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WYSIWYG

You can't step into the same river twice, the old Greeks said. Least of all the Hudson, south of 14th Street. Max knew better than to try. He began to paint the river from the window of his small apartment, ten floors up, in 1970 or thereabouts. Thirty years later, he was still trying to get it right. From his bed each morning, he studied the softened abstract forms on the Jersey side and planned his next canvas. In all those years he could have visited Hoboken but why bother? Distance mattered: warehouses, apartments, factories, a Bauhaus arrangement of rectangles and squares in the modest tans and grays of early Cubism. He pondered the giant neon signs beaming their messages at the city from the other shore. He studied whitecaps in midwinter and the river's rusty sheen in mid October, just before the end of daylight savings, when every minute of the golden failing afternoon was money in the bank.

What he hated was the river's asphalt edge, the traffic in bodies, substances, the late night whooping that could be pain or jubilation. Fires broke out inside the covered pier, two blocks north, where garbage trucks unloaded onto seagoing barges. Twice lately he had phoned 911 and been gratified to see how promptly the firemen arrived. He also monitored drug sales from his tenth floor lookout. Sometimes he called the station house. Nothing happened. Weekends were worst. The pursuit of pleasure grew more strident, impossible to ignore, even with windows shut, and him in bed, eyes bandaged with a sleep mask.

They should all be shot, he muttered grinding his coffee one Sunday morning, after a hot summer night when loud popping noises that were either fireworks or gunshot, broke into his sleep again and again.

Shame on you, Max, his conscience chided him. You sound like a dictator

"Oh dont give me that," another voice, call it his unconscience, retorted. OK guys, cool it now. Let's nip this in the bud, he warned the squabbling chorus. This was his American overself, keeping order with a well placed, Cut the crap, gimme a break, geddoudatown. The others were early, alien inflections. His father's, peremptory, accusing, passing sentence from behind the desk in his study in Berlin. Where was that desk now? Burned for firewood in winter 44? Max imagined a woman slamming into it with a dull axe. Her husband was on the eastern front, or in a prison camp in Texas. She wore an overcoat and three skirts, for warmth. She didn't know the name of the desk's owner, didn't want to know. She shared the house with three families bombed out of their apartments. The desk burned for three days in the kitchen, where his father never once set foot.

Max took his morning coffee to the window. His father's ghost drank from the steaming cup, like a shade in hell, bowed and disappeared. It was his mother who used to chide, Don't be a little Hitler. Of course, she had no idea what she was saying.

His eyes travelled the clean Sunday sweep of the river. The view calmed him, put his ghosts to rout. Dear parents, he dismissed them, continue to quarrel if you like. But leave me out of it. At least for now, he amended, because he knew that without him, they were less than nothing, and that he could never allow. His head was a puppet theater, where Punch and Judy swatted one another gleefully, screeching falsetto insults. He was the busy concealed hands working under the stage; he was the weary audience,

that knew the play by heart, but listened anyway, because it was the only show in town.

Stepping out of the building half an hour later, he saw broken bottles, greasy crumpled papers, a discarded condom in the gutter and looked away, determined to let only the cool, empty morning determine his mood. The breeze came right up from the sea, from Portugal or Africa for all he knew. He bought the paper, and read it upstairs, by the window, between draughts of his shining river view. By midday he had counted seven sailboats and a clipper ship heading north with a fresh wind behind them.

That afternoon he was invited for drinks on a terrace way uptown. The view from thirty stories up was too panoramic to suit him -- the city reduced to a fusty geometry of cylinders and spires, the park a lazy stripe, a green afterthought.

"I never see the street any more," an actress who made her off Broadway debut in 1932 was saying. "I slip right into a taxi in front of my building and out at the theatre, or my friends' houses. I live indoors or in cabs. I know I'm missing something..." her voice trailed off.

"If you'd been in the streets lately, you'd know that's not true," their host said gallantly. John Bell, earnest kindly son of Pennsylvania Quakers, mistook conversation for confession, and rushed to soothe.

"I still like Sundays in the park," his wife Laura demurred dreamily. "The steel drums, the Chinese juggler, the cellist by the boat pond."

"Compared to Bosnia, we get along," Sander pointed out. He was the kindly father figure in this group of old friends, a Berlin painter loyal to the same subject matter for fifty years: Weimar by night. Cabaret singers with red mouths and flapper bobs, lubricious schoolgirls in striped stockings; soldiers in drag. If you judged by his work, or by his imperishable accent -- he pronounced Warhol as a cognate of Wahrheit - - you'd have thought the US rolled right off him. In fact he knew all fifty states. He

had friends in Alabama, Alaska, North Dakota who had no idea of his New York reputation, which he carried lightly.

"Any painter who lives past eighty can be an old master," he had told Max lately. "Since arriving in New York I have been rediscovered five times. Not counting the original spread in Vogue in 1948."

"Can we all just get along?" the actress, eighty, blonde, erect in a straight backed chair, mimicked Rodney King's soft slur. "I agree with you," she told Sander, "I believe in the melting pot. Or the mosaic. That's the new term, isn't it? A misnomer if you ask me. A painter friend in Positano taught me mosaic. You start with something whole and nondescript, a discarded bathroom tile, smash it to splinters with your little hammer, then scatter them....It's hard work. Your fingers bleed. Bloody mosaic. Not nearly as friendly as it sounds."

