

The Museum

She was not the kind of girl Salepian could easily approach. In fact, looking back on those long-ago years, he remembered that he would grow weak and anxious at the sight of her, possessing, as she did, the glitter of a fine jewel. And there was the defense of that quizzical half-smile, suggesting that she knew you before you so much as spoke. Surely she would dismiss him as a pathetic bumbler, simply one of those testosterone-addled young men she routinely and perhaps even unconsciously assigned to the reject pile in the course of a week. Because if he was drawn to her, as he painfully was, then how many others were as well? And why wouldn't they be, given that radiantly beautiful face and lustrous black hair and curvy figure?

If beauty was a draw, the museum had positioned her wisely, there at the circular information desk in the main hall. And so, at least twice a day, when he came and left, there was no need for a contrived reason for passing the desk where she sat and fixing his eyes on her.

Old and worn as it was, an opening line came to him. "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

And, of course, before he asked her, he would have to ask himself.

Like the girl he was drawn to, Salepian was an entry-level employee at the museum. He too had a booth, though it was not circular and conspicuously set out in the main lobby. His was small and rectangular and on the second floor, where he handed out audiocassettes for a modest hourly wage. Frankly, he found the work pleasant. It gave him a sense of mastery to attach the earphones to the bulky boxes and hand them to patrons willing to shell out five dollars for an audio guide to Macedonian art from the second century, B.C. And he liked rewinding the

cassettes from the returned boxes and removing and straightening the headsets. It was the kind of work that simplified his life and gave a structure to his day.

And the people he worked with were interesting. There was a young and bleary-eyed young man named Ralphie, who claimed to have memorized all the paintings in the museum by age thirteen. “I could be a curator here. I have a doctorate in art history from Yale University,” Ralphie said, on the first day they met. For some reason, Salepian took Ralphie’s bold assertion as proof of a kind that he never would rise to such status. Possibly some developmental flaw would hold him back; it struck Salepian as a warning sign of perpetual adolescence when men in their twenties held on to the diminutive. Perhaps the greatest barrier to a brilliant future was Ralphie’s astonishing confession that he had ruined the tear ducts in his eyes by overindulging in cocaine. “On cocaine the fruits in a Cezanne still-life would just explode,” Ralphie said, as a way of explaining that he had used the drug to enhance his aesthetic experience of art.

Salepian had no such visual memory and no such precociousness. At age thirteen his mind had been crowded with baseball statistics—winning percentages and batting averages and home run totals.

“That’s great,” he said to Ralphie, during a lull in business, not sure what Ralphie wanted him to appreciate, the power of cocaine or the beauty of a Cezanne still life while stoned. Or maybe, it occurred to Salepian, Ralphie was simply looking, not for an appreciation of Cezanne, but for recognition of his highly developed aesthetic sense.

Ralphie’s wife, Pearl, worked in the museum as well. She was stationed downstairs in the gift shop as a cashier. Several times, during the day, she would come up to see Ralphie. She wore her hair in a ponytail and had alert, intelligent eyes, and the solicitous warmth she showered on Ralphie told Salepian she loved her husband very much, though perhaps as a wayward child.

Salepian felt a twinge of pain seeing them together. He didn't quite know why. He sensed Pearl's confusion under her amiable smile and saw sadness in her turned down mouth. It caused him some unhappiness to think about Ralphie and his wife, as if some horrible indigence awaited them. He saw that Pearl had pegged her hopes to someone who was out of control, even if he was under wraps for a while.

The museum seemed to attract its fair share of people maintaining themselves precariously in the world. Some days he shared the booth with a woman named Mary. A sad calmness seemed to flow from her as well. Even in motion, she gave the impression of traumatized stillness. He wondered, after a full day with her, whether she had entirely lost the ability to smile. In spirit she seemed as listless as her lank brown hair. In a quiet moment, her voice a murmur, she emerged from her internalized state and told him her story. A speed habit had developed while she was at the University of Pennsylvania. She came to rely on Dexedrine for studying and filling those little blue examination booklets. And then she needed the pills to talk to people. And then she was introduced to crystal meth. Eventually, she was admitted to a hospital for drug-induced psychosis. In fact, she was in a hospital program as they spoke. The staff were trying to ease her back into the world with a low-stress job.

Salepian had some idea of her as rotting away from within, as if one strong shake would cause her internal structure to crumble. Her eggshell fragility was uncomfortable to witness.

