front desk with the uptown woman, Trudy. She seemed uptight, but nice enough.

"Here at Godd Gallery, we have a certain way of doing things." Trudy said. She had lockjaw. However, her eyes were very mobile and they wandered below Melody's belt line. A sapphic glance. This place is a hothouse of homosexuality, Melody thought, trying not to register her reaction.

As if on cue, Ronald came through the plastic curtain with the contractor whose overalls were covered in plaster.

"Good. I'm glad you two are getting to know each other. Trudy will show you the ropes." Ronald looked at his watch. "I'm heading uptown while the plaster dries. Don't hesitate to call. Also, I hope you don't have plans after the installation tomorrow. We've reserved a table at the Ritz Foundation benefit dinner. That should provide everyone with some extra initiative." He clicked his heels together.

*

The sweet smell of oil paint. Harrison breathed it in. Nothing toxic in it. The cadmiums and cobalt could build up from skin absorption, but he was working in black. Organic minerals and oil. The highest quality paint had no fillers. It was so dense it had to be squeezed and mixed with medium. Harrison used a standard formula: one third linseed oil, one third damar varnish, and one third turpentine. Actually, turpenoid, a turpentine substitute. Traditional turpentine could be toxic also. The fumes could build up in the system when breathed in unventilated spaces, and cause kidney or liver damage.

Harrison's substitute made with orange peels filled the studio with citrus aroma. Damar varnish made from the Copal tree usually came in crystal form and had to be dissolved. The color, Mars Black, had an earthy smell. Traditionally black was made from the soot on lanterns. Carbon. It was a warm black, almost dark chocolate, and Harrison had quart metal containers full of the powder which he ground with a pestle on a piece of ground glass until it was the smooth consistency of black butter.

There was a zen to the process of preparing to paint: mixing paint, stretching canvas, and sizing the canvas. His thoughts could go wherever they liked. The acidic content of oil paint decays canvas so it has to be sized, protected with the traditional coating of rabbit-hide glue which is heated up in a double boiler and painted on the raw stretched canvas while warm, but not boiling. This resulted in fabric shrinkage so the canvas couldn't be too tight or it bent the stretchers. Like cooking, it was an imprecise art of trial and error. Harrison sometime called artists friends to get advice, the way cooks do.

A large tube of Vermillion paint lay in the top drawer. He put it there to remind him what he had to look forward to. A rare, expensive, and toxic Cadmium pigment that cost \$350 a tube in its matte lead container with the signature Old Holland label.

When Harrison opened the drawer, it sat waiting like an expectant Cardinal. And that moment was coming. Harrison had begun to make paper studies of that color, sometimes paired with blues.

Harrison slathered the paint into containers, preparing material for his next session. His thoughts drifted to college and the art collector he worked for as a student. She tied her silver hair in a bun and wore simple cotton dresses. She drove an old navy Mercedes. Her family held the patent on a method of drilling oil, which made them wealthy beyond belief. She ran the University Museum and was in the process of having a state of the art museum designed which would house her prodigious collection, some of which was temporarily installed around the campus: Johns, Stella, Fontana, Magritte. She owned a majority of Magritte's work - the largest collection of Surrealism in the world.

"Art is like people. It likes to be moved around to different rooms, in different light," she often stated.

Harrison had no idea that he had walked into working for one of the greatest art collectors of the century. Until he realized it. She was totally hands on. They hung paintings together for a show that she financed which later went to the Pompidou.

Harrison's buzzer rang and he went downstairs. It was Ethan, alone.

"There's talk about some fancy dinner tomorrow and I was wondering if I could borrow something to wear."

"I'm painting but come on in."

"Considering that we're being in a show together, I thought we might get to know each other better." Ethan said as they bounded up the carpeted stairs.

Harrison's clothes fit baggy on Ethan, but they looked OK. That was the fashion. A baggy white shirt, baggy suit with pleated pants in grey pin stripe or black. Kneeling, Harrison cuffed the pants so they hit Ethan's boot at the right length.

"I'm feelin' kinda smart." Ethan said cocking his shoulders and looking at himself in the mirror. "I've just got one thing to add..." Ethan unzipped his pants, reached in and pulled out his member. It was huge and uncut and it looked like an elephant trunk flopping against the suit pants.

"How does this look to ya?"

*

Sadie pried open the paint cans that had been brought there by Godd's moving crew with her knife, then folded it and put it in her pocket.

Ethan had set her up to make some small color square paintings for him. The pre-stretched canvas panels were taped off in grids and she carefully started applying the colors in the taped squares.

Althea wrote:

"I do my best to not make sense of things. I feel it's best that way. If something gets into my mind, then I'm ready. Ready for action. I don't want to..."

Althea felt it was best to not talk about her feelings. She had always been told that, from her early childhood.

Althea folded the paper into an airplane and threw it into the bin already full of wadded paper. What was she going to do? She didn't want to write down her thoughts. They were private. HE had figured out how to corner her. And she was going to figure a way out of it.

Perhaps Brahms had arranged this? Was it possible? Patches of color. They're not about anything.

The question is to solve this situation. That side of her brain had to get going. "At the very best, I'm going to be the gallery slave. Why should I do it?"

"I'm not going to tell anyone what I think. I'm shocked by the requests for handouts. People ask. Don't they know not to ask?"

It didn't matter what she wrote. Everyone just wanted to steal from her. What if she wrote a one word essay? "Net" by Althea Bridges.

*

Standing on her front stoop watching the passersby, Marguerite saw him. He was down the block, but she knew he was coming for her. It was him. In his tired old brown burlap robe with the hood and the scythe over his shoulder. He disappeared and reappeared as he got closer.

"Oh no no no no no. You are not going to get me! You can not AFFORD me!"

She slammed her front door so hard that the knocker hammered like morse code.

"NON!" She screamed as she ran up her stairs.

*

Trapped. It slowly began to dawn on Althea. She had been replaced. Then, once she was here she was expendable, unimportant, disposable. Who cared if everyone seemed to be clawing to get a job here, she didn't want one. She wanted her life back. She missed her artists. Had she lost them?

The thing was to confront Godd. This was all part of a grand plan, wasn't it? Recognizing a good thing, he just absorbed her.

People are so strange. They defy understanding. Her problem was her kindness and generosity. That gets taken, gobbled up, and never talked about again. The human body: awkward and barely standing. When will it all collapse?

The dividers of the office resembled a Suprematist painting in canary yellow, tan, and white. A soothing atmosphere. Something to tame us. Because we are beasts. The arc of the sun rose above as the shadows passed. The generic handsome young men and women worked in them.

Them. And. Us.

We, the creative. Opposed to them, the non - creative, the un - creative, the opposing force to making something out of nothing. The captors. The destroyers.

The tan office grid plan was a tic-tac-toe board. How shall I tell Godd that I quit, thought Althea. What move shall I make?

"I don't want the show to happen and I'm going to stop it."

Althea's Daydream: Old honkies dressed in their Sunday best waited quietly at some kind of religious building. Delicately, they removed the top section of their heads and placed them in the hands of the check girl, who shelved them and gave them their tickets. Flowers were everywhere. Soft organ music swelled.

"Wonderful to see you," a man in a powder blue leisure suit said as he clasped their hands, one after another. "You are going to make a lot of money."

They followed the stream of headless honkies into the pastel stadium.

"Folks, just remember, always check your brains at the door," an announcement stated over the PA system.

Above more flowers, cascades of pink, yellow, and baby blue, hung a giant bronze \$ mid air, flooded with spotlights. It sparkled and sent scatter rays into the crowd. Some were brought to tears.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

She headed for his office straightaway. Up the stairs and past the main exhibition space where Gorky paintings hung, guarded by security. The colors of the paintings sparkled under the skylights like jewels. She walked to the front office. She was nervous.

"Is he there?" The receptionist picked up the phone.

"Who shall I say?" You know who I am, bitch.

"Althea. Althea Bridges."

The door opened and Ronald came out, looking conciliatory. "Althea, dear!"

"What is going on here. Really?"

"But we want you to relax. Enjoy yourself."

"Relax? With an assignment to write something. I'm not a writer."

"Tut Tut. Of course you are. I'm waiting with anticipation." This coming from a scholar who dumbed down his magazine writing to the level of gossip column, she thought. She could tell he was patronizing her.

"I know what you're doing. Sent to the little room downstairs. Taken out of the equation. Neutralized. And I won't have it."

Ronald shook his head like it was all in her mind.

"I QUIT!" She dropped her shoulder from Ronald's clasping hand and squeezed past the receptionist to Godd's office. But Godd's desk was empty. Godd wasn't there.

Art galleries take a 50% commission when they sell the work of a living artist. Over time galleries incrementally increased their commission from 30% in the 1950s to 40% in the 70s and finally to half and half. No one talked about it. They just accepted it as unchangeable fact. When a gallery like Godd, or \$he, or Barbara Mangold, decided to "represent" an artist there was almost never a written contract. That's the way the galleries liked it. Artists who requested a written contract didn't get it. They were made to feel lucky to be shown at all. They had to take what was offered to them. The galleries were the power. 50% and nothing in writing: the huge pink elephant in every gallery. Galleries created a scenario in which the artists were dependent on them but in which they were not obligated to do anything. The gallery business appeared

glamorous and alluring from the outside but the secret artists kept was that it could quickly turn into a living hell, like being kidnapped and imprisoned. Buried alive.

Althea was an artist advocate, so it followed that she would be treated like an artist. What she had to offer was taken by smiling thieves, who humored her while they stole from her, then once they got what they wanted, they ignored her. There was nothing in writing. In time they would throw her away.

*

Bernie closed the apartment door and pocketed his keys.

"Felicity?" His call echoed down the hall. Something was different. He took a right to the living room. Felicity was quiet. She wanted him to find her. She had put on the black dress from the Soho boutique that she tried earlier. She decided to buy it after all. And then she bought an art - deco vanity with beveled glass top and round mirror she found at a little place on Thompson Street. They delivered in the afternoon while she wrote her piece on the Gorky show for Sunday's edition. She had the movers place it in the living room opposite her writing desk. Carefully she placed the engraved silver brush on it that her mother had given her. She lined up the brushed glass containers of her make-up.

"There you are." Bernie turned and looked at her, then sat down on the sofa on the opposite side of the room.

"Did you hear about Althea?" He asked.

"Mmm." She looked away. The afternoon sun cast trapezoids of light on the floor. There was no art on the walls.

"Well, is that all you have to say?"

"Is that all YOU have to say?"

"But this is a game changer. Althea can do whatever she wants to now. She can cherry pick artists for him." But Felicity had learned not to share all of her plans with Bernie.

"We're invited out tonight." Felicity said, changing the subject.

"Where?"

"B.E. and John have invited us over."

"WHAT? You must be kidding."

"No, she called today. I think she's really had a change of heart. Besides..."

Bernie interrupted her: "Did you read my piece on her?"

"Mmmm. Necrophilia, wasn't it?" A copy of **The Paper** lay open on the coffee table between them.

"Well you don't have to go." Felicity wanted to go without him.

Bernie stood up and started pacing excitedly. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss it. Did you know John offered to back Althea's gallery? I wonder if..."

Felicity took that fact in. She didn't know that. Perhaps Bernie's presence would be helpful after all.

*

Melody wore a black cat suit. The fountain of her sculptural hair and delicate face exploded out of the top of the black curvaceous silhouette. She liked to wear black sometime. It cleansed the palette. Her body was a beautiful moving cut-out she inhabited with her face in 3D. She stood at Harrison's kitchen counter preparing an appetizer: Manchego cheese and sliced fresh tomatoes from the local market. She ground some pepper in a mortar and pestle then mixed in some Balsamic and olive oil. Harrison brought some fresh basil in from the balcony and kissed her on the cheek.

The rush hour traffic out front was like a wall of heat and rage, made of people waiting to go home to New Jersey. They didn't let up. They sat on their horns, indifferent to the people that lived nearby. They fumed and they blew. But once they were gone, Tribeca was so wonderfully quiet. Almost deserted. It wouldn't be long until they were gone. They were on their way out. There really wasn't a lot to say about them.

"Looks like I'm going to be having a show soon." Harrison announced beaming. Harrison's studio were lined with painting. He was ready.

"And you're going to be in a very important group show." Their eyes fell on the card that Melody had arrived with - a simply designed card with the word "NET" in bold capital letters at the top, and Godd Gallery, 138 Wooster Street, New York, NY 10012 at the bottom. The half-tone rendering of a net served as the background. Harrison picked it up from the kitchen counter. It was printed on thick card stock.

He pointed to the net. "You're a part of it too. An important part."

"Well...it's not art. And I'm fine with that." She looked down at the mortar and pestle. Melody had a shy and modest side, which Harrison found appealing. "I'm happy too. I had wonderful day."

"Sheldon showed me his new space. It's uptown! I'm going to be showing uptown."

"Let's have champagne!" Melody turned her head sideways, playfully.

Harrison got the champagne from the refrigerator and opened the bottle between his legs with a pop and put the cork on the counter next to the NET card. Melody took two glasses from the shelf.

While Harrison poured, Melody decided to share a bit more about her day.

"Trudy sat next to me this afternoon. She came from the uptown gallery."

"Where was Friday?"

"She volunteered to go find Marcus."

"Oh, right."

"Anyway, I already miss her. I left a message for her to come by." They clicked the rims of their glasses. "Cheers."

"To you."

"No, to you!"

"To us."

*

Brahms called the Mrs. and told her he was working late. She knew not to object on these occasions. When the muse called...which she knew from her own experience.

The painting ground was prepared for a new piece in a neutral wash. In it was subtle drawing over which he could see primary colored circuits in his imagination. Like a virtual projection from his mind. It had been almost thirty years since he had worked in primary colors. Not since he was single and dated Janis Joplin, briefly, and Patti Smith. He named paintings after them.

This time it was different: Frozen gesture instead of his previous panels of absolutized color. He knew it wouldn't necessarily work. But he had to try it. If it didn't work, he

could wipe it off with a rag soaked in turpentine and pretend it never happened. He started with yellow first and loaded the brush from the palette and lightly stroked the beginning of a shape - a continuous circuit which travelled around the canvas like a map of a race track in one curvilinear line.

He felt calm. Self possessed, perhaps to a new level. The mark, as simple and reductive as it was, felt inevitable. Stella, Diebenkorn, others had explored similar forms but this was clearly his own. He stepped back to the opposite wall to look. The yellow popped off the painting visually like neon. This was a feeling that he would never share with anyone. He wouldn't ever admit that he had ever experienced such joy.

*

Althea left the building, but this time, she didn't turn around at 79th. The horror. Everything looked blurred. The storefronts melted into green, tan, and grey patches. Shirley Temple's song "Smile" came into her mind. It's so odd the things that occur. She hated that song. They used it in a movie she worked on in Hollywood. No wonder things didn't go well for her there. A memory of her father's voice interrupted: "Buck up. No one said it was going to be easy."

"But they didn't give me a choice, did they?" She said it out loud. She didn't care if anyone thought she was crazy. She wouldn't be the first person talking to themselves on the streets of NYC.

She rubbed her eyes, which cleared up her vision, and her eyes landed on a sportswear shop across the street. When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.

"I'll take those." She pointed to a tailored white nylon running suit. "And I'll need some running shoes in white." She said as she headed to the dressing room. After putting on the suit, she threw her dress and shoes into the waste basket, then paused, and pulled them back out.

"Would you like these? I won't be needing them." She handed the dress and shoes to the shop attendant.

"Seriously? The young woman said examining the label. "But they're Alaia..." She inhaled. "Thank you."

Althea had shed her skin. Her new clothes felt good and she felt light as a feather. She burst out the door running. At 78th, she turned right, realizing she could run through Central Park. The dry fallen leaves blew around as she ran through them. She decided to head to Strawberry Fields. Her determination, her clarity, was returning. Truth was she thrived in challenges. But was there a way to thrive without them? Was there a way to avoid this pattern? She stopped at the Imagine Mosaic and sat at a nearby

bench, slightly winded. What did she want? To stop the show? No, that would be destructive. But how to put herself back in the equation? Or...how to free herself and still have her contribution acknowledged. She stood and stretched her arms out, then put her legs on the back of the park bench and stretched her hamstrings. Perhaps she could play the show to her advantage by allowing it to happen. She stood again and took a deep breath, pushing her breast bone forward. She felt a crack, an opening of the heart area. Stretching her arms upward she emulated her memory of the Rocky pose and felt her sense of personal power return, like she was a bridge between heaven and earth. It felt good. Then, she started running again. Picking up the pace, she ran down the serpentine sidewalks past the Sheep Meadow and exited The Artists' Gate at 6th.

She was a white streak. An apparition. An erasure rubbed through the crazy patchwork quilt of reflective metal and heavy stone. Passersby walked in unison across the wide avenue oblivious, but some doormen more tuned in to the details of the street nodded and tipped their caps.

Her shoes barely hit the pavement, floating over rivulets of garbage in the gutters, distorted reflections in the run-off water of stop lights and neon, wheels of vendors' carts, the endless expanse of concrete and asphalt grids. The light changed at 51st and she took a right so that her pace was unbroken then turned down Broadway toward Times Square. She headed downtown to find John. She had an idea.

*

"Can I tell them?" Melody asked, looking toward Harrison at the kitchen counter, "Harrison's having a show with Sheldon in his new gallery space."

Ethan tried to look behind one of the paintings, then tilted it forward to examine the back.

"Where do you get these? Hey Sadie, get this number. We've got to get a lot of these."

Sadie looked annoyed. "He's got me in production making those color squares." Sadie confided as she leaned her hip against the counter.

"And it sounds like you're about to go up in scale," Harrison said.

"Right. Take down this number." Ethan yelled from across the room. Everyone ignored him.

*

"What is it that John does?" Bernie asked as he and Felicity followed B.E. into her townhouse. Felicity had changed into a white cotton dress. Bernie wore his usual corduroy jacket.

"Futures." B.E. answered as they climbed the stairs. She, too, had toned down her outfit to a navy dress and sweater.

"Is that like Sonya the Soothsayer?" Bernie asked. He seemed to be adding up the value of the contents of the place.

"Well...they have a team of experts and researchers to identify good investments." B.E. explained as they entered the Dining Room. "I don't think they depend on psychics," she laughed under her breath pointing to the dining chairs.

Felicity sat and Bernie continued to walk around the room, then went to the large multi-pane window looking down over the courtyard.

"He buys low and sells high," B.E. summarized in an effort to close the topic. She waved her hand as if to brush away the discussion.

"Has he thought about getting into art?" Felicity asked. She seemed guarded and held her arms close.

"Oh, he's not interested in art."

"What does he buy futures in?" Bernie asked. Felicity pretended not to know.

"Most recently, Oil. But he's very interested in precious metals. Gold."

Bernie pulled a chair out and sat down. "I wonder...you know, I'm a bit of a psychic... and I feel that he may be backing an art gallery." He served some cheese for himself. "He may be more involved than you know."

B.E. and Felicity both stared at him wide eyed. Bernie loved the attention he was getting. Felicity was petrified.

"You'll have to ask him. He's working late." B.E.'s tone was getting frosty.

"I know he offered to back Althea."

"Oh, he just likes her."

"But Althea's working for Godd now," Felicity interrupted, attempting to redirect the conversation.

"She is? I mean, I knew that." B.E. was getting flustered. She wrung her hands.

"They're mounting the show she organized across at his gallery," Bernie added.

"I knew that." B.E. lied.

"I did too." Felicity lied.

"And there's a private reception there Wednesday." Bernie was clearly the winner.

Bernie's revelations derailed B.E.'s plan to make amends. However, she had common ground with Felicity for that moment. They both were clearly out of the loop. And she had to make it to that reception. Felicity was thinking the same thing.

"I'm so glad you came." B.E. said to Felicity warmly. She ignored Bernie. "Let's make this a regular occasion, the two of us."

*

The trading floor where John worked was like a sports stadium...if the fans had stormed the field, trashed the bleachers, and passed and caught trading cards. The small square cards littered the floor like over-scale confetti. Clerks scrambled to carry them to central terminals. Skirmishes broke out as fortunes were gained and lost. It was a mosh pit full of sweating, hysterical men, discreetly located one block from a row of strip clubs.

John stood behind the smeared plexiglass of a trading kiosk, from which he supervised his traders. He asked his favorite researcher if he had ever heard of a "search engine." The phone rang; after a moment, John nodded and said "Bring her in." A uniformed security guard escorted Althea onto the trading floor. She and the guard stood at the top of the stairs as John headed up to greet them.

John gave the guard a conspiratorial nod. It was rare for a woman to appear on the floor, and usually they were prostitutes. One of the trading clerks had the specific task of booking women for the traders.

Althea exuded something. She glowed. Her eyes burned with excitement and her hair was tucked behind a band. Her white silhouette stood out against the black and silver interior. Some of John's traders tried to see what was going on without being obvious.

"The time has come, John."

John looked slightly alarmed. Was Althea proposing? It was Althea's plan to create this misunderstanding, then put him at ease before he could start with a "...but darling, it's complicated" right on the trading floor.

"It's time to start our gallery, John."

"Ooooooh...that's wonderful, darling. I'm in."

*

Having drawn red and blue lines to follow the yellow one, Brahms had completed his first primary-color painting. Like the translation of a major musical chord, the triad travelled around the rectangular surface together. At times one of the colors veered off, describing a circle or arabesque, before falling back into harmony. It was a self-contained system.

A tuning fork can electrify the molecules in the air through sound waves. Dong! The effect the strike can have on the human body feels like all the cells are animated, realigned, and harmonized. He felt prickly, sunburned, light-headed, like he had had a great workout, or greater sex, the best workout of all. Ah the feeling, like soma, ecstasy, or manna. And it was a feeling he would not share with anyone else.

Heading home on Spring Street he thought he saw a familiar figure walking briskly up West Broadway. Her posture was familiar but not her clothing: white rayon that caught the pale moonlight. The sky was moody, mixed with dark and light clouds. They converged at the corner of Prince.

"Wouldn't it figure I'd run into you this evening." Brahms whispered.

"It is a nice one, isn't it. Did you paint late tonight?" Althea felt transformed. Brahms nodded. "Come over, please, just for a little while. Let's celebrate."

When they entered her loft, Althea switched on the lights and they stood side-by-side, in shock at her place stripped bare. Althea thought she felt the hair of Brahms' hand brush against her and it sent electricity through her.

The only objects left in the main space of her loft were her phone, her answering machine, and her rolodex, which sat together on the floor. Her library was empty. The dining table, sofa and club chairs were gone. So were the Net, Sadie's sculpture, and the murals. The walls were peeled from the removal of the canvas that she had mounted to her walls. Marcus' marks were barely visible and stripped of meaning. They just looked like random marks on an ordinary wall. Even the kitchen cabinets seemed like they had been rummaged through.

"Now what are we celebrating?" Brahms asked.

"Not this. Come, let's have a drink. We deserve it."

Thunderclouds broke open into a milky downpour outside the windows, making the TV people across the street invisible. Althea turned down the dimmers and lit some candles in the kitchen. She pulled a bottle from the brightly lit fridge and handed it to Brahms.