"What never fails to dazzle me when I come back to town, is our New York subways," Sander continued.

All very well for you, Max thought. I'm the only one here who doesn't own a car. Who takes the subway everywhere. Who lives in one room. Who can't afford to retire. Who will be forced to retire this fall when no more students sign up for my class. Who....Enough already. Shaddup, why doncha?

"You take the subway, do you?" the actress asked.

"Oh always," Sander said. "There, I make discoveries. For example: there is a new type of girl in town. She's twenty-two or so, tall, or not so tall, full bosom, small hips, round nose, full lips. Dark eyes. A mass of dark hair, but with reddish glints. Henna? Irish grandmother? A lovely rounded forehead. Is she Spanish, African-American, Moroccan? From Brazil? I look for clues. A wedding ring, a nose ring, a necklace of gold coins."

"Gold coins on the subway?" John was doubtful.

"I said I look. I didn't say I find," Sander insisted. "Then I ask myself, twenty years ago, where were these girls?"

"Women," Laura corrected him.

"Quite right, vimmen."

"They weren't born yet," Max said.

"Exactly. But their mothers?"

"Were dreaming of escape from Peru or the Sudan," Laura guessed.

"Perhaps. Or they were here, all around us, and we did not know to see them. A new beauty has been revealed to our eyes and for that I am grateful, at my age," Sander concluded.

"The city is now over 50% minority. We are the new minority," the actress spread her arms, in a triumphant, maternal gesture remembered, Max imagined, from some 1930's drama of social optimism.

"And all of us are old," he said under his breath.

"Max," his hostess pleaded. They were good friends. She valued his opinions, took his advice, and scolded him freely.

"That's from Lewis Carroll, the Walrus and the Carpenter," he defended himself.

"But you have it wrong, you see," the actress said, gentle grande dame. The line is, "And some of us are fat."

"Well, that certainly doesn't apply to this crowd," John made peace. "Now, who is staying for dinner?"

There is tragedy in all their lives, Max thought, as the elevator descended softly later that night. Sander has outlived two wives and both his children. His daughter was killed in a car crash last year in California. Laura and John have a son who's schizophrenic. Her savings went to doctors who told her she was to blame. Now they say it's chemical but they still can't help him. She sold the summer house to put him in an establishment reputedly humane. It takes her months to recover after each visit. They convinced her she's guilty of "soul murder". Seelenmord-- it's not even good English. Some doctor, some sinister Freudian, put that barbaric phrase into her head. He should be shot. The actress has worked from age fourteen to feed a family of dilettantes and Schwärmer who still depend on her. She loves her work, her pupils worship her, but she is very tired. When I saw her to a cab, an hour ago, she pressed my hand significantly. I pretended not to notice. Why did I begrudge her a returning squeeze? Why so self-protective at my age?

And then there's that sad sack who's always invited and always shows up alone. What's his problem? The voices had this insidious trick; they mimicked even his few friends, his ersatz family, still upstairs over coffee. What a stick in the mud. Still living where the ship unloaded him, oh, fifty years ago. The pier is rotted, defunct, torn down, hauled away for scrap, but there he is, right where he landed, by the water's edge. Waiting for the tide to pick him up and cast him back again? Waiting for his father's chauffeur to appear and whisk him back into a life of ease? Even the nomad Mongols of China have managed, under duress, to settle down. But the sons of our dispersed Hochburgertum are hopeless. Without their inherited decor, they go to pieces."

"Ah, but they do it so discreetly. Max never complains," Laura would defend him. He could count on her.

Sander jogged Max's elbow. He hadn't stayed to gossip, but debonair as one of his own sketches, in a blue blazer with gold buttons, offered Max a ride downtown. A cab appeared at once, as if attracted by his generous magnetism. Their driver, Sander quickly ascertained, was from the Sudan.

"North or South?" he asked. He had crossed the Sudan with a camel caravan in the 1950s. His memories were fresh. By the time they reached 14th street he had produced a quick sketch, in a tiny pocket notebook --a village market, including camels in both standing and kneeling positions. He signed this instant work of art with name and phone number and handed it to the driver with the fare. The driver, a young man with a plump mild face, tore a page from the fare sheet and wrote down the names of an uncle in Houston and one in the Sudan.

"You give out your number to total strangers?" Max asked as they continued south on Fifth Avenue.

"He has more to fear from me than the reverse," Sander assured him. "The laws of desert hospitality are strict. If I show up and say that Ahmed sent me, they'll feel bound to feed me for at least a month."

"A global schnorrer," Max thought. Did Sander, at his age, expect to see the Sudan again? Cockeyed optimist. Bidding him goodnight outside his hotel, Max headed west, mulling his otiose comparisons, till the river breeze and the reassuring smell of salt decay, told him he was home.

Max turned obsolete in 1989. How did he know? It wasn't the sight of Germans partying atop the Wall on Kristallnacht. After forty years of Stalinism, they were entitled to a party. It wasn't reading that Deutschland Uber Alles had been sung in the Bundestag. The Greens at least had the decency to walk out.

