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Stalker

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By the third occasion—she couldn't exactly call them "dates"—Mira thought she had him figured out. Before that she had not been able to determine whether he was a crazy person acting sane or a sane person acting crazy. She had met him through the personals. His ad had described him as "energetic" and "ambitious," and had said he liked public radio, long moonlight walks, and quiet times at home. They had moved smoothly enough through the early rituals of acquaintance, though there was an awkward moment after she told him where she worked, when he flushed and confessed bleakly that he had dated someone else who worked there. It was a big company, she remarked, and then changed the subject. Finally his quality of manic inertia had proved too much for her. The reason she had seen him a third time had been only to figure him out. Now that she felt she had done so, to the extent possible or desirable, there seemed little point in continuing. But when he briskly dropped her off at her door and asked in his odd way, "Want to do it again?" she answered cheerfully that he should call her the next week.

Angela had been having trouble sleeping in the week since the phone calls began. At first she thought if she removed the phone from beside her bed, her sleep would be restored. But she resisted the idea of moving the phone because she did not want to have to think she was undertaking any action in her life whatever as a result of the phone calls. So she lay in bed resenting the caller, with his ridiculous, breathy, high-pitched voice, for demanding with his own illicit attentions any of her attention at all, and she stared at the bedside phone as if it were some small, vicious creature curled up in a sleep that mocked her own wakefulness, whose dormant violence could spring back to life at any second. Finally she removed the phone to the extra bedroom, and then she lay staring at the empty space on the bedside table, worrying over her own fear and weakness, and remembering the words of

the caller. When she had picked up the phone the first time, she had heard a man's voice screech a stream of nonsense syllables that sounded something like, "You dare for nothing in the least this fine fine sweetness." Taken aback, she had stupidly asked who was calling, as if the speaker of such words could be called to account by the common powers of telephone etiquette. Then he shouted clearer obscenities, and she remembered what you were supposed to do in such situations, but as she hurried to hang up the phone, she heard the caller say, "I'm watching your every fucking move, bitch!"

People at work were starting to notice a quality of distraction in her. She explained it by saying she had not been able to sleep. Often this explanation prompted the intricate elaboration of home remedies for insomnia. She knew that people liked to believe they could cure other people's woes, and she was sure that if she told them about the calls, these same people would offer up a variety of ready-made, makeshift defenses against the sundry threats of violation that were abroad in the world. That would only make it worse, so she decided to keep it to herself so long as he did not call again, and she wondered how much longer she would have to endure her own fear, and listened to her pulse reverberating in her ear as her ear pressed against her pillow. Sometimes the sound of her own pulse comforted her in its familiar regularity, but other times it alarmed her, like the insistent beats of a clock ticking away irreversible time, or as if it were the rhythmic noise of water leaking slowly, drop by drop, from a minute chink at the bottom of a vast but finite reservoir that would one day run dry.

Behind his milky blue eyes gathered a cluster of thoughts and ideas that troubled Mira by accumulation. "People shouldn't believe most of the stuff they believe," he had said, with a broad sneer, "but it's not like there's stuff they *should* believe that they *don't* believe." She had only nodded. How else could one respond to such a remark? The remark had been uttered in the context of what she had thought was a pleasingly circumspect conversation deploring forms of extremist behavior. They had begun by talking about the spate of recent bombings of government buildings, and this led to talk of the rise of private militias in the country, and

that in turn led to discussion of the excessive religious fervor or political affiliation that caused such problems in the first place. She had thought they were in basic accord—for how could there be two sides, who would defend the terrorists?—when he made his remark. She had nodded, and quickly turned the conversation to the subject of movie stars who became Scientologists.

But what did the remark mean? It had at once the scary force of an injunction and the open destiny, the laissez-faire attitude, of a shrug. If people were going to give commands, she thought, they could at least be direct about it. Maybe it was a matter of tone. She was aware of men's fondness for giving orders, and she knew that when men tried to be sensitive, the effort resided not in resisting the temptation to give orders but in issuing the orders in patient, gentle-sounding voices. His remark had the blunt tone of an order but the complicated structure of a paradox. She felt deeply frustrated that she was smart enough to recognize the kind of knot he had tied but somehow not agile enough to unravel it. It would not be fair, though, to write him off as crazy on the basis of this utterance alone, however readily its sophistry could be used, in the worst of all possible worlds, to justify the violence of mad bombers. It was what she thought his ideas would finally add up to, one by one, that disturbed her. She glanced down the narrow road of this possible future and saw a wall at the end of the road.