"Would you mind if I take a quick shower?"

Rushing down her hallway, Althea said: "John has agreed to back my gallery." That should get him.

*

Melody, Harrison, Ethan, Sadie, Friday, and Marcus sat under the moonlit raindrops falling on Harrison's skylight.

"Everything is working out." Melody said. "I'm so happy." Althea would be the director of Godd Gallery, Soho.

"Well...I hope so," Friday whispered. Harrison heard it. The others relaxed on the carpet after dinner. Harrison poured champagne.

Ethan looked to needle Marcus. "Are you going to suit up to make some more marks?"

"I don't have to, and I won't if I don't feel like it." Marcus shifted. "My videos are going to be financed by a team organized by Mangold Gallery."

"Ooooh, who's a pretty boy now?" Ethan crooned.

"After everything Althea's done for you?" Friday asked calmly. Finally it was her time to confront him on this issue. It was easier among friends, with reinforcements.

"Althea's going to be fine," Marcus snapped. His lips curled. "I saw her at lunch today with Godd. Is she working for him now?"

"Doing lunch. Fancy!" Ethan continued.

"Oh go ahead then, abandon her."

Melody whispered to Harrison: "Just remember. You have options too." She hoped Sadie, who was next to her, heard her. "Everybody does."

"I'LL DO WHAT'S BEST FOR ME!" Marcus screamed. His face was red with anger.

"I don't like to play people against each other." Harrison whispered back to Melody.

"Here's to Althea." Harrison said, breaking the tension. "To Althea." They repeated, clicked their glasses, and drank.

"Do we really have to do anything tomorrow?" Harrison asked.

"I'm more interested in the party tomorrow evening. Let them remount the work we already did." Ethan said. "And I've got me an outfit."

"Easy for you to say," Sadie added. She was going to have to be involved with the re-installation.

"I would definitely hang around there tomorrow," Friday said drawing her words out for emphasis. She glanced toward Marcus who was silent.

*

Lurch backed the Cadillac into the loading dock, got out, and circled the car to open the door for Marguerite. They carried Marguerite's fabric figures back to the room where she'd made them.

Marguerite looked up. "Tie them to the cables so they can fly."

Lurch pulled the cables and the sprawling figures banged together.

"I need to devise a connection, but for now let's tie them together." Marguerite reached up and joined a pair of hands.

Lurch held pairs: red and orange, orange and yellow, yellow and green, green and blue, while Marguerite tied the mitten hands together with black yarn. Once connected, it was as if they were skydiving in a circle, with their heads downward and their arms describing a hexagon.

"Now raise them."

They pulled the cables until the formation raised above their heads. Then they tied the cables to opposite walls. Walking under them, Marguerite wondered if she would have anything centered below, or just leave the space open.

*

The dark clouds parted to reveal the half moon above Harrison's skylight. All the champagne was gone. They lay back and looked up. In the constellation a hexagon grew into a six pointed star filled with twinkling triangles, like a Chinese checkerboard set against the sky. Solid stripes of yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, and green filled the star as it receded.

As Harrison stacked dinner plates in the kitchen sink, he caught himself. He felt strangely dizzy. He took a deep breath and rejoined the group. They were all sleepy, like magic dust had been sprinkled everywhere.

Distant music can often sound the sweetest. The song cannot be identified and yet the essence is there. The mind cannot divert direct communication to the heart. When you hear a hit for the first time, you may not like it. You may even hate it because you don't know where to situate it. You didn't ask for it. You did not think you wanted it. Eventually, when you come to love it you can identify it with one note. It becomes a part of your life and you attach memories of specific life events to it, which are triggered every time it plays. The person who wrote it had a similar experience. It began for them as a faint unformed melody, a flash of inspiration: something ephemeral that they captured.

*

Wearing her plush white terry cloth robe pulled tight at the waist, Althea rushed through the steam billowing from her bathroom and glanced at her reflection in her dressing room mirror as she brushed her hand through her hair. Silently Brahms entered the reflection holding their glasses in each hand symmetrically. He stood close to her and Althea stopped moving as he put the glasses on her dresser and lightly touched her shoulders.

"Remember?" He whispered. His voice was smoky, compelling.

"Of course I do." Althea answered softly looking into the mirror.

Deja vu: the strange and pleasing familiar feeling that something has already happened. But something similar, very similar had occurred...a long time ago. Here they were again together on an auspicious day and it felt like putting on a beloved old suit.

Reaching around her, Brahms stacked his hand on her belly. Althea relaxed and sighed and added her hands to his.

Dreams

Asleep, Marcus saw open fields around him. He raised his arms and realized he could fly. By turning the angle of his hands he could adjust his speed and altitude. Others on the ground watched, fascinated and inspired. Groups of young men formed in the field under banners, preparing for a flying relay race. Marcus landed and realized he had not registered to be on a team. A giant man handed him carved wings made out of an ivory-colored material and pointed him to a raised platform. Holding the wings under his arm Marcus climbed the ladder to the platform and stood on the edge above the waiting crowd. He became nervous. Another flyer had been killed below and it distracted the crowd from him.

*

Friday rested her head against Marcus' shoulder. In her dream she organized her new photographs when an old lady stood quietly behind her looking over her shoulder. She surprised her. The lady wore ragged clothes and looked a little crazy. She held out her hand begging but instead of giving her money Friday bit it. The lady did not react so Friday decided to show her to the door. Looking closely at her face, Friday realized it was not just any old lady, but Marguerite Chopin. Friday thanked her for giving her her camera and Marguerite danced around the room.

*

Ethan slept across the room with his feet touching Sadie's and his hair in his eyes. He dreamed of a town full of empty white houses that he had seen before, but when he looked up he saw other places above it. He climbed up the trees and pushed himself up to a deck, finding a warm, inviting brick house with beautiful flowers and shrubs. Two beautiful young women in bikinis greeted him and invited him to get into the hot tub with them. An earthquake hit and sloshed them around in the tub. They ran to the driveway which was full of luxury vehicles and Ethan realized he has made it to Beverly Hills.

*

Sadie dreamed she was in her London apartment. She found a new door that she hadn't noticed before and went through it to find a huge loft with sky lights flooded in pink light. It had two grand pianos surrounded by plants. No one else was there. Dust covered the pianos. She realized this incredible environment had been there for her all along. Why hadn't she noticed it before?

*

Harrison lay next to Melody and dreamed of looking for a new studio. He opened some iron spear gates and realized it was the gate to Icon Brahms' townhouse. Mrs. Brahms offered him a studio on the second floor overlooking the park across the street. That

night, Harrison looked out the window and saw a ghostly figure emerge from a coffin in the park cemetery. Harrison went across the street to investigate and discovered it was not a ghost but a living person who was buried alive kept miraculously alive by underground streams and tunnels. Harrison and the people with him wore brightly colored clothes, a welcome relief to the Gothic atmosphere. They weren't afraid but found the buried figure to be sad, pathetic. Leaving the park Harrison realized that the Brahms' had bought into the world of dead souls.

*

Sleeping peacefully, Melody dreamed of being in a cemetery with a group of friends around Christmas. One day they noticed the stone slab had been moved off one of the mausoleum style graves and lay diagonally to the side. It was Jesus' grave. Jesus was buried but he had finally arisen without anyone noticing. Melody turned to see Jesus in his white robe looking splendid and alive. "Hey look everybody! Jesus is back!" Melody exclaimed. She took Jesus by the hand and knocked on doors around the neighborhood to introduce him.

*

The storm had gotten stronger. Rain came pouring down outside in sheets and lightning struck, sending stroboscopic flashes of light through the space.

Brahms lay on top of Althea. He propped his angular physique up with his elbows so his weight did not bear down on her. How often Althea had put these feelings, hopes for this to happen again, out of her mind. He was still so attractive, even more so. His arms and hands so strong. How natural it felt for him to be inside of her. Gently, rhythmically pressing into her.

Wearing the same outfit he had on in the morning, Althea saw him. He stood glued to her bedroom wall, but creepy, not dashing, menacing, like Nosferatu, with those horrible fangs, illuminated by flashes of lightning as he slithered up the wall. Godd. Why would anyone give themselves such an assumed name unless they had something to hide? It's the unholy that masquerade behind holy names. They made Faustian bargains cloaked in the cover of night. Then by day they parade in designer clothes hiding their soul rot behind a facade of glamour, lording their power built from what they stole from the poor souls who trusted them.

*

"Hello! Excuse me..." Friday whispered insistently. She had been woken up by stirring in the room and in the pale moonlight saw a figure going through purses and pockets. The figure froze.

Friday got up and flipped on the light.

Ethan was busted again. He held a wallet he pulled out of Harrison's coat. Ethan looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"I wasn't gonna keep it. It was just practice."

Tuesday

Lightning added ozone to the air the subtle smell of chlorine, like everything had been meticulously cleaned. The grimy film of the city was washed away leaving color and details sharp, enhanced. The storm was over and puddles dotted the granite sidewalks of Soho. Droplets hung from the ironwork and rusted cornices and hit the concrete below.

John liked to leave early while B.E. was doing her morning meditation. He heard the gong sound and said "Good-bye dear" knowing that she wouldn't respond. His driver Woody got out of the car and opened the door for him. Holding **The News**, **The Journal**, and **The Herald** together in one hand and his brief case in the other, John slid into the back seat, saying:

"Woody, go to Wooster Street. I'm meeting with Althea before work."

"Yes sir, Mr. McBain." Woody took a left on Houston.

"You remember Althea don't you? I'm going into business with her, so you'll be seeing more of her."

"Very good sir." Woody's discretion was a given.

Why is it that everything happens at once? You can sit around for years and nothing occurs, then everything happens simultaneously. When it rains it pours. And it poured last night. Althea couldn't process it all. Like cooking, she would take things on the front burner and let the back burners simmer. On the front burner were Godd and John.

Technically, she had quit yesterday in a dramatic flourish that she now regretted. However, it gave her the impetus to confront John, and it worked. She was making coffee when the buzzer rang.

It was a good intercom but sometime it was hard to make out what they said. "It's Woody." There was a lot of static.

"Who?" Althea asked, as she pressed the listen button again and put her ear closer.

"Mr. McBain is here in his car. He's waiting for you."

"Oh....just a minute." She understood but wasn't sure what to do. Should she invite him up? Better not to. The place was a wreck. It would have an impact, but better not to show him.

With her coffee cup in hand, she dropped her keys in her bathrobe pocket and took the elevator down. John was delighted to see Althea emerge from the building in her new outfit: her bath robe, a matching towel turban, and bedroom slippers, looking fresh as a daisy.

"I think you've started another new trend." John laughed as she slid in next to him and Woody closed the door after her.

"I could invite you up, but...."

"Nonsense, let's go. Woody head back downtown." Woody took a left on Houston and another on West Broadway.

"We can talk on the way to the Exchange then Woody can drop you back here."

*

After Friday busted Ethan, she and Marcus quietly got their things and found their way back to her apartment.

"Are you installing today?" Friday asked Marcus, trying to hide her nervousness. She didn't want Marcus to have another tantrum. But he didn't. He'd gone taciturn. He looked at her journal sticking out of her purse.

"Are you going to stop writing now that you're taking pictures?" Even though she had not intention of that, she said:

"Good point. I think I will." Friday had given the negatives to Melody last night to deliver to the photo lab. Contact sheets would be ready soon...not too late to be included in "The Net" newsprint.

"Tell Althea I haven't forgotten her." Marcus seemed morose, almost guilty. This show of vulnerability surprised and touched Friday and she embraced him. But Marcus kept his arms out and didn't hug her back.

*

"Must have been the rain." Harrison and Melody were trying to reconstruct the end of the evening and it was a blur. Harrison watched Melody pull her hair back and put on her coat.

They crossed Canal on Greenwich and took a right on Spring. When they got to West Broadway, they saw Althea's toweled head emerge from the back window of a car. "I'm going to see you later for a meeting."

John laughed jovially from inside the limo. "Then I'm going to take you to lunch and shopping." He looked at Melody. "As you can see, she needs it. Harrison if you don't mind, I'll take the ladies to lunch."

Harrison smiled. "I have studio visits this afternoon." Sheldon was coming over and he was looking forward to it.

"Well, in that case, maybe I don't have to go home, but we're so close." Melody said. "Can you walk me to the photo lab to drop off Friday's film?"

"Sure."

"Then I'll decide." So, they headed to Broadway.

*

Sadie and Ethan were awoken by the front door buzzer. "Too early" Ethan complained as he shuffled toward the buzzer panel, in his underwear. "WOT?" He pressed all three buttons with his palm.

"I've got stretchers here for Ethan Crone."

"Oh...right...come in." He pressed the front door opener again. Then he removed the metal cross brace from the freight elevator doors so they could enter. The Freight

Elevator opened directly into the loft, so when the three men in work uniforms opened the metal doors and began to unload the stretchers from the freight elevator, Sadie shuffled out, looking pretty bleary eyed.

"Put them along the wall side-by-side." Ethan said. The loft was huge and a long wall fit them. There were at least 12 of them: half in square format, 6 x 6 feet, and half 6 x 10 feet. The mitered redwood 4 inch wide stretchers held a quarter round addition glued to hold the plane of the canvas out from the stretchers. That way, there would be no imprint when applying pressure painting on it. They were ready to work on and they marched around the vast open loft like a line of white abstract Malevich squares. White abstract planes leaning against the white painted brick walls.

One of the guys approached the kitchen counter and pulled the bill out of his overall pocket. Ethan glanced at the bill and pulled a check from Godd Gallery out of a pile of papers on the granite counter. Sadie couldn't believe it and walked over to take a closer look.

"What'd 'ya do to get that?" Sadie asked.

"Tell you wot, I'm going to give you extra for such a keen job," Ethan said as he simultaneously filled in the amount of the check and held it out to him.

"Wow, thanks." He seemed genuinely surprised. He backed into the freight elevator where the other two already waited. Ethan closed the door, barred it, then turned to Sadie, exasperated.

"Don't you get it yet? I'm gonna take over the world."

"And who is going to help you?"

"YOU are. And you can start by finding some workers to make these paintings."

"ME?"

Ethan held up a copy of The Paper. "Go through the classified. I'm going to the gallery."

"You're not going without me. I'm in the show too you know."

*

Friday sat with Trudy at the front desk looking at large black and white proofs. The installers were in the main gallery mounting the murals.

"Look!" Harrison said pointing to the Net, which was hanging above the entrance to the gallery. Someone had done a good job of installing it, pulling it in two lines like a draping venetian shade. Melody smiled and they walked underneath the Net into the main space. Sadie's room was assembled. Althea's books lined the walls and her table sat centered on the right. Ethan's mural fit exactly on the far wall. Harrison's was centered with white space on either side serving as a visual break. The right wall had three monitors which were being wired with VCRs to play videos of Marcus.

It was outstanding. Harrison and Melody approached the desk with the sunlight hitting them from the skylights above. Friday and Trudy stopped what they were doing and looked up, expecting a good reaction. They weren't disappointed. Everyone beamed.

"It's amazing. I can't believe it." Large black and white layouts were spread across the desk that Friday and Trudy looked at.

"Instead of a catalog, it's going to be a fake newspaper called 'THE NET.' All in black and white. It's not going to be fabulous or innovative at all." Friday added.

"They're putting it together in the Graphics department uptown...with Ronald supervising," Trudy added.

"And best of all...it will be ready for the opening. Just like a newspaper." Friday added.

"Fabulous," Harrison said, bowing toward them.

"I told you it's not going to be fabulous," Friday said, smiling.

"Well, that was easy," Harrison said as Melody and Friday walked him to the door. He was too numb to be excited.

"The way it should be..." Melody said.

"...until the bill arrives." Friday added, tolling a note of foreboding.

*

John spoke to Althea in his car.

"Things have picked up at work. Now that we're going to be business partners, I feel that you should know. You can thank the oil market and the war for financing our joint venture. I've got open lines with the CIA and the NSA, so I want you to keep your nose clean.

"Oh, John, you know you don't have to worry about me." Althea had never had a drug problem if that was he was hinting at.

"Anyway, as you know, Iraq has invaded Kuwait and the wells are on fire. The word is that war is imminent and oil could top \$100 dollars per barrel. The current price is \$40." Woody took a left from Houston and headed down West Side Highway.

"But isn't this insider trading?" Althea asked under her breath.

"Ha! That's what I love about you! All trading is insider trading!" John let this sink in. He understood the impact of a pregnant silence. The traffic came to a standstill. Then he continued: "Which brings us to you. What happened yesterday?"

"Oh, I quit." John found this hysterically funny.

"Let them hire you back at a higher salary. Much higher." John was still laughing.

"Why should they? They've taken everything. They don't need me."

"What you need to do is put the fear of God in Godd!"

"How am I going to do that?" The traffic starting moving again.

"Just tell him you're desperately in love with him." John continued his machine gun laugh. Althea didn't like this and sighed. "I was only joking. What were we talking about before? The solution is obvious: Tell him you have a buyer for the entire show and money is no object." They turned into the Financial District and after a couple more short turns the car came to a stop.

"Yes. That should do it." Althea felt relief come over her.

John cocked his head forward. "Woody, take this lady back home and pick me up for lunch." Then he turned back. "And I'll see you then for a little shopping after I've made another Million."

John closed the car door then stopped and turned around. Althea lowered the window and John stuck his head in.

"Damn right that will do it. Then...we're gonna squash him like a bug. LIKE A BUG!" He turned and joined the stream of dark suits heading into the exchange.

*

Momentum in studio production usually happens after two weeks of consistent daily work, except in unusual circumstances, for example, when the MOMA has bought one of your recent paintings. News like this can hit an artist like a double edge sword. It's one of the greatest accomplishments an artist can achieve. And so the next thought could be: where do I go from here? What next? How do I top this one? Is it all down hill from here? And from a critical point of view: will I ever paint anything that good again?

B.E. had gone to her studio, but she didn't paint. She knew the most important action was showing up. Show up and things begin to happen. Then before you know it...She-bang! Come to think of it...what a good title..."She-bang."

She had the place to herself. She pressed the play button on her blinking message machine, a comfortable habit, and the quiet studio filled with echoes of familiar voices.

"It's Harley again. We haven't heard back yet and hope you'll be joining us tonight at our table at the Ritz Foundation Dinner." She ignored the worried tone in his voice.

Beep. A woman's voice: "B.E., it's been so long and I hope you're doing well. Anyway, I'm calling about the dinner tonight. Is it possible that you have an extra ticket? I'd love to go. By the way, I heard a wonderful rumor about you and I hope it's true."

B.E. grimaced and touched the delete button and the message machine rewound and turned off. Instead of picking up the phone, she faced the tall vertical painting leaning against the end wall of the studio.

"Y' know," she said to herself, "I could paint today." She approached her incomplete painting and slid her palm across its smooth surface. Her face came so close to the painting that she could smell it: that special chemistry of paint. It was in this context that she was most open, most able to show love, warmth. The canvas became a membrane with which to interact with the world, but also a protection from cruelty and malevolence. Too many wounds, most made by people she trusted: Family and friends. John. The warm brown surface expressed this deep sadness, and a desire for relief. She ran her hands across her hair and down the back of her neck. She extended her arms into the air and flung open her fingers, like a flash of a crucifixion. Then she turned to the wall and took her dark painting smock off the hook and pulled it on.

B.E. mixed white and yellow to make a creamy custard color. It looked delicious, like icing for a dark dense chocolate cake. Then she mixed a deep red. The painting was 10 feet tall and five feet wide, so she was going to have to use one of her ladders. She dragged an aluminum ladder across the floor from the corner behind her new stretchers, pulled the two sides apart, and straightened the elbow like cross braces. Slowly she climbed and lowered the painting shelf, then slowly descended and walked to the two palettes of paint on her table. She could barely reach the shelf from below, but she managed to balance them and rest them on it without spilling anything.

It helped her to know the title, or her working title: "She Bang." It gave her direction, an impetus. She knew it was a two-color painting over deep brown, so three colors with variations within their application. This would represent a crystallization of her work, another step, a simplification.

One can not fake chance. There is an order beneath it. B.E. had studied with a master of chance: John Cage. What one had to do was to become nature in order to replicate its processes. Trying to duplicate the appearance of nature could be a losing game. People use the expression: Game of Chance, but it's not a game. It's a reality. A reality beyond control. A reality that can not be controlled. The Zen Masters studied for a lifetime so that they could make a circle in Ink in a matter of seconds. This was not an achievement of ego, but of supreme humility. Letting go of the ego was part of her Buddhist practice and she was able to... in her studio.

She stood back and looked at the aluminum triangle of the ladder against the dark painting. In a way, the ladder deserved to be expressed in the painting. And it was clear that the dominant gesture would have a strong verticality to it. But after thinking about it for so long, too long, you have to let it go and just do it. Allow it to happen. She climbed the ladder.

She made repeated wave motions in the air close to the plane of the painting and the white yellow drips flew out in spirals, some hitting the plane of the dark canvas in long teardrops. A concentration of the heavier drips drew the eye to the center as if a centrifugal motion was described. When she completed the gesture, she dropped the brush and palette and let them splatter slightly, and leaned back. The ladder rocked, reminding her that she couldn't make such big motions. She had to remain stable.

There was a sense, a feeling that the fresh paint worked. From her bird's eye view, it seemed to rhyme, but she wasn't going to descend and stop. She was going to launch directly into the red. But her apron string got stuck on the ladder and she started to fall backwards. Turning, she flung the red paint over her head as she headed down, the ladder falling ahead of her.

She could see the results of her fall towering above her, like a sky rise of her own making. Her fall was imprinted upon the canvas. From the top of the painting, a loose diamond shape swept downward like a waterfall into her eyes. Her vision was blurred, but still she could tell. She could tell so very very well. She knew she had just done something.

"It's my best yet." And then she passed out.

*

Felicity looked up from her typewriter. Bernie had his coat on and seemed to be going out.

"Are you going to shows?"

"Maybe uptown."

"Didn't you go uptown already?"

"There's a show of maritime paintings."

"Oh really? I'm going to the East Village."

"Hardly any galleries left there."

"The ones that remain deserve support."

Felicity waited a decent interval after Bernie left to head for Soho. She had no intention of going to the East Village. Bernie had no intention of going uptown. He headed to his editor's office on Cooper Square. He made his way through the paper-lined labyrinth and walked into his editor's office, pulling a paper from his coat like a piece of precious currency.

"You asked...and I listened." His editor looked up, weary-eyed.

"What?"

"I have a piece here on hot young artists, and we're there first."

*

Jumbo price screens and live headline feed flashed on overhead screens around John's exchange. Primordial waves ran the crowd. Pit cards were gathered by yellow jacketed runners who wore nets tied around their waists to catch the flying cards. Bluecoats double-checked the prices being reported then transmitted them across the world.

John was on the phone and his traders waited to hear the results. An official warning was issued to John that war was imminent. John listened quietly nodding, saying nothing but an occasional "hm." Kuwait was on fire. The UN Security Council was considering what deadline to issue to Iraq for withdrawal of their troops from Kuwait.