But that was taking way too high a tone. He was obsolete, quite simply, because he didn't know computers. He knew graphic design, layout, cut and paste, typography. He knew Jugendstil, Modernstil, Loos, Bauhaus, Corbusier, Albers, Feininger, Mondrian. His room, Laura said, was laid out like a clean blank page, with here and there a bank of type in neatly squared off columns. The printed page was his birthright: his father's library, full of old books, incunabula, with covers heavy as church doors, or stout and swollen like the ark. The kids he taught, at a downtown college, knew something called print media, slick, shallow, throwaway, last month's magazines stacked, bound and dropped in the street, to be hauled off, pulped and recycled. His father's books fed the same kitchen fires as the desk, he supposed. That was neither here nor there. He could still kindle his students' respect for the stiff dignity of print, the tender pliability of paper, born like Moses, in the Egyptian bulrushes.

When computers revolutionized the art department, Laura sat him down at her little Macintosh. It was like sharing your brain with a jocular engineer, who would always cajole you to do things his way. As Max's uncle used to say, nicht mein Dampf. Not my locomotive. Enrollment in his classes dropped sharply. Soon

he was down to a single class each term. Basic design. It was a line with its own cachet, like German Jews. He felt obliged to warn his students, however, that what he taught had no market value, none whatsoever. Yet somehow he hung on. In fall '92 four students signed up for his class. The department head called him in and put on a show of being sorry but.... At the last minute a fifth recruit was found.

Like everyone else, she came straight off the subway, after work, at 6:15 PM Mon & Wed. She was one of Sander's girls, no, vimmen. A mane of curly hennaed hair, her skin a glowing bisque. Rings on her fingers, rings in her ears, a small diamond stud in one nostril, a floppy velvet hat, intricately lacedup boots with heavy soles. A fashion statement. That was good, that was promising for a student of basic design. Her name was Naima. Latin, Arab, African American? Further information was not provided on her registration card.

"What happened to the rest of your name?" he asked first day in class. He didn't mean to put her on the spot.

She flashed a brilliant smile.

"Excess baggage," she said and looked around, good humoredly but hoping to be challenged.

"Another Madonna wannabee," Won So, a rather handsome Korean boy of twenty-two, quickly obliged.

She shot him a look of sovereign contempt.

The following week she wore a small stiff porkpie, of Kente cloth. The week after that, a baseball cap covered with a Byzantine mosaic: red, yellow, bright blue dots of fabric paint.

"I was trying to write  $E=mc^2$  but this is what turned out instead," Max heard her tell Won So. The work she handed in was good, exuberant and self assured as children's drawings. Like a child she repeated the same motif week after week: an odd sort of woolly bird, with ibis legs. A precious, self indulgent kind of drawing, graceful and fanatic, like very early Andy Warhol.

She was a biology major.

"This is just for relaxation," she explained to Max one night. "I always liked to do things with my hands."

"An easy A you mean?" he asked. That was another reason people took his class. If you showed up and did the work, you got an A, for ars longa.

"Something like that," she said and went back to her assignment, designing a record jacket for k.d. Lang.

"Who is k.d.Lang?" he asked.

"I'll bring you a CD," she said, but the next week she was missing and the week after that. The other students had no idea why. Most of the students at the college had fulltime jobs time and ran to class from work. The city swallowed them up. He was miffed. He was going to have to fail her. Or drop her from the course, which would end his teaching career with a whimper, after all.

After the fourth absence he checked her registration card again and found a phone number. Brooklyn? Queens? That night he phoned from home. A woman answered in an accent he couldn't identify. Spanish, Lebanese, creole?

"Tell her Mr. K tried to reach her." He forgot to leave his number. He was going to call back, but decided against it. He would leave it up to Naima to push him into the void.

She called him the next night.

"It's me, I'm at a pay phone in your neighborhood."

"Who told you where I live?"

"Oh, oh, I overdid it, right? You told us, first day of class, remember?"

"When are you coming back to class?"

"It's a long story. I could ring your bell."

He looked around his room for signs of disorder. He wanted to say no. He said, "If you like."

She came in, walked right past him, to the window and stood looking out for the longest time. Then she turned around.

"My brother's out there somewhere. He ran away two weeks go. He's gay, they were giving him a hard time at school. High school, you know, stupidity times two thousand. So he was cutting classes, and staying out all night. My mom was tearing her hair. What's left of it. Finally she told him to get out. So he did and we haven't seen him since."

She didn't sound distraught, just businesslike. This week's hat was a black winter turban that framed her forehead in a stiff widow's peak. Who said capitalism means public squalor, private affluence? What Max saw of his students' lives was private misery, public splendor. What if every subway beauty done up to the nines was on a desperate mission? All those girls taking on the world, while their brothers fell by the wayside? Sander would know.

"I didn't realize you lived right here" Naima said. " They told me this is one area to check out. Maybe we could go around once more, in your car? It's really cold out there."

"I sold my car for scrap a year ago," he was ashamed to admit. No student of his had ever been in his apartment before, much less asked for a ride in his car.

"That's all right," she said. "It's no big deal. I've been all over this neighborhood tonight again, on foot. But maybe you could keep an eye out, you know? Here, this is his picture." She handed him a passport size photo in lurid technicolor. "He looks just like me, people say. His name is Nataniel Ortega. Natan, or Tani, for short. You can keep it. I have lots more. They give you twenty free when you order the 7 x 10 keepsake enlargement." Her plump chin trembled briefly, the first and only sign of emotion.