When he called to set up a fourth meeting, she told him she was busy.

Angela was slicing a red pepper when she cut her finger. The pain was immediate; it shot to her core. She dropped the knife on the floor. The pain was so sharp it did not seem to be located in the small, deep cut. It seemed to be elsewhere, attached to something larger. She had not been paying enough attention to what she had been doing. How foolish, how foolish. She looked at the cut. It gaped, and some blood began slowly welling into it, but the cut was very deep, and it would take time for the blood to come. She tried to remember where the bandages were. When the blood came it would be the color of the pepper. She gave the faucet a slow turn. Warm water streamed into the sink. She waited for the blood to come.

* * *

By the middle of the afternoon, the news had traveled throughout the building. Angela, in accounting, had received a special delivery, and she had broken down in the office and been sent home. There were differing versions in circulation of what terrible thing the package had contained, but what was clear was that it had been some sort of small, dead animal with a string tied, noose-like, around its throat. Mira, in marketing, did not exactly know Angela, but they had friends in common, and it had been because of Angela, indirectly, that Mira had recently decided to try dating through the personals columns. Angela had confided to Maureen Hackett that she was trying it, and Maureen had mentioned it to Mira, and that had been enough to fortify Mira's curiosity. If a woman of Angela's beauty could resort to the personals, then Mira, without inordinate shame, could do so, too. Mira had met Angela once at a retirement party a while ago, and on that occasion she had found it necessary to strive consciously to quell her own envy of Angela's beauty, just as now she pushed away the ill-spirited thought that this was what such beauty came to, having angry, wounded men send you dead rodents wrapped up in gift boxes. So much of life had to do with resisting the constant tug of meanness.

That night, Angela swore to renounce her fear. All day friends and family had comforted her, and she had spoken to the police, and they had comforted her as well, with a comfort more hollow but still welcome. But she hated herself for needing their comfort, and she resolved that she would need it no longer. Her resolve was hardened still further by an interview with a murderer that she happened to see on television. Before, she would have changed the channel, but now she forced herself to watch in a state of disgusted fascination. The murderer was a truck driver with a jowly face and placid, quizzical eyes. He spoke of his killings boastfully but affectlessly. He prided himself on the tricks he played on the police, confessing and recanting, or confessing to crimes he had not committed, in order to expose the justice system for the fraud it was. The sight of the murderer, and the sound of his calm, even voice as he spoke of the horrors he had inflicted on women, excited a feeling of loathing in Angela. For a period of years he had gone from town to town, taking women

from their homes, or snatching them from phone booths, or picking them up in bars. He was especially brutal with the ones he picked up in bars, he said, because they should have known better. The interviewer asked if he felt any remorse, and the murderer answered that sometimes he felt bad that some of the women were dead, but he could not let himself think about it much. The story of the world was that hatred engendered hatred, and Angela believed the reason she was still alone was because she did not want to be a part of this story, or any of the stories that went along with it, but maybe in the long run she would find that she was able to rise above loathing and feel a contemptuous gratitude to these men, these murderers, for spurring her to be proud of her chosen reclusion, hard in her lonely strength.

Mira glimpsed Angela on the mall at lunchtime, walking with another woman, then settling to eat. The other woman looked like a paler, heavier version of Angela. She must have been Angela's sister, and as Mira watched them she felt a pang of pity for the heavy, pale, plain woman sitting with Angela, pity for having the blessed Angela as her sister. Mira imagined the lifetime of unflattering comparisons such a circumstance would lead to. The afternoon sun was bright, and Angela, smiling and laughing, was wearing designer sunglasses, but her sister was squinting into the daylight, eyes unguarded, contemplatively chewing a bite of a croissant sandwich. It was immediately clear how her sister could make Angela laugh, and it was clear that this ability required no effort on her sister's part. Her sister enjoyed remaining stoically straight-faced, Mira saw, while Angela laughed at her dry observations of the world. Angela offered her sister a stalk of celery, but the offer was refused, and the sister looked away, distance coming into her face, her full cheeks stretching as she turned her head. It was like a little ballet, a stylized pas de deux, thought Mira, an anatomy in mime of a whole history of offering and refusal, advance and withdrawal. She could see Angela's need of the sister; she could see how the sister accepted this need but still drew back, and she could see how Angela hardened, without disowning her need. Then she could see how the whole process started over and repeated itself. The sound of Angela's laughter carried across the mall, so carefree that it bore no traces of recent upset—seemed a

laugh always ready, imperturbable, but more expressive of sureness in oneself than of pleasure taken in others. This is my sister, Mira imagined Angela saying, she's the funny one.