When John hung up his traders looked in his direction. John looked over his shoulder then turned toward them, addressing them from the door of the trading booth. "Well,

boys, that's it. War is coming. Buy everything you can. Everything. Not a word. Split it so it isn't noticeable. We're working around the clock."

*

Woody took a right on Wooster from Houston and slowed to a stop in front of Althea's building. Althea leaned forward and strained to see what was going on at the gallery down the block. Two installers came out and went to the silver truck parked in front that was blocking her view.

"Woody, could you pull down the block and park?" Woody eased forward and parked directly across the gallery, which gave Althea the ideal view. The grating was pulled down to just above head-level and the installers came and went. Several people stood around hoping to get a look: students, younger artists, and a few downtown types of various ages. Every time one of them got the nerve to go inside, they were escorted back out by Trudy or Melody. They didn't see her across the street. Just then, Ethan and Sadie crossed Prince and headed into the gallery. Ethan wore his blue jacket and Sadie her red windbreaker. She seemed to be growing her hair out. They were stopped by one of the installers when Trudy appeared, and after talking for a minute, they all went back in.

"Woody, do you have anywhere else to go before lunch? Do you mind if we stay here?"

"That'd be fine."

Althea leaned back in the leather seat and relaxed, with one eye toward the door. After a few more minutes, Harrison exited, alone, looking happy. He looked across the way and recognized a familiar car, then crossed the street toward them. Althea lowered the window.

"What are you doing?" Harrison laughed.

"I'm afraid I don't have a thing to wear." Althea smiled. "Who's in there? How does it look?"

"Great. You're going to be very happy. Let's see...Friday, Melody, Trudy...and Ethan and Sadie...and the installers, making finishing touches."

"Marcus?"

"Haven't seen him."

Althea thought for a moment. Another curious couple stood in front of the gallery waiting and talking, their arms crossed. A uniformed delivery person passed them and went into the gallery carrying a satchel.

"Would it be possible to get Melody out here without attracting any attention?"

*

"Here we go." Friday whispered to Melody as Ethan sauntered into the gallery with Trudy while Sadie followed. They stood at the opening of Sadie's room: the books, "Old People," the Cellophane video playing on a larger monitor opposite, and the big table in the center. Sadie was pleased. She pursed her lips, nodded, and smiled. After a moment, Ethan separated from them and walked into the large gallery toward his mural.

"There's one more thing I'd like to do..." Sadie said to Trudy. Trudy was all ears. She liked Sadie, but they were interrupted by a booming voice in the next gallery:

"It's just missing one thing: The Rolodex. Where's my Rolodex in the perspex?" Ethan yelled. The workmen were installing the monitors on the right wall for Marcus' video. They stopped for a moment, concerned that more work had just been created for them.

"I'd like to put something on the table to complete my installation. Would that be possible?" Sadie looked at Trudy, who looked confused.

"Photos for Friday Winstanley," the delivery person said.

"Thanks," Friday said as she took the envelope and ripped it open. The delivery man started to leave. "Wait..." Friday said as she shared the contact sheets with Melody. She was pleased. They looked amazing. "How fast can they make prints?"

"If you put a rush on it, maybe an hour."

"OK. Do it. Three prints of all of them."

Harrison passed the delivery man, who seemed in a hurry, on his way back in. Friday and Melody were poring over contact sheets and he took a look.

"Nice!" Then he whispered: "Melody, can you meet me outside?"

Friday overheard, which was fine. Harrison mouthed Althea's name so that both of them understood. "What's going on back there?" Harrison saw Ethan and Sadie standing with Trudy in the middle of the gallery.

"Last minute demands by a certain prima donna." Friday said, rolling her eyes, then looking toward Melody and quickly shifting her attitude. "Go. I'll stay here."

On the way out, Melody was approached by the couple standing out front. "We're closed for installation." She was kind, conciliatory. "Come back tomorrow night between six and eight for the opening."

Harrison joined the threesome in the gallery. "We're having a meeting here at 3. Any issues can be discussed then." Trudy was firm.

*

Melody approached the car as Althea watched her. She wore flared navy pants, a white shirt, and her low v-neck sweater.

"Get in," Althea said playfully as she opened the door and slid over in the seat. "You could get used to this, couldn't you?" Melody nodded. "Good."

"What is going on?" Melody couldn't hold back anymore.

"*Lots*. First things first. You can share this with Friday, but only Friday."

"OK." Harrison left and waved from across the street, holding up the number 3 with his hand. They waved back and he crossed Prince heading south to his place.

"Tell Ronald. No...first ask for Godd and if they don't put you through, ask for Ronald. Tell them I have a buyer who will purchase the entire show."

"Isn't it sold to Sissy Ritz?" Melody asked.

"It was, but now it's different. Actually, we didn't invoice her, so tell them my collector is willing to make a higher offer. Money is no object."

"Wow." Melody thought for a moment. "Just one more question."

"Anything..."

"Are you going to work out of a limo in your bathrobe from now on?"

*

"Sit. Sit. Sit." Trudy said to Sadie, pointing her to Melody's empty seat at the front desk, next to Friday, who stacked up her contact sheets and returned them to the envelope they arrived in. "Tell me more about what you would like to add."

Trudy had been ignoring Ethan, who lurked in the back of the gallery pretending to inspect his mural. What he was really hoping to do was get into Godd's Executive Suite, however, the installers were watching him. They thought he was going to make them redo something.

"Great job, guys," Ethan said, attempting to divert their attention. The installers nodded and returned to their work. He started ambling toward the front desk and Friday gave him a dirty look, so he kept walking until Melody stopped him on her way back in.

"I'm so excited about the show. And the opening. Are you coming back at 3 for the meeting?"

"Yea, s'pose so. See 'ya then."

When Ethan exited the gallery and took a left, Althea leaned forward. "Woody, see that fellow who just came out the door? Can you follow him?"

"You got it."

The car followed Ethan from a safe distance as he walked south on Wooster and stopped in front of Mangold Gallery, stood for a minute and went in. Barbara's gallery had a clear glass store front and the reception desk was centered behind it facing the double glass doors. Woody pulled up out front and Althea watched as Ethan spoke to the girl at the front desk, then started high-stepping through the rope installation into the back.

Althea watched him. She knew what he was doing. He was going to Barbara's office and she was going to catch him.

"Woody. How are we on time?"

"We got an hour or two."

"Perfect, then I'm going in and won't be long."

When the front desk girl saw Althea enter in her bathrobe and slippers she actually looked a bit surprised. Althea shrugged and said:

"I'm just too busy to get dressed." The girl laughed. Luckily she didn't know her. Althea started her journey through the ropes. She could make out Ethan's voice in the rear office and she had to get there fast. Isn't there a military exercise like this, she thought. Ropes or stepping through tires. She picked up her pace, made it through the ropes

and stood between the wall to Barbara's office and the floating wall in front of it, conveniently out of sight from both sides.

"I'd like to invite you to my exhibition. The opening is tomorrow night, just up the street," she heard Ethan say.

Althea could just imagine Barbara's appearance, with her pursed red lips and her arms crossed.

"Hearing that you're interested in new artists, I thought I should tell you that I'm about to become the most famous artist in the world."

Althea heard the front door open and someone stepping thought the ropes toward her but she didn't look around the corner to see who it was. Besides, she was out of sight.

"Come to my studio on Howard. I'd like you to be the first one to see my new paintings." The nerve, Althea thought. He keeps lowering the bar. She felt the anger welling up in her as she looked across the corridor and saw a shadow cross the opposite opening to the gallery. Then she realized she didn't have to be angry. Her position was vastly stronger than it was even yesterday. A fit young man entered the space from the gallery, wearing all black. He looked at her and nodded, like he had heard the whole thing Ethan said as well. It was Marcus.

They stood in the unlit hallway between the gallery and the office facing each other, on opposite sides of the opening. Marcus looked at Althea's outfit and was amused, which provided him with relief what he was feeling toward Ethan. He put his hands out in a slow relaxed shrug. His black bag was slung over his shoulder: a good sign, Althea thought, that he was on his way to install his piece. Then, Marcus leaned forward like he was going to walk in and Althea held both her arms out in an adamant "Stop in the name of love" gesture. Wait, she mouthed. Wait.

"Aren't you showing with Althea?" They overheard Barbara ask.

"Her gallery got closed." Ethan said pretending sadness.

"Has she offered you a show with Godd." There was a pause.

"Nothin's in writing as of yet," said Ethan bullshitting. He doesn't know the half of it, Althea thought.

"I see," Barbara paused. "Well, I'll be in touch," she said as she walked beside him out of the office. For a second, they all stood in a straight line: Barbara on Marcus' side and Althea on Ethan's. Althea could see the thoughts racing through their heads. Thankfully, neither of them uttered the Hollywood cliché: "What are you doing here?" Even better, Barbara suppressed her urge to state the obvious: "You've been spying on us?" She could hear the unapologetic answer before it came: "Yes, we have."

Barbara's main concern was that she hadn't said anything that compromised her with Marcus.

Althea loved having more solid financing behind her. It put her on more equal footing with Barbara, who she had never liked, and who she knew had a million dollars in her checking account. She looked down the line of them: Ethan looked at the ground. Could he actually have feelings of shame? Barbara pivoted toward her after taking in Marcus, so Althea broke the silence:

"Are you stealing all my artists, Barbara?" and didn't wait for an answer. "Ethan, shouldn't you be installing, rather than going behind my back?"

"Everything's installed."

"Then why don't you help Sadie. She's certainly helped you."

Ethan walked past Althea with his tail between his legs and scampered through the ropes. "Off you go." Althea said after him. Althea was in control and it felt great. She crossed her arms and faced Barbara. She didn't care if Ethan overheard any of what she was going to say. In fact, she preferred it.

"You can't have Marcus," she said to Barbara.

"I want to share with Althea. It's only fair. I want her to continue to be involved with my work." Marcus said to Barbara.

"But she's taken care of. You saw that." Barbara was on the defensive.

"Taken care of? Are you trying to relieve your guilt?" Althea felt empowered by her new found position and Barbara could tell, and she didn't like it.

"Look, Althea discovered me," Marcus stated calmly.

"But I would have discovered you." Barbara insisted. Marcus and Althea exchanged looks.

*

Ethan puffed his chest back out and entered Godd gallery. Melody and Trudy were at the front desk. They smiled at him and Melody said: "You're early!"

"Actually, I came to check on Sadie."

"She left. Didn't you see her at your studio?" Ethan shook his head. He wasn't going to offer more.

"She said you need painting assistants so we're sending some down for you to interview. So, I think you better get down there," Trudy said in her lockjaw.

"Brilliant!" Ethan exclaimed and he was out the door running.

*

Althea had Woody take Marcus and her back to the gallery. She assumed Marcus was installing. Even if he hadn't planned on it, and he seemed to, he was going to now. Wooster headed south so Woody had to go around the block.

Having a common adversary can bring people together and erase the subterfuge and miscommunication. Solidarity through shared opposition.

It was the right moment for Althea to confront Marcus. A moment of truth.

"Look, why didn't you just talk to me?" She turned toward him. "I could say get rid of Barbara, but I won't."

Ethan ran past their car in the opposite direction, dodging tourists and gallery-goers.

"I could say get rid of Ethan." Marcus said. His voice was steady. "Why do you put up with him?"

"Look...he grew up practically homeless." They took lefts on Houston and Wooster.

"Why do you care?"

"I'm from closer to that background than you, way closer," Althea confided. Woody pulled up in front of Godd Gallery. Althea put her hand on Marcus' knee, shifting their focus.

"Thank you for speaking up for me. In terms of Barbara, I'll work with her if it's important to you. But I encourage you to leave it open. I have exciting things happening that I can't share yet."

They made their star entrance and were greeting enthusiastically. "She's left the limo!" Melody laughed.

"That's right, and I'm taking you to lunch. Just after we see this."

They walked into the gallery, surveying Sadie's room, nodding because it looked great, and quickly went to the main gallery. Althea was pleased. The show transferred to the gallery better than she could have imagined. The extra wall space, additional ceiling height, and natural light from the skylights gave the work room to breathe. To sparkle. The works really seemed to talk to each other. But, it was clear that Marcus' involvement was needed. The monitors were playing various earlier videos but they weren't calibrated. The rest of the huge wall was empty with what could be a dramatic and effective intervention, were he to begin installing now. In her state of renewed confidence, Althea felt she could will it into being...a huge improvement over a feeling of *needing* an artist to do something and being in a state of constant nervousness over whether it was going to happen. Will they come through? She looked at Marcus and he appeared ready to go. He walked to his wall.

Melody walked quietly behind Althea. When they completed the circle, Althea saw the Net hanging above for the first time. "Oh, darling, it's wonderful." They really had done a great job, everyone.

"Where's Friday?"

"She's uptown working on the Newspaper."

"Newspaper?"

"On newsprint with her photography."

Althea made another run through the gallery. "I wondered about installing process photos for Harrison's and Ethan's mural."

"That's covered by the newspaper...the fake newspaper."

"Then the last things, and I can't believe I'm saying this, is Ethan's mural needs the Rolodex. We need to return the Rolodex."

"I can't wait to tell my friends at Vogue that wearing your bathrobe is the latest." Trudy said as Althea and Melody left.

"Tell them I'll be back whenever I feel like it," Althea said laughing.

*

Woody shot down West Side Highway. The traffic was light and it was a beautiful fall day. The clouds had cleared. Before they knew it they were in front of John's exchange.

"Thank you Woody. Ladies..." John said as he slid in..."I hope you're ready to spend some money because it's burning a hole in my pocket." Melody sat between Althea and John in the spacious seat. He rested his arm on the back of the seat. "Melody, has Althea told you that we're kidnapping you and you won't be going home again?"

"Fine with me!"

"I thought you would break it to her slowly, but it seems it doesn't matter." Althea laughed.

"Let's go shopping first, then lunch. Althea, you look lovely in white. Let's find you more of it. And Melody, you too. Woody, we're going to Max Mara - Madison and 69th Street. And La Goulou for lunch.

Woody had already taken the Battery Tunnel and was heading up the FDR, knowing that Mr. McBain wanted to go to the Upper East Side.

*

"The thing is....," Sheldon said stroking his chin, "...is that you don't know what's going to happen to Althea next. One gallery closed, she's curating a show with Godd, then what?" Sheldon was worried about Althea stealing artists, just as he was getting going. She came out of the blue because he had been focused on Barbara, Godd, and \$he. Harrison wanted to put him at ease. He wasn't going to be going with another gallery. He had committed to working with Sheldon and was excited to. They had been getting to know each other for over a year now, ever since they had been introduced. Besides, the other galleries just seemed about the money. Sheldon focused on the art. "Exhibitions are not about selling," Sheldon insisted. They talked about it again and again. Sheldon was critical of other dealers and often became outraged at their methods and madness, particularly when Harrison shared what he was going through.

"I've been gathering my forces and making a plan," Sheldon continued " and there's an article in the works for **House** magazine. You could be a part of it."

"Really?"

"Probably a two page spread, with color photos of art." He looked over his shoulder. "The writer is a friend of mine. She may call you for a quote."

"Great!"

"My friend the writer also works for **Time Out** and she said they were writing a piece on your market." There was a frenzy to purchase Harrison's work.

"Oh no. You're kidding, right."

"I said to her: 'What market? Anyway, it's alright.'" He sighed. "One of your collectors convinced them not to do it. So, let's talk about what your quote could be for this article." Harrison took a moment to regroup. Sheldon had worried him, then put him at ease. Why did he bring it up?

"Well, I'd tell the truth: Paul introduced us...." Paul was another dealer who knew them both.

"Nope. This is not about Paul. This is about me."

"Oh." Harrison thought for a moment. "Then I'd say that you're an artist's dealer and that makes you different from the rest."

"That's more like it."

"They won't have a lot of room, but I hope they'll include an image of your work."

"It would be great to talk about Althea's show."

"No." Sheldon was flustered. "This is not about Althea, or any other dealer. You've got to get that into your head."

Harrison was taken aback. Sheldon had not talked to him this way before, and he didn't like it. Sheldon put on his coat...a coat that Harrison recognized. They had been shopping in Boston on Newbury Street for Harrison's opening and Sheldon looked at the price tag, gasping with shock and covering his mouth. He must have returned and purchased it later.

Harrison recognized that he was going to have to take this in stride. He had a show coming up with Sheldon, who he thought was going to make all the difference in a gallery world that seemed screwed up. Harrison received a check every month from Sheldon, and all his paintings were pre-sold, often to people who had been collecting his work before he worked with Sheldon. That was fine, too. They would grow together. It reminded him of how his childhood idol, Jasper Johns, had found a young dealer, and had stayed with him throughout his career. This was the kind of relationship that Harrison had been looking for, and he had found it.

Sheldon stood up and brushed off his new coat. It was time to go. "Last but not least: I have friends in high places, who say we're on the verge of war. We may be in for tough times. People may not be thinking about art when we're sending our beautiful boys off to war." He headed down the stairs, looking backward as he exited. "So, I want you to start to tighten your belt."

*

A cigarette hung out of Sadie's mouth as she crossed the studio loft carrying the two color square paintings she made. Three scruffy young men wearing paint covered boots and clothes sent by Trudy watched. Sadie was comfortable, relaxed. She like hanging around with other artists.

"It started with those paint sample racks in the store," she said, explaining the origin of Ethan's paint square paintings.

"What about Gerhard Richter's color square paintings?" One mumbled.

Ethan burst out of the elevator out of breath. He rushed in front of Sadie and took over:

"What you have here is a rare, once in a lifetime opportunity: the chance to work on a world-famous art project. Something that people will talk about for years to come."

"Let's keep this simple," Sadie interrupted. "We're looking to make some paintings like these." She pointed to the studies. "Think you're up for it?" They nodded in unison.

*

Sheldon decided to walk through Soho from Harrison's to Brahms' studio and took Prince, the same route he had taken with Harrison several days earlier. On the corner of Prince and Wooster, he spotted Friday heading into Godd Gallery.

"Hi Sheldon," she said as he approached. He seemed meek sometime, she thought. Friday put her camera and purse in the cabinet behind her and sat next to Trudy.

"This is Sheldon Shepherd, a close friend of my dad's," Friday said to Trudy. Maybe that's why he's shy around me, she thought. Trudy extended her hand. "Here to see the show?"

Sheldon didn't want to admit that he was. "I'm visiting my boys today. Studio visits. But I'll take a look."

Sheldon barely looked. Marcus was marking the far wall. Anger surged within him. He prepared to keep it brief with Friday as he didn't want her to know how he felt.

"Are you going tonight?" Friday asked.

"Um - hmmm." As he was leaving, Felicity entered, so he stopped.

"How are things?" She asked Sheldon, continuing to walk. She nodded at Friday and Trudy. Sheldon followed her back in.

"Good. Very good," Sheldon answered. He wasn't shy anymore. "I'm opening a space uptown."

"Uptown? How interesting."

Sheldon watched her sign the book on the front desk. "Felicity Frank" in curvilinear script. It was the first signature in the book. Sheldon signed afterwards. His signature below hers was more curlicue. Felicity pulled out her notepad from her purse.

"I might be able to include you in the 'In the Know' column along with Althea. You're working with Harrison, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You must be so happy about this show."

"Althea's great," Sheldon said nodding with fake enthusiasm. He was cringing inside. He held back from asking her to wait to write until his opening. Felicity caught a glimpse of Marcus installing and moved into the gallery to watch him, leaving Sheldon at the desk. After that, Sheldon decided to take a cab to Brahms' studio. He wasn't going to walk anymore. He looked at his watch.

"I have to go," he said. When he got into a cab, he didn't see Bernie spying from across the street.

Two blocks east of Wooster was another gallery which Felicity wanted to visit. It had a wood panel and glass garage door painted dark green, with an entrance door set into it. It was on Mercer, which was narrower, darker, with more loading docks.

The owner and founder of the gallery had once been an artist himself - a performance artist. He defaced Picasso's masterpiece "Guernica" saying it was protest performance art. He walked into MOMA and spray painted something non-sensical across the painting and leveraged his notoriety into opening a gallery. However, he did not deface the art he showed: graffiti art. He often collaborated with another art dealer who had started as a drug dealer.

The show was Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat. Felicity looked at the show, holding the list. No one else was there except the staff. Both of them had died, young. Their careers were really taking off. Dying is a great career move.

*

John's glamorous guests preceded him as the maitre de showed them to the center table in the bar room. David Bowie and Iman were at the next table. The shopping bags were in the trunk and Woody waited in the parked car out front. "Champagne" John said as they sat. A bottle was popped instantly.

The ladies looked beautiful in their new outfits: Althea in white and Melody in pink, sitting against the green leather banquette and beveled antique mirrors. John faced them in a matching upholstered chair. "Let's drink to perfection," he said and they clicked and drank...."Except, we have one problem: Felicity and Bernie."

Althea and Melody were surprised. Why would he bring them up?

"I have an idea." Althea and Melody listened. "We're going to make some art for them. Canvas bags marked with big dollar bills, like in the cartoons, placed so they can't resist..." He couldn't hold back the laughter anymore. "The bags will be tied to fishing wire, so then they grab for them... WOOPS! POOF! GONE!" He laughed hysterically at the scenario he described. He began to elaborate: We could dangle them outside their apartment window."

He took another sip of champagne and choked. Althea and Melody weren't sure what to do.

*

Sheldon inhaled as he walked toward Brahms' new painting.

"Has anyone else seen this?" Sheldon asked. Brahms shook his head. "Correct me if I'm wrong," Sheldon continued, "But isn't this the beginning of a new series?" Brahms nodded. "Then this makes an even stronger case to show your previous series at the Ritz Foundation." Brahms listened. "I'm making progress with them, so let's do our best tonight. We're sitting at their table. The best approach is to let them think they had the idea of showing your new work."

Sheldon sat down and relaxed while Brahms stood with his arms casually crossed and waited for Sheldon to speak.

"I needed this," Sheldon said relaxing. "I just came from Althea's show and I don't like it.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's too flashy. Too much going on. The whole thing bugs me."

"It's good for Althea. She seems happy." Sheldon didn't want to talk about her. He knew about the drawing Brahms had given her and it pissed him off.

"I just hope this doesn't screw things up with Harrison. If she screws up his market, I'm going to kill her."

Brahms blinked. "You don't think his work is too architectural?"

*

Curious onlookers and passersby continued to gather outside Godd Gallery. Some tried to get in. Before they got to the desk, they were taken gently by the arm and pivoted back to the street. Ronald Penn Warren arrived from uptown as two people were being escorted out.

"I see there's no lack of interest. Hello Friday. Hello Trudy. And who else is here?"

"Marcus" Friday whispered.

"Ah...the missing piece is in place. The keystone up high." Friday appreciated his poetic humor. "My only concern is about one person."

"Oh, he'll be here," Friday said, thinking he was referring to Ethan.

"He? I'm not worried about him. I have him very well situated. It's just...where is Althea?"

"Oh she's at lunch. With Melody. She was already here. She brought Marcus in." Friday explained.

