

LAND OF TEN THOUSAND LAKES

by C J Nolan
© copyright 1999

Headlights strafe the front of the house as yet another car drives by. That makes four in the past two hours. They never stop. Just slow long enough to let the light break into her home uninvited - take a good look, pass judgement, then move on either left or right. Such an intrusion when someone wants to be alone.

The room is dark again, like the rest of the house. The dark is broken only by the glow of the joint in her hand. This “vice” from her college days does not suit her new life as a parent. But selfish pleasures are rare and usually denied. Even finding enough time alone to masturbate successfully has become a search for the Grail. She will take what she can get, thank you, and to hell with everyone's perceptions.

Kate breathes deeply the smoke into her lungs. As she holds, she looks around the living room in darkness, not needing light to see the unused fireplace with its mantel covered by small figurines, their wedding picture and two or three small department store portraits; the far wall perfectly hung with collages of family pictures - his and hers; the living room set which was their second purchase as a couple (the first being a decent stereo); a faux-maple coffee table which sports two neatly stacked piles of magazines at each end. So familiar is this room that in the darkness she could pick up all the children's shoes and toys without stumbling.

Kate exhales.

The rest of the joint gets stubbed out gently against the side of a small ceramic ashtray which claims to be from the Watergate Hotel. Then it is placed in her jewelry box next to a tightly wrapped plastic bag and a pack of papers.

Kate leans back into the sofa with a slight grin playing on her lips. There was a time, ages ago, when getting high meant she would feel euphoric and giddy. Someday, she thinks, I'll feel

that again. With her jewelry box in her pocket, she grabs the can of Glade on the table and proceeds to make the room smell like potpourri. She has a can of Raid in the pantry that has exactly the same smell. Maybe even better. The next time, she'll use the bug spray - just to compare. She heads up the stairs, unsuccessfully trying to avoid the louder creaks. Not that it matters. It is nearly one thirty in the morning. She could have blown her brains out and no one would know until daybreak. Ray and the boys are safe and sound and sawing wood as Kate furiously brushes her teeth and washes her face in the hall bathroom.

As she slides into bed, Ray grunts and pulls on the covers. She rolls over and closes her eyes.

Seven A.M.

Kate's stomach growls fiercely as she chews a small, starchy sphere formed from a standard slice of white bread and a juice glass. This is the preparation for "egg-in-a-hole", Richie's breakfast this morning, along with apple juice and a Flintstone vitamin of his choice. Little Ray is content with Cheerios and a banana - his standard without variation for over a month now. Recently, however, he too is choosing his own vitamin shape. Independence is where you can find it.

"Breakfast in the kitchen only!", she shouts to the other room. "No exceptions."

First in is Ritchie, a tangle of arms and legs and sandy brown hair. Little Ray is more like his father - dark and square with deep brown eyes. With the press of a button, the sights and sounds of the living room fill the TV in the kitchen and breakfast, with its usual calamity and mayhem, begins.

Little boys fight over the damndest things. Not having brothers, this has become a revelation to Kate. Right now, there is a serious discussion - at little boy volume - about the Road Runner.

“He is not a chicken!”, declares Little Ray, with a cheerio hanging on his chin.

“He looks like a chicken, doesn’t he?”, goads Ritchie.

“But he’s NOT! He’s - he’s - he’s a running bird.”

“Chicken! Brawk, brawk, brawk!! Chicken!”

“MOM!”, Little Ray cries in defense.

“Knock it off - immediately.” Kate is bagging sandwiches and scooter pies while trying not to gulp her coffee. Her only solitary cup is after the kids have gone to school and the coffee has cooked for an hour or two. Then she turns to the pan and flips the omelet she has assembled for Ray. It lightly splatters her tee shirt.

“Braaawwk...”

“Ritchie”, she says without looking. “Just eat your breakfast. You’re going to be late.” As if the boys would mind being late for school. Of course, they wouldn’t. But they are never late. That is her job. She turns off the burner.

“Bye, hon.”

Ray, who wasn’t even out of bed a half hour ago, is showered and dressed and pulling on his coat.

“Ray, you’re bleeding.”