At dusk Angela stood at the kitchen sink, carefully and slowly washing a week's accumulation of dishes, when she saw a boy in the street below wearing a white nightshirt and staring upward. Despite having vowed to renounce fear, she might well have felt a rush of fear all the same if she had not seen at once that he was looking not at her, but past her, up toward the roof of the building. Her third-floor window overlooked a shadowed alleyway, and it was unusual to see anyone passing there, and even more unusual to see, in the midst of the city and in the depth of a cold spring, a nightshirted boy who, with his sharp eyes and delicately flared nostrils and high cheekbones, looked as if he had escaped from an English country manor house. He stood stock still in an attitude of frozen concentration. In the briefest second that she glimpsed the boy's face, she saw an intense expression of compliance in it, so that it was clear that the boy was exchanging a look with someone who was looking back at him from above. She thought she saw the boy nod in the instant she looked at him: a brisk, quick nod, barely perceptible, not of permission but of assent, as if he were receiving and accepting some dark command. Too much steam heat was hissing through the clanging radiators of Angela's apartment, so she had cranked open the casement window to let in a little cold air as she did the dishes, and because the window had no screen, she could easily extend her head through it; instinctively she did so, leaned forward out the window, and peered up at the roof to catch a glimpse of whom the boy was looking at, but a twilight glare, bleached and dappled with glimmering black dots, obstructed her view, and when she looked back down at the street, she saw that the figure was moving quickly away. As the figure strode from the effulgent shadow of the alley, rounding a corner into the pale light of the street, Angela saw that it was not a boy at all, but a man, and she saw that what he was wearing was not a nightshirt but a long gray overcoat.

Mira agreed to see Justin one last time, just to confirm her foreboding. On the way to the restaurant, he suddenly pointed glee-

fully at the car in the street ahead of them. The car sported a vanity license plate, ELVISFAN, and a bumper sticker that said, "God is Pro-Life," but the bumper sticker and the license plate were not the source of his glee. The car contained two passengers, a man wearing a business suit and a turban in the driver's seat, and a woman in an elaborate sari sitting behind him in the back seat. Mira and Justin could see only the backs of their heads, the man's regal headpiece, the woman's shrouded head. Justin laughed and repeated, "Check it out, check it out!" He was clearly delighted by this spectacle of subordination. Abruptly, he grew more serious and said, "Last time I looked I thought it was already going on the twenty-first century."

This time, Justin seemed more consistently self-assured than he had seemed on their previous meetings, but he still shuttled between the dizzyingly bipolar characteristics of the emotionally backward, the bashfulness and the insouciance, the sullenness and the unpredictable, fickle exuberance. As before, he would indulge in occasional half-crazed monologues on arcane topics and then fall silent with an air of stagnating embarrassment. Mira smiled at him across the dinner table with waspish, pseudo-benevolent forbearance in order to encourage this embarrassment, which appeared to have the effect of warding off, or at least postponing, the monologues. Because she knew she would not see him again, she felt expansive and lighthearted as she gazed at his wide, chary face with his too-small eyeglasses, their arms straining to the sides across his temples in their effort to encompass the breadth of the face, to reach the big, far-off ears.

Unexpectedly, Justin embarked on a new monologue that occupied the rest of the meal, souring Mira's mood. If you don't have theories about things, Justin believed, then you are leading the life of the blind, so Justin made it a point of honor to have a theory about everything, and one of these theories was that you should not talk about relationships right away in a relationship but if you do not talk about relationships early on in a relationship, it is a very bad sign for that relationship. He wanted her to know of his past, but she could not know of this unless she understood that he still loved the few women he had loved in his life. He hoped this would not disturb her. He still loved them, and he knew that he would always love them, and he was glad of this, for he

believed, he sincerely believed, that if it is the case that love, real love, can die, then it must be the case that life has no meaning. His mother had often spoken, he told Mira, of a man, another man she might have married if she had not married his father. She had once loved this man, and she spoke of him often with a quality of humorous, teasing regret to get a fond rise out of his father; then, after Justin's father died, his mother had met this man again, and she realized after all those years what she had really known all along, that she no longer loved the man. When she told Justin this, she had expected him to feel some kind of relief, as if the memory of his father were being properly honored, but instead he had felt furiously disappointed, disillusioned, enraged. If his mother could stop loving this other man, then how could he be sure she would never forget his father, or even that she would always love Justin himself? If love had an end, how could one be sure of anything?