"I see. Wonderful."

"Wearing a bathrobe and slippers. So hot," Trudy added.

"Well I'm going to take a look..." Ronald tip-toed into the gallery, making every effort to not be detected. These were the moments he savored: having access to see a famous, or soon to be very famous artist installing their work. He was there first, yet again. And not only that, this artist was hot, hot, hot.

What he saw surprised him. It gave him a jolt. He even worried for a second, then he realized how cohesive the entire installation was. Marcus was still making arcing lines across the wall in much bolder black. Over the monitors and heading toward Ethan's mural, he drew, even incised, into the wall covering directional gestures like tracks of

bullets, or tracers. They converged in a huge black shape, like a black hole blown through the wall, right next to Ethan's mural.

*

White is the color of starting again. A blank piece of paper, a primed canvas. When Althea arrived wearing her new white dress she glowed. Stepping out of John's car, she felt that momentary transcendence that Virginia Woolf wrote about. It comes unexpected and is fleeting, but it's real. Champagne helps. "I'll see you tonight. B.E. and I are sitting with her gallery. They're celebrating the MOMA purchase."

"Wonderful. John, thank you so much. And thank you Woody." They both waved as she allowed Melody to walk ahead of her. She pulled the door open and touched Melody's shoulder. Everything seemed in slow motion. More significant. She felt the love. Tender feelings that people love to ridicule, so we learn to keep them to ourselves. Why are they so afraid of their feelings? She didn't have to bring it up to Ronald.

"My dear, I quit at least once a week. Several times when I'm writing something for the gallery." Ronald seemed genuine. If only everyone could have his perspective, Althea thought.

"Did you mention it to....anyone?" While they talked she watched Marcus. He was silhouetted against his wall drawing and the monitors played various videos of him.

"Not a word. Not even a prayer." Ronald smiled. He made everything seem light, airy.

"What about the new, higher offer?"

"That we can turn over to Godd. We are seeing the buyers tonight, but come to think of it, we're paying for a table at their benefit. Not exactly a bad position to be in."

"And where is he?"

"On a cloud somewhere, controlling the weather," Robert managed to be wry and evasive.

They moved into the center of the gallery to get the full effect. Marcus turned his head and made eye contact with her. It was like the old Marcus again. Had he picked up on her surge forward or had they just grown a bit together? His piece was clearly done. It was magnificent. As if he picked up her thoughts telepathically, he turned and joined them. They stood in a triangle centered geometrically in the space.

"Marcus, you've unified the installation. It's remarkable." Althea glowed. There's a window when creative production allows honesty, total honesty. The electric egg. The invisible vortex reaches down and then withdraws.

"You brought me back." He said, looking at the floor and then making eye contact again.

"And you did it," Althea added quickly.

"Like I've given birth and died," Marcus confided. He dropped his facade. It was a brave thing to admit. And admirable to share it.

Althea felt it. She understood. To nurture creativity is to co-create. So few people around artists helped them. They took the role of the antagonist. The destroyer to the artist's creator. They treated artists like spoiled children, impractical dreamers who had to be brought down to earth. This has its source in the bias against the feminine, the creative, and the nurturing. It put Althea in a unique position. And she accepted. She loved artists and she loved art and she loved helping them to make art. In her own way, Althea had gone through her own creative process -- and it paralleled a life cycle -- death and rebirth. And it paralleled the processes of her artists...and the processes of life.

The symbiotic relationship of the four installations was more than she could have ever imagined. There was a strange slipping symmetry to their internal relationships. In simple terms, reading from left to right: Harrison's wall could be the birthing wall: two concentric circles with wood nipples at the center points, like two breasts. Or two openings. Ethan's wall was the fracturing of light into color, in a digital and modernist formation, indicating the order and chaos, heterogeneity of life, of our constructed physical environment. Opposite, Sadie's room represented the everyday, books, food clothing. So the reading could occur in a clockwise or a counter clockwise direction. Sadie's cellophane video led the way to Marcus' performance video and the transition into bodily experience: the physical and the holographic reality. And those in turn, led with tracer lines back to the abyss of death. The circle was complete, and the aspects of life were rendered economically and beautifully as if they were all just a formal game. There was also a dialogue across the square: the dialectic of the couple, Sadie and Ethan, and the two circles of Harrison's with the double aught of Marcus' philosophy. Two breasts and two balls in a face off.

The work, when it's good, is ahead of us. Ahead of our understanding. We catch up to it. People were going to be baffled. Pissed. Prepare for the attacks. Or the opposite extreme: they claim it as their own. If it's not successful, they ignore it, if it is successful, then it's theirs. Immediate absorption.

Althea felt like spinning and letting the work all blur into a streaming, smeared panorama. A familiar voice interrupted her. Ronald and Marcus had wandered away and were watching Marcus' videos, which she knew well already. It was Ethan making

a fuss at the front desk. He strode past her to examine Marcus' work and had his hands on his hips.

"I see what you're up to," he spoke loudly in the direction of Marcus, who ignored him. "You're takin' away from MY piece."

The funny thing was that Ethan was more comfortable being in the role of curator. He and Sadie secured the warehouses, organized the shows, and smoothed the egos of their artists, but this experience didn't make him immune to high maintenance behavior himself. And he and Marcus had been sparring.

Knowing when to leave is an art in itself. Marcus saw this moment as his time. Holding his bag, he shook hands with Ronald, "So you're happy," kissed Althea, congratulated Sadie and Harrison, and gracefully avoided Ethan, and headed to the front desk.

"Ethan..." Althea said. Ethan approached her. "I was just telling Ronald about the Rolodex."

"You were?" Ronald said, joining them. "I mean, yes, you were."

"I think it's indispensable to the show."

"Really?" Ethan was genuinely surprised.

"The hardest part of doing a good piece is knowing when to stop," Harrison said.

"Hear. Hear." Friday yelled. Marcus lingered at the front desk. This was too good. He had to stay.

"I love it when he talks like that." Melody added.

"Yes, we need to finalize the installation." Ronald wanted to sum things up.

"Do we? It began as a work in progress, a constantly transforming installation. I welcome it being open-ended, evolving." Althea said.

"There's something more I want to do, too," Sadie added. She had a shopping bag in hand. Ronald looked exasperated.

"Let me remind you that this is sold." Ronald was holding out his hands in damage control.

"Really? How much?" Ethan shifted. Marcus' piece was forgotten.

"It's still being negotiated," Ronald said tersely. He didn't want to get into it.

"Then I can put in the Rolodex and Sadie her things and you can raise the price!" Ethan knew he had a point. Sadie laughed and everyone joined in except Ronald.

"But Ronald, there's another offer anyway," Althea said, attempting to help.

"Really? How much?" Now everyone was interested.

"Higher than the other one," Althea blurted out.

"Really? How much?" Ethan had a new mantra.

"Then you can raise the price twice!" Harrison laughed.

"I need to get something." Althea said leaving the gallery. "Back soon." Marcus followed her. In the elevator, they were able to speak.

"You were right. It turned out, this show." Marcus seemed so focused, Althea thought. He'd really come through. "Why not split my representation 50 /50 with Barbara?"

"Sounds wonderful to me." The elevator opened and Althea got her keys out of her purse. "Get ready for a shock."

She had barely been in her loft in the daylight, and when she arrived at night, it was as if she was camping out. It appeared like someone had just moved out, or she had moved into a fixer-upper. She walked to her Rolodex, The Rolodex, and picked it up.

"See. I get to be in the show, too."

*

Sadie pulled an electric frying pan she bought on Canal Street out of the paper bag and put it on the table to show Ronald. The cord snaked across the glowing gold wood and fell off the edge. Ronald listened with curiosity. The others gathered around the front desk gossiping about the show, the dinner tonight, the opening, etc.

"See...we need to have something on the table. So, I'll fry two eggs every morning, sunny side up, and put them there."

*

Marcus said good-bye to Althea at the gallery's front door.

"Together again." Althea said. He kissed her on the cheek.

"Were we ever really apart?"

"I suppose not." She watched Marcus walk down the middle of the street toward Houston framed by the Soho architecture. Heading back to his studio, no doubt.

"Oh! You're joining us tonight, aren't you?" She yelled after him.

Marcus turned and nodded, then continued walking.

Althea returned to the gallery, passed the others, and joined Sadie, who repeated her idea. Althea arched her eyebrows. "Hmmm. Interesting Sadie. Isn't she just adorable, Ronald?" Ethan saw Althea carrying the Rolodex and he casually ambled over to join them. He stood close to Althea, looking down at the Rolodex.

"Well, go ahead. Tell him."

"Oh, OK! Well, you see, what happened was..." She couldn't believe she was feeling nervous. She began to walk into the center the gallery. "Ethan put my Rolodex in the center of his mural in a small vitrine...which must be around here." Althea walked to the far wall and stood at the center of Ethan's mural. "It went here." She held it to demonstrate where it was installed. "When I discovered it was *my* Rolodex, he said it was appropriation art. And someone, not to mention any names, took it and returned it to me. All in the presence of the collector who said she would buy it, Sissy Ritz.

"So does she feel that it's part of the piece or not?" Ronald asked.

"Actually, I don't know." Althea tried to retrace the steps of how it happened in her mind. She felt confused because so much had happened since and she was on overload.

"The point is we're goin' to tell her 'cause I'm the artist. Do you get my drift?" Ethan interjected.

"I don't need it anymore because Melody and I duplicated it," Althea added.

"Put in Sadie's bits too and raise the price and make that ol' cow pay through the nose."

"Well, the buyer is another topic we'll get to...later. Not now. If WE agree to this. Can we also agree that there will be no further changes?" Ronald asked with finality.

*

"Come on. I want to show y'all something." Harrison took Sadie and Ethan across Wooster to an apartment building and rang a buzzer.

"Second floor. It's a surprise."

The marble treads on the narrow stairway were so worn that it would be easy to slip, but a pleasant moist aroma entered the air: moist and natural, grounding. A sign at the top of the stairway read "Dia Foundation" and they continued down a narrow white hallway. A man sat at a desk in a windowless office. He looked up and spoke and they turned right. Ahead of them was a wide glass partition holding solid topsoil three feet deep, filling a space easily the size of Godd Gallery. It was free of growth and looked like it had just been put there. 250 square yards. 3600 square feet. 280,000 lbs. And it had been there since 1980 as a permanent installation commissioned and funded by the Dia Foundation.

They stood at the glass partition and took it in: A giant room full of earth in the middle of Soho.

*

Althea, Friday, and Melody leaned against the reception desk looking at the exhibition.

"Can you believe this has come together?" Althea said looking toward Friday.

"I still don't." Friday replied.

"Did you shoot Marcus installing?"

"He asked me not to."

"Well, there will be more photo opportunities."

"Can't I be a part-time photographer?"

"As long as you remember someone's always waiting in line to replace you."

"Alright. Alright." Friday got her camera out of the cabinet behind reception and put it around her neck.

"The photos you took of Marcus are...not uninteresting."

"Ha! You're talking to me like I'm an artist." Friday said.

"You must be imagining things. That's what artists do." Althea said.

*

The headlamps of Marguerite's Cadillac lit up yellow cones that pierced the darkness. The chrome pediment grill and garland-encircled hood ornament crowned the long sloping black hood. A metal temple on wheels. She settled into the black leather seat. Even the gas pedal had silver trim. Her foot couldn't reach it and she searched for the electric seat adjustor to move it forward. She turned the ignition and all eight cylinders cranked to a low rumble. The torch tail lights lit up red. It was the mean machine and it was hers.

She put it in drive and the wide white-wall tires began to roll down West Seventeenth. The raised asphalt of Ninth caused the headlight cones to bounce as she put the pedal to the metal. The ceremony wasn't far away that night - only seven blocks - but she felt like driving. It was Lurch's night off. He liked to go to The Monster, a West Village Bar, where there was a show-tune sing-along around a baby grand.

Right on Tenth and left on Twenty-Second. She cut in front of the line of limos and cabs waiting to let off at the canopy ahead. The valets moved out of the way when she jumped the curb and skidded to a stop in front of the carpeted arrival area. She tossed the keys to the closest valet, who looked shocked.

"Keep it running here. I may leave early." He was speechless. "I am the guest of honor tonight." And she was. This was Marguerite's night.

The windowless room for the Ritz Foundation Dinner doubled as a gallery for the foundation. Once a year, the foundation took down all the art and had caterers set up for the fundraiser.

That night the room was divided by a horizon of table tops with identical floral arrangements, and bottles of water and champagne. Guests waited to be seated.

Sharks and Penguins. The staff wore penguin outfits and stood at attention around the periphery of the room waiting for the big fish to arrive. One by one, the sharks arrived slowly eyeing the place setting and table numbers. Wearing Designer black which distinguished them from their religious cousins who had also relinquished joy and pleasure. Wearing thick rimmed glasses, hats, and gloves. Carrying umbrellas like a weapon. New York Art Dealers and Curators: all expecting to get a piece of the action. Shiny, sparkling teeth and beady, soulless eyes. Predators circling the waters before finding their temporary resting point. Checking their peripheral vision. Who's looking at me? Who here do I want to take advantage of? And how? There weren't many artists present. Only the most successful could afford it, at \$1,500 per ticket or \$10,000 per table. Even fewer critics attended. Critics were notoriously poorly paid. So, Felicity

and Bernie weren't in attendance, but they would have loved to have. Bernie considered disguising himself as a waiter, but he didn't share his fantasy with Felicity. They decided to go to a movie and argued over what to see. Felicity wanted to see "Misery" and Bernie wanted to see "Dances with Wolves."

At events like this, there was an oversupply of Sharks and an undersupply of brightly colorful fish. Then, there was the Sharks' mortal enemy: Dolphins. Smarter and faster, Dolphins could out maneuver Sharks. Althea's artists had arrived early, dressed in their usual, sitting at the Godd Gallery table which was located at the center. Artists could wear whatever they wanted: a rare perk of the profession.

The biggest Shark in the sea arrived, fashionably late, wearing a grey suit and a matching blue shirt and tie, with Althea on his arm. All the other sharks made way. Althea wore her white wool dress suit and jacket that John bought her. With his standing and his confident steely gaze, Godd didn't need to look about. He focused on an unoccupied point in space and waited for people to acknowledge his authority. Certain sharks saw their opportunity and approached to kiss his ass.

"They make such a nice looking couple..."Friday whispered "...if only...anyway, never mind."

Althea thought she would go out of her mind. However, she did get her raise, so she could consider herself being well-paid this occasion. That made it easier to stomach. It wasn't that they were so menacing - it was that they were so boring. If they listened, perhaps they could hear how they sounded: the false tone, the false inhales, the hyperbolic statements, the obvious, leading questions. Every word was like a turd falling out of their mouths. She wanted them to find a way out of their dead-end dullness, not to drag everyone else in.

"Net. Not *The Net*," she clarified. "Net. Yes, Net. Opening tomorrow 6 to 8. Yes, Net. Net. Net. Yes, we're working together if that's what you're implying. Yes, I'll still be giving my 'famous dinner parties,' as you call them." She waited. "You'll have to hear about them afterwards." They instantly shriveled up and disappeared, like when you throw salt on a slug. Another one waited in line. "Net. Yes, Net. Well, you'll just have to see...."

Althea wished again for envelope ears. Why can't we close our ears and protect ourselves against toxic airwaves? Could selective listening be in our future? Surely nature will get us there. But how long will it take? It was surprising, Althea thought, that their fetid hot air didn't shrivel the floral centerpiece. But the centerpiece they were eyeing was the delicious sampling of attractive, talented young women and men sitting around the table with her. Her artists.

Sharks don't understand kindness. They confuse it with weakness. They don't understand politeness, delicacy. They think it's nostalgic, puzzling, obsolete. It doesn't compute, but that's because part of their brain is missing. Their pretension and lack of

humor are their trademark. Their inability to hear themselves say the most astounding things about artists: "I made him" and "I don't know if I'm going to make it happen for her" and "The jury is still out on their work." Being in favor with them didn't really add up either. "She's hot" meant they wanted to use her. "He's a nice guy" meant he could be easily used. Later, "He's over" and "people are not into that work anymore" were pronounced, and the time in between these two pronouncements for most artists was around three to five years. They said it so it was impossible not to hear, because that was how they got attention. They looked at the young artists present like they could consume them whole. But that wouldn't be happening, Althea thought. Not even a bite, nor a stroke, nor a lick. They were out of their league.

Ronald Penn Warren was a natural in treacherous waters. His intelligent charm was like a magician's sleight of hand. Godd placed him on the opposite side of the table next to Althea's best friend who was an art PR agent. He could distract the circling sharks with a reflection, a flicker of the tail fin, mesmerize them with a clicking sound, like any good dolphin. Ronald stood making the introductions: Althea Bridges, Melody Martin, Marcus Schumacher, Friday Winstanley, and to my right: Sadie Jones, Ethan Crone, and Harrison Stevens. Althea's friend entertained the artists, charming them with her bawdy southern accent: "I like my men lusty. Lusty. Y'all just keep me in mind. I've got some benefit auctions comin' up and I need some art to sell."

A woman wearing a red wig pulled Godd's arm. "Did you out-bid me for the Brahms drawing at auction? I know how you work. It was one of your people, wasn't it?" She seemed personally offended. Godd didn't respond. His restraint served him well.

Althea could feel the invisible daggers. But not everyone wanted her dead, or at least severely maimed. She had her fans mainly among the young. She caught an admiring glance and hello from some of the other gallerinas who had been lucky enough to be invited, who looked at her with awe. The other rare artist attendees waved and mouthed hello. Collectors who knew and respected her track record seemed genuinely happy that she had landed safely with Godd. She felt the heat of a more intense stare and turned around. It was Marguerite, who was also bored, and who had been trying to get her attention. She sat at the head table between the President of the Foundation and Sissy Ritz, who was talking with her husband Marvin on the other side. "Later" Marguerite mouthed the word. "Later."

A tall, foppish man stole Sissy's attention, whispering with his hand guarding his lips, glancing toward Althea's table, obviously talking about her. Barbara Mangold's table was next...great!...with the Japanese and German businessmen and their wives, as well as some of her gallery staff.

She didn't ever take a table at benefits. She didn't like to attend them, much less leave her immediate environment at all. Besides, she would have to face Godd. She liked to control everything around her. Instead of attending, she sent a check.

At the head table, the foppish man left and Sissy turned to Marguerite. Sheldon sat next to Brahms, talking frantically.

B.E.'s gallery director, Harley Sedgwick, and his staff sat perched at attention, looking through the crowd when people approached, but B.E. wasn't present. There were two empty seats at their table. Uptown denizens dressed and acted more formally than the downtown crowd: the cravats, pressed shirts, tie pins, brooches, sprayed immovable hair. They nodded politely and surveyed the crowd with circumspection. Harley saw Brahms approaching Althea's table and knew they were the most likely to know where B.E. could be, so he got up and headed in their direction.

Electric neurosis erupted into laughter. A waiter spilled wine on the woman that Godd outbid at auction. She cried out like a pre-historic bird.

Brahms stood talking politely to Althea and Godd. What was the word to describe Godd's expression, Althea thought. Sharky, snarky, smug, sneering, shifty, shitty - all S words - a snake hissing in the grass. Like he knew something, and he wanted you to think it was everything. She had seen him come up behind people and breathe down their necks. More than a snake, like an electric eel. Brahms shook hands with him and talked politely, but they both were going through the motions. Brahms couldn't take his eyes off Melody. Friday noticed and got up to speak. Friday seemed to be coming into her own.

Harley came to say hello and asked if anyone had heard from B.E. Heads shook no and Althea wondered: has B.E. had a falling out with John? She replayed the day and realized he hadn't mentioned B.E. all afternoon. Althea had a vision of her lying at the base of the stairs. But John wouldn't...he couldn't...would he?

"Did you hear?" Harley asked, which pulled Althea from her thoughts. "We sold a painting to MOMA!"

Was he kidding? B.E. had her phone on speed-dial, telling everyone. Well, it's not suicide, Althea thought. She'd kill to be here to bask. God knows, you have to bask when you can. Brahms didn't react to the news. Did he care? For all his involvement with B.E., could he be happy for her? He must be thinking MOMA hadn't bought a new one of his. He was still staring at Melody and Friday had positioned herself between them. Visibly bored, Godd headed to the head table. How she wished she could overhear his conversation with the Ritz' and Marguerite. Should she follow him? Better not. Marcus got up to talk to Barbara. Should she go over? Sheldon saw Godd heading to his table and headed to Harrison and Melody, keeping an eye on Brahms. Without thinking what she was doing, Althea put her hand on Brahms' arm. He responded by looking down at it - her hand - and his meaning was clear: Don't do that in front of others. But was he also indicating more? Was he saying: Don't get used to it?

It was starting to be too much. The deafening din of conversation overtook Althea. The Fop came over to introduce himself. She knew a phony when she saw one and she was cool to him, keeping her eyes on Marcus, who flirted with Barbara. She abruptly excused herself to intercede and Fop waved to Harrison and Melody, who seemed to know him, yet looked so innocent, so unaware of the treachery, the insanity. Althea smiled at Melody. Sheldon was fawning over them, especially Harrison. Was he trying to make Brahms jealous? Harrison looked up and happened to catch Brahms staring a hole through him, and he didn't stop when Harrison noticed. Then, she saw it: Sheldon was in love with Harrison.

Dealing with Barbara was a cinch: appeal to her vanity. She complimented her outfit, her hair, her lipstick. Pretty soon Barbara was eating out of her hands. Barbara must have been an ugly duckling, craving compliments about her physical appearance, and feeling no one wanted her. The way Barbara delicately stroked Marcus, the same way she'd just touched Brahms, caused the nickel to drop: Althea had a moment of crystallization, like looking through a kaleidoscope when the turning stops. Stendahl's crystallization in "On Love," she thought. Sheldon was in love with Harrison. Barbara was in love with Marcus. But she wasn't in love with Marcus, because she was still in love with Brahms. Love makes the art world go round.

A dull man chimed a glass with a knife at the lectern got up and gave the standard greetings and stale jokes. As people scampered back to their seats, he listed the benefactors and recited the figures. He began with the founders, Sissy and Marvin Ritz, who nodded. Sissy wore a ruffled silk shirt with several strands of pearls and diamonds and Marvin wore a suit. Art dealers clapped loudly because they wanted to sell more art to them. The foundation was thriving and its endowment had doubled in one year. Perfunctory applause. The crowd listened as they ate what was served them. The Master of Ceremonies who followed was an upgrade. He wore a nicer tux and told better jokes. Sections of the crowd started to stir and come to life.

"We know the line: 'What makes a legend most?' Don't we?" the MC paused. "A copyrighted line from a popular fur campaign." Pause. "I created that ad campaign," pausing again, "Thank you. Thank you." He added, even though meager applause came from only one table. Godd arrived and sat down after he began talking. Althea sensed that he had a bad talk with the Ritz's and/or Marguerite. She hadn't had the chance to watch.