He himself had never done crystal meth, but he had taken diet pills on and off through all four years of his college experience, and probably for the same reason as Mary, to give his brain a boost. But he was fairly confident he had left those pills behind. It had been at least six months since his last one, and even in that time that he had been using them, he felt wary. It was too hard on his body and his mind to do them on consecutive days. First that high. Then that devastating

crash that endured through a mostly sleepless night. And the cold, clammy hands and feet as his blood failed to circulate to his extremities.

But the girl at the information booth. She was not on the path of doom. Her gifts were too abundant. They radiated throughout the art-filled rooms of the museum. She was herself a living work of art, a Vermeer, a Velasquez, a Titian, and whatever else they had hanging on their walls.

In the employee cafeteria one lunch hour she passed by his table, tray in hand, and he blurted out, “What are you doing here?”

She looked down at the ID that she wore clipped to her blouse and then at him. “Isn’t it obvious?” she said. There was cool mockery in her voice.

“No, no. I didn’t mean it that way. I’m not a policeman. I was just being--”

But she had moved away before he could complete his sentence, having reduced him to a fool in his own mind. “Silly,” he called after her, but she ignored him in setting down her tray at a table some distance away and seating herself with some others.

Later that day, in the privacy of a bathroom stall, Salepian prayed. He asked God to relieve him of the miserable state his encounter with Rita had plunged him into. While he was at it, he asked God to help him to connect with this woman. Shortly thereafter, during a lull in the audiocassette action, he was seized by boldness and wrote out a note on the back of a postcard of Van Gogh’s “Starry Night.”

You are not a Botticelli angel. You are in a category even more wondrous and you are occupying my head. I give out audiocassettes ALL DAY LONG. I want something better for my life. YOU!!!

Then he ran downstairs, handed the girl the note, and ran back to his station.

An hour later he was back.

“I need some information,” he said.

“What could that possibly be?” She had the beginnings of a smile she couldn’t quite hold back.

“I need to talk with you in depth about my life and all the things that are not in it.”

“Here?”

“No. Outside somewhere. All this art puts me in a trance. There isn’t a blank wall anywhere.”

“OK,” she said, though her laugh sounded derisive.

They found a Greek diner down on Madison Avenue, just a block east, where over coffee shop food he tried to express himself in a way that would further his place in her life.

“I am on the horns of a dilemma,” he said.

“How originally you speak.”

It took more than a minute of stupefying shame pain for the pieces to remotely reassemble, a reintegration that had to take place under the wicked glare of her smile. Her expression seemed to suggest she took great delight in appraising the size of his wound.

“The English language is mine as much as yours,” he finally said, with some sullenness.

“When will we get to hear about this horns of a dilemma?” She was laugh-cackling now.

“Maybe never. Doesn’t sound very much like you want to hear anything I have to say.”

“I’m sure you have something very interesting to say.” Her effort at seriousness only worsened things.

But he came out of his funk and decided he would take another chance on love. “Do I go to law school or do I not? Do I accept my ticket for success or find a route that will still take me to the grave but perhaps bestow on me immortality? I’m thinking that I want to be a writer.”

“You are crazy. I knew it when I saw you.” She didn’t seem displeased.

As if his survival were at stake, he pushed on. “How is it that a man can feel like the lowest of the low and at other times feel like the prophet armed and dangerous? I have all the evidence of my seeming failure, but I have the call of greatness as well. What I mean is that law school may be an impediment to my true desire.”

When she said nothing, he recalled for her, amid the clatter of dishes, a dream in which he was outside the law school building, sitting on the terrace with two other male students. The feeling in the dream was one of bleakness, such as he often experienced in the company exclusively of males, with whom no joy was to be had. A woman of serene bearing, clad in a diaphanous robe, appeared from the forest’s edge. Barefoot across the lawn she came, turning him toward her with the same entropic inevitability as the sun turns a flower. Salepian had never met a goddess, but she had the bearing of one, as well as the beauty, he thought, the bottom of her gown trailing across the grass. She reached out for his hand and he gave it. As if he were but a child, she sought to lead him away, causing him to protest. What about his friends? The law school curriculum? “This experience is too common for you,” she said, simply and directly. And so he followed.

Having shared his dream, Salepian thought it reasonable to expect a response, but Rita stretched her arms and arched her back and yawned. “I’m so sleepy.”

“And bored, too,” Salepian said, sounding, at least in his own mind, like her.