“Huh?” Ray puts his hand to his face, searching, and finds the open wound. “It’s not so bad,” he says, only remotely aware. Kate sighs. At least his shirt won’t be stained. Hopefully.

“Don’t you have time for breakfast?”, she says looking at the nearly perfect omelet. This is not something she does often.

“Um, sorry. I have to get in early today.” He looks at her blankly, his tie askew. She looks back at him.

“You remember. I’m picking the boys up from school today. Remember? We’re going to the Nets game tonight. I told you that a long time ago.” He smiles at her, then finishes tying his shoes. “Come on. You’re on your own today.”

“Oh. Right.” Now that he says it, Kate does remember. Sort of. But that was a couple of months ago when he spoke about buying tickets to the game. Who knew he actually did it? She remembers being excited and making plans for the next week or so. Her big day off! There was a hair appointment and a movie; getting together with Denise and bar-hopping; and that short, mad affair with a nineteen-year old that she would meet while walking through Soho. They both had stopped for a cappuccino and . . . But Kate forgot. It never happens. There was that time on her thirty-fifth birthday when she was going to have a day by herself. But then Ritchie got a stomach virus. Or the weekend Ray was to take the kids to his mother’s and Hurricane Gloria arrived instead. She does have those hours the kids are in school. And they could hire a sitter. But, guilt - unexplained, unintelligible catholic guilt - keeps her home. In case the phone rings. Can you really trust a babysitter? What if they drop the bomb? Who knows.

“See ya tonight, hon. Late,” Ray says as he pecks her on the lips. He looks again at the omelet, grabs his untouched coffee and takes a big, conciliatory gulp.

“Have a great day off,” he yells on his way out the front door.

Kate stands in the light rain at the corner, her umbrella sheltering the boys. Ritchie fidgets in the damp morning air. He literally hates the rain parka she bought for him. She overheard him telling one of his friends it was “sissy”. It is so hard to be ten years old. Kate imagines that the ideal dress codes for ten year old boys must be to run around stark naked with a large tattoo of Michael Jordan painted on their chests. Shouting, shoving, laughing and scrambling about until

they fall unconscious in a sweaty heap. And who could blame them? For women, this is what inspires both the attraction and the consternation in men. This little boy in all of them. And boys are so beautiful at this age. Kate is sure all the other mothers at the stop feel the same way, but who would be the first to say it out loud? Pervert.

At six, Little Ray is much more agreeable. Though the older boy's grousing is often contagious, he is still happy just to be waiting to ride a bus to school. Ray gleefully stomps the shallow puddles with his Spiderman sneakers.

The school bus lumbers up to the corner. "Okay, boys. Off you go." As with the other mothers, Kate turns them both around to elicit a goodbye kiss. Little Ray, of course, is wholly forthcoming. He holds out his arms and gives her a big wet smooch. Ritchie has to be pulled over so Kate can nail his cheek.

"Bye, Mom," he says sullenly, feigning humiliation.

She loves her boys.

Kate backs onto the curb, as do the other mothers, and watch the children board the bus. The doors fold closed, the safety gate retracts and the bus pulls away. All the mothers wave in the rain, though the children, in their new special world, seldom wave back. Once the bus leaves, the mothers - in unison - bow their heads, turn and walk back to their homes. Life is full of rituals. But few are as emotionally charged as this, on a day to day basis.

The slow rain begins to make its presence felt. The drops drum the leaves with more insistence. Kate looks at the house from the edge of its sort of green, sort of mud lawn (the new grass refuses to grow). The house stands as a large, pale yellow box against the grey backdrop. That house, whose demands are overwhelming. More than she can ever give. She shivers and bows again. "Who keeps whom?" Kate whispers as she slowly walks back inside.

With the tip of her towel, she streaks the steam from the mirror, clearing a space for inspection. She sees a face - fresh, unmarked, unpainted. Her mother's "crows feet" are a mere phantom, lying in wait for the future. And, after thirty-eight years, Kate can proudly say that her skin has cleared. The mirror begins to fog again as she stares into her eyes, curious. The fog takes over before she can render judgement. Kate turns, with trepidation at leaving her privacy, and walks into the bedroom.