Marguerite shifted restlessly in her chair and rolled her eyes. A slide show of her and her artwork began flashing above on the wall behind them - from early to recent - the carved wood totems and tapestries, the brightly colored watercolors, studio shots of her from various periods, the opening of her MOMA retrospective, the new photo of her making a karate chop, a bronze, and even the recent installation piece of The Flyers.

"We in the Arts have our own legend and we're here to honor her tonight." He looked toward her and Marguerite stopped squirming and smiled. "And she is with us tonight to

receive the Sissy and Marvin Ritz Legend Award for a lifetime of artistic excellence." Marguerite turned shy, even flirtatious, as the MC flattered her.

"Let's have a round of applause for Marguerite Chopin." His voice raised to a crescendo. The audience clapped but the loudest response came from Althea's table and the kids, who whistled and yelled. Ethan made a cat call. The waiting staff stood along the side walls applauding politely.

"I loved her in Ninotchka," a waiter said.

"Um, wrong artist..."the near waitress said. He looked at her confused.

"Isn't she wonderful, folks? A living work of art!" The MC continued. There was a second livelier round stimulated by the enthusiasm from Althea's table. The MC held out the award, a clear lucite faceted jewel on a metal stand. Marguerite pretended to wave the attention away and shook her head. Demure, she looked across her shoulder.

"Would you say a few words?" The MC pleaded. Marguerite covered her mouth with the tips of her fingers. More applause. "Yes. Speech!" Harrison and Sadie yelled. Arcing her hand on her breast bone, cocking her shoulders upward, fluttering her other hand, Marguerite mouthed the words: "Who, Me?"

"Who wants this Legend to speak? Everybody, clap your hands." He said melodically as if he was addressing kindergartners. Higher applause. The MC pulled her by the arm. Marguerite smiled and approached the microphone. The crowd fell silent.

"Thank you." Marguerite strained to reach the microphone, holding her acrylic diamond. "I've waited so long for this. It's a good thing I wasn't in a hurry." The MC adjusted the microphone downward to accommodate her height. "Where have you been all my life? I could have used you..." She gestured toward the MC. "...in my bedroom."

The MC looked shocked and sat down.

"Why didn't you give me a fur instead of this?" She said holding up the acrylic diamond. "A fur will be useful if you put me in cold storage again."

Laughter continued but with a nervous edge, except at Althea's table where Friday, Harrison and other's tried to keep straight faces. "She's turning this into a roast." Harrison whispered looking down, and drawing on his place mat in a ball point pen. Melody drew on hers in her pink lipstick. Ethan took the opportunity to introduce himself to the MC.

"Why don't you concentrate on a young artist, that way you won't have to hear this tripe."

"I'm sorry, have we met?"

"We have now. Ethan Crone, at your service. And I'm going to be the most famous artist in the world."

While they talked, Marguerite continued:

"You know, when you've been around, like I have, you're able to be there first. Over and over. I heard about a new material, something I could work with first..it was bronze." She looked at the audience. They were falling under her spell. "I always loved totems. They were so young, so innocent, before that dirty old man, Sigmund Freud, made them taboo."

She waited for the laughter to die down. "Then, there were my tapestries. All hand stitched by me. How else could I warm myself while I was stuck in cold storage? Then my comeback arrived...again...this being my ninth. Thank God."

"Speaking of God, you know, he's with us tonight. Aren't we fortunate?"

Godd shifted nervously in his seat.

"How can any of us compare to this supreme being?"

Godd got up

"Yes, go...I'm sending you to your room without dinner.

Godd sat back down.

The MC approached the microphone. "Isn't she irresistible, folks?" People applauded, and Marguerite squeezed the MC's rear end, who looked shocked, and sat down.

"I'm so glad you find me irresistible. I wish the feeling was mutual."

The MC tried another approach, putting his hand over the microphone, which she pushed away.

"I see my 15 minutes are nearly over, but don't think you're going to put me in a vitrine. Next time, give me a real diamond to go with the fur."

Beeping from the street interrupted Marguerite's talk and the double front doors opened revealing a suited man pushing an accident victim in a wheel chair. The person in the wheel chair was covered in bandages - a white head, neck brace, arm and leg casts. It was B.E.!

Marguerite left the lectern and instead of taking her old seat, where Ethan now sat, she walked to Althea's table and took Godd's empty chair. She joined the others making drawings of each other as dessert and coffee was served.

The drawings took off and as they stacked up, some fell on the floor. People waited to see if they would sign them.

"Let's go to my studio," Marguerite offered. "My car is in front."

"But we can't all fit in your car." Althea says, wanting to go.

"I drove too!" Melody said.

Ethan flopped into the back seat as he said: "Nice wheels." Sadie joined Ethan from the other side and Althea got in the front. Marguerite slammed her door.

"I used to have a gold 'Deuce and a Quarter'...and jammed the gear shift into drive..."but it died," she said as she looked in the rear view mirror at them.

"Fierce speech," Sadie said from the back. Althea nodded and Ethan arced his eyebrows.

"A consolation prize." Marguerite said looking in the rear view mirror. "Since I'm a 'living legend.' But let's not talk about me. I want to talk about you."

Althea propped her forearms on the seat back and rested her chin on them, facing the back seat.

"Really! What are you gonna do now?" Sadie thought out loud. "You could become a surfer." She imagined Marguerite surfing on the East River as they crossed the Manhattan Bridge.

"Ha!"

"Begin a new career as a conceptual artist," Ethan said.

"Because Conceptual begins with a 'con.'" Marguerite said, liking the direction.

"Nah. A Rock an' Roller," Sadie added.

"See what happens when you say you don't want to talk about yourself."

Melody's olive green land yacht followed Marguerite's Caddy down the West Side Highway, with Melody driving and Harrison in the front seat. In the back seat, Friday and Marcus laughed. Lights on the supporting cables of the Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges reflected off the East River like strings of pearls.

"...like when she said: 'that bitch always tries to upstage me.'" They followed Marguerite as she turned off Flatbush.

Marguerite's studio was in a remote area of Williamsburg. It was quiet when they pulled into the parking area and got out, stretching under the half moon. After she unlocked the door and flipped on all the lights, she stretched her arm out signaling them in. She had been looking forward to this occasion. The rooms of the studio were connected by a wide white hallway which opened to a courtyard that had knotted trees growing in it. A small utility room was lined with shelves packed with tools and materials for her sculpture as well as the heating and air conditioning units and the tubes and wires that service them.

The ones that walked ahead found the room full of the stacked furniture Lurch arranged. Harrison and Melody wandered through the labyrinth. Ethan and Sadie passed by and found the next room, full of piles of fabric. Althea walked beside Marguerite down the hallway and Friday and Marcus ran ahead to the last room and found her newest sculpture.

"These are the Flyers. They came from all over. They had a dream to do something everyone said they could not do: to fly. They found a way. They found someone to teach them or they taught themselves."

When success in art comes, people react. People around the newly successful can act out in the most peculiar ways. They recognize the statistical rarity of success in art, supposedly as low as 1% of artists support themselves from sales of their work. Then, there's the access to the highest echelons of society: the rich and famous. Best of all, Marguerite. People like her who are almost completely inaccessible otherwise. Fear of success is a common problem, one that Althea had examined in therapy and she knew that most of her artists had as well. It was easy to sabotage success when it arrives. Opportunities don't come along often, sometimes only once in a lifetime. Even when self-sabotage has been avoided, you are conscious of the tight rope walk involved and the risk of slipping and falling. A tall order for a young adult, and yet if they didn't jump in the ring in their 20's, chances were less they wouldn't hit later. Someone becoming known in their 30's was rarer, and in the 40's was almost non-existent.

How they were perceived shifted. Even if they did not perceive themselves or project themselves as 'special,' they were bound to be seen in this way. The adjustment in perception required for friends and family was often not possible. Sometimes, they didn't seem available and played phone tag. It was easy to paint the newly successful one as a prima donna, as if they were the ones who had moved on. Worse, they could make scenes over something trivial, or just not show up. Or they could try to promote themselves, handing out their cards, bragging about their art. Seeing what they could grab for themselves, growing angrier and angrier that it didn't seem to be working.

The result: successful artists hang around with each other. Only the most confident and secure old friends stay. Some do a slow fade, others leave in a ballistic fury.

"Get used to it." Marguerite turned and smiled. "Get used to it."

*

"Where have you been?" Felicity yelled from the kitchen. Bernie gave up tip-toeing into the apartment and pocketed his keys.

"Seeing a movie." Felicity appeared in the kitchen doorway with her hands on her hips. She was scrubbing appliances, something she did at times like this.

"Oh, really, what did you see?"

"Dances with Wolves."

"Oh." They had talked about it.

"You said you didn't want to see it." It was true, Felicity wanted to see "Misery."

"Oh and B.E..." Bernie blurted out, then he had to stop himself. Oops, nearly blew his cover by blabbing.

"What about her?"

"Did you hear MOMA bought one of her paintings?" Whew! Luckily he had something else to report that didn't expose him.

"Isn't that why she invited us over?" Felicity said as she scrubbed.

*

The parade of liquored-up patrons left the party, waiting for valets to bring their cars, bickering and complaining about how long it was taking, and trying to break in front of each other in line. They had certainly seen enough for one evening. There was always the next spectacle... which was tomorrow: "I'll see you tomorrow at the opening at Godd Gallery," someone slurred. "Did he leave early? I thought I saw him get up during the talk." Sissy and Marvin stood saying their good-nights. They knew better than to get drunk and they basked in the glow of self satisfaction. Another successful evening.

Inside, staff stacked plates onto rolling carts shelves and lined them up at the freight entrance next to the laundry carts full tablecloths and napkins. Waiters folded up the round tables, collapsing the metal legs with a bang. Carlton's table was the only one that was still occupied. He tipped their waiter to keep serving wine as the other tables were being taken away. He and two members of the gallery staff listened with rapt attention as John told his story. Brahms and Sheldon sat down and joined them.

"When she didn't come home, I knew something was wrong. I found her in what I thought was a puddle of blood, but it turns out it was red paint. She had fallen off the ladder while she was painting."

B.E. listened, loving the attention, but she couldn't speak. Her jaw was wired shut.

*

That night, they all had versions of the same dream. They flew on cables instead of Marguerite's figures. If they held their arms in line with each other, they formed a hexagon, and if they thrust their heads forward and their arms back at an angle they formed a six pointed star, which was also a combination of two overlapping triangles. Sexes alternated so one triangle was male and one was female. The straps that held them buckled around their mid-sections at the perfect center of gravity. By dropping their heads, and straightening their legs, they flew downward, like skydivers in formation. Raising their heads together, they became more vertical, then they could repeat the movements easily by dropping and kicking back their legs.

Marguerite marched around them speaking into a bullhorn.

"No longer will we listen to downers, because the sky is the limit. In other words, there are no limits. We will accept nothing less, and we will listen to nobody who does."

Wednesday

As soon as Althea awoke, the gears began to turn. Even in a sensory deprivation chamber, she could find something to think about. She concentrated and made an effort to identify the sound in her bedroom. There was none. But there was always

sound, even if it was not perceptible, like grains of sand cascading down millions of stairs. The sum of infinite, barely perceptible sounds.

The corresponding visual was a blank screen, but what color? Photo-grey? Or white? Like her bedroom ceiling? She closed her eyes again. It was early. In her mind's eye, her dream screen wasn't flat, but a dome that she looked into. It lacked harsh shadows and was washed with light.

She was interrupted by a sound that she couldn't place, at first, but she could as it got louder. Fingers snapping, coming closer...an irritating affect. He knew it bothered her. That's why he was doing it. Was she stuck with this annoying person forever? The sound of paper being cut replaced the snapping, and a figure shimmied through.

"Ethan, you're on my dream screen. Get off. It's supposed to be blank."

"Get off? Well, that's sounding rather suggestive, ain't it?" He started snapping again and doing an annoying little dance.

"Perhaps I should just say: 'Go away.'"

"But I brought some friends with me." Ethan tore one side of the opening in the screen and Sadie, Harrison, Melody, Marcus, and Friday followed, all imitating Ethan's silly line dance, out of synch.

"What are you doing? Are you asleep, too?"

"Mmm hmmm. We're meeting you in our dreams." They picked musical instruments off the floor and starting playing. "We're going to sing to you."

"No! That's even worse than the snapping."

"Alright then..." Ethan ripped the rest of the screen down. The paper came apart in irregular triangles and drifted to the floor, uncovering what was behind it: the installation of "NET" in all it's colorful, wacky glory. The six artists took bows.

It was impossible to get back to sleep. Althea got up and put on her running outfit. She ran past the corner of Broadway and Houston and didn't see Hazel. She passed Bowery and thought of Brahms, but didn't slow down. The crowds dissipated as she headed east, away from the commerce, until she got to FDR. The sky over Brooklyn was striped with lavender and pink. She headed south toward the bridges and thought of the night before, especially Marguerite's studio. She kept this memory close to her. Marguerite helped her focus on what mattered. When she got to Houston, Hazel was still not there, so she walked to the shelter where Hazel lived. A beggar in front held out her hand as she entered the narrow vestibule and spoke to a guard behind the reception window.

Althea leaned down to speak through the opening at the bottom of the glass. There was something chaotic going on in the room behind, sounds of a struggle.

The weary receptionist wore a blue uniform. "Are you a friend?"

"Oh, um, Yes." The receptionist and gave her a compassionate look and shook her head.

"She's gone." Her meaning was clear. Althea felt like she had been hit.

"You mean..." Without completing her sentence, Althea turned around and pulled in, but when she passed Hazel's corner, she couldn't hold back and the tears came down.

*

Harrison answered the phone and listened while Melody put on her heels.

"But those are already sold," he said. As he hung up, he said to Melody: "I'm going to have to rearrange the studio."

"Why?"

"Sheldon is bringing collectors. I have to hide the work that's sold." Melody looked at Harrison slumped on the sofa. He seemed discouraged, deflated. She sat next to him. "He was in such a panic. I guess I can't walk you to work today."

"Are you sure about him? You could still go with Godd." Harrison didn't respond. He wasn't sure what to do. He had been hoping to work with someone new.

*

Althea decided to walk it off. Passing Wooster, she crossed Houston and walked down West Broadway. This section was tourist galleries that she avoided. She picked up her pace. She and the rest of the old Soho set faced each other on the next block. The metal grate was down on the gallery. Another block and she came upon a familiar and comforting sight: Broome Street Bar. The guy behind the counter washed glasses and had a towel tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

"Do you know, I used to work here," she said to him. She sat on a bar stool, nearby.

"You look familiar." He seemed nice, open.

"Well, not recently...when this place first opened."

The floors were worn and even the plate glass windows didn't bring in light.

"You live in the hood, right?" She nodded. While he poured her coffee, she turned to the front door and Brahms entered through the rectangle of her memory, as he was twenty-five years ago. She stood at the bar in her old uniform. She reached for a pen in her apron pocket.

"Bruce Brahms..." she wrote on her order pad. "It's alliterative, but...did you have a nick-name?"

"Ike. I'm related."

"Ike Brahms..." she wrote on her order pad. "I know!" She turned the page and wrote on the next sheet: "ICON BRAHMS..." and she held it up to show him. "Now that's a famous artist name."

The waiter stirred her. "What else do you do?" Althea asked.

"I'm an actor with the Wooster Group."

"You must be very good." She sipped her coffee. "I used to go there with someone I was just thinking about." She and Brahms went everywhere together, then, she got pregnant and everything changed. She left for England to have the baby. And he married Mrs. Brahms.

*

The new issue of **The Paper** lay open on Felicity and Bernie's coffee table. It had been delivered that morning and Felicity got up early to read it. She was furious. When Bernie entered he had no idea what awaited him. He carried the unread **News**, which Felicity had not bothered to pick up outside the front door. She crossed and held up the article by him: "Godd Introduces Hot Young Artists" and threw it back on the table.

Bernie was silent. He stood holding **The News** and looked out the window.

"YOU SCOOPED ME!" Felicity screamed.

"But, darling, what do you mean?"

"You *know* your paper comes out a day earlier than mine. You planned this!"

"But it's just a mention." Felicity stopped herself from responding to this absurd defense.

"GET OUT!"

Bernie left the room. Felicity put her head in her hands in front of her new mirror. What was she going to do? She couldn't keep working at cross-purposes with the person she lived with.

Standing outside, Bernie counted the planks in the floor. He overheard talk about Marcus' representation at the party last night. He pulled himself together, and stuck his head back in the door.

"There's something more important we need to discuss. It's about Marcus' representation. There's talk of a split between Barbara and Althea."

Felicity's outrage at Bernie diminished.

"What?"

"Neither want that." This truth jolted Felicity. The time to act was now.

*

Friday flipped through **The Paper** in bed while Marcus sipped coffee and sketched until she got to Bernie's column.

"Look! First article." Marcus seemed unimpressed, and only looked up for a moment. Ha ha...Bernie scooped Felicity."

"I don't suppose anyone saw photos they liked?" Friday said and paused. Marcus continued drawing.

"Nah. I had a talk with Althea. I'm going to split my representation." Friday felt like jumping up and down with joy, but she kept her cool.

"Oh, nice." she whispered and ate another chunk of granola.

*

Melody walked up West Broadway, and Althea spotted her, as she paid for her coffee and said good-bye to the actor.

"Immediately I feel better," Althea said, taking Melody's arm.

"What's wrong? You have an opening tonight." Melody said.

"Can you come with me while I get dressed?" The grate was up on the gallery when they passed by.

"Trudy," Melody said. They looked at each other and laughed.

"We'll make it quick. I know you need to get there," said Althea, picking up the pace.

When they got in the elevator and Althea was sure no one could overhear, she said:

"Marcus has agreed to split his representation."

"Wow. Does anyone else know?"

"Not yet. So I need you to keep it close. And...can we have morning meetings like this outside the gallery?"

"Good idea."

Althea opened her front door and they stood looking at the empty loft. "Every time I come home, it seems bleaker."

The fax, the phone, and the answering machine still sat on the floor. The parachute covered sofa was pushed against the front windows.

"At least you have the sofa."

"Only because they couldn't fit it. I feel like I'm camping out here."

"Time for a makeover!" Melody walked to the center of the space and performed a cheer. "Move over, moreover, for my makeover!" She raised invisible pom-poms and made it cheer.

"Right! Let's get started. Notepad?" Melody pulled it out of her purse.

"Always."

*

Sadie told stories to the assistants as they gridded off the new paintings with tape measures, rulers, and t-squares.

"There's wasn't a lot going on." She talked about London in response to one of their questions. "None of the galleries were interested. Other than our teacher we didn't have anyone to help us. Things were sewn up by the older artists. But we weren't gonna be held back."

Ethan called Sadie over to the kitchen.

"What are you telling them about that for?"

"Cause it gives us something to talk about."

Ethan looked at the pencil lines for the grids. One of the guys was beginning to tape them out on the first painting. "Keep them all the same size for this series. Then we'll start a new one with smaller ones." He entered the freight elevator and disappeared.

"Anyway," Sadie continued, "We found empty warehouses and we made a show and invited everyone and pretty soon the press was foaming at the mouth. And some of of those same dealers who turned us down...we got to turn them down."

*

Bernie pushed open the front door of Barbara Mangold gallery.

"Could you tell Barbara that Bernie Shore is here? Thank you."

Barbara made her way through the ropes as Bernie looked her up and down.

"I'm thinking of writing something on this..." It didn't matter to Barbara. She knew Felicity was reviewing it favorably. It would be coming out tomorrow.

"I saw what you wrote." Her voice had an edge.

"I could focus on something more in depth, starting with Marcus in 'Net,'" Bernie concentrated on relaxing the muscles of his face.

"I'm not part of that."

"Yes...but Marcus is. Felicity and I are very committed to Marcus's career. It's a delicate matter, and his representation is important. We feel he's better with you."

Barbara walked Bernie outside. She knew the opening was tonight and that Felicity's reviews would appear tomorrow.

"Is it possible to arrange a meeting with Felicity before tomorrow's paper goes to press?"

*

The one block distance to Godd Gallery was a quick trip and Bernie had a mission. He called Althea into the middle of the main gallery space so no one else could hear.

While they were talking, Brahms showed up. "Hello Melody." Melody looked up to see Brahms standing over her. He had decided to drop by on his way to his studio.

"Oh, Hi! How nice of you come by." She purred. "But Althea is busy." She spoke in a hushed tone.

"I came to see you." Melody felt nervous.

She gestured next to her. "Have you met Trudy?"

"It's an honor." Trudy said, extending her hand.

"Are you planning to stay?" Bernie asked. Althea was taken aback by the directness of his questioning. "I had the impression that you were getting your own space, and backing was in place."

"My, we are full of questions today, aren't we?" Althea wanted to get away from him, but didn't know how, then she saw Brahms talking to Melody.

"Wouldn't Marcus be the perfect show to launch your new gallery?" Bernie asked.

"That's all hypothetical." Bernie was relentless. She turned in Brahms' direction. "Come over and say hello." she said.

Bernie faced the opposite direction from Brahms so that Brahms couldn't hear. "It's a delicate matter, I know, but Felicity and I are committed to the direction of Marcus' career. We feel he'd be better off with you." He turned to Brahms and became overly friendly. "So nice to see you," as he waved good -bye.

"What a slime-bucket," Brahms said after Bernie slithered away.

*

Marcus emerged from a jelly-covered silicon tube. The new videographer could barely contain his excitement. Marcus wore prosthetic pointed ears, a skin cap, and dark contacts: a hybrid alien. The sound man held a microphone above and out of frame. Marcus stood for his close-up.

*

"What's back there?" The collector husband from California pointed to the closed door where Harrison's sold paintings were hidden.

"Storage," Sheldon said. "Don't you love these together?" He pointed toward a group of three paintings that the collector's wife looked at.

"Your work touches my soul," she said, holding Harrison's hand, who sat next to her. The husband joined them, saying: "We already own five major works by you."

"It's such an honor," Harrison said, smiling, and he meant it.

"Come with us to lunch, both of you. We're going to Chanterelle..."

Harrison knew Sheldon wouldn't go. He was still on his liquid diet, and the results were apparent. Sheldon was thinning down, and he had shaved his beard and mustache. Harrison would have loved to join them but he knew he had to stay for a meeting with Sheldon.

"Thank you but...come to the opening tonight.." But Sheldon interrupted and said: "We're planning his show," as they walked to the door to leave. As soon as the door closed, Sheldon shifted. "Don't tell them about another gallery. I'm overwhelmed with artists who want to work with me."

"That went well, don't you think?" Harrison attempted to keep Sheldon focused.

"Brahms just made the most fabulous painting."

"Do you think they're getting these?"

"Oh I don't know. Of course, I would need to offer a discount." Sheldon's round black glasses resembled handcuffs.

"Don't you think the prices could go up?"

"Absolutely not. Anyway, you've got plenty of time. Don't make the mistake your friends are making - getting too confident. You can raise prices but you can't lower them. Besides, there's always another artist..." Sounded like a mild threat. Harrison's head began to spin. He felt dizzy.

"But she just said they touch her soul."

"Yeah, the sole of her shoe."