Max held the photo carefully, by the edges. It was the least he could do. It was probably all he could do.

"You can make up the work, you know," he said.

"I couldn't concentrate now...." Naima brushed his offer aside. So that was that. "I'd better go and let you be."

"I suppose you went to the police?" he asked, to say something.

She nodded. " You know how many kids are running around out there? Not counting the ones from out of state. He was going to go for his beautician's license. The world needs innovative colorists, right? But they won't enroll you till you're seventeen. Bet this never happened to you before?" she asked, and before he could answer, "Who did this?" She pointed to a small painting, the Jersey shore reduced to a smattering of pale squares and rectangles, a trail of cloud, a swath of iridescent green water, a tug with a red smokestack.

"I did, a while back."

"You can paint like that?" she sighed. "You better do some more quick, before...."

"Before what?"

"Nothing...." for once she seemed at a loss. "Before the river dries up. Before the sky falls on us. You know what I mean. Good night." He knew just what she meant. Before



you croak. Through the door of the apartment he heard the purposeful tread of her heavy boots. The vanguard of a generation marching off in the opposite direction.

The spines of his books along the shelves were still perfectly aligned; the table and the bed met at the same right angle. Naima had touched nothing, only window sill and door knob, but she brought disorder, an appalling intrusion. His first instinct was to refuse it. He went to the two big windows and gave a strenuous tug on the Venetian blind cord, like a monk pulling a bellrope. Closed off from sky and river, his apartment was a cell whose proportions -- it was Laura who had pointed this out, jokingly -- were exactly those of a kitchen match box. Or a desk drawer, he said, and reminded her of Kafka's wish to see all the Jews shut into a drawer and suffocated.

"Pfui," Laura said.

"You have to know how to take it," Max told her. "It's not a wish, it's a memory. He's describing his childhood."

"I see," Laura said. But did she really? She was a babe in arms when her parents left Hamburg. An American upbringing, from the start. Still, in any argument, she could be relied on to take his side. When he called her that night to tell her he'd lost a crucial student, she said,

"You know, I think it's all for the best. "

"Why's that?" he asked.

"You're an artist, not a social worker. What do students expect these days? I'm really rather shocked."

It was absurd of Naima to ask for his help, a sign of desperation. She didn't know him or she would have let him be. He was not unhelpful, generally speaking. His friends considered him a good listener. Laura phoned several times a week and talked for an hour.

"You've saved me from the therapists," she told him. "Not to mention their fees. I wish I could repay you. You're so undemanding."

He heard the reproach. So uncommunicative. Real friends bled into each others' open wounds, as in the German rite of Bruderschaft. You put your sword to your own flesh, just a nick, enough to seal the compact. Not his steamship.

He went to bed after a while and tried to sleep. Around two AM the street noises woke him, sirens, amplified shouting. "Pull over to the right." He groped his way to the window. Down in the street a man in a baseball cap stood splayed against the police car. Two cops were patting him down.

"One less troublemaker" said his voices.

"The trouble with Germans," -- his uncle's voice -- "is that they always side with the cops. They see a man in custody, they say, "He must have done something."

He retreated from the window without waiting to see the transaction concluded. He had enough trouble keeping peace among his voices. No one had a right to ask more than that. He went back to bed, pulled the covers over his head and slept.

The next day was unseasonably warm. Even after dark, which came quite early, the temperature remained well above freezing. Good news, Max caught himself thinking. A boy with no place to turn would not die of exposure, or be tempted into risky situations, just to escape the cold. Returning from the supermarket in late afternoon, Max rode in the elevator with a mother and two children, a boy and a girl about ten or twelve years old. The boy's skateboard juttled sideways, like a battering ram; the girl wheeled a bicycle. The mother tugged on a large hairy pale dog, with one blue and one brown eye. The dog kept circling round them, tangling his leash among their legs.

Trapped in the far corner, Max missed his floor. It happened all the time. Families were ruthless to an old bachelor. Monopolizing the largest apartments, overrunning the hallways. Children played handball along the walls, rollerskated down the corridors, crayon in hand, leaving grafitti trails. Dogs piddled in the lobby. The solitary tenant of a single room, returning home with two lamb chops and a bottle of red wine, was shoved aside, as if lack of posterity annulled one's claim on present time as well.

The dog sniffed at Max's groceries. He snatched the bag away, and shot an angry glance at the pet's owner, who failed to notice, as with her free hand she smoothed her young son's tousled curls. Eyes shut, the boy submitted happily to her caress. At the sight of this intimate gesture, Max's anger curdled into Schadenfreude. He knew, as these poor souls had yet to learn, that families can self-destruct in no time. Sons ran away from home, dogs turned on their masters, fathers disowned sons. There was nothing anyone could do about it, anywhere.

Max was thirteen when his parents took a teacher's advice and sent him to boarding school in England. They promised to visit. At first he was homesick and nauseous with fear every morning. Then he made a niche for himself and began to dread his parents' arrival. They would embarrass him before his classmates, remind everyone he was a foreigner. His mother's piping voice, her enthusiasms. His father's monocle. His ungainly little sister. Then the war began, and visits were permanently cancelled.

"I begged them, I begged them to get moving. Your father was so stubborn, it was criminal," his uncle told him when they met again in Canada, in '45. "God help you, you look just like him."