“I’m not bored,” she said, matter-of-factly enough for him to believe her.

The waiter cleared away the dishes and cups. He wore one of those tight red vests over a white shirt with a big stiff collar. A monkey suit, Salepian had heard it called. Probably one of those Greeks who came over here and worked like a dog for a while before returning home with a bundle.

“Greeks are to coffee shops what Jews are to real estate, at least in this city,” Salepian said.

“My father’s one of them,” Rita said.

“Your father works in a coffee shop?” With her dark features, it suddenly occurred to him that she might be Greek.

“Not exactly. My father is a slum landlord. He owns half of Harlem. He’s the Jew they love to hate, and I don’t blame them.” Her tone as well as her words were condemnatory.

Salepian had seen some of the places that poorer Blacks lived, like the couple of single-room occupancies that still existed in his neighborhood. Welfare hotels, they were called, places he associated with shocking violence and bad smells and danger, and which you passed by quickly. His fascination as a child with zoot-suited Negroes, as they were then called, and the Isley brothers, tall willowy Watusi warriors in sharp shirts and with conks on their pomaded hair. Some strange divinity operating in them that compelled them to embrace the now so fiercely.

“That doesn’t sound good. The way you put it, I mean. Slumlord.”

“My father’s hands are very dirty. Very.”

“That’s a strong image—your father’s dirty hands.” What a strange girl Rita was, that she spoke from such cranky depths. If she had a talent it was too soon to say what it was, unless maybe bad temper. It really was an unfortunate combination, causticity coupled with such beauty. It caused you to be drawn to someone who might bite you, if not fatally, like a black

widow, at least with sufficient venom that you would feel the effect for days. He suddenly saw her like a child having a tantrum in ill-fitting clothes, and wondered if she needed something that possibly the earth couldn't give her. He could feel that way himself at times, just this supreme irritability.

“It's more than his hands that are dirty,” she said.

“I'm sorry that is so,” Salepian said softly, not knowing what more to say.

He pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and placed it over the check the waiter had left.

“Can I help?”

“Help with what?”

“The bill, of course.”

“That's all right.” Money was not an issue for him, though it wasn't anything she needed to know, just then.

“Well, can I help with anything else?”

Her smile was easy to understand. It drew his own, if shyly.

Dr. Ehrlich, at the psychoanalytic clinic, had got him started with writing. She had suggested that he keep a journal of his feelings and thoughts. And so he bought one of those composition books with a mottled cover at a neighborhood Woolworth's and began making entries. He couldn't say exactly, but there was something soothing—like discovering his center—about putting words on paper, even if he only recorded his dreams and his feelings, mostly anger and sadness. Or just to say in simple terms what he had done with his day. The words somehow gave meaning and substance to his life, no matter how ordinary it was. It was like coming home to himself.

And then the writing took on a life of its own, as if, on the basis of pedestrian entries over the course of months a life's purpose had been presented to him.

“It’s your way of maintaining your distance from life,” Dr. Ehrlich said. In fact, it seemed to be her opinion that writing was no life at all. “People send out and send out and everything comes back. Nothing, they get nothing,” she said, with a wave of her hand. Her harshness about his literary ambition was prompted, he knew, by the reservations, and even terror, he increasingly expressed about law school, and of course, by the dream he had related to her. He sensed she saw him trying to take the back door out of reality, as some writer called it. But he knew nothing about the law, he was coming to realize. It had just been some fantasy, some way of packaging his life, which as the first semester drew nearer, now appalled him, a dreary grind in a atmosphere of extreme competition.

Dr. Ehrlich a sturdy German—not only physically, with her thick middle-age body, but in her mind as well— who had survived World War Two in her native country, Dr. Ehrlich had seen a lot. Now, in midlife, she had a blue-chip medical degree from Columbia University and was doing her training to be an analyst at this well-known clinic. Every session she wore a new outfit. Colorful blouses and skirts, as if she wasn’t afraid to be seen. She wanted him to lie down on the couch, but he couldn’t. He wouldn’t. He had to keep his eyes on her at all times.

“So skinny. So underfed.” She sucked in her cheeks to support her words.

When he first came to her, he told her of bad feelings and dark thoughts.

“It’s a wonder you have gotten as far as you have, given your feelings about yourself.”

Such had been her initial assessment.

But a year had made a difference. His white afro, with seven parts in it, was gone, and he had done well enough to get into a law school, even if it wasn’t the very best.