"But what about Brahms? These are a fraction of 1% of his prices." People waited in line to purchase Harrison's paintings. Some of them had already auctioned or resold them and made more than he had.

"You can't compare yourself to Brahms. So don't do it. You know what they say about the small trees: they don't grow in the shadow of the larger ones."

"But everyone was a small tree once." Harrison dared not point out the elephant in the room: Sheldon was younger than he was.

"Every artist thinks they're the best," Sheldon muttered as if he was thinking out loud.

"Not every artist," Harrison retorted. Sheldon put on his coat, the same coat he had protested the price of in Boston. He headed for the door, as if to escape this conversation.

"And they're probably right," Sheldon said as he left.

*

Felicity waited at home with her purse in her lap. The phone finally rang and she and Bernie were off to meet Barbara, who chose an out-of-the-way place near them, a bodega on First and First.

When Barbara hailed a cab in front of her gallery, she didn't notice a man hailing a cab to follow her. Ethan had purchased a sock cap and sun glasses at Canal Jeans and bought the tabloid at the newspaper stand. The cover had separate photos of President Bush and Saddam Hussein facing off. The headline: "I'M SADDAM MAD."

Ethan followed Barbara in and hid at a corner table hidden behind the paper. Barbara handed Felicity and Bernie sealed white envelopes stuffed with something weighty. How considerate, Ethan thought, that they both got one. He made a mental note to remember that courtesy. He held up the newspaper again as Bernie followed Felicity out. Barbara gathered her things, paid the check, and headed out. Ethan got up, doffed his cap, and pretended to be surprised.

"Is that Barbara?" He took off his sunglasses. "Why, what a surprise. You remember me...Ethan Crone...soon to be the most famous artist in the world." He saluted.

Barbara frowned. "Oh, yes." Her attitude encouraged Ethan.

"Was that Bernie Shore with you? He wrote about my show tonight. Bernie and Felicity will be there, I'm sure."

Barbara tried to pull away.

He followed her outside as she hailed a cab and got in.

"I'll tell them I saw you."

Her face was so blank. So very, very blank.

*

Godd Gallery was open for visitors and traffic was picking up, some carrying **The Paper**, open to Bernie's column.

"Excuse me, is the opening tonight?" Melody nodded. "Six to Eight." Althea wore her new white dress and had done her hair, knowing that she may not have time to go home before six. She stood under the skylight watching folks come in. She loved this part of it. The opening itself...not as much. There was a time when openings in Soho happened on Saturdays during the day. People came and went and the artist was in attendance for the duration. She preferred this tradition. It was more casual.

Where was Ronald? And where had her Rolodex gone?

Althea spotted Friday arriving, carrying a stack of newspapers. "Extra, Extra, read all about it."

Newsprint: 12 inches high by 11 inches wide. The cover duplicated tabloid design with bold capitol italic print reading: "THE NET," American flag on the left and the weather forecast on the right: "Hot all the time." The front page image was a detail of the net itself. No headline.

Melody opened the first page. The left page included the masthead surrounded by a net unfurled. Friday pointed and cringed, looking at Althea. The masthead read:

THE NET

An exhibition

GODD GALLERY, SOHO, 136 Wooster Street, New York, New York 10012

November 13, 1990 - December 15, 1990

Executive Producer

Godd

Senior Curator

Ronald Penn Warren

Curator

Althea Bridges

Artists

Ethan Crone

Sadie Jones

Marcus Schumacher

Harrison Stevens

Photographer

Friday Winstanley

Weaver

Melody Martin

*

Althea had to take it in stride that Ronald's name was above hers. She smiled and looked at Friday, who recognized her concern.

"There was talk about using maritime terms like Captain and Fishermen. I discouraged it," Friday said as they looked at the opposite page - the first page of her photography.

"Thank God!" Althea said. That would have been a disaster. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why upset you?" Friday responded. The layout of the next page was clean, establishing a two-by-two format, which showed the original installation at Althea's loft. One photo of each artist. Gallery visitors noticed their rapt attention and tried to get a look, but it was hard to see over the lacquer barrier. The following two fold-outs were dedicated to pairs of artists in the order in which they were listed. Clean. Simple. Effective. No text.

"Wow..." Melody cooed. "Really, amazing job. I'm impressed," Althea put her arm around Friday.

The following two fold-outs covered the gallery installation, alternating between wide angle shots and details. Melody turned to the final spread: casual shots of the group, including Althea, Ronald, Brahms, and others. The only person missing was Godd. Odd, Althea thought, but he must have wanted it that way.

"I don't even remember you taking these," exclaimed Althea. There were flattering images of everyone.

"I don't just shoot with this." She pointed to her Nikon. "I have...this." She pulled a small black camera out of her side pocket.

*

B.E. was housebound. She wheeled around the main floor of her townhouse in her wheelchair. She couldn't use the stairs alone. John was at work. So, she tried to use her crutches, but it was hard to lift up. One of her legs was broken. She gave up and collapsed back into the upholstered wheelchair. She felt lonely, bored, but she didn't want a nurse. She looked out the window at the garden when the buzzer rang. Woody had a key so he let himself in and climbed the stairs as he said:

"I'm supposed to take care of you. Need anything?"

B.E. shook her head. She couldn't speak. Her jaw was wired shut.

The doorbell rang again and Woody went downstairs to answer. Harley came in with flowers and a card, followed by Woody.

"Darling! How are you today? I brought a card and everyone at the gallery signed it for you."

B.E. was learning how to maneuver the wheelchair. She approached Harley and braked.

"How long?" Harley asked. B.E. shook her head and turned up her hands.

Woody went downstairs to find a vase for the flowers. B.E. read the card and looked down. Searching for a subject to lighten the mood, Harley said:

"Well, of course, everyone is talking about the opening tonight." B.E. immediately perked up. "Althea's show. Have you talked to her about it?" B.E. made a writing gesture with her right hand. "You need a pen?" Harley took a Cross pen from his shirt pocket and handed it to her as Woody put the flowers on the table. She wrote on the back of the envelope as Harley continued: "I suppose I'll be going...." B.E. held up the envelope to both of them. It read in bold print:

"I WANT TO GO."

*

John walked down the hallway of The Exchange to the men's room. It was a dirty, rat-infested maze. An abandoned elevator shaft had plywood over it. At the urinal, he could barely tolerate the smell. Walking with the roar of the traders more distant, he had to admit he didn't enjoy it anymore. He was tired of the hours, the intensity, the volatility. He could afford to feel that way. Money was rolling in. The Federal Reserve called to confirm that there really were 3 billion dollars in trades happening, because they couldn't believe the volume. Word of the war attracted way more client money, and money managers -- some of them big banks -- were investing heavily in oil. When big trades came in, John sent a front-runner to make his trade ahead of the client, and charged the client the new higher price once his trade had raised it. The client never knew.

John envied those money managers, who were in a no-lose position, and they made more than he. If they won, they got richer and if they lost, they weren't exposed, because it was their client's money. They called it "risk management," a fancy term for betting against their own advice. They were hedging and this was the source of the term "Hedge Fund." No matter what the results were, they made money. John wanted to do what they did: to form a fund that traded in active liquid markets like gold, silver, energy, and technology...from other people's money.

John looked for who to take on more of his role at the exchange and the answer was obvious. His eyes hit him as he entered the trading hall. Tom started as a booth clerk and quickly distinguished himself with his calm demeanor and his ability to calculate multiple trades in his head and make accurate assessments. He was miles ahead of the others, and he was honest. He wore a starched button-down and khakis.

"Goldman just called with another huge trade." Tom said as John put his arm around him.

"Send one of the other guys. I want to take you to lunch."

They went to the corner hang out, The Pink Pussy Cat. A woman in a lace costume greeted them enthusiastically and showed them to a table near the stage, where a stripper posed against a mirror. John ordered his usual, a double scotch on the rocks. Tom ordered a Coke. John avoided saying "don't you drink?"

"Tom, I've been watching you, and I don't like what I see." John watched for Tom's reaction and laughed.

"Sir?"

"You'll get used to my humor...We're on a roll. We're making lots of money, Tom. Lots."

"Yes, Sir."

"But, it's temporary. Once the war begins, this is going to slow down, and once it does..."

"Yes, Sir?"

"I'd like to form a fund to invest in liquid markets."

"Like our buyers."

"Exactly. And I'd like you to be me." Tom was silent.

The more they ignored the stripper, the more she tried to get their attention. Her high-heel shoe stepped closer and she leaned over so her breasts hung.

John could tell Tom wouldn't answer. "Think about it. We have time. Tell me, do you have a girlfriend?"

"No Sir."

Again John resisted the impulse to joke. It was good that Tom didn't seem to booze or carouse. "Plans tonight?"

"Yes, Sir. Work."

"Well, I'd like to invite you to an Art Opening."

"Yes, Sir."

"By the way Tom, do you know what a search engine is?"

*

Marguerite dropped a lace handkerchief in her studio hallway and ran away, glancing backwards. At the end of the corridor she pulled her dress and curtsied. He followed her. She'd succeeded in luring him into her studio. He kept appearing and making himself so tiresome that she had to get rid of him. She was playing hide and seek with Death himself.

"I'm over here..." she sang with a quiver.

He lumbered toward her in his burlap tunic dragging his scythe. Hearing him coming, Marguerite pulled the cable which raised the drop cloth over her new sculpture - a wax cast that had been delivered from the foundry for her approval. It was ephemeral, translucent, like a ghost. A ghost of death.

He rounded the corner, thinking he'd cornered her and stopped in front of the wax sculpture, a near-perfect likeness of him. He froze, hypnotized, like Narcissus staring at his reflection. Marguerite stepped out from behind the sculpture and released the cable. The heavy drop cloth fell over him and his likeness.

"You're just a dead meat has-been." Marguerite was out of breath.

Lurch waited for her in the Cadillac, crocheting, engine running. She got in before he saw her. He put his work on the passenger seat and set the car in drive. Marguerite laughed so hard she had trouble breathing.

Lurch stared across the seat, at his weaving he had just been working on, of a skull and cross-bones with bow-tie. He drove toward the Manhattan lights, and hit pot-holes along the way.

*

After knocking, Ronald entered Godd's office. "Questions remain about this," he said as he placed Althea's Rolodex on Godd's desk.

Godd signed letters that his secretary put in front of him one by one. He looked up.

"Is it part of the art?" Ronald asked. Godd leaned forward. "There a question, hardly worth repeating, about eggs on a table."

"Leave it here for now."

"Then I'll be off." Ronald said as the secretary tip toed after him.

Godd drummed the edge of his desk and looked at the Rolodex. How could he play it? He moved it next to his Rolodex, so they were like a pair of wheels at the carnival. Holding their opposite wheels, he turned them together, like wheels of destiny, then his eye fell on something that got his attention. He stopped and made a note, then turned them again.

His phone rang once and he picked up, listened, and hung up.

A voice on the intercom said: "Sissy Ritz is calling. Do you want to take it?" He picked up.

"Sissy," he said, "You're coming tonight." He continued to flip while he talked. "Well, the truth is that someone has outbid you." He paused. "I'm not at liberty to say." He held the receiver away from his ear. "Let's talk tonight when you're feeling calmer." He hung up, unaffected by screams.

He turned Althea's Rolodex to the C's and pulled a leaf out. It was thicker and stapled. He pulled out the staples and unfolded a concealed paper which had an address and number on it. He pressed the intercom and said: "Hold my calls. And have Ronald call Sissy Ritz and butter her up." He picked up the phone and dialed a long number and waited for the low double ring of an international call. A woman answered.

"Is this Mrs. Crone?" Godd's voice was higher, like a solicitor. "I'm calling about Ethan."

"Oh, I see. Are you an artist?" She asked.

"More like a supporter..." Godd leaned back, satisfied.

"I always encouraged him to be like his father."

"Oh?"

"He was an artist."

"Why...I didn't know."

"How is that possible?"

"I was told, by his mother."

"He's not yours?"

*

Marcus and his team sat in folding chairs in Marcus' studio while Marcus repeated his plans for his upcoming video.

"We're going to need a second camera," his videographer said. "Two more."

"And more sound equipment," his sound man said.

Charges made on Barbara's credit card had been rejected. Marcus called but the receptionist would not put him through. A fax came in on Mangold Gallery stationery which read:

"The corporation that I set up is unable to pay your charges under the present circumstances. Since you insist upon sharing your representation, let the other party cover your expenses. Signed, Barbara."

*

Harrison couldn't concentrate so he took a walk and decided to visit Ethan and Sadie. Why was Sheldon acting the way he was? If he was so enthusiastic about his work, why didn't he want to raise the prices? Why had an antagonistic tone sneaked into Sheldon's voice? He walked Canal Street to take his mind off of it. Sensory overload merchandising, grids full of nuts and bolts, pirate Rolexes, like the one he bought there. And Pearl Paint. The solution was to keep making art. Sheldon would snap out of his funk. Harrison looked at the joints in the sidewalk and the way food stains and garbage made urban ground paintings. He arrived at Sadie and Ethan's building, and rang their bell.

"Hey." Sadie and the assistants were painting Ethan's paintings.

"Couldn't concentrate, so I thought I'd come by." Harrison got out of the elevator.

"Ethan's out, as usual." She threw a paint brush in a bucket and stepped over the drop cloth. "That way, he doesn't bother us."

"Where's your work?"

Sadie gave Harrison a conspiratorial look and whispered: "It's happening." They went into the spare bedroom and she showed him what she had been working on.

"I'm going to make some puppets." There were sock puppets on the bed and they both picked one up.

"I'm sad today." Harrison's puppet said.

"Why?" Sadie's puppet said.

"My art dealer gave me a hard time."

"We knew him from London. He's like that."

"Really?"

"Don't let it get you down. We get to be artists." Sadie danced her puppet. "And we have an opening tonight."

*

It was 3:00 and Ethan knew that was meeting time at Godd Gallery. He arrived to find Melody and Friday looking at "The Net" with Harrison. Althea was not in sight. Several people were looking at the show and more were coming in.

"You're back at the front desk?" Ethan asked.

"For the opening. My request," Friday said. "Where's Sadie?"

"I put her to work." Ethan headed to the back until he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Good for you." Ronald said as he and Godd walked in.

"You should know." Ronald was amused, but Godd didn't hide his contempt.

"Never mind that," Ronald said pointing to "The Net." Godd guided Ethan to his office. Melody pressed the intercom and Althea came out from the office. Ronald stayed with Harrison and looked through The Net. He and Harrison walked into the exhibition space and talked.

"Althea get in here," Godd demanded as he guided Ethan into his office. He closed the door and Ethan sat down in one guest chair and Althea in the other.

Friday's hand wandered to the intercom button and pressed it.

Godd put the Rolodex on his desk, looked at Ethan and said: "I've been wondering why Althea puts up with you." Godd sat in his desk chair. "Now I know."

Friday and Melody looked at each other and listened.

"One big happy family," Godd leaned back, "Ethan, you are going to apologize because she is your Mother." Ethan didn't look at Althea.

Melody and Friday looked at each other in disbelief.

"You wouldn't want anyone to know that would you?" Ethan froze. "Everyone knows you're a scammer, Ethan." Godd turned toward Althea. "What do you want me to do with him?"

"Give him a show. That will keep him out of trouble." Althea said.

"So...if I do that will you get me Brahms?"

"Why would I do that?" Althea didn't seem to disagree with anything else.

"Because he's his father," Godd said toward Ethan, "Isn't he?"

Friday released the intercom button. She wished they hadn't overheard what was just said. Melody looked at her confused, trying to gauge her reaction. Friday shook her head slightly and looked into space. Ronald and Harrison walked toward them but were too far away to overhear.

"Keep us informed..." Ronald said to Harrison, "We're interested." Harrison felt relieved. Harrison nodded at Melody who smiled as they walked toward the front desk. Ethan came out of the office and trailed Ronald. Harrison noticed a tension in the air. He scanned their faces.

"Has everyone signed the book?" Melody asked. A hard bound volume lay open with the title of the show written in her hand writing. Ethan signed it and left.

"Guess I'll see ya later."

Godd stared at Althea with vacuum eyes.

"How?" Althea asked. "How?"

"This." He said, his hand on Althea's Rolodex.

"How clever of you. You excel in knowing other people's secrets."

"Yes. Looks like we're going to be representing Brahms after all." Someone knocked.

"Mmm... one big happy family," Althea said. Ronald stuck his head in. "I think I need to go home." Althea brushed past Ronald as he entered and sat. When the door was closed Ronald looked at Godd with wonder and said:

"Looks like you've done it again."

"What's she going to do?" Melody whispered to Friday as Althea approached.

"Nothing." Friday said. "Sometimes the best thing is to do nothing at all."

*

Harrison went to Dean and Deluca to get some flowers. He saw the Brahms and waved at them, but they didn't acknowledge him, so he chose some roses and waited in line. Mrs. Brahms shopped while Mr. Brahms watched, which made Harrison feel weird. Brahms kept staring from the corner, then moved toward Harrison and whispered: "You've got a long line ahead of you, buddy." Harrison laughed, then realized it wasn't meant to be a joke. It was then that Harrison realized Brahms considered him a threat.

*

"Come to the opening..." Ethan overheard Sadie say as he arrived. She was painting with the other three. Ethan pulled her aside.

"Don't invite them." The painting assistants could hear what he was saying.

"Why not?" Sadie hated Ethan sometimes.

"Let 'em stay here and work."

"We wanted to get another view before the crowd," Felicity looked at "The Net," pausing at the photos of Marcus. Bernie stood behind her.

"Who took these?" Felicity asked.

"Friday." Melody said.

"Oh." Felicity said. Althea watched jealousy flicker across Felicity's face. Felicity fell backwards and stepped on Bernie's toe.

"We'll be back later," Bernie said as he pulled her out the door.

They took a left on Prince and went to Fanelli's.

"Did you know they were together?" Felicity asked under her breath. As soon as they sat down, Felicity ordered a martini, dry with a twist. Bernie looked surprised, because Felicity didn't drink. Bernie ordered white wine. Felicity seemed on overload, and she was having doubts. "Everything's going wrong."

"What if **The News** finds out about Barbara?" Felicity shook her head. "I think we should return it."

"But we're a team now," said Bernie.

Harrison passed the window. How odd they were, he thought. What he found so strange was that they socialized with artists that they wrote about. And nobody seemed to have a problem with that. Conflict of interest? But when she wrote about his work it was with an edge of cruelty. Where was the mean streak coming from? Should he be going to the movies with them like Marcus?

*

John had Woody park in the usual spot in front of his townhouse and went inside. Tom followed him.

"But dear, are you sure?" B.E. nodded big and slapped her arm rests. So, they loaded her into the car and drove slowly down MacDougal.

"War is in the air, every sight and every sound..." John sang. Woody and Tom laughed as Woody started the car and turned left on Houston. B.E. looked ahead of her. "...something we all can believe in / and it's there when I mention your name..." John sang, but B.E. ignored him. Woody turned down Wooster. As they approached the gallery, John said:

"Oh come on. We're rich. Really, really rich." B.E. didn't care. "What do you want?"

B.E. wrote on her pad: "To show at Godd."

"You can't do that and don't make me tell you why." John held his hands tight.

*

Harrison walked in with a dozen President Lincoln Roses and Friday and Melody kissed him on both cheeks. Friday went to the back to get a vase.

"Why don't we check on Althea?" Melody said to Harrison.

"OK, but be back soon," Friday said as they nodded and left.

*

Althea looked in her mirror. It's amazing, she thought, the amount of stress and excitement one can experience and yet the face does not change.

"Ready?" She heard a voice say. It was The Photographer. She saw his reflection in the mirror. He was standing behind her.

"I don't like openings," she said.

She put mascara on heavier than usual. More. What was she? A clown? A witness? A teacher?

"Neither do I."

Her white dress hung on an ornamental hook, ready. She decided not to wear it.

"Jonah's at college. It would be different if he were here."

A facilitator. More than a curator. A force.

"Can I come in?" Althea was startled, then realized it was Melody's voice.

"Of course."

"Were you talking to someone?"

"An old friend." The Photographer dissolved and Melody replaced him, her hands resting on her hips. Her eyes wide.

"Good to be your old friend." Melody smiled, looking into the reflection.

"Sit down with me." Melody sat in the metal dressing chair.

"Opening night. Make-up time." Melody leaned forward, arcing her back.

"Harrison's outside. Would you like us to walk you?" Althea nodded. Melody let her hand stroke Althea's back as she passed by.

"We'll be in the kitchen."

Harrison watched Melody as she came into the kitchen. He looked shocked.

"I can't believe this place. It's like someone let the air out of the room."

"Never mind," Althea said, coming out from her dressing room. "Let's keep walking."

*

People began to arrive. Ethan and Sadie slipped in. Three women got out of a cab wearing white terrycloth robes and slippers and Trudy greeted them.

"It's the Voguettes," Friday whispered. "Althea's started another trend."

Godd took interest in B.E. for the first time. He wheeled her around the show while John stayed at the front desk and introduced Tom to the ladies. Sissy listened.

"I invest in oil, oils and search engines...anything that requires oil."

"Got a fiver?" Ethan interrupted.

"I've got a lot more than that." John snarled and Ethan perked up and put his arm around John.

"Then I've got to get you to my studio." John had been waiting for this opportunity.

"I'll come over with my art advisor."

"Who's that?"

"Althea."

"I bought this show. I outbid some old cow." Sissy overheard that remark and was furious. She stormed off, looking for Althea.

Openings are not about the art being shown. Opening are not about the artists either. They appear to be but they're not. They're an event that people go to to see and be seen and drink the free water and wine.

*

Althea walked down the street between Melody and Harrison. The crowd was growing outside and excited conversation came from inside. She recognized Sissy's limo out front.

"Oh, God."

Woody sat in John's car. She waved to him and he waved back. Traffic was backing up as cabs let people out, and cars stuck behind blew their horns. A taxi driver yelled. A waiter came outside with white wine and bubbly water.

The doors were propped open. Guards flanked the entrance. It was already getting pretty packed.

The crowd included:

Matching bald drag queens in shiny red dresses.

A furry-headed man with a waxed mustache in tweed, who was actually looking at the art.

An Amish family standing in a triangle.

A fop and various sharks whispering behind their hands.

A tall man in a nice suit with a monkey face.

Carol, Harley and his staff, and other familiar faces.

None of them got much attention, or even stood out. Many of them looked at Althea as she arrived, arm-in-arm with Melody and Harrison. Harley and Carol ran up to Althea to congratulate her.

"I'd like you all to meet my wife and my husband," Althea said. They laughed.

Sissy was in a frenzy that she had been outbid. She spotted Althea and confronted her. Harley and Carol scattered.

"If you don't sell to me, I'll dump all the other stuff I've bought from you."

Harrison and Melody couldn't believe she was serious. They waited for her to say she was kidding, but she didn't. Sissy's features were red and twisted.

"I'm so sorry..." Althea said, "but it's not up to me anymore."

"But I said 'I'll take it,' when it was up to you."

"Well, it would have been nice if someone had come to my rescue when my former gallery closed...so I know how you feel."

