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Part One

IT is the first Saturday in August when I walk up to the porch of the summerhouse and see them. I am supposed to be in the city this weekend but my interview is canceled, the actor called out of town. I see them through the fan propped in the window, through the transparent blur of its blades.

She is moving on top of him slowly, with such concentration that though she faces the window, though she could look right at me, she does not. I am only a few feet away from her. I have never seen her before.

I watch her glossy brown hair shift on her shoulders, I watch her empty eyes as she moves on him with calculation, with slack lips, with nipples so erect that the areolae wrinkle around them – as she moves with such pleasure, really, that who could hate her in this moment.

To love her, to want to be her, to want to touch her, yes. But not to hate her, not in this.

I watch her, and watch, too, a sliver of Ilan's narrow chest beneath her, its pattern of hair that breaks across his sternum. I can see the necklace sliding on his chest as they move, the tiny silver hand slipping back and forth, its touch faster and jerkier than Ilan's own smooth caresses – than the touch of his hand moving on her downy back.

For perhaps five minutes, I don't say a word. It seems a weird privilege: Here is the life I don't see, the life that goes on without me. I watch them as a ghost watches the living.

Then I say his name slowly, just audibly. She starts and looks around wildly. When she looks right through the fan and sees me, she gasps.

Ilan does not start at all; not a flicker. But he lifts his head, sees me, and winces, and just like that he lifts her off him and at the same time off the bed.

“You have to go now,” he tells her.

She dresses insolently slowly. Her blouse ties in the back with a line of ties – it is really just a square of cloth that settles on her breasts – and she loops each of the ties into a perfect bow.

“Fuck you,” she tells Ilan. “You fucking liar. I deserve better than you.”
Righteous anger, but controlled.

She and I brush past each other in the doorway. She is the woman I am supposed to be: A hair-tosser, a thrower of water from glasses, a slapper, a terrific girl all told. Dignified, she slips through the high reeds near the driveway and begins to walk along the road slowly, carrying her pretty, embroidered shoes. She does not look back at him, at us, at the house for even a moment, because she knows what she deserves.

It’s as if she’s preempted me with her anger; I want to shout at Ilan too, curse at him, but I don’t have the heart. “I should leave too,” is all I say.

“You can’t leave me, Maya. I love you.”

“Was this the first time – the only time? I need to know.”

“It started in college,” he admits, “a few weeks after I met you.”

I shiver. I never expected to be chosen by myself, for myself alone. It had felt wrong – unlike me – to be chosen. Now, hearing this, I feel only a sickening familiarity, not surprise.

“It never meant anything,” he assures me. “I felt awful about it. I don’t know where it comes from. I thought, with enough therapy, I’d talk myself out of it. But all I

do is confess, I don't change. Look, can we at least sit down? I feel like any moment, you're going to leave."

"Okay, but I'm not promising to stay."

I sit down on the rattan couch. He stands behind me. I lean back and reach my head up to him – like a rabbit in a cage straining to sip from its water dispenser, the single, round hanging drop. And he leans down, princelike, to kiss me.

Then he starts to touch me. He slips his hands down my jeans, his fingers splayed, rubbing my clitoris insistently, with the slightest pressure. I moan quietly, move against him.

"Don't I know you?" he says. "I know exactly what you want, don't I?"

It agitates me as he rubs and rubs, softly, softly. He touches me the way he learned from me years ago – the way I touch myself. He studied it. The detail of his knowledge of me devastates. If I were to close my eyes, I could confuse his touch with my own.

But as he nuzzles into my shoulder, I smell sex in his hair and break away from him.

"Would you at least shower?" I demand.

"No, you love that. Tell me you love it."

In seconds my jeans are gone, my shirt is gone. He holds onto me, won't let me leave.

"It's so soft," he says as he touches me. "You're so wet."

He gets a little bleat out of me as he rubs. Then I clamp my mouth shut. Ah, but then I relax it. I begin to breathe in the sex smell in his hair; I begin almost to like it.

“Maya. Tell me you want this.”

“I want it.”

“I knew you did.” And I do. And it is hours, then, before we can stop.

Early that evening, I return to the city alone. As I walk away from our house to meet the bus, I look back and see the fan there in the window, its blades spinning in the same blur. I imagine that again I can look through it and see the girl, moving up and down so slowly, her breasts bare.

At our loft, I am alone for days – for so long that I feel as if I should be taking a plane somewhere, for only plane trips have separated us for this long before. Ilan calls and leaves messages every day, but I don’t pick up. I only listen to his voice, trying to assess what he says as if I were a stranger, someone objective. I notice that he never promises to be faithful; he only begs to see me. He says he loves me, and he wants me back.

As I lie on the bed we share, I feel as if my chest bones should be opened like a doored cage, and my heart displayed so that someone can say “Enough.” I cry my mascara off, cry it into black rivulets on my face and leave it that way.

Then I try an experiment. I kneel on our bed and brace myself against the wall as if I were above Ilan. I close my eyes to visualize his face, imagining the silver hand on its chain shifting on his chest as he strains beneath me. I test, in the most visceral way I can, whether I can withstand his being gone.