"I'm going to tell you something I think you already know," said Justin. "*No two people are ever in the same place at the same time.* And what that means is, is that in any relationship, one person is always ahead of the other. They can be ahead in different ways, and at different times, and maybe one's ahead in some ways and the other's ahead in other ways, and it, like, switches around and stuff, but one is always ahead of the other, no matter what. I'm not telling you anything you don't know already. I know you know it. I know from stuff you've said, because even though we're just starting we have this simpatico thing going and we basically think alike, and in any *human* relationship, and I'm talking *human* here, not just romantic-type stuff, but every time you're with anyone else, it's basically about giving and getting, giving and getting, and it's basically this back-and-forth thing, either you're giving and they're getting or they're giving and you're getting, and for there to be something really mutual there, to be giving and getting *at the same time*, is just very very very rare, and when that happens you should never ever let it go because if it was real in the first place, and I mean really real, then it's always going to be still there. I just want you to know this up-front so there are no surprises later; I'm just a really up-front kind of person."

He began a detailed history of several past relationships, breaking off from time to time to ask if he was boring her. When she

answered that she was not bored, she thought she was being truthful, since she was conscious only of growing increasingly scared, but she realized with a dulled sensation of slow discovery in the course of the monologue that fear and boredom were not incompatible states. She tuned out for only a moment to consider whether it would be easier to excuse herself and flee or to wait out the rest of the evening in careful silence. When she rejoined his discourse, he had somehow moved from the subject of his old girlfriends to that of popular misconceptions about leprosy. She interrupted gently to tell him she was not feeling well and wanted to leave. He looked thunderstruck for a second, then he neatly folded his napkin and placed it on the table in front of him. On the way to the car, he said nothing, but he walked so fast that she had to break into a run every few steps to keep up with him. She had wondered earlier why he had parked on the same street where he had parked last time they had gone out, even though the restaurant they had gone to then had been several blocks in the opposite direction, but she had concluded that this reflected the staunch commitment to habitual behavior that marked a certain type of obsessive personality. Now, though, as he opened the door of the car for her, Mira noticed that he was looking with steely directness at a window, a particular window, in a row of apartments down the block. As Mira got into the car, she followed with her own eyes the direction of his gaze, and she saw what she thought was the silhouette of a figure moving quickly past the window. Then he slammed the door.

All that week the pattern had been the same, a sharp, unexpected thought registering in Angela's brain just at the decisive moment of sleep's onset, as if its prevention were an urgent need. Usually the thoughts were trivial, their ability to wake her mysterious, and Angela sat up in bed wondering at her continued failure to achieve the condition of sleep, a state formerly accessible without effort, without the thought of achievement, or of failure, or, for that matter, of success.

This time the thought that jolted her—intrusive, violent, stealing into her mind like a mugger lurching into a dark alleyway, shocking her awake—was surprising not for its insignificance but for its magnitude. What if it *was* someone she knew—someone

she had dated, or even someone who worked in her office? Suddenly she recalled the face of the last man she'd gone out with. His face had been sharp-jawed, the features severe, and his skin was pale, and cast in a delicate shade of pink, the color of blush wine. The color of the skin looked like a blush, as if he had just been fondly teased and was mildly, pleasantly embarrassed, but the blush never went away, and it gave him an aura of vulnerability despite the hardness and sharpness of his features. Around the edges of his face, at the line of his straw-colored hair, was a thin border of skin of a different color, barely perceptible between the red and the straw, closer to the more ordinary tones of white skin, and this border made it appear as if he were wearing a mask, and the mask was a blush.

It had been nearly three months ago that they had gone out, and she had seen him only a few times, but she had slept with him the last time, and then they had never called each other again. They had not called each other even though, as they were parting after sex, they had each whispered that they would call the other the next day. The very fact of whispering had implied a newfound intimacy. But the next day had passed with no call, and then a week went by, and a month, and with time she knew more completely what she had already known then, even as she had whispered in the darkness to the man she had just slept with, that the intimacy was not real.

She tried to recall the man's voice, so she could imagine his voice speaking those awful words, but she could bring to mind only the way his voice sounded when he whispered. Then she remembered that she had seen him, or someone who might have been him, in the food court of a mall a few weeks before. She had been with her sister, and he had been with an overweight woman who had a star-shaped bruise on the back of one of her hands and was ravenously eating a pizza. Angela said nothing about it to her sister, but she imagined a flicker of recognition and rebuke in the man's eyes. If it had been him, he had changed in the short time since they had dated. He was wearing thick eyeglasses and a gaudy earring, and a thick clump of hair sprouted from his chin and pointed down at the ground. These features were new, but even from a distance and under the mall's artificial light, she could see that the color of his skin was the same and the border at

the hair that made it look like a mask was the same. Still, she had concluded that it was not him, but as she and her sister were leaving the food court to go on with their shopping, she had seen the man slowly begin to scratch his forehead with a deliberately extended middle finger as he seemed to gaze at her, a gesture of ambiguous contempt. She had hurried her sister away, and in spite of a moment's alarm, she had not spoken of the incident.