The clock radio has been left off this morning, so the room is silent but for the light sound of rain on the windows. The bed is disheveled and will remain so. Sitting, she squares herself with the bureau mirror and unwraps her hair. She shakes it out, then runs her fingers through twice. It's a good length, just above the shoulder. And the color is holding. Nothing to worry about here. Her hair always performs well, even on rainy days. Kate has decided, if she were a superhero, then that would be her only special power - invincible hair. The rest is pure chance.

Kate starts to tug on the other towel and stops. She could stay home. Imagine, a whole day with no interruptions! There is a dresser in the basement screaming to be refinished. Three shirts missing buttons lay in wait in the laundry room. Junk drawers could be excavated. Maybe just finish that joint, in the middle of the day, and watch TV or read *Ulysses* or something. Kate catches a glimpse of herself and sees a pained, slightly scared expression on her face. The decision is made.

Kate stands before the mirror and lets her wrap fall away. The chill air hardens her nipples. She touches them, lingers there a moment, then runs her hands tightly down the length of her torso. Not.....bad. Not bad. And this is a woman in her late thirties, with two kids, few workouts and a nasty sweet tooth. Her breasts are still firm and just enough for cleavage. Her

stomach is flat. Her mound is trimmed and neat. She knows she doesn't have any curves, but her ass still looks good in a pair of jeans. As for her thighs, well . . . maybe she should wear a long skirt. She runs her hands again making sure she is whole. Safe and secure in her own flesh. A hint of excitement flushes her cheek, as if she were on her way to meet a secret lover.

“How much?”, Kate asked through the glass.

“Where are you going?”, the man demanded.

“New York City.”

“Twelve-sixty-five round trip”, came the answer as the microphone was snapped off.

With ticket in hand, Kate looked around the intimate train station. Fluorescent lights bounced off burnt orange plastic seats, which somehow made it seem colder here than outside. She had not taken the train to the city since the whole family went to see the dinosaurs at the Museum of Natural History. Was that last year or the one before?

The rain was still for the moment, so she walked out onto the platform. Kate surveyed the greying concrete as if exploring a new terrain. Flecks of black slate and red brick scattered before her, as well as green and blue indestructible scabs of gum. She noticed the restaurant across the tracks had changed hands yet again. It was certain to be the most inconsistent cuisine on the Jersey Shore. Strange. She rarely drove this way, past the station, as if even the train was beyond her reach. The commute between the sister states was common to Kate. While she was getting her degree, she often shuttled to and from the city. Doing laundry was cheaper at home. But after marrying Ray, then giving birth to the boys, her former life in the city just got further and further away until the distance became insurmountable.

The shower of rain returned just as the bells sounded for the train. Huddling under the shelter, she could read the sparse graffiti on a beam next to the pay phone. "Allison is fat and disgusting", screamed a green felt marker. "We are the enemy" and a lyric about the "coming age" was written in a smaller dark hand. "Just kids", she murmured - though she felt bad for Allison wherever she was this morning. As she turned to face the approaching train, she read one last sign. A warning. "Danger. Do Not Cross Tracks". Fair enough. The train cut off her view and stopped. Kate let out a sigh and climbed aboard.

The tracks had been laid with one objective - out of sight, out of mind. And on a grey, damp day a window seat on New Jersey Transit could be depressing. It was like looking into the state's ruthless, exhausted garage. You could see the waste, the broken and the abandoned pieces of industry. Cages filled with oil slicks and rusted sheet metal and grey bales of barbed wire. Cars came here to die. So did children's toys, delivery trucks and old warehouses, with their jagged windows and rusted doors. This landscape was broken only by the station stops themselves. Long, concrete landings behind what must have constituted Main Street for all the towns on the line. Hidden and removed behind life's motion.

Kate leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She hadn't been alone in the city since just after college. In effect, she had been hidden and removed to Jersey. All the city people you know think you're dead once you leave. Especially if you have children. Well, you do change! You have to change with a child. Giving birth - by itself - is a great mutation the female body goes through. Horror movies have been trying to replicate that trauma for years. Remember *The Brood*? *Demon Seed*? Even *Alien*? The horrors of birth - frightening and in technicolor! Kate laughed out loud. She loved horror movies for some reason. Maybe that's why. She slunk in her seat so no one could see her, still giggling.