“Join us,” Dr. Ehrlich said. She meant join the human race, he vaguely understood. Well, he was trying, in his way.

He didn't have much to offer Rita, just some wine and cheese, but she didn't seem to mind.

“You like nice things,” she said, appraising the maple dresser and the roll-top oak desk he had managed to get into the small second-floor apartment. She was feline in her cautious movements, feeling her way with her hands along the surfaces. He liked that she had removed her sandals and that the nails of her small, arched feet were painted cherry red, and that her hair was up, showing off her thin, swanlike neck.

She was right. He did like nice things. He hadn't had them when he was growing up. A messy apartment with too little space. “They're heirlooms. They were left to me by my uncle Bert.” He didn't tell Rita that Uncle Bert, his mother's brother, was gay and had no children, and that, for some reason, he, Salepian, was his favorite. It felt like a dream, this money that had been showered on him.

But was *heirlooms* the right word? Could you call them that if they were left to you by an uncle, not an immediate family member? It would be just like him to be tripped up by his need to sound smarter than he was.

“*The Neurotic Personality of Our Time?* That's what you're reading?” She made it sound like he had the *Reader's Digest* on his night table and not a legitimate offering between hard covers of a prominent neo-Freudian.

“I'm there on every page,” he said, when he had recovered. “The author has this concept of the idealized image. She says people have some fixed idea of who they should be, and if they can't realize their goal, they fall into depression and sometimes even kill themselves. I guess the

healthy person makes some kind of adjustment. And I guess that's my problem. I have the desire for greatness without any of the tools for achieving it." He sat there in his creaky wicker chair—definitely not one of Uncle Bert's heirlooms—feeling, for the moment, not chagrin, but a measure of peace at his own words, as if the only way he could stay in the room with a girl of Rita's quality was to be honest without veering into self-deprecation.

"Hal wanted to be a writer."

"Hal?"

"My boyfriend. He went off to Stony Brook for a doctoral program in English and left me behind along with some old underwear."

Was there more to the story for it to be complete? There had to be.

"A Ph.D. in English. That means standing up in front of a class and telling them what it is you know and don't know. I hear the sound of my own anti-intellectualism when I even try to consider such a path for myself."

"What do you mean?" Rita asked, taking a rare break from her somewhat mocking tone.

"Somehow the classroom is lacking in substance for me, or the liberal arts are. I still feel I should be good at things that remain a mystery to me, like the hard sciences."

"Are you a math dope? Is that what you are telling me?"

"Well, yes. You could say so." Once again her words pierced him.

She poured out some more wine for herself. His own glass he had hardly sipped from.

"I'm an alcoholic, or at least I have alcoholic tendencies," she said, causing him to wonder again at the strange places she took him with her assertions. She could have said she was an accountant, so matter of fact was her tone.

“I don’t understand.” He genuinely didn’t. He imagined an alcoholic to be a derelict sleeping off a drunk in some doorway. “Why are you an alcoholic?” The word itself frightened him.

“Because if I open a bottle of wine, I have to finish it.”

“I see,” he said, when he wasn’t sure he did. Her definition astonished him. He had assumed, if he thought about it at all, that alcoholism had to do with the volume a person consumed. He remembered seeing Jack Lemmon thrash around in the greenhouse in *Day of Wine and Roses*, searching frantically for the bottle of liquor he had stashed among the plants. That was an alcoholic.

“Do you want to see something more?”

“Maybe,” he said, and smiled nervously.

She threw back her head and exploded with more unbridled laughter, her hand gripping the neck of the wine bottle. When she had gathered herself, she said, “Do you see that sex is at the top and the bottom of everything? *Everything?* Just like Papa Freud said?”

“I don’t know what to say,” he replied. It did sound a little reductive, and Dr. Ehrlich might have concurred.

“Maybe it’s not about saying,” she said.

You couldn’t really know a woman unless you knew her in the biblical sense, a friend had once said. Sex was a door you walked through. It was also a door men were expected to knock at. The woman answered or she didn’t. Inside that door was darkness and mystery and something close to a shared prayer. Whatever the general truth of his friend’s statement, it was certainly so with Rita. She lay on her back, her sex exposed, having shed all garments except for her bra.