Some of the alarm she felt then returned as she remembered the event. Perhaps the man had felt betrayed by her failure to call him after they had, if not achieved genuine intimacy, at least approached it, achieved the semblance of intimacy, done what was necessary to achieve it. But why then did she not feel, in turn, betrayed by his failure to call her? If he had done so, she would have seen him again. She would probably even have slept with him again. She had not been attracted to him, but she had slept with him because of his gentleness, and because she did not want to hurt him by refusing him. She herself had lived with her own beauty for all of her thirty-one years, and creeps who had seemed nice at first always claimed it was her beauty that drove them to creepiness, so she knew how unexpectedly gentleness could depart. As she'd gazed at his body, she experienced a distant, vague stirring of repulsion. The skin of his chest was very white, marked by many imperfections, and in the hollow of his chest were several ruddy creases, like the grainy wrinkles in sand that an ebb tide leaves behind on a beach. She resisted the feeling of repulsion, and the meeting of her receding, muted disgust with his eager sweetness produced a rush of tenderness in her that subsided as she undressed. He looked and looked at her after she undressed, and she could see the emotion in his blush-red face, but she could not tell if he was moved by her beauty itself, or by her willingness to give herself to him. "I knew you were beautiful," he said; and because of the way he emphasized the word "knew," she had thought he was going to finish the sentence by saying something like, "But I never dreamed you were *this* beautiful." He did not complete the thought in this manner, though. Instead, he had whispered, "I am seeing you in a different way"; and she had replied, also in a whisper, "I'm still what I was."

* * *

Justin left three messages on Mira's answering machine over the next two days. The first was solicitous, wondering how she was. The second contained a subdued note of sarcasm, observing that if she was out, her sudden illness could not have been serious, since she was already back to work. The third was direct: "Look, I'm not the kind of person who's very good at playing games, okay," said his voice, muffled by the bad sound quality of the overused tape. "So if you're not going to call could you kind of let me know instead of just leaving me totally hanging?" Mira was stunned: He wanted her to call to tell him she was not going to call. It was some completely new form of passive-aggression, yet to be catalogued by the experts. She was listening to his message again in continued disbelief when the phone rang. It was Justin.

"So were you just not going to call or what?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Mira. "I don't respond well to hostility, I know that much."

"Are we just, like, *off* or what?"

"I think," answered Mira, "we are just, like, *off*."

"Can I ask why?"

"I don't know if I can give you answers. I don't know if I really want to get into it."

"Oh, well, that's just great. Isn't that just typical. I mean, you women: You're always, like, 'Men just can't communicate and it's just so terrible and blah blah blah blah blah,' and so here I am trying to communicate and look who's the one that doesn't want to communicate."

"I don't really know," said Mira, "if I would call this trying to communicate."

"I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry." Mira heard him taking deep breaths. Then she heard him resume in the voice she recognized, his earnest, sad-sack voice, only now she saw that this voice, too, was filled with rage, a kind of rage so perpetual that it goes underground, lurks there, learns to imitate reason, waits to break out. "I really am sorry," he said. "Can I just ask you what it was that I did wrong? I think it would really help me to know. I mean, for the future."

The resort to cliché, Mira speculated, might prove to be the quickest way out. "It's not you," she said. "It's me."

"Because everything seemed to be going good, you know, and it

really seemed to be building, and like developing, and I was getting to know you, and you were getting to know me, and you really seemed to like me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mira.

“So if I could just know what I did that was wrong.”

“It wasn’t anything you did.” Mira decided she would try one last gambit. It was a risk, she knew, for although most maniacs do not recognize their own thoughts when those thoughts return in altered form to beset them, some maniacs do. “Let’s just put it this way,” she said. “In any relationship one person is always ahead of the other; so why don’t we just say you’re ahead of me, and leave it at that?”