"But it's mine. *Mine*. I'm not going to have it going to someone else." Sissy looked around the room, fighting the tears back. "Where's Marvin when I need him." But Marvin wasn't there. Sissy had come without him.

Ronald saw Sissy confront Althea.

"It's not done. I need eggs," Sadie complained.

"Sorry, I have something else to attend to," Ronald said as he headed toward Sissy. When he arrived, Althea took the opportunity to slip away, joining Sadie, while Ethan joined Ronald who attempted to soothe Sissy.

Bernie and Felicity came in but Bernie wasn't sure what to do. Felicity was drunk. Felicity headed to Althea and Bernie followed, trying to keep her in line.

"You are so wonderful. So beautiful." Felicity said to Althea, as she hugged her, then saw Marcus arrive with his studio team. "Althea is the right one for you. An older woman is what you need."

Bernie tried to save her but got grabbed by John, who said: "Did you hear what that old cow said?" He laughed hysterically. "Now she's making threats because I outbid her."

"So, it's a bidding war," Bernie said, loving it. People in the crowd overheard and the news began to spread like wildfire. It's a bidding war. Did you hear? It's a bidding war. It's a bidding war. They looked at the art more closely, now that greater value had been established.

Ronald put his arm around Sissy and led her toward Godd, who returned B.E. to John. Godd and Ronald disappeared into the office with Sissy.

"Don't you think my table needs eggs?" Sadie asked. Sadie was usually so calm. Why do openings make everyone so crazy? However, she had to admit that they made her crazy as well.

"What?"

"I wanna put 2 eggs on the table. I'm doing it. I don't care."

When Brahms arrived, he stayed near the front desk. He didn't want to go into the exhibition. Besides, it seemed like a zoo in there. "Hello Melody. Hello Friday." He was smoky. Melody had replaced Trudy at the front desk. Trudy joined the Bathrobe Vouettes and their boss, a lady wearing large sunglasses.

Althea slipped away from Sadie and headed toward Brahms.

"Finally you're here." Brahms didn't say anything. "What this gallery needs is a father figure artist." Althea thought of Harrison and Sheldon and continued: "Artists should work with their own generation."

Brahms paused. "Yes, well, I tried that and it didn't work."

"Who is that horrible man?" Sissy asked Godd and Ronald as she sat in Godd's office. Ronald waved her concerns away in the air. "John McBain. We don't have anything to do with him."

Althea walked through the crowd. Something in what Godd said didn't ring true: the timing. She stopped. Digging up buried memories made her head hurt. She didn't want to go there. She got pregnant in New York and returned to England to give birth, so that no one would know, and left the baby with a friend of a friend rather than going through a formal adoption process. She returned to New York and tried to forget. But that was in 1965, which would make Ethan 25, not 29, as he claimed to be, unless he was lying about his age. And if Ethan wasn't hers, how did he discover her secret? Either way, Brahms must never know. Never. How could she keep Ethan and Godd from breathing a word?

"Althea? Althea? You look like you just lost your best friend. And here you are the Queen of the Art World."

"Oh...yes. I suppose I am."

She hadn't diffused Godd's second bomb. How did he know Brahms had gotten her pregnant? There were so many people eager to provide Godd with information. The problem was when Godd said it, she didn't react quickly and effectively. She was still reeling from the revelation that Ethan was her son, Godd went on to Brahms being his father. She simply didn't have the presence of mind to deny it, because that part could have been true.

Come to think of it, Ethan didn't seem too pleased with any of it. He escaped as soon as possible.

Althea watched Ethan strut toward Brahms, who was talking to Friday. She had to get over there and intercede.

"Excuse me," She said as she angled through the crowd.

If Brahms found out, after twenty five years, it would serve him right. He would be horrified the little scoundrel could be his offspring. But he could doubt it too, and then it would be up to her to somehow convince him they hadn't had a child, a task she could not face.

There was a resemblance, slight, but there, nonetheless. Ethan's long, dark hair looked like Brahms' used to before it started going grey. The brow was similar in bone structure. The eyes - Ethan's were blue, Brahms' were grey, but hers were green. Different face shapes, different lips. But the noses were not dissimilar. Ethan's body was more compact, his structure more tightly knit. Poor English diet, also a reason for Ethan's British teeth. Brahms was taller, but also slim. She honestly had to say that she didn't know what the truth was.

Friday had her camera ready. "Join in. The middle." Friday said. Althea stood between Brahms and Ethan; she hated being photographed, even by Friday.

The woman in dark glasses had been waiting behind Friday, and tapped on her shoulder.

She handed her card. "Call me."

Friday introduced her to Ethan. She nodded at Brahms and Althea and left.

"What this gallery needs is a father figure, a mature artist."

The words came pouring out of Althea's mouth like an exorcism. Friday turned around. A look came into focus on Ethan's face like exposing film. Ethan was actually *afraid*. He had opened Pandora's box and wasn't prepared for what came out. The long-hidden secrets. Now she had him.

Ethan didn't want Brahms to show in the same gallery, and he didn't want Brahms to be his father. This would take attention away from him. Worse, it would destroy his carefully constructed mythology as a self created working class artist. Ah divinity. Althea had discovered the antidote to Ethan's bad behavior: the truth. The threat of exposing the truth. And he wouldn't talk. Ever. Godd knew this too. He divined a way to put Ethan in his place. And Godd had no reason to tell Brahms because his goal was to sign Brahms, and he would do better to keep Ethan in the closet.

"This is all to please you." Althea said to Brahms. Friday looked at her like she was crazy. "A way to get you into the gallery." He looked at Althea but he didn't say anything. Brahms saw his options narrowing. His time of playing his dealers against each other was coming to an end. Where was Sheldon? He hadn't shown up. Neither had \$he, but he didn't expect her to. She never attended openings other than her own. Althea was about to really spell it out, when Brahms said:

"Time to go." He kissed Althea and Friday, even shook Ethan's hand, and cut his way through the crowd, as people spoke and nodded toward him.

Althea headed for Marcus and passed Harrison's huddle on the way. A collector asked Harrison what gallery he was going to show with.

"Sheldon Shepherd," she heard him say. "Who?"

Harrison was taking a big risk, she felt. Sheldon was young, younger than Harrison, and just starting out. An unknown quantity, despite his experience. She hadn't seen him and wouldn't be surprised if he didn't attend this opening, even though it would have been a chance to kiss Brahms' ass. Brahms would never go with Sheldon.

Marcus stood with his assistants near his videos and scowled. He wasn't getting enough attention. It was rare to get a view of Marcus in front of his videos. In one he was in drag, in another a satyr, and a third a quarterback. Friday took photos around the crowd. Good, she listened to me, Althea thought. Marcus saw Althea coming and made his signature flirt move: looking down at the floor then up sideways toward her, but only for a second, then back down. Available but only momentarily.

The crowd was now thick, elbow to elbow. Despite the cool weather, the air conditioning blasted to no avail. The problem with the space was it was a dead end. No rear exit. No way out.

"Where's Barbara?" Althea asked Marcus.

"Not happy."

"I didn't expect her to be." Marcus shook and licked his lips. He gave Althea a curious look.

"Shall I sick Godd on her?"

Was Sadie frying eggs in an electric skillet? Over the heads, Althea could see her making it into a performance, with a crowd applauding as she flipped the pair of yellow eyes onto the table, like a professional chef, and bowed. Wild laughter and hoots. Ronald, nearby, watched and joined in. He had been won over.

Marcus arched his eyebrows. "She's got balls," as he and his studio nodded.

Althea watched Godd come out of his office with Sissy, who looked transformed, radiant. Had Godd had sex with her on his desk? Something had happened. They seemed to think Sadie's applause was for them. Sissy blushed. Godd looked triumphant. He was holding a glass of champagne in one hand and her Rolodex in the other, which he handed to Sissy while he took a key from his pocket and tapped his

glass. The ring echoed over the chatter. Ronald hushed the crowd and Althea joined in. Slowly, the nervous flapping lips and clattering tongues came to a rest.

"A toast," Godd said. "Althea come. Ethan, you too." He waited for them to arrive. "It's because of this that we're all here tonight." He held up the Rolodex. You bastard, Althea thought. "All of the others know: Friday, Marcus, Harrison, Sadie...It began as a simple idea in Althea's place on this very block. Thanks to the patronage of Sissy Ritz, we have brought it here before it is permanently installed in the Ritz Foundation as a promised gift to MOMA."

The sound of clapping was interrupted by a loud bang near the front desk. "WHAT?" John yelled. "This is outrageous!" John whirled around and wheeled B.E. out of the gallery as she waved her arms in protest.

Godd paused, then continued: "There's been a question about one thing..." Godd held the Rolodex out to Althea and Ethan. "Here."

Look relaxed, Althea thought. She grasped her hands behind her and held a lofty peaceful look above eye level, but the commotion of John and B.E. was hard to disregard. She would deal with John later. Out of the side of her field of vision, she was amused to see that Ethan seemed even more nervous.

"Hold this." Godd said to them, but their hands didn't move. Godd motioned to Althea and Ethan to hold the Rolodex. "Together" he said to Ethan, who begrudgingly reached out to hold it.

*

"Who does he think he is?" John was furious. The sidewalk crowd parted. Woody spotted John and jumped out of the car. B.E. frantically wrote "STAY" on her pad.

"No, we're not staying." Tom came out and stood near John.

"Tom, he's been front-running me."

"Yes sir."

Woody lifted B.E. into the car and put the wheelchair in the trunk.

"Stay here and report tomorrow. I want his head." John slammed his door. People stood back as they pulled out and headed down Wooster.

Their parking space was immediately taken by the car waiting behind them, a black Cadillac. Marguerite and Lurch had arrived.

Tom stood next to the people who had just run from John.

"Who is that?" Tom asked.

The crowd buzzed. "It's Marguerite Chopin." "Oh my God, I love her."

One smoker shoved a copy of *The Net* in front of Marguerite as she headed for the entrance.

"Ms. Chopin. I'm such a fan. Can I get your autograph?" Marguerite looked at their cigarette.

"No, I died two years ago." She bounded into the gallery, followed by Lurch.

*

Althea scanned the crowd. Younger than most openings. Angry young men with lone wolf stares and wide-eyed young women wondered when and how they could they be next. They looked at her artists with a mixture of admiration and envy.

The truth was rarely stated: success comes down to the work. Most can't face the fact that their work wasn't ready for prime time. Oft-repeated excuses were encouraged by galleries that wanted to be the designators of importance. But even major galleries waited for younger galleries to get new artists started, then swooped in to cherry-pick when they were ready. What they offered was a high profile show and "exclusive representation," which meant a verbal agreement that every sale had to go through them -- whether they originated it or not -- so they could get their 50% commission, as well as the names and addresses of all the artists' collectors, curators, and contacts. If another gallery, independent agent, or art consultant was involved, the 50% was divided between them. In tough negotiations, the artist could be asked to take another hit of 10 - 15% from their remaining 50%. The "exclusive representing gallery" usually demanded a larger cut - 30% - 40%, and they were in the position to get what they demanded, because they were in possession of the work. And possession is nine-tenths of the law. However, none of this was in writing, so there was lots of wiggle room. Only in the case of very established artists was anything in writing. Galleries were allergic to contracts; They preferred to reserve the right to dump an artist at any time. The artist was made to feel very lucky to be there at all, because there was always another artist ready to show. Which brought her back to an earlier thought: those prickly issues of quality, talent, and just plain hard work. Not all art was created equal.

Althea imagined the place filled with water, full of bent legs and twisted arms struggling to dig out of the muck, stirring up the muddy bottom. Entwined masses, undivided,

half-buried, digging out. Some floating up, awkward swimming. Seeing the surface above, pulling, slithering up through the milkweed. Getting out, breathing, shaking, walking, and then the net came down.

Maybe she shouldn't have gotten John interested in art. Maybe she could have left him to oil and gold. But now he was hooked and there was no going back. Art is the one thing money can't always buy. Sometimes, art is just not for sale. And the minute it's not for sale, it becomes much more interesting. Hooked. She was going to have to manage him, distract him from this show. Get him to the studios. Start a collection which can be an investment fund, etc. Give him the pep talk about being a force behind the scene. Convert him further.

Most collectors were not present. The show was too new and unproven for them. Sissy had guts. She was obsessed. She stepped up to the plate first, if even for no other reason than to be first. In another season or two, if the buzz continued, others would follow. Many claimed to be there first, but few actually were.

Marguerite came in and everyone behind her came to attention. How did she turn everyone into her soldiers?

The Net hung above them. "Unfortunately, the objects of our liberation are often the objects of our capture, as well." Althea thought. "Where was Friday to take this picture? Too far away. Well, then and I'll keep a mental image of it always. It's mine. My point of view."

Godd stood to her side holding her arm which he had extended to the Rolodex and he pushed his thumb into her wrist, hard, but no one else could see except Ethan and he didn't care. She couldn't slip out of his grasp.

"Althea, are you a prostitute?" Godd whispered it so that no one in the crowd could read his lips. Everybody seemed to be looking at her and she didn't want them to. Ethan was laughing.

No wonder she didn't like openings. Just at that special moment, the clicking of glasses, the dealer pulled the tablecloth out. Actually, this was even more passive-aggressive. It was a set to trip her up, remove her from the picture, and to make her look like a fool. Fine, then she'd follow John out the door.

Wow, she must really be someone if Godd was seeking to humiliate her. Godd realized, probably early on, that he couldn't turn her into what he was.

It was all so clear to her. The reason people clung to religion was because of moments like this. But looking for the answer outside of oneself, usually dictated by some male authority, only perpetuated the problem- a recipe for disempowerment and depression. The tougher her thinking, the better she felt, because she knew what she was dealing

with. The vaseline had been removed from the lens. It was the feel-good crap that was the trap because it was a set up for disappointment.

She wasn't going to give up. Ever. She would not be defeated. She would fight, she would win, and she would outlive them. Wasn't that the ultimate test: not who died with the most toys, but who had lived best and longest. She met Marguerite's penetrating gaze. The sage. Marguerite had earned the right to speak the truth. She survived, continued, persevered. How long did they give her? Months? A year or two? So, Marguerite was indulged and laughed at. After she was gone, there was a huge body of work to cash in on.

They *all* had to hang in: Brahms and B.E. were at the dreaded mid-career stage, and becoming bitter, defensive, paranoid, discontent. She mustn't. Her young artists kept *her* young. Fresh, fearless, innocent. She wanted to protect them, even Ethan, postpone the dangers. The sharks circled and only Ethan and Friday seemed prepared. Sheldon showed signs that he was going to the shark side. Barbara was already there. And yet, we needed sharks. You just had to keep out-maneuvering them.

She made a choice from strength and clear vision. If Ethan was hers, and she wasn't sure he was, then it wasn't anyone's business. For Godd to bring it up was the ultimate attempt to sabotage her. Then, to call her a prostitute...to whisper that in her ear...what a creep. An asshole with good taste. What was he saying? That she was an art world concubine who slept her way to the top? She could feel the sting as if he had actually slapped her. But what about him? A high level spy and thief, a black-mailer who used information and lies to gain power and money. He was fired, not her, and this was the place to do it - in front of everyone.

"Anything this man says is a lie." Did she hear herself saying that? "I have nothing to be ashamed of. Nor do I make peoples' secrets a way to control them." She saw a cloudy yellow bullet shoot towards her and it hit her like a jolt. Wow. Hang on, it was going to be a wild ride.

It was quiet in the room full of people. No one said anything, until the silence was broken by a clap. Then another. Marguerite gave Althea a rousing applause, and then others joined in. The noise echoed off the paintings and the ceiling and seemed deafening.

Godd interrupted and spoke over them:

"Thank you. Our next show will be Ethan Crone."

The crowd parted as Althea walked out, arm in arm, with Marguerite.

Thursday

Althea stared at the seam between the elevator doors as she went to street level. When the doors opened, she bounded out the front door and glanced to the right. A dandelion grew out of a crack in the sidewalk. She checked every morning to see if it was still there. She loved to be out the front door before she heard the elevator close. Once on the street, she looked up and saw storm clouds over the NYU towers across Houston. A gust blew and she buttoned her new plaid coat. John waited in the back seat. Woody stood next to the open back door. The oldies station weatherman trumpeted through an echo chamber. "A Blizzard on the way, folks. Get ready."

"Who cares. Let's do it." Althea said as she got in. "Thank you, Woody."

John pushed the newspapers out of his lap.

"Big day." Althea leaned back in her seat. "Art."

"And revenge..." John said gritting his teeth. Woody checked the rear-view mirror and put the car in drive.

Down the block, two beauties rounded the corner from Prince, looking under the weather. John rolled down his window and said: "Excuse me, do you know a cure for the common... hangover?" Woody stepped on the brake and Melody and Friday leaned into his window.

"Raw eggs in a blender?" Melody said. Her eyes were a little swollen.

Friday grimaced. "I'd rather be hungover."

"Oh, you don't have to drink it." Melody perked up. "Just watch the eggs go round and round and then you feel better."

"You were at Odeon?" Althea leaned over John's lap to get closer to them all.

"Table dancing and Ethan made a public display of his privates."

"So glad I didn't make it." Althea slumped back in her seat.

"We'll have none of that once you start working for us." John winked at them.

"Where are you going now?"

"Studio visits."

"Can we come?"

"Enjoy one of your last days in *that* job." Melody and Friday looked at each other. Althea really had quit.

"Any reviews?" Althea shook her head. She didn't know, nor did she really want to know. It was the furthest thing from John's mind as well. John passed them his morning papers, still in their sleeves.

"Here. You need these more than we do," John said as he closed his window and they took off.

Althea folded her hands in her lap. "Woody, Howard and Crosby."

"Tell me everything," John hadn't gotten his report from Tom yet.

"I didn't stay much longer than you," Althea said. She loved how her new coat felt. It was like a cocoon. The hem of it had heavy hand-stitching, and the length perfectly hit the fold in her legs.

"Just tell me." He's gauging my loyalty to Godd, Althea thought.

"Honestly, I don't remember."

*

Friday ripped **The News** out of its sleeve and found the Arts Section while Melody unlocked the front grate and it clanked open. Once inside, Melody pressed the light panels one after another as the gallery illuminated and the front door glided closed. Friday took small steps toward the front desk reading out loud.

"Basquiat works on paper. Now that he's dead, she loves him."

Melody went around the other side of the desk and they sat down. No one else was there to interrupt them.

"She reviewed the show at Barbara's," Friday continued. "It's a rave." Friday looked at Melody.

"We didn't get a review?" Melody asked.

"Actually, how could we? The show didn't open before press, and she doesn't do previews." Friday turned to the page before. The 'Inside Art column,' She read as she said: "Oh...my...God."

"Althea Bridges didn't waste time when Bakery Gallery closed, landing at Godd Gallery where she has co-curated a show called 'NET.' It has not been announced whether Godd Gallery will represent the artists. Rumor is that Marcus Schumacher will be represented by Barbara Mangold Gallery."

*

A delivery truck and its aluminum ramp blocked the curb in front of Ethan and Sadie's building. Woody pulled into a space across the street.

"What happened last night? Marguerite arrived and I left with her." Althea held the door handle and John held his.

"But what was the point of having you and Ethan hold your Rolodex?" John was looking for ammo.

"Setting the stage for Ethan's show, I suppose."

Althea opened her door. Why get into it? John already wanted to hang Godd upside down from a meat hook. They stepped over the ramp as the delivery men stopped in their tracks, annoyed.

"What's your take on Ethan?" John asked. Althea put her hand on John's arm.

"Let me have a moment with him before you join us? I'd be so grateful."

John got back in and Woody drove to the deli on the other corner. "Tell you what, Woody, let's get them breakfast."

Ethan shuffled to the elevator with bloodshot eyes and bed hair, unlocking the deadbolt to the elevator doors. Althea crossed her arms. "Sleep late again?" The doors closed behind her and the machine descended.

"If I don't sleep late, how am I supposed to stay up late?"

"Where's Sadie?"

"Even later. You missed quite a party at Odeon."

"John's coming up in a minute, but first..." Althea said. Ethan looked nervous. "Since I quit, we're going to work directly. We're prepared to purchase all of these, if you work with us directly."

"No Godd?"

"No Godd."

The elevator doors slammed open and Woody stepped out carrying coffee and donuts. "Now, what's your price?" John said as he entered, with his hands knit behind his grey suit.

Ethan woke up. So did Sadie, as she listened from the hallway.

"I'll let you two decide while I visit with Sadie," Althea headed to the hall. Sadie heard her coming and ran into her room

Sadie's work seemed to grow out of the spaces she inhabited, as much as they grew out of her. The sock puppets had taken over the guest bedroom, melding into a quilt.

"How are you doing all this, and painting for Ethan?" Althea asked. Sadie was quiet. "Yes, I know you're making his paintings."

"Keeps me going. Keeps me sane."

"Sadie...Ethan's decision about where he shows is up to him." Althea stopped to gauge Sadie's reaction, but there was none. Blank stare. Sadie took a swig out of a water bottle. "You really don't seek to influence him, do you?"

"You got it backward, really. He doesn't care about my work, but he doesn't stop me either."

Holding the door frame, Althea leaned into the hallway and called: "John, come in here after you're finished..." then turned back to Sadie. "Think of what you would like for this, quickly."

John came in smiling, and when Althea presented Sadie's work with the sweep of her arm, he laughed.

"Your next acquisition. Perfect for the collection."

"Who's next?" John asked as they took the elevator down.

"Harrison, Marcus, and Brahms. Oh yes, and Marguerite invited us for tea."

"Ah the thrill of spending - kind of like sex, isn't it?"

*

Harrison explained his situation: Sheldon insisted that they not raise the prices, but discount them. There was a strange shift in Sheldon's attitude to antagonism.

Althea didn't want to say too much. She didn't want to get involved, so John spoke up. She remembered the story Harrison told of Sheldon upgrading to first class and leaving him in coach when they flew home from Harrison's museum show.

John looked at his hands and laughed. "Since he insists on talking numbers, tell him you have some briefs you'd like him to take a closer look at."

"Look, I turned down offers, including from Godd, to work with Sheldon, who was young and just starting. I thought that would have advantages. Instead, I'm now wondering."

Althea had to speak. "The key with dealers is whether they want their artists to do well."

"Why wouldn't they?" John asked.

"Maybe they fear the artist could become too successful and leave them?"

"Well, I have another idea..." John said..."Tell him that you have just sold this triptych at a higher price and tell him that they (we) want to buy more. But don't tell him who, yet."

John turned to Althea. "Let's make a name for our art fund. How about Net Fund? Or Net Art Fund?"

When they left, they gave Harrison a hug.

*

Woody parked in front of Hogs and Heifers for Althea and John.

"Where's your staff?" Althea asked Marcus.

"Waiting to get paid."

"So what did she say?" John was enjoying being the grand inquisitor. It suited him.

"She faxed this." Marcus handed him the letter. John took it and read it out loud:

"Since you insist upon sharing your representation, let the other party cover your expenses." John thought for a second. "Well at least we don't have any conflicts." He returned the letter to Marcus. Marcus looked at Althea. "So, what would it take to finance this video?"