He lay down beside her and kissed her, but it was a kiss she took to a different place than other women—girls really—he had been with. The voraciousness of her appetite she placed on full display. With her tongue she began to explore his ears and then, to his shock, licked the inside of his nose and nibbled his lips with her perfect white teeth. And there was the writhing power of her warm body as she maneuvered on top of him, signaling her intent to be in control. This was what it was to know a woman—to be witness to the power of her desire.

“Slow, slow. We’re going to take this nice and slow,” she said, as if in a dream state, as she unclasped her bra. Such a small waist and slender shoulders, and then those beautifully shaped melon breasts, as it had been written of some woman, he couldn’t say where. “I’m a sex addict. I belong on Forty-second Street,” she declared.

Unable to contain his excitement, he came right away.

“Why did you do that?” There was anguish in her every word.

“I don’t know,” he murmured. He lay face down, engulfed by a sense of his own ineptness. She was in another league. He had allowed a tiger into his apartment and his bed, and she was mauling him.

“You don’t know?”

He was done. There wasn’t a single thing more he could give her. That was what he had meant to say but couldn’t say. It will be over soon. Then I will have the pleasure of my own bed, he thought, and also didn’t say.

But she did stay. Not that it was easy having her wander through the small apartment inspecting his things and making her caustic comments. “What’s with the piano? Are you a budding musician as well as a budding novelist?” It was an old upright, something he had bought for one hundred dollars.

“No. I can hardly play at all. But I’m trying. I take lessons,” he said, thinking of the bleary-eyed man uptown, as if he had had a hard night hitting the bottle, whose spacious apartment always smelled of coffee and cigarettes.

And then the sharp crack of her laughter as she found his journal.

“And you can hardly write at all. I can’t read a word of this.” For once he didn’t regret his indecipherable handwriting.

Rita came back and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran a finger from her neck down to the small of her back. Her round butt served as a gentle but firm cushion. “My boyfriend had literary pretensions, too,” she said.

“Can’t it just be ambition? Does it have to be pretension?” Salepian asked, kissing the small of her back.

“You don’t understand.” She turned on him, her eyes blazing with tear-filled anger. “He left. He just left.” She began to cry uncontrollably, her body shaking as she emitted one long cry of pain. It was like one of those violent summer storms, the sun suddenly vanishing behind clouds of pregnant darkness before they opened up. He reached for her hand, but she pulled away. “No, no. Just don’t do that,” she said.

Salepian had only meant to comfort her. He had been left, too. He told her about Monica, whom he had met here in the city, when she was a high school senior and he was in his first year of college. Though she went off to art school in Boston, they somehow managed to stay together. But she had wanted him to be better than he was. “‘You could go to Harvard if you wanted to. You’re brighter than those jerks who get in,’ she would say. And she once bragged about how many courses I was taking when we spent some time with her artist friends one evening. It was what she wanted to believe. But her friends could see I wasn’t very bright, that I didn’t know the

things they knew and wasn't engaged with the creative process in the way that they were. Then, about a year ago, she broke the news that she had fallen in love with the school genius, as she refers to him, a supposedly brilliant painter who in fact did go to Harvard before transferring to art school. She said he had tried to hold her off, but she couldn't."

"So now you believe you have to be a great artist, too, like in that dream?"

"Well, yes, though that dream can also be seen as a warning, my analyst says. After all, where do I wind up being led by the goddess but into the woods, and God knows what awaits me there—wolves, hunger, disorientation."

Then things changed again, with no more time for words, or only a few. She pulled him down on her and whispered, her breath hot in his ear, "Let's go to those woods. Let's go right now."

A place to go. A defined routine The museum job was an antidote to the pain that freedom inflicted on him. A lot of his time he filled with reading, everything from the screenplays of famous directors to glitteringly successful novels. He read the script of *The Seventh Seal* and longed for the artistry of Ingmar Bergman. He read *Sometimes a Great Notion* and longed for the pulsing power of Ken Kesey's prose. And so he was infected with the dream of greatness. Surely he was an example of the narcissistic personality, as described in Karen Horney's book.

One day at the museum, he worked the entire day with Maude, a tall, slender woman who wore designer blouses and skirts with stockings and expensive high-heeled shoes. Over lunch she informed him that her father was the owner of one of the leading pharmaceutical companies in America.

“I’m the apple of his eye, his little princess,” Maude said. Salepian wasn’t sure he had heard right, that Maude would say a thing like that. But Maude said a lot of things. She said her drawing teacher at the Art Students’ League was pinning all his hopes on her. He noticed that a look of insecurity played on her face as she sought a visual receipt by him of her claim. Salepian felt sad hearing Maude go on in this hyperbolic way. He didn’t have to be Karen Horney to know that she was not in true accord with her own words.