She knew the risk had not paid off and the silence that followed was an angry silence when he said in a withering voice, “I see.” Then he went on: “Well, I guess the shoe is really on the other foot now, isn’t it? All that talk, all that talk about men not being able to commit, but when it comes right down to it, we can see exactly what that’s all about, now, can’t we, and you know what it’s all about? *Hypocrisy*, that’s what. *Hypocrisy*, pure and simple.”

“Please, Justin,” she said wearily. “I never said men can’t commit. Why don’t we just say goodbye now? I don’t want to have to hang up on you.”

“But you will have to,” said Justin. “Okay? You’ll have to. Because I’m not going to. So go ahead. Hang up. Hang up. Go ahead. Turn the last screw.”

Mira waited only a second before she hung up.

The hard rain that had fallen all day turned suddenly to snow at nightfall, big wet flakes wafting downward slowly. Driving to the store for milk and cranberry juice, Angela saw a handicapped man crossing a street. One of his legs listed wildly to the side as he walked, the sign of some neuromuscular affliction, and Angela, stopped at a light, regarded him in the moment before she drove on with a combination of pity and gratitude. Imagine living in such a condition, where the simplest task demanded the most daunting work, where every few steps required the effort it took to execute a gauntlet. She took the man’s laborious trek across the street as a reminder to appreciate her own comparative good fortune. On the way back from the store, she saw the same

man standing a little farther on from where he had been, in the middle of the street, in Angela's lane of traffic. Although it was dark, the snow lit the night, so she saw him in plenty of time to stop, but the road was slick, and as she braked she felt the car slide before it came to a stop. Her heart quickened. She shouted to the man, and as he turned in an antic pirouette to face her, she realized that he was not handicapped at all, but drunk. His tongue was sticking out, gathering snowflakes, and there was a look of scorn in his face, of intoxicated derision. He smiled at Angela malevolently. In his smile Angela saw the drunkard's recognition, which she knew from having shared it when she herself was drunk, that everything is absurd except oneself, and oneself is kept from absurdity only by virtue of being a self, a self that, distilled, is somehow still one's own. All these separate entities, a multitude of oblivious monads, each subscribing to the absurdity of all the others, and the essential rightness of itself: What kind of a world was that? She shouted to the drunk man that he was standing in the middle of the street, and he said it was all right because there was nobody else there. "But I am," Angela cried, "I'm here."

"Keep going," said the man, "and get gone, and then you won't be."

Mira avoided going into Maureen Hackett's cubicle at work because its aura of smug domesticity felt oppressive to her. Maureen Hackett's desk was cluttered with plastic stand-up frames containing photographs of her husband and her two children in a variety of dispositions, from the diurnal pleasure of ordinary life to the posed ritual of special occasions. Alongside numerous posted slogans, comical philosophies of the workplace, more photographs were pinned to the industrial-tweed covering of the cubicle's walls, kids blowing out birthday candles, family groupings in exotic vacation spots, forthright displays of the conspicuous consumption of happiness. The photographs gave Mira the willies. Though she did not doubt that the happiness they chronicled was real, the amplitude of its evidence made her think of it as a greedy happiness. The whole family was cursed with big-toothed smiles that showed their bright, pink gums. Their gaping leers of happiness in the photographs spoke to Mira of un-

quenchable voracity, insatiability, as if they wanted, the lot of them, to hoard happiness, to squirrel it away, even if it meant others might not get any; as if they would not hesitate to lap up, hoggishly, as much as they could of this scant resource. Mira had to get Maureen Hackett's approval of a memo before she sent it out, and as she signed off, Maureen murmured the lowdown on Angela. The package was not all there was to it, it turned out. There had also been phone calls, and Angela felt she was being followed, watched. Once she thought she had been followed in the parking garage.

It was Justin, Mira knew immediately; it was Justin who was stalking Angela.

Once she had articulated this to herself, the wonder was only that she had not done so sooner. It made cold, lean sense. It fell into place with sharp precision, like the clean-edged segments of a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. The varieties of a family's happiness can be verified because there are photographs, millions upon millions, to commemorate every one of them; the fact that no pictures document the grubby thoughts of lone, rapacious, anti-social men who spend their time in festering solitude hatching insidious plots does not refute the certitude with which those, too, can be known. They had answered the same ad, Mira and Angela; he said he had dated someone else from her office. Angela had seen him once, twice, maybe three times, and then she had refused to see him again, and he had felt this as a profound rebuke to him. Mira knew that Justin was the kind of man who would interpret Angela's beauty as a form of arrogance, and he would see her rejection of him, because of her beauty, as a crime of the spirit, as evidence that she, like other beautiful people, felt herself exempt from the decencies of ordinary life. He had wanted to know what he had done, but there had been nothing that he had done, and once he understood this, then he knew that if it was not anything he had done then it was he, *he himself*, that was the problem. It was not his outward action, but his inner essence, and this could only be overwhelming to him because he had to know it meant he could never be acceptable, for one can perhaps change one's action, but one can never alter one's essence.