The day before Max left for England, his father took him to the station, a trial run, to confirm the schedule and the track and how much time they'd need to check the baggage. He did this before every trip; it was a mania. He went about his crazy errand calmly, without apology, questioning one worker, then another, weighing their replies. Railroad employees, some in uniforms with tarnished buttons, others in blue smock and baggy trousers, answered patiently, with no sign of the ridicule Max dreaded, because his father never noticed it, while he always did.

"So, track six, and tomorrow also, on track six? Well, let's just make sure, shall we?" And to verify the information given, his father headed to the platform to watch the train pull out, the very train-- with its impressive complement of dining cars, sleeping cars, lounges, smokers-- that on the next day would separate them forever, although neither of them knew it at the time.

Destinations were posted on thick slabs of cardboard, fit into metal slots on the side of every car. The Gothic lettering transformed familiar names -- Hamburg/ Lubeck/ Kiel -- into something ugly and righteously old fashioned. They spotted several acquaintances among the passengers, but it was too late for greetings or farewells. The travelers were sealed behind a sliding wall of glass and steel. The train gathered speed, dwindled to the merest point vanishing at the horizon. Hand in hand, father and son headed for the exit.

"You see?" Max's father seemed less anxious, with this rite completed. "Now we are prepared. Tomorrow will be relatively easy."

From the street, his windows were two tall black rectangles, admitting nothing. It was after midnight on a Thursday night. He was headed uptown, towards the Meat Market, armed with only a flashlight. Its heft comforted him. If necessary, he could stick it in his pocket and pretend it was a gun.

Where the sidewalk gave way to broken cobblestones, he overtook two tall figures in high heels, and short fur jackets.

"Hi Pops," they addressed him. He nodded politely and kept moving.

"Look at him swinging his flashlight," one said to the other, in an unmistakably male voice.

"Lose something, sweetie?" the other called after him.

"Maybe he's a night watchman."

"Nah, he doesn't look the type. His shoes are shiny, and his coat is way too long. He looks more like a Russian diplomat."

"Are you with the UN? Are you with UNICEF? I always give to UNICEF on Halloween. The High Commission for Refugees? No, they're all in Bosnia."

"He's not talking. It must be a secret mission. The whole UN shows up down here on secret missions. Their own neighborhood must be soooo boring."

"Maybe that's why he won't talk to us. It's OK, really, we can keep a secret. Trust us. Absolute discretion guaranteed."

"Maybe he doesn't understand English. God, if only I spoke Russian, my life would be a lot easier." They were about to head east on Gansevoort Street, when Max turned and shouted,

"Wait."

In the light of a streetlamp he caught the expression on their faces, curious, amused, mistrustful.

"Where is your limousine parked?" the taller one asked.

Max shook his head.

"No limousine? So why are you wasting our time?" the other challenged him. The anger was no less real, Max felt, for having been pared down, shaped and contoured into an elegant disguise, a theatrical projection of itself. Some people hid their misery; others flaunted it, hawked it in the streets. What if it was all they had to sell? This thought struck him with such force he couldn't speak. The two exchanged impatient glances, forcing him to remember his errand.

"May I ask you something, seriously?"

"He wants to know where we bought our shoes. Barney's doesn't carry his size."

Neither customer, nor cop -- what should they make of him? It didn't matter what they made of him. He was obsolete. That gave him a certain freedom. There were no appearances to keep up. He was beyond ridicule. He had nothing to lose.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee somewhere?"

"Oooh, how generous," the shorter one squealed. "Thanks but I never touch the stuff."

"Let's just hear it right here," the taller one said. Max wondered if he ought to introduce himself and ask their names. No, that would be like a member of the audience jumping on stage during act two of the play. These two were "on" now. Best to respect their strenuous performance.

"I'm looking for a kid who ran away from home two weeks ago."

"We haven't seen him," the shorter one said quickly. In the streetlight his skin looked yellow, in lurid contrast to his purple lipstick. It was as if a painting by Kirchner had come to life sixty years later in a different place.

"I'm not officially concerned. I'm just a family friend trying to help out," Max insisted, although he already felt it was hopeless.

"If he left, he probably had good reason for leaving," the taller one said, which was either a brushoff, or the closest thing to an intimate confession Max was likely to hear.

"Think about it," his companion agreed. A good-natured warning, all in all.

"There are a million stories in the big city. Live and let live, you know?" the taller one concluded.

They took off, leaving Max alone with his flashlight in the meat market at two in the morning.

"You went out with your flashlight, like Diogenes the cynic with his lantern," Sander laughed when Max told him. "Real fur or fake they were wearing? What do you mean, you didn't notice. So, next time take me with you, no?"

"There won't be a next time," Max assured him. "I'm not a social worker."

But that night he woke at three AM and couldn't sleep. He got up and went to the window and stood, looking out, for a long while. No one passed on West Street. It was too cold for the drug dealers, and the private security company van that patrolled the neighborhood, white and square as a bread box, ended its tour at midnight. After a while his eyes became used to the dark. He focussed on cars speeding down West Street. At this hour the light traffic moved quickly. Why did Naima expect to find her brother roaming the streets? What if he had already left town, on the bus, or hitching a ride? He thought of the Port Authority basement, where blond children in brand new parkas, sleek women in camel hair coats caught the bus for rural Connecticut. Half a day in the city could not dim their glow. Naima's brother on the Red and Tan Line? That was unlikely. The boy he imagined wanted to be found. He was stubborn enough to hold out; but too timid to run very far. He would be drawn to the essential, to Manhattan, and no farther. While waiting to be found, he would struggle with immediate necessities, food, warmth, safety, and congratulate himself on his ability to cope. If the adventure lasted too long -- it was never meant to be anything but provisional -- anger or despair might make him reckless. Even without that, the risks were great. There are a million stories in the big city; a runaway could walk right into someone else's story and disappear for good.