Something birdlike about Maude, that beaked nose and slender frame and flighty manner. Opposites attract? He wondered about that truism. That was so as far as magnetic poles, but sitting with Maude, he wasn’t sure. It could seem that, more often than not, like found like.

“I’m starting over. I’m a little older than some of you,” she said, in a moment of candor. There had been smashed Corvettes during her college years at Sarah Lawrence. A lot of more intangible wreckage. “I’m thirty-three in case you’re wondering.”

There was no cause to wonder. Her years were there in her lined face. The disparity in their ages increased her feeling of vulnerability, he sensed. She was not where she wanted to be. She was unhappy. She, like him, had become the prisoner of her dreams. Together they were finding salvation rewinding audiocassettes.

What a strange life, that you would come to a museum to learn to take comfort in being ordinary.

They worked in close quarters behind the booth. The camaraderie that came with a shared purpose moved to another level when he brushed against her. Though light and inadvertent, the feel of her responsive butt pressed against him was electric.

It was a day that Rita happened to have off.

At closing time he asked if she would come home with him. She said yes.

It was a problem for him, this desire for more. He had no real power to resist.

Maude was eager and easy in the way that frightened and insecure women can be. It was over fast, and afterward there was no lingering with her, as there had been with Rita. Maude flew out the door. She was not a creature who could easily stay on the ground.

Because he had been with Maude, he felt afraid the next morning as he mounted the wide set of stairs to the museum. Rita was the one he had to be good for now, and he had not been good, and so punishment had to be drawing nigh. And there she was at the very top, poised as an omniscient if casual deity, one foot pressed flat back on the wall she leaned against. He approached her in a state of recoil, some separation mode. It was the morning light. It was Maude. It was whatever kept him apart from people, and now the voice in his head was very loud that she did not want him and did not allow him to ask if he in fact wanted her. He could barely say hello.

And the sense of separation only grew stronger that day when, in the cafeteria, he saw Rita and Maude together at one of those white Formica tables. The sense that some sort of blow was being prepared for him. It was not for him to simply see two women talking. He had to bring a story, and it was one of gossip and ridicule in which he figured strongly, the two of them laughingly comparing their experience of him, down to the particulars of his anatomy. It was a thought to unnerve even the most confident of men.

“I like Maude. She’s smart and more than smart,” Rita said that night. That word “smart.” She said it angrily, almost reproachfully, as if in playing up Maude’s assets she was implicitly pointing out their lack in him. They were words that put him in a cold place.

“Who is this?” Rita held a framed photo in her hand of a woman with an oval face and almond eyes, her black hair braided in a swirl atop her head.

“Naomi. My sister.”

“She’s older than you?”

“Yes. Or she was.”

“What does that mean, she was?”

“She struggled. She had some kind of condition.”

“What does that mean, a condition?”

Condition was his mother’s word. Naomi couldn’t handle stress, she would say. It was a condition that caused her to stand on the eighth floor window ledge looking down on Broadway as the police tried to coax her back inside. And when they did, she would be taken away. For weeks and even months he would not see her, and then she would come back. And then there was the time the police could not coax her back inside.”

“She got very sick and passed away,” he said.

“Tell me more about this sister of yours. Tell me.”

The question took him in a direction he did not want to go. He did not enjoy talking about his sister. The subject was dark. She had been turned against the light.

“She was older than I was.”

“Older?”

“Yes.”

“By how much.”

“About eight years.”

“What was she like?”

“Strange. She was there but not there. Like the air. I can’t explain. Once, she called me across the room to where she was sitting. I was thrilled. I had this older sister suddenly and knew what it meant. It just flooded my being with warmth and excitement. She kept her smile as her hand struck me hard across the face.”

“How did you feel?”

“Astonished. Betrayed.”

He did not tell Rita that his sister would sing and that she fantasized about becoming a star like her idol, Judy Garland. He did not tell her that Naomi’s voice would crack or that she would forget the lyrics to the songs she was singing. He did not need to give Rita that.

A rhythm established itself in their lovemaking that night. It took on a life of its own, going on and on. There was no need for her directional words or any others really. It left them sweaty and tangled on the double bed, and when she woke in the morning, she found him sleeping on his stomach with his arm around her, as if afraid she might go away.