The hurt was as profound as his very self was now felt to be immutable, but he would never be able to let go of it, to put it

aside as he would surely see himself as having been put aside.

No: She had hurt him, and now he would have to hurt her. It was a matter of giving and getting.

So he went on dates with other women, and he parked on her street each time, and glared up at her window, thinking to parade these other women before her, to show her there were women who did not find him profoundly, immovably unacceptable, to show her he had moved on but that she would never in turn be able to elude him. He called her with tidings of assault. He followed her, he sent her horrors through the mail. Maureen Hackett spoke of these things quietly. In no sense did she appear to be afraid for herself. Her tone was one of measured concern, tinged with gossip's lurid curiosity. There was no telling, she said, where it would end.

At a movie with her sister, Angela, bored with the film, slipped away into the lobby. She whispered to her sister that she would be right back. Absorbed in the film, her sister looked startled, and in the second it took her to comprehend that Angela had said something ordinary, not something startling, her hand darted out protectively for Angela's hand; after that second passed, she drew her hand away and nodded to acknowledge her understanding. The lobby was empty, the hulking computer games blinking in silent, colorful disbelief. Ushers pushed popcorn-devouring sweepers across the hard carpets. All of the many films at the multiplex were underway in their separate enclaves, and any stray patrons who wandered out into the lobby were suspect because their presence there signified discontent. It meant they were constitutionally unhappy, dissatisfied with the film, unable to accept direct pleasures or to defer random needs. These patrons clearly sensed that whatever lack their presence exposed lay within themselves, for they shuffled through the lobby with their heads bowed in shame. Angela refused to play that game. She stepped up to the candy counter and voiced her request loudly. Her sister had reached for her hand; then, as she had drawn her hand away, she had done so with what seemed to Angela a quality of shamed recognition of something that was deep, full, but evanescent, too small to be spoken of. The older, Angela had been her sister's guardian when they were children.

She remembered pushing her sister in a swing, how her cries of joy could so easily be heard as screams of fear. The moment of shamed recognition, Angela saw, implied a feeling of rueful commiseration in her sister, kept from pity by force of will, that her sister thought she should resist. Now, between them, Angela's safety might always be at issue. She wondered if she were more vulnerable to the assaults of unknown men or to the consolations of those who loved her. Her sister did not look away from the film when Angela returned to her seat.

Mira could not find Angela's address in the company directory, and her telephone number was unlisted, but even though she had never been to his apartment, she knew where Justin lived. His building was wedged into a busy corner, a corner in the city where five streets came together in a treacherous intersection. The building, with brick the color of an underripe peach's flesh, was shaped like a narrow-tipped triangle in order to fit into the severe bight of the street corner. There was a drugstore on the first floor, and there were apartments on the second and third floors. In the vestibule Mira scanned a row of six mail slots, doors of tarnished copper with circular, barred clefts in each door showing what the little chambers held. None of the slots was locked, and Justin's yawned open carelessly. Such indifference to security did not surprise Mira. She knew that intruders into the lives of others seldom consider their own susceptibility until the moment of their victimization, when their sense of indignity is boundless. As Mira shuffled through Justin's mail, she imagined his outrage with amused satisfaction. Standing there in the open, she smiled, flouting secrecy, adopting an artless, genial watchfulness as an antidote to caution. Anyone who happened upon her would never mistake her for a trespasser.

Mira did not know which window was Justin's. She did not know which floor he lived on. From her car, parked on a near side street that afforded a wide view, she scanned the rows of windows. Some of the windows had latticework covering them, imitating a European style. Others had rusted air conditioners hanging from them like guts protruding from under the shirts of beer-bellied men. In one of the windows, only her face visible, stood a woman with a kerchief tied around her head. She was

looking downward, pensively content, engaged in an unseen task, chopping vegetables or preparing meat. In another window that was covered by a translucent shade, a light blinked on and off at irregular, convulsive intervals. Mira looked at the letter she had kept out of Justin's mailbox. It had a return address from the weekly paper where his personal ad had appeared. It was only an instrument; she had no curiosity about the envelope's contents. That was no more the point than it was the point that the task at hand was a test of her courage. She would leave ideas about bravery to the invaders, the pursuers, the warriors of infringement. They were the ones who thrived on such ideas. She was interested only in justice.