Who would mourn him then? Naima in her black turban with the widow's peak, like a doomed cinquecento princess. When this was over he would offer to paint her portrait. Or enlist Sander, who could catch a brilliant likeness in three lines. No, she deserved the full treatment, in slick oils, or tempera thickened with egg and honey. By this time he he had pulled on a sweater and trousers over his pyjamas. Socks, shoes, overcoat. Empty corridor, empty elevator, the polished steel walls sending back a winnowed, ghostly reflection-- his true self. He was out on the street again. This time he would do like the cops did, shine his flashlight into every car on the street. NO RADIO NOTHING IN TRUNK But maybe a precious backseat cargo, a stowaway curled up asleep, out of the cold.

"Hold it, what do you think you're doing?" Max spun around and shone the flashlight in the eyes of a uniformed policeman.

"Drop it quick," the cop ordered.

"It's just a flashlight," Max said. Where were you when the drug deals were going down last summer, he wanted to ask.

"All the more reason." Max dropped the flashlight, without looking. It rolled into the gutter, under the car he'd been inspecting, a Lexus. Who parked a Lexus on West Street?

"Anything else I should know about?" the cop asked. At least he hadn't reached for his gun.

"I live just upstairs. I was on my way home," Max said indignantly.

"Up against the wall," the cop ordered.

"The wall of my building," he protested. He wondered if his humiliation was visible from upstairs, the sixth floor. Maybe, leaning way out...Thinking about it made him dizzy, as if he were in both places at once, up there looking out, down here, caught red-handed. But he was innocent, he had to remind himself. Sirens sounded down the block, loud enough to wake the dead. A police car with flashing lights pulled up at the corner. A second cop came running.

"What you got there, Phil?"

"Nothing much, yet. OK, turn around slowly. ID?"

"I left it upstairs." He looked up. No neighbors hanging from the windows. That at least.

"Suppose you tell us what you were looking for."

Max hesitated.

"I was looking for a young man I know," he began with what dignity he could muster.

"Oh, that. You should have said so in the first place," the cop greeted him like an old friend. "Lovers quarrels. Look, it's late, it's cold out, go home and go to bed. If he wants to get in touch, he will. If not, what can you do?" He spoke with a mixture of contempt and routine pity, as he would have to a distraught wife. With gruff gallantry, the two cops escorted Max to the entry of the building and waited till he produced his key and turned it in the lock.

"You get a lot of this kind of thing around here," he heard the older cop explain to the younger. "It's usually some older guy. You'd think they'd calm down, but with them, it doesn't work that way. Who knows why."

"We're oversexed, I guess," Max couldn't resist muttering.

The forces of order were no more on his side than the forces of disorder apparently. He went to bed discouraged, and slept badly.

Laura's call woke him early next morning.

"Max, what's going on?" "Sander is so worried about you, he's reverting to Yiddish. He says you've gone meshugge."

"Meshugge is perfectly good German," Max answered automatically.

"Well, never mind that. We're coming down this evening. Promise me you won't do anything foolish till then."

"I'm not setting foot out of the house today," he assured her.

"Why not? Are you ill?"

"You just told me to stay put," he pointed out.  
"Just make sure you're in at five. I'll bring some dinner."

He was fidgety all day. To calm himself, midafternoon, he set up his easel by the window, although the thought of painting repelled him, made him want to hide. He knew painters who put in the hours every day, seven days a week, regular as good digestion, year after year, *ars longa, vita brevis*, for a lifetime. That had never been his way. He worked in bursts, nonstop for weeks, euphoric with

discovery, conviction until suddenly, the wind turned, the moon waned, and self-disgust took hold, so strong he couldn't bear to look at his vile daubings. He shoved the mess into a closet or under the bed, out of sight, out of mind. If only.

When he was younger, around fifty, and extravagant, he had actually heaved a dozen paintings in the trash, chucked them right into a dumpster at a construction site across the street. A thrifty neighbor promptly found the lot and lugged them home, to salvage the stretchers. Then he actually phoned, talk about misplaced good will, and offered some to Max.

"What did you do with the canvasses?" Max asked the well-intentioned colleague, one of those digestive painters to whom the act came naturally as defecation.

"I cut some up for my children to fool around with. I could let you have the rest. It's good stout canvas. Just give it another coat of gesso." Then he told Max the story of an art dealer who bought an authentic Leonardo in Italy, for a very good price. When he got it home and had it cleaned, he discovered an authentic Picasso underneath.

"You're talking to Picasso," Max felt like saying. He couldn't recall if he'd ever showed the guy his work. If so, it had made no impression. So much for romantic despair.