The train hit Elizabeth, which her kids know as “that smell” on the Turnpike. Her hands were sweating. She rubbed them dry and held them tight. The city and she used to be lovers. This was both a practical issue and a deep fondness. As an NYU student, she learned the city’s ways. Became part of the flow, the energy. She learned all the rules and the streets and the tension. She loved those years. No matter how often she went home, she belonged to the city. Days when fire escapes and window ledges were important. Flower pots outside in the summer, six-packs of beer in the winter. Throwing your keys to a friend on the sidewalk and having conversations out the window. Watching and listening and always feeling involved. That must be what is wrong with the suburbs - no one hangs out their windows or sits on their porch anymore. In the city, you talk to a lot of people whose names you’ll probably never know. In the suburbs, you know everyone’s name and you’ll never speak to them. Maybe that is just the difference between being young and being an “adult”.

For her part, Kate didn’t really spend much time with her classmates. Pretensions were quite severe amongst her peers. She studied art history because she loved art and wanted to know more. Others chose the major so they could travel and be cosmopolitan. Wealthy kids (girls, mostly) looking for wealthy climes to find wealthy husbands. Not Kate. Everything she wanted and cherished was right here. As Kerouac said, she “saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there”. America. Her home. Her aesthetic. Her peace.

The train pulled up with a slow fade. Lines of people file out and become swamps of people on the platforms, scuttling in a single motion toward the same singular set of stairs. Follow the flow, keep your eyes straight and clutch your purse. Old instincts fell into motion. Just like riding a bike. Still underground and moving, Kate paused briefly to check herself in the

darkened window of a vacant store. Like everyone else. A quick turn. A hand goes up to the hair. Then back. A city ritual. Every reflective surface - glass or chrome - becomes a savior, a fast fashion check for the city's minions. Just like riding a bike.

As Kate surfaced into the heart of the terminal, everything was familiar. Nothing had changed with time. The old patterns were all restaged for her benefit. All she had to do was watch. One of the city's eternal lost souls struggled past a steel column where a teenager sat with a coke and a backpack just as a grandmother crossed them both, purposefully clutching the hands of her charges. There were people coming, some waiting to leave and others seemed to be home right where they stood. The station is one of the nation's crossroads. New York's hum was the country's song as far as she was concerned. Here you could find that pearl.

She made her way through the fluorescent lights outside to stand in front of Madison Square Garden. The rain had stopped, so she kept her umbrella at her side. Damp and grey seems to suit this city. In fact, only in black and white - think Bernice Abbot or Alfred Stieglitz - is the shimmer and power of New York City truly revealed. Color is barely a close second. The best paintings of this town were in dark shades from the perspective of a still photograph. New York as a still-life.

She went to hail a cab and quickly pulled back her hand. Where? Kate looked around. "Come on, remember the grid. You are on Seventh. Seventh goes down. So Sixth travels up and stops at the Park. Okay. Fifth Avenue travels down and the Whitney is on Madison which is . . . three blocks up and travels uptown. Right?" Kate tried to get her bearings and stood, unmoving, in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Oh, damn!", she says to no one. There she is - with that neon light over her head that spells "tourist" - the only type of person who *stands* in the middle of a New York sidewalk. Her face

flushed with shame. “Damn”. She punished her negligence by walking the three long blocks to Madison and catching a cab from there.

She sat unconsciously straightening her skirt as she looked out the window. Long fingers rhythmically soothed the wrinkles, the spots of rain and her excitement. It turned out to be a slow march down Madison. The street had changed - in appearance, if not demeanor. Past the back of St. Patrick’s, monstrous structures of art and architecture crowded each block. Every major designer had planted a mausoleum to his or her fashion perfection. Most reminded her of nothing more than overwrought, three-dimensional advertisements. Yet, in between, lurked old New York- timeless and unapologetic. Small awnings and old money. Attitude handed down from the 1800's. Perfume, jewelry and haughty knick-knacks for the Upper East Side widows and “gay divorcees”. She couldn’t afford it then and she can’t afford it now, but she was happy to look.