Just when she was starting to think her mission would be fruitless, Justin appeared on the stoop, blinking under the dim light of a street lamp. He was carrying a satchel, its leather scarred and bruised. He hoisted its long strap over his shoulder. He walked in Mira's direction, passed very near her car, and got into his own car parked farther down the street. She followed him downtown to a street near the city market. He parked and got out of the car, and pulled on the door's handle to make sure it was locked. After he had started away, he suddenly turned back and pulled on the handle again, to make doubly sure. What fortune was he taking such trouble to protect? Mira watched him cross the street and disappear into a storefront with big glass panels painted black and with three white letters, A-I-M, painted across the door. She did not know what the letters stood for. Mira peered into the back seat of Justin's car. A rumpled coat and scarf, a thick, dog-eared map that bore traces of the frustration of someone who had tried to refold it, a lone tennis shoe. She lifted one of the car's windshield wipers. It felt brittle and fragile, like a skeleton's arm. She placed the letter under the windshield wiper. At first he would think it was a parking ticket. When he had come so close to her car, she had felt something rise in her, a thrill, something she felt that she wanted at once to resist and to follow to its apex. If he had chanced to notice her, she would have looked back at him evenly, without defiance. Standing next to his car, she tried to feel what she knew he would feel, the clandestine tremor of nearness. But she could not incite this feeling in herself, it was nothing she could share.

The first call came that night. No speech: just a long, crackling silence, meant to threaten.

Angela had stopped seeing a man she'd loved many years ago after she discovered he kept copies of his letters to her. He wrote beautiful letters to her, and she loved them. Then one day he told her he had been unsure of the date of something so he had looked it up in the letters. "But how could you?" she asked. "I have them." "I keep copies," he answered. "You keep copies of your letters to me?" "Oh, I keep copies of all my letters." Some weeks later she broke off with him. The letters reminded her of him. Like him, they were usually matter-of-fact but sometimes took sudden flights into lyricism. They had made her believe he had given her something, but he had not. He had kept it.

From the bar, Mira watched Justin and another woman at a table across the restaurant. The place was a big, open room, lit dimly, and Mira sat at the far end of the bar so she could face their table. She wanted to be seen, but Justin sat with his back to her. He had parked in the same place, on the same street, looked up, Mira was certain, at the same window. It was a cycle, and this was another round of the cycle. The woman who was with him had black hair and thick black eyebrows. She did not appear to be uncomfortable, but that was because she could not know. Sometimes Justin leaned toward her across the table, grimly attentive, but most of the time he leaned back and looked distractedly around the room. Their interaction had the air of an unsuccessful audition. The cycle would go on and on until Mira did what was needed to end it. She drank two scotches as they finished their dinner. As they were leaving, she walked right in front of them, and looked into Justin's face, unblinking, but if he noticed her, he did not react.

When the phone rang that night, she listened to the silence for only a moment before she spoke. "Do you think I don't know who this is?" she said. "I know exactly what you're doing. But it's going to stop now. Do you understand me? You're going to leave me alone, and you're going to leave her alone. Do you hear me? *Just leave her the fuck alone.*" She had managed to speak calmly, but when she hung up she was overpowered by a rush of deferred

feeling. She would change her phone number the next day. The decision to protect yourself, once taken, is easy enough to put into practice.

They met in the women's room. Angela remembered Mira dimly. It had been a long time since they had been introduced. She said it was good to see her again. Angela was about to leave when Mira stopped her. She said she was sorry, but there was something else she had to talk to her about. There was a man, a certain man. Did she know him?

Mira said his name. Angela's face emptied for a minute, then it filled up again. She had been afraid that this stranger was going to offer her more heedless consolation, but now she understood. She bit her lip and looked away for a moment. The row of mirrors reflected them: two women, standing side by side. She nodded.

Mira thought she'd heard something outside the door. She waited in the hallway. She saw that she had forgotten to draw the curtains. That meant she might also have forgotten to lock the door. Midnight blustered, cold, outside the cold, exposed windowpane. For long minutes the doorknob did not turn. There was nobody there. She knew she was alone. She was in a specific place, but she imagined abstract distance. In her mind she saw gray hills rolling in a vast mist. It was pain that gave rise to understanding. You do not feel the need to understand until after your fullest want has been denied. If that was true, then maybe something, too, would bloom from this fear. She stood fast in the hallway. Light came in the window. She might have felt revealed, but her solitude seemed secure. Her hand went to her mouth.