*

"Brahms agreed to join us for lunch," Althea said as Woody drove them to his townhouse.

"We'll convince him to let us into his studio," John said, patting Althea's leg.

Althea tilted her head. "We'll see."

"What do you want from Brahms?" John wondered. To leave his wife? To leave his gallery?

"What's best for him."

Brahms was waiting outside his townhouse as they arrived. He was airy and casual, as always. He was accustomed to getting picked up in my limousines.

Woody drove slowly by da Silvano to make sure Godd wasn't there. He wasn't.

They requested a table in the back, away from curious ears. Althea felt cross-currents coursing through her: tenderness for both of them, and ambition for John and for herself. "It's so good to be with both of you." She extended her hand to theirs, much to their surprise.

"What happened last night?" Brahms seemed curious, amused. No doubt he had heard a report, if not several.

"Things changed...after you left." Althea put her napkin in her lap and lined up her silverware.

"Don't worry about last night. Let's talk about the future," John sized Brahms up as someone who wanted attention and never got enough of it.

"Brahms, I admire how respected you are by the women in my life." John said. Of course, B.E. would love to be attending this lunch. Too bad she was stuck at home, ordered to rest after last night. The doctor chided B.E. for going out in her condition. She knew better.

"We've formed a fund to purchase art." Brahms watched John put his arm around Althea when he announced this.

"Oh? For what purpose?" Brahms asked.

"For the betterment of mankind. May I ask you a question? John continued. "What do you feel about Godd?"

"He's been through various things..." Althea answered for Brahms.

"Would you like to see him get what's coming to him?" John was intent.

Before Althea could stop John, she realized that they should be seeking Brahms' advice. Let Brahms be the expert. Althea leaned in and spoke in a hushed tone.

"John has kindly, and generously, offered to back my gallery." Brahms frowned.

Althea smiled. "Or fund a collection." Now Brahms was smiling, too.

Althea had hit his sweet spot. Brahms turned toward her and his expression opened. She knew which one he preferred. Who needs another damn gallery?

"Whose collection?" Brahms asked.

"Mine." John said. "Business has been going well. Very well. The collection will hang in my new offices."

"Oh. Will you be hiring anyone else?" Brahms asked.

"Like Melody?" Althea asked. "Yes. And we'd love to hire anyone else you recommend."

"Good." Brahms wore blue. His salt and pepper hair hung out his hand-knitted skull cap as he twirled pasta on his fork. "After this, let's go to my studio."

*

Harrison arrived at the gallery looking relieved and visitors streamed in after him. Back to business as usual. Friday finally unwrapped the other paper, in red plastic. The cover showed a photo of the burning oil fields of Kuwait being extinguished by Red Adair's company. The headline was "Smoke 'Em Out."

"Turn to Page 6, the gossip column. It's on page 10." Harrison looked at the papers with them.

Marcus came in seeming lighter, happier. Harrison and he shook hands.

"Thanks for coming," Friday said smiling.

"I'll take you over," Melody said, taking her key out of her purse. "Sadie and Ethan are already there."

*

Brahms' studio was hung in advance, like it was for every visit. It was important to lead them to the obvious conclusion: the one he wanted them to reach.

Althea felt Brahms' new painting. It was the joyful yellow. The blue and red were clear continuations of Brahms' earlier monochromes, more cerebral, muted. The yellow was new. How could she get John to purchase it? The words tumbled out:

"What is the way that a company announces its image?" She paused. "If I were to go to the office of a wealth manager, I would like to feel their optimism. That golden yellow, circulating through the painting, is undeniable. *That* is optimism. Radiating energy that blazes a *new* trail and creates its *own* rules. Everything else, the blue and red, fall into line, and follow the flow."

John had seen the pitches, heard the rote pulp crap. There's a difference. Ah, the honied ends of swollen nerves, fed by violet rivers, exploding into magenta orchid tips, dripping lemon sauce. Now that's what he lived for.

He saw it: the vestibule of his new office for Net Funds. Tasteful, light, peaceful. Peace came in the form of a beautiful lady. The smell of her citrus perfume and the caress of her hair. But it wasn't possible to have her, so he saw her in geometry, the primaries surrounding her like ribbons. He longed to have her essence near him. This painting was her essence. His body was flooded with champagne bubbles and he felt erect.

Althea stood behind plush chairs that faced the painting and allowed them to be silent for as long as required.

John thought about how much he made in one day. One day of his income. The new Net Funds tag line?

John broke the silence. "Brahms, may I ask you a question?"

Brahms nodded.

"If someone were to offer you One Million Dollars in cash for your new painting, would you be interested?"

*

"Where is Althea?" Godd asked.

"She doesn't work here anymore."

"Get her back."

"He does seem to have this weird sixth sense." Friday covered the intercom with her journal. "Does he? Or is he always spying on us? Any secret wishes for your last day here?"

"I don't think so. You?" Melody said. "Do you think we could come back here?"

"Backing up is not my idea of a come-back."

*

Woody dropped them off at Marguerite's townhouse.

"Woody, go check on B.E. for me."

Lurch and Marguerite were waiting for them and John and Althea got in the back seat.

Lurch drove as Marguerite watched John and Althea in the rear view mirror from in front.

"I'm glad we're going together..." Her voice trailed off. Her eyelashes were so black they looked like mascara, which she never wore.

"I have someone...following me."

John and Althea looked toward each other and out the rear windshield. "Now?"

"No...I left him in my studio."

"You left a stranger in your studio?"

"Not a stranger. I know him."

"So you're saying he may be there..." John and Althea's knees touched. "...when we arrive."

"If he is, we'll shoo him away. He's pathetic."

"Do you mind if I ask...what does he do?"

"His business? Making people stop."

The outside of the studio was painted white, like a boat, a cruise ship. Marguerite unlocked the heavy metal door, like an atmosphere lock, and invited them in.

Althea liked the room ahead: upholstered in red, orange and pink, with a white floor, back-lit in lavender lights. A small chapel-like room to the right was dominated by one of Marguerite's wood sculptures.

Marguerite went into the kitchen and put a hunk of honey on a plate, loose tea in her favorite pot, the cups and saucers on a platter, and waited for the kettle to boil.

John walked down the hallway, not sure whether he wanted to see Marguerite's stalker. He passed the courtyard windows and the gallery full of furniture, then stopped in front of The Flyers. He turned to look into the opposite gallery.

"He isn't here." John's voice boomed down the hallway as Marguerite approached.

"If he isn't here, he's with someone else." Marguerite said. Her voice was a mixture of relief and dread. She walked to John and stopped.

A triangle of salt came out of the last gallery on the left, large crystals. Althea walked into the studio. A multi-pointed star made of radiating stripes of pastel-colored salt.

Why wasn't Marguerite turning around? It was as if the light had changed. Another source shined: A waxen likeness of Death, shouldering a scythe, surrounded by iridescent salts.

Reflected light hit the wax figure, and it occurred to Althea that she should not look long. And she was seeing it first. Just a little more, she had to look at it more, she had to keep looking.

Whispers wormed into her ear that she could not make out. What were Marguerite and John talking about?

She created a monster beyond her control. She never wanted to manage people but to put them together. The results were logarithmic. Exceeding all hopes. All of her hopes for herself.

All of her hopes for herself.

"I'm supposed to spend another million?" John said as Marguerite moved away.

Althea kept her eyes on the sculpture. She looked at John. "I didn't say anything. I was looking at this...masterpiece."

"He's called 'Imposter.'" Marguerite interjected. She faced the other way.

"But you just told me to buy it."

"I didn't say anything. However, I do advise buying it."

"He's mine. He's not for sale," Marguerite said. Her voice enforced finality. Good, Althea thought, John has just had his first experience in not being able to buy something. "Imposter" belonged in a museum anyway, probably the Tate, or Pompidou. And not being able to buy something would ignite John's motivation to buy more, more, more.

*

Woody let himself and climbed the stairs without a sound. Crossing the living room, he thought he caught a strange reflection in the mirror over the fireplace, just a flash.

He knocked on the door ahead. "Ms. Wright?" Behind him the sound of a clap startled him and he spun around. He jumped. B.E. sat in her wheelchair in the doorway to the study. "Excuse me ma'am, you scared me."

It had become routine to write on her board. "Sorry" she wrote, and turned it toward him.

"He asked me to check on you. Can I get you anything?" She erased and wrote:

"Where is he?"

"Visiting artists."

She nodded, despondent that she could not be in on it. What a hassle. She felt stir-crazy.

"I brought you the paper." Woody seemed sympathetic.

She perked up. Something to distract. Woody pushed her into the living room while she flipped to the art section and read the Inside Art column.

"Well, I guess I'll be leaving." Woody said. "Got to pick up Mr. McBain."

Just when she heard the door latch, it hit her: Who cared what the doctor said? He'd never know anyway. The sedative she took was kicking in and everything blurred. She slapped the wall. How to make a louder noise? She threw the paper; it fluttered down like falling leaves. She then threw her board and it hit the door, loud enough for him to hear. She waited to hear his key in the lock. The light in the room shifted, the shadows darkened, like the snowstorm had moved inside and chilled the air. She felt someone behind her and got a glimpse of burlap and a bony hand. She jerked her head hoping Woody would appear and save her. But Woody had started the car and his favorite song came on: "Be My Baby." He turned up the volume.

All it took was the slightest push and the front wheels rolled over the top step. The rear wheels followed and her face crashed into the jumbled pages of *The News*, as red from her broken head seeped into the black and white.

*

Bernie liked the way his new Rolex looked under the cuff of his pressed striped shirt. Felicity noticed it but didn't say anything.

"You know," Bernie said, "Reporting a rumor is not enough. You have to write that Marcus will be represented by Barbara."

"What if I don't?"

"Felicity, just do it." Her eyes swelled. Was she going to cry again? He started pacing the floor.

Friday's photos stuck in Felicity's mind. Why hadn't *she* become a photographer? She watched Bernie pacing. He didn't know it but he loved this, the strategy, because he had chosen to leave art-making. He wanted a team, now he had her. She didn't want to be alone and she realized she was going to marry Bernie (one day). So...every marriage had its compromises, or so she had been told. Being with an artist was out of the question, and she had to let Marcus go.

If she wrote what Bernie recommended, would that set everything straight? Or would this be her albatross? Her entire standing, not just her position at *The News*, was at stake. And she wasn't going to settle for some tweedy tenure-track position in the Ivy maze, talking about the old days. She was going to remain in the center. Bernie's hungry look gave her strength and she hated to admit it, but when he gave her an order, she felt a tingle. And she didn't like that she liked it. She would deal with that British artist who saw them meeting Barbara. What was his name? Ethan. He knew too

much. She'd have to find a way to cast doubt on his credibility. Either that, or kill him with ink. Better yet...both.

*

Ronald adjusted his collar and touched his heels together. He had something to tell Godd and he marched to his office. Someone has been going to artist's studios and buying them out. He'd gotten the word.

Godd looked up. Stern.

Ronald could see how perfect the part was in his silver hair. How he wanted to run his fingers through it.

Godd threw down his pen, annoyed, on the note he had been writing. "Who?"

"The artists in the show downtown, Brahms....and even Madame Chopin."

"That's not what I asked, moron. *Who's buying?*"

Ronald stood back, having his moment, and said: "John McBain."

"How could you let this happen? He doesn't care about art. It's Althea. She's with him." Ronald nodded. "She quit because she wasn't going to get a cut." Godd leaned back. "Cancel their shows."

"Well, there's only one, so far, next month, and you announced it last night."

"Cancel it."

"That wouldn't be, I mean, would that be wise?"

"Move the show we cancelled into that slot." Godd had in mind to organize a show of Early Icon Brahms, and get Ronald to do the research, but he'd bring this up later. First he would enjoy putting Ronald firmly under his thumb. "Go go go." Ronald appeared stunned. "I'll take care of Althea myself. Get out of here. GO!"

When Ronald was gone, Godd locked the door and took a painting off the wall to reveal a safe. He turned the dial several times, stopped at the sound of a click, and pulled the lever. The thick metal door opened. He reached for a stack of bills and smelled them. He pulled an attache case from his lower desk drawer and kicked it closed. He knew the solution to any problem: throw money at it.

*

Bernie went by Godd gallery downtown to snoop. Something felt different. Althea was no longer there. Neither were Melody or Friday. Instead, uptown Trudy sat there, looking sad and lonely.

"What do you mean she's not here?"

"Just that," Trudy didn't know Bernie, and thought he was just like an annoying artist who wanted to show his slides.

"You mean just today or permanently?"

"Yes, I was called down here unexpectedly, and they're busy getting ready for some party I'm not invited to."

Bernie rushed home. "Felicity, we're not going to 'Dances with Wolves.'"

"Right...we're seeing 'Misery. You saw 'Wolves' the other night."

"Oh, right. Anyway, something has come up: We're going to Althea's."

*

How the wind blows off the Hudson when you're downtown and a cold front moves in. People yell on the streets for no other reason than just to let themselves be heard. A cold gust of wind, the first of the season, and you can hear some yells. Human howls down the frozen corridors.

Godd drove downtown. He wasn't accustomed to driving in the snow and he put the windshield wipers on high, taking Park South to Broadway, then right on Houston. He parked in front of Althea's and waited.

*

Lurch stopped the Cadillac in front of Althea's building, sliding on the ice. He watched the rear-view while Althea bundled up. Althea thanked Marguerite and got out.

John was going to ask Lurch to drop him when he saw Woody parked across the street. Then, he saw Godd get out of the car ahead, leaving his door open, so John thanked them and got out. Lurch drove away, in billows of snow stirred up from the street.

Godd blocked their path. "Forget something when you left?" Godd asked Althea, holding up her Rolodex. "I thought I'd give it to you, myself."

"Well, it *is* mine." Althea took it from him. "I thought you might have a check, also."

"What makes you think I'm going to pay you...any of you." Godd waited for her to react.

"Oh. How big of you."

"Instead, I have something else." Godd pulled the attache case out of his car. "Cash." John signaled Woody to wait, and walked next to Althea, and said : "What is your offer?"

"A large amount of cash, in exchange for her return to me." The snow gusted between them.

"May I see the contents?" John asked.

"Let's step inside." This was serious business.

"No. Show us here."

Godd opened the case to reveal neat bundles of hundreds, lined up. The snow sprinkled on them. John hit the bottom of the case so that it flew high into the air and the bundles flew out, some coming apart, and taking off, and some hitting the ground, coming undone, and curling into the cutting winds.

Godd watched in shock as his cash blew away. He couldn't believe, never imagined, someone could just throw money into the air.

Godd tried to step on as much money as he could to keep it from blowing away, picking it up in clumps, cramming it into his pockets and into the empty attache case. He slipped in the ice. Althea and John laughed. What a clown Godd had become to them. They embraced. Godd ran down Wooster past his gallery, chasing loose bills. Gusts of white powder carried cold, hard cash high into the air, twirling many stories up, while some landed on Marguerite's car as she and Lurch waited at the stop sign, their brake lights glowing red.

John felt so heated up that he thought he would explode, and he kissed Althea, melting the beads of ice on her lips. They formed a warm spot in the freeze. John looked across the street. Woody was still waiting there in his running car, so he yelled:

"Woody, you can go. Drive safely." Woody got out, with his overcoat on.

"Mind if I chase some?"

"Go right ahead." Woody took off in the wind. Althea and John blew kisses after him. If they had looked up, they would have seen the lights in the loft, and had a hint of what was coming, but the snow was too thick.

Upstairs, Friday and Melody worked in Althea's kitchen, preparing beet salad. Snow whited out the windows, and the wind rattled the window-frames. The heating pipes knocked and hissed out geysers of steam.

"Ready for your new job?" Melody asked.

"It may not be the one you're thinking," Friday said.

"What do you mean?"

"I got an offer from **Vogue** to photograph for them." Melody gasped, and started to say something. "Shhh! Don't say anything yet."

*

Marcus and Harrison took a break. Marcus leaned toward Harrison. "What's up?"

"I may be looking for a gallery."

"Yeah? Me too."

"What happened?"

"The financing was pulled on my video."

"Bummer. My dealer wants to lower my prices, even though the work is sold."

"Drag." Marcus paused for a minute. He looked at the floor, then made eye contact with Harrison. "Hey, but I wanted to talk to you about something else...." Marcus leaned in so close that Harrison could smell him: Vetiver, clove, and sweat.

"Yeah?"

"So, would you like to switch girlfriends?" Marcus whispered in Harrison's ear.

*

Felicity and Bernie knew power when they saw it, they knew what was interesting, even if it threatened them. They wouldn't miss this, even if they weren't invited. Felicity wished she could blend into the wall. Bernie talked to Sadie.

"Alright, I'm done." Ethan threw down his brush covered with pink paint.

"What about the tape?" Sadie asked.

"You take it off. I've got a call to make."

Felicity noticed she was undetected when she followed Ethan as he disappeared down the hall. He turned into Althea's bedroom and picked up the telephone on her bed-stand, dialed a long number, and waited.

"Allo, Mum? It's me. I'm visitin' her now. Well done. I think she may even believe she's me Mum. It worked out just like we planned. Told you I'd do you proud. Another month and I'll be back to take over London. You'll be the Queen."

The noise picked up outside.

"Her real kid? Well, what she don't know won't hurt her, will it? Mum, better go." He hung up and rounded the corner with a bounce in his step, only to come face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball with Felicity, who heard. Everything.

Sadie finished putting red potatoes in stockings and took a cigarette break, not bothering to go to the window. No one seemed to be complaining about the smoke.

*

The idea was to reinstall the work in pink. Pink potatoes, even, in Sadie's room. Strung up in pink stockings.

The color pink can seem ethereal and fugitive. Some say it doesn't exist in the spectrum - like a mirage between red and purple. The mineral is rare and expensive and can cost the most, and it's toxic. Gloves should be worn. Absorbed through the skin, it can lodge in the muscle tissue and in the brain. But, oh how it lights up and unifies a painting. It's easy to overlook its effect. Its power is subtle. And it must be handled with care, for it's more vulnerable to fading and cracking.

In every way, it seems to represent love? Why don't people talk more about love? Bring it up in the art world and see how quickly you are ridiculed, interrupted with embarrassed gasps. Exasperation: could we please move on? Could we please get back on track? Prepare to be accused of sentimentality, as if it were the same as authentic emotion. While negative feeling, especially if it involves violence, is

considered acceptable, realistic. More blood please. Another spray of bullets: now that's art imitating life. Violence over love. Having trouble resolving your plot? Just kill everyone. It's the lazy way.

Love is a threat to the status quo. Most remain silent when She is overrun.

Melody and Friday ran over when they came in.

"We were going to say 'surprise,' but we were making too much noise."

Althea held out her Rolodex. "Where shall I put this?"

Melody took it, saying: "I'll put it in a safe place."

They hugged Althea and John spotted Ethan exiting the hallway followed by Felicity. He ran over, saying:

"Look who we have here."

Felicity wasn't going to reveal what she had just heard. Ethan wasn't going to reveal what he had seen. Check-mate.

Ethan walked to Sadie and looked at the heart she made out of stockings and red potatoes.

"A potato heart. How naf," Ethan said.

"Sod off." Sadie was sick of him.

John followed Felicity to Bernie, pinning them against the wall. Bernie and Felicity realized they were going to have to leave.

"Who invited you anyway?" John asked. He followed them to the door. Althea watched. When John returned to her, she said:

"I hope you know what you're doing." John nodded with glee.

"Let's go to the roof."

"I'm staying here, where it's warm," John said as he poured himself a drink.

They took the stairs in the hallway up and stepped carefully over the threshold of the roof door.

A half moon cast shadows behind the parapets. Dappled shadows merged with their imprints as they walked around.

Snow spiraled down over Soho. Across the grey roofs and yellow illuminated streets. All over New York, thousands, millions of white diamonds spiraled down.

Joy comes from a little black box that no one wants to look at. When you get everything you want, you don't always realize it. It makes a good memory, later. But how can you appreciate it when it's happening? How great if the moment could be stretched out. Even if just for a bit. Just a little longer.

*

Marguerite rubbed the mist off the side window. Moisture escaped to the inside, seeking warmth. She liked everything white and she watched the ones that ventured out, and looked up. Lurch squinted behind the wheel.

People trudging through the snow saw leaves falling from above. *Wait...is that money?* They didn't believe it. Another scam. Yeah, we know...here comes another one. Don't tell me, the flip-side is an ad for a strip club. Keep going and ignore this scam.

When Godd skidded to the corner, and Woody followed, they thought again. Oh, my God, is this real money?

Marguerite leaned against her opposite door, annoyed. She sighed and and got out. She walked to the center of the intersection, and struck a diagonal in a strange marching dance, making double karate chops. The money grabbers watched the freaky sight as they scanned for more fallen bills.

"GO. Go up." Marguerite yelled in halting syllables. "Up. UP!"

A cold parabola of wind reversed direction and carried the little green rectangles back into the air.

"Higher."

The money grabbers ran up Wooster, underneath the cloud, looking up, stumbling, falling. "NO. Come back," they wailed.

The blue and white cloud dotted with little green rectangles halted above Althea's building, then spiraled down, like it had dropped out of a bottle.

Marguerite brushed her hands together and got in her car. "Let's go. My work is done."

The running crowd got Bernie's attention as it got closer and he looked behind. He and Felicity had been waiting for a cab, but there were none. Only a few cars had come by, at a snail's pace, crunching the compacted snow.

"Felicity, what are they doing? Chasing a storm?" Felicity didn't bother looking.

"Never mind, Bernie. Let's go home."

A black Cadillac glided past. The lady in the back stared them down.

"Was that who I think it was?" Bernie asked.

"Woody gave up chasing flyaway bills and got back in John's car. He pulled up next to Felicity and Bernie and rolled down the opposite window.

"You folks need a ride?"

They looked at each other. "Don't you work for Mr. McBain?"

"I sure do. Thought you looked familiar. Get in." They did, and slowly headed east on Houston.

Godd looked up at Althea's, standing in the corona of a street lamp. That gust had carried everything upward, so he had a clearer view. The cloud centered above. Grabbers straggled by with bills sticking out of their coat pockets. One counted his plunder.

"You better not touch that. It's laced with poison - Digitalis." It will kill you." Godd said. The counter panicked and wiped his hands in the snow.

Godd thought he could see heads moving over the roof line. Were they up there? Payback time was coming. He would let Ethan have a show after all, then...let him, or any of them, try to get paid. They wouldn't have a case - nothing was in writing. It was freezing and he shivered and looked up one last time. In one of Althea's windows, he could see a rotund man looking straight down at him, laughing, and holding out a glass. It was that scoundrel John McBain. He'd get him too. Revenge is a dish best served cold. Godd got in his car and emptied his pockets and threw the jumbled bills he had rescued on the seat to dry. He turned the hot air to full blast.

*

On the snow-covered roof they formed a six pointed star. Goddess lay in the clouds. Her breasts were made of indigo and white. She didn't believe in Crucifixion. She had her arm around the half moon.

They looked up, and money fell from the sky. Hundred dollar bills fell all over them.