(Laura said he lived under a curse, like a prince in a fairy tale. You know, a mother trades away her first born son. Rumpelstiltskin, minus the happy ending. He was only free and human half the time. The other half, he slaved for evil dwarves under the ground. They picked him apart. The magic potion that undid the curse was called Prozac, she got to the point. No heroic feats required to obtain it. On sale in every pharmacy. She could easily get him a prescription. Why was he so stubborn? She spoke in a rush, a speech prepared in advance. She must have talked to a Jungian psychopharmacologist. He promised to think about it. )

After several hours of false starts, he  
began to paint without thinking, delighted by the early sunset, those



Venetian golds and reds pollution casts into the sky above the Hudson on a winter afternoon. Smoke was rising from the pier, a thin grey squiggle, cutting through the gold. He dipped his brush in black, before he realized it meant fire again. He called 911, then ran back to the window. Smoke billowed out now, and who was that running from the covered pier? Two men went north, a third went south. A variegated flash, a cap of many colors Max recognized at once. He ran out without his coat, down all ten flights and across the street, dodging traffic. The tall figure in the painted baseball cap, its colors glowing like the dome of St Marks, loped well ahead of him. Max finally caught him at the corner of Christopher and West.

"Where's the fire?" Sirens sliced the air, as the engines sped down West Street. A routine call.

"I didn't start it." His face was pale and streaked with grime and tears. Max hesitated. If finding the boy was this easy, the real ordeal must be ahead of him. One wrong word and he would lose him again, for good.

"I like your hat. Is it for sale?" he asked.

"Depends," the boy said, after hesitating.

"Twenty dollars?"

"Forget it," he was about to hurry on.

"Name your price."

"A hundred," the boy said.

"All right, but I don't have it on me. Come back to my place. It's up the street." There was the surface misunderstanding: An old man picking up a kid on the street. Is that what the boy imagined? There was the deeper lie, of knowing more than he was letting on. He had no experience of fatherhood, manipulating children for their own good. He wanted to blurt out the truth, but waited.

"Let's go," he tried to sound authoritative. He turned and started walking. The boy followed. Max fell into step with him. Neither of them spoke. Their frozen breath hung in the air like blank balloons in a comic strip.

Max prayed that none of his ninety fellow tenants would show up in the lobby or the elevator. His prayer was granted but the feeling of self-hatred, of total uselessness grew insistent, blinding. He was sure to mess up. Naima would never forgive. He fumbled with the key. He tried to recall what cash he had on hand. Afraid of saying something that would backfire, he said nothing at all.

Inside the apartment he calmed down somewhat. The boy looked frozen in his jean jacket. Max offered to make coffee, a sandwich, a lamb chop. The boy gave him a funny look when he heard the words "lamb chop."

"A sandwich is OK. Thanks." The wind off the river rattled the windows. It was growing colder in the apartment, even with the heat on full blast.

"Look, why don't you wash up and change into these." He gave the boy a pair of jeans, shirt and sweater.

"Go ahead. The bathroom's over there," he spoke firmly. "With children and dogs," a fragment of some idiotic German proverb ran through his head.

"They fit," Tani announced a minute later. A quick study, he slipped right into a costume, a new role, and got caught up in it. Max looked at him. He was a tall, gangly kid but the resemblance to his sister was unmistakable, if you knew to look for it. The same delicate features. In a young male, the effect of such soft beauty was startling. His hair, under the cap, was dyed bright blue, like the UN flag. A form of camouflage so patently useless it made Max cringe with pity.

He hid himself in the kitchen, busy with the sandwiches, his hands trembling. He laid down the knife, covered his face with his hands, that reeked of onion, and wept. It wasn't an attraction, he was fairly sure. Imagine discovering that at his age. It was probably aesthetic. Naima's beauty without Naima's combative character didn't stand a chance in this world. He could offer Tani a few minutes of reprieve, and then what?

"Hey, where did you get those? What's going on?" the boy had found Naima's drawings, lying on the table, and crumpled them in his fists.

"Why don't you eat while I explain," Max said. "I hope you like raw onion. One of my students did those drawings and you just ruined them."

"I can do what I want with them. They're mine. Naima had her chemistry midterm to study for, so she got me to do her work as usual. All I got out of it was this," he waved the many-colored cap.

"Maybe you should have been the one taking my class," Max began. Once the boy began to eat he couldn't stop. Max talked and fed him sandwiches. This went on for quite a while, until the doorbell rang. It was Sander, in his martial overcoat, his face bright red from the cold.

He read the whole situation in the blink of a well-trained eye.

"The blue badge of courage. Quite effective in its way. This kid has a future, no doubt about it." He picked up the drawings and smoothed them out.

"Professional curiosity," he explained. "Not bad, untrained, but not bad. Max, aren't you going to introduce us?"

In no time Sander had Tani perched on a stool, posing for a nervy elongated portrait -- Schiele, Kokoschka -- in pastels on brown paper. He worked quickly, efficiently, like a court reporter. Laura arrived, took one look and ran out again, returning half an hour later with a dozen yellow roses.

"It was all I could find in a hurry" she apologized.

"Who are they for?" Max asked.

"For poor Mrs. Ortega, who do you think, after all she's been through," she answered.

"Full of thorns, how fitting," said Max, who expected Naima's mother to be a holy terror, to blame him for her son's defection, to accuse him of corrupting a minor and who knew what else. Or she might be so effusive in her gratitude he would have to flee to the incinerator closet, since there was no second room in his apartment.