Kate paid quickly and bounced out as Dr. Ruth was reminding her to take her belongings. She clutched her purse and umbrella to her chest, almost giddy, as she stood before the Whitney Museum’s square stone ramparts. “Hi, Edward!”, she wanted to shout. “Hi, Georgia, Alexander, Mr. Wyeth, Mr. Marsh, - I’m back! Did you miss me?” Her soft eyes brimmed with tears. It had been years - years! - since she had consummated such a simple passion. During school, she had been here most every weekend, many evenings and every special exhibit. This wasn’t Ray or the boys’ fault. History - immediate family and universal history forced Kate’s hand. She had made the decision in which she became someone else. Once a woman is married, all the important things that formed the woman - from talents to friendships - were now given up as a sacrifice, folded into a U-Haul box, double-taped and left in a dark corner of the attic. She became a “mother”. And a mother doesn’t have needs.

Kate wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her raincoat and took her place in the ticket line.

Memories are very active. They leap and angle and hide behind the rocks in your head. They are fluid and mischievous. One will plummet to the pit of your stomach, then crawl slowly back up your spine to sit near your sinuses. Memories are physical. They are fears and loves; a succulent mango, bad milk, toothaches and orgasms - all attached to any one of your senses and planted in your muscles. Waiting. For example - Kate's face was doing something. Her mouth had tightened and drawn itself up to the left. Her eyes had narrowed, somewhere between a squint and a frown. When her arms closed around her and two fingers came up to press against the center of her lips - she startled herself! Of course she knew that look. The stance, her hands. Once upon a time, she had reserved that look for special pieces of sculpture and all truly abstract artwork. The "Look of Feigned Comprehension". It only happened when she viewed "art" she couldn't possibly explain or look upon without a headache. Right now, she was standing in front of four horizontal rows of different colored Dixie Cups, suspended over a broken wooden crate by airplane wire, and backlit red with strips of fluffy cotton hanging limply about. Kate would not even fathom a guess as to the meaning . . . if there was one. But she did make a mental note to tell Miss Simpkins, Little Ray's art teacher, that it might be fun for the kids to work with Dixie Cups.

The museum's true treasure was upstairs.

"Ow! Hey!"

"Oh! I'm sorry!"

Kate was in front of a Wyeth painting she had never seen before. Stepping back to take a

better look, she landed solidly on someone's foot.

"I'm terribly sorry. Are you all right?" she said to the young man she had just attacked. He was in his twenties and five inches taller, with neatly unkempt, brown curly hair. He appeared scruffy in his white T-shirt and jeans.

"Yeah. No sweat. It's cool." He straightened up, his hand on her arm. "My fault, absolutely. You were focused and I was . . . scattered." His blue eyes looked in so deep, her toes blushed.

"I am sorry," she lied.

"You like this painting?" he asked.

"Yes. I've, um, I've never seen it before."

Quickly, the young man moved to the wall and put his hand over the title marker. "What's it called? You haven't seen it, right?"

"No. No, I don't know the name yet."

"Tell me the name of this painting," he challenged. "This one's not hard. Pretty straight forward once you understand the mood. Come on."

This young man had put her on the spot.

Slowly, Kate says, "Okay. Does it count if it's in the ballpark?"

"Absolutely. Drop it in the field."

"Well . . . it's . . . maybe midday. It's bright. Calm. Isolated. There are no people or animals or machinery or . . . structures in the scene. Just the grass, the woods and the stream. The window is opened out onto the scene, to catch a slight breeze or to listen to the water. The person in the room who opened the window is . . . reflective. Relaxed. At peace. It's the moment before the event."

“Or just after. Score one for the lady.” The young man bowed slightly toward Kate and unveiled the plaque for Andrew Wyeth’s “Love In The Afternoon”.

She smiled. Somehow the name made the painting more exciting. “But I don’t think I would have guessed that.”

“Close enough for jazz,” he said. They stood next to each other and looked at the painting in a new light.

“I like a few of Wyeth’s pieces,” the young man said with authority. “But I have a problem with certain artists who have been reproduced to death. That “Christina’s World . . .”

“Hmmm”, Kate muttered as she examined her shoes. “I’ve often felt like Christina.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“Oh. I don’t know.”

“You live in New York?”

“No. No - ah - Jersey,” she said apologetically.

“Oh.” Shifting his feet, the young man bent his head and grinned to himself. “Married, huh?”