“I had this dream,” he said, kissing her and kissing her. “I was falling and falling. I couldn’t stop. I was in some kind of cylinder. At the bottom of it was this enormous spider, a scorpion or something, but many many times its size. The frightening thing was that the creature was so dusty, so blended with the colors of the earth, that you almost didn’t know it was there. You could almost have mistaken it for a piece of sod until it moved. You sensed that if you even touched it, you would die or experience something even worse.”

Rita merely listened. Listened and listened, with her eyes on him all the while, smiling at him in that way she could. Not a smile of warmth but of knowing. It was a smile that suddenly seemed unnerving, as if he had been living with it his entire life. And with that smile on her face, saying to him, “I’m going to make you very lonely. Do you hear? Do you hear?”

The next afternoon a man appeared at the information desk. From afar Salepian watched as the man chatted with Rita, his elbows on the counter as he leaned forward so their faces were almost touching. Was it the boyfriend, the failed novelist who had left behind some old underwear and nothing else? Had he come back to sport with her, to trifle with her affections? But somehow, even from a distance, Salepian couldn't place him in the halls of ivy, not with that black leather jacket he wore and that gelled hair slicked back and that knit shirt buttoned at the top and those shiny black shoes and sharply creased pants. A man like that discoursing on Proust or Eliot? Well, there were stranger things in this world, but somehow, Salepian didn't think so. He had the look of an operator, a person who ran scams, more than a budding professor.

The man came back the following day, and the day after as well. Each time he struck a pose of intimacy with Rita as he spread himself all over the information desk. It was clear he was not asking for direction to the Rembrandts.

"He has a film production company. He wants me to be part of his business," Rita said. They had gone for a walk in the park, and now were sitting by the pond. Nannies with babies in strollers. Kids sailing their toy boats. It was a peaceful setting, one of his favorites. So much green. It took him back to another time.

"Business? He makes movies?"

"He does pornography. You know, skin flicks."

She was matter-of-fact in her presentation, as if she might be talking about the mattress industry.

"And what exactly would your role be?"

“I would be making my film debut. What else would I be doing? Keeping the books?”

A child's red ball came rolling his way, headed for the pond. Salepian chased after the ball, stopped it with his foot at the water's edge. He gave the ball to the child, bending down as he did so.

“Thank you,” she said, in her little girl voice.

“You're welcome,” Salepian said. A woman, presumably the girl's mother, came over behind the girl. She thanked him as well.

“The savior of the world,” Rita chuckled.

“Well, the ball is round. The two have that in common.”

“Let things play out the way they need to,” Rita said.

“It's an interesting principle, but I should apply it to a child's ball that has gotten away?”

“Nothing has gotten away. Nothing. Stop trying to contain things. Stop trying to control the world. Stop trying to control me. You're just like my father.”

“Where, along the line, did I come to be just like your father? Am I a slumlord, too?”
Salepian asked.

“Don't you get it? Don't you?”

“No, I suppose I don't,” he said.

“I've got to go,” she said, in a lowered and emphatic voice, as if her mind were made up to put him behind her.

He stayed on the bench as she walked off. He had no desire to chase after her. He didn't know what had happened. It was like a flash flood had come and swept away everything. He stayed a while longer in the protective atmosphere of the park. He stayed until he felt a chill in the air.

She was absent from the information desk the next morning. No sight of her anywhere with that cascading hair and that clear-eyed, intimidating stare. A plainer woman, who gave off none of Rita's sparks, was there in her place.

It was like slogging through knee-deep sand to get through the day. She had vacated the museum. She had vacated him.

And then, by the next week, Ralphie and his wife were gone as well, as was the woman who could not smile. And Maude. Art might be enduring on the solid walls of the museum, but if you were young and a certain kind of employee, you stayed only so long before moving on. The sun could be shining, but life had this undercurrent of sadness which even the bright days couldn't fully conceal.

He turned the photo of his sister so it was facing the wall. It was not a nice thing to do, to put his sister where she could not see him. But he felt he had no choice. He was tired of the weight of her eyes upon him. That look, so unrelentingly fixed. It wasn't like he was putting her in the closet, or getting rid of her altogether, God forbid. He would never do such a heartless thing as that. He would simply lie down and find his way into sleep.

And the phone. He would keep it at the foot of the bed, in case it was her, Rita, in the night, and she had need of him. He would hear it ringing in his sleep and awaken from his dream and reach down to answer her call.