She was neither. She was a small inexpressive woman in a shiny raincoat and white Reeboks, and short spiked hair the color of raspberry jello. Her children's looks must come from their father's side, Max thought, as he studied her square jaw and low forehead. He reminded himself not to stare.

"Sorry, we had to wait for the night nurse to come in from Canarsie," Naima took charge, while her mother hung back in the doorway. "Did he give you a hard time?"

"Not in the least," Sander dusted the chalk off his hands and introduced himself with the merest suggestion of a courtly bow. Naima was stunned speechless for about two seconds.

"All right you two, kiss and make up and let's get out of here," she ordered her mother and brother. Neither of them budged.

"Did you apologize to these people for all the trouble?," Mrs. Ortega began to harangue her son. "No? How about to me? Look at me, I'm a wreck, I haven't slept one single night since..."

"Since you threw him out, Ma, you can say it. If you can do it, you can say it," pitiless Naima intervened. Laura took that as her cue.

"These are from us, Mrs. Ortega," she dangled the bouquet at arms length, a carrot to a shy pony. "We mothers are in it together."

"You don't have to give me flowers," Mrs Ortega made no move towards the roses. "You did enough already. It was good of your husband to worry about Tani. He doesn't deserve it."

"Oh, my husband is uptown in bed with a cold and a biography of Churchill," Laura recovered her social manner. "Max is just an old friend."

"Whoever he is, we apologize for the nuisance. Come on, Tani, what do you say? "

"We took care of that before you got here, Mrs Ortega," Max intervened. This little woman was a pint-sized Pandora's box, ready to fly open any minute. Hard to imagine her as one of Sander's subway beauties. No wonder Tani fled.

Naima smelled judgment in the air. With wounded pride, she came circling behind her mother, leaned up against that tree trunk body, looped an arm around her mother's neck in a proprietary chokehold.

"You don't have to be so formal with us, professor. My mom's name is Vilma, like the Flintstones." Mrs. Ortega tolerated Naima's playful aggression, but it was her son she had eyes for, flashing traffic signals of love and reproach. He eyed her in turn, running a hand through his blue hair. Finally, he slid off the high stool and moved in her direction, hips jutting like a runway model's, putting his faith in his ability to camp in any situation. But he had the wrong scenario, Maxi realized with dismay. Not the Return of the Prodigal, but a Star is Born. He was waiting for someone, anyone, to yank him by his collar -- Max's collar, he was wearing Max's shirt -- and command "Stay right where you are. You belong with us, we need you in Manhattan."

To rescue a kid from the street was a snap; to save him from his family was too big an undertaking, when you were terminally obsolete. Because obsolescence, Max finally had it straight, was a continuous process, like hardening of the arteries, which begins, the experts say, in childhood.

He turned his back on the reunited couple and addressed Naima.

"Now, may we expect you back in class?"

"I was going to tell you, I dropped out two weeks ago. Too late to get a refund. Anyway, next term I'm going to college, in Minnesota. They're giving me full tuition plus thirty credits for life experience."

"She's going to be a doctor," her mother spoke up. "Not bad for the daughter of a home health aide."

"You're a very good home health aide, don't put yourself down," Naima

scolded. "Mrs Perlstein would be dead without you." The words were kind but the tone was angry, judging. Max almost felt sorry for Mrs Ortega, for Vilma. Better than feeling sorry for himself. This oblivious girl, full of life and promise, had shut down his career while launching her own.

"So how did you bring the kid round?" Laura asked later that evening. She and Max sat over their meal. Sander had gone off to an opening uptown.

The Brooklyn intruders were becoming a topic to dine out on. This was the rehearsal, so to speak.

"We just had a man to man talk," Max said.

"That doesn't sound like you."

"All right, boy to boy. After all, I was a boy myself once. I can't help it. I was born that way." Laura considered this.

"I've known you for thirty years and you've never told me anything."

"There's not a lot to tell. WYSIWYG, you know."

"Wysiwyg?"

"It's computer slang my students taught me. It means," Max pointed to his long rectangle of living space, its entirety visible at once, "What you see is what you get. It could also work in painting, come to think of it."

"Your ex-student could have shown more gratitude, I must say," Laura persisted.

"When you think of all the dangers you rescued that boy from...."

Max had no complaints. On her way out the door, Naima tipped forward onto the steel toes of her combat boots and planted a cool kiss on his cheek.

"When I'm a doctor I'll take care of you for free," she murmured next to his ear. "You're one of the good guys."

"We've heard that before," his voices jeered, as the door shut behind her.

At the start of the spring term, the dean called Max in and told him he was being terminated. The demand for basic design just wasn't there.

"Terminated? How terminal is that?"

"Please, don't make this hard for me," the dean replied.

"Sorry," Max apologized. "I wish you all the best."

"Likewise," his employer said.

Now there was no delay, no interruption to his work. Max would always prefer the distillate of distant shores to what the street washed up. Sander came by from time to time, to inspect the new paintings.

"Not bad. Keep at it. Keep at it. Another twenty years and you may accomplish something. As an artist, you have your whole life ahead of you."

"And as a human being?" Max asked, out of sheer masochism.

"Ask me next year," Sander said, kind and evasive. But by the next year, Sander was dead.