Kate swallowed. “Yes. Why? Is everyone from Jersey married?”

“Maybe. I wouldn’t know.” Laughing now, he said, “No no no . That’s not it. Your fingers. Always look for the ring. Habit.”

“But that’s a girl’s trick!”

“Well, one of my old girlfriend’s taught me. Now, as I say, it’s habit.”

“I have two children as well,” Kate added. “Little ones.”

The young man looked up at her and shook his head. “Now that - I would not have guessed. Absolutely never.”

Suddenly she didn't know where to put her hands.

"You were saying - about art that is over reproduced?"

"Well, take O'Keefe for example . . ."

"Oh! Where is she!? Does she have her own room?"

"You haven't walked around yet?" the young man asked.

"No. I just got here actually."

"Come on," he said. "O'Keefe is right across the lobby."

So together, in conversation, they walked past the elevators to the far room, as a reclining Mrs. Whitney watched attentively from the wall.

As Kate walked inside, she voiced a sigh.

"Yeah, but -," the young man answered, "you can get numb to it. I see these prints on the wall of every quote-unquote 'family restaurant' from here to Maine. It's like looking at catsup bottles."

"No. Never." Kate whirled on him. "Sure - you can see it as flat and uninspiring in those places, where no one is paying attention anyway. But that's why you have to return the art to the artist." She walked over to "Flower Abstraction". "Look at the structure first. The lines grow into curves and rivers that explore mounds and swells that travel past the canvas. The painting flows continuously. And it is totally symmetrical! Filling the canvas with movement up and out! And it's a flower, so you notice the colors - which is probably what places work like this in diners anyway. But look again!"

Kate heard her own voice, expounding on knowledge that had long been a personal treasure. And her need was to continue. "Her colors are so rich. Her shadings so full. The colors are in total harmony with each other - they evolve so smoothly. And then you have to remember that

this is an abstract painting done by a woman in 1924! Unheard of at the time! I mean, sure - I can look at 'Summer Days' and see every Grateful Dead album ever made. But "Days" is still such a strong piece! Look - Abstraction on the Western landscape. And that was the 1930's - after the Crash and into World War II. Georgia fought uphill against both her sex and her nationality. She was so rooted in this country - in the land and the consciousness! My God, her paintings of New York are towering and gorgeous! But Europe was the authority on "art" and no one gave a damn about American art!"

Kate stopped to catch her breath. The young man was just watching her.

"Sorry," she said finally. "Anyway, you should know this. You're a painter."

"Oh? A guess?" he asked.

"No," she said coyly. "Your fingers. You have oil paints under your nails."

At which point, he checked his hands and smiled. He had a good smile.

"Come with me," he said. "I want to show you my favorite paintings."

"Ohhh, I just got here . . ."

"We'll come back," he promised, excitedly. "We'll go around once and then go back again to the sweet spots. You haven't been here in a while. I'll show you around."

"Well . . ."

"You did step on my foot."

"So now I owe you?"

"No. You owe me nothing. In fact, you would be doing me the favor. I would owe you." He looked at her over those cheekbones and her toes blushed again.

She held out her hand. "I'm Kate."

He took it. "James."

God, he had a good smile.

Together, they walked the halls of the fifth floor. Kate was reacquainted with Reginald Marsh's "Twenty-Cent Movie", Thomas Hart Benton's "Poker Night" and Hopper's "Woman In The Sun". They spent time in the New York room with Marin's and Stella's Brooklyn Bridge paintings, O'Keefe's "Radiator Building", drawings of New York's bread lines in the depression and Man Ray's "La Fortune". And, true to his word, once they toured the circuit, Kate and James went back again.

To other people, they were a very animated couple - even when viewing a painting with silent awe. They dissented from each other often and merely accepted the alternative opinion without giving ground on their own. Most of all they were in love with the work someone had so graciously allowed them to visit - though Kate had other favorites which, sadly, were not being displayed. No matter. The talent and visions of the spirits that filled these halls served to fuel the flames of both her and James' personal joys. It was enough. James told her that he often came from his studio in the afternoon to find inspiration, which is why he was here today. He had begun painting portraits. The work was new to him and he spent the past week in frustration. He took Kate downstairs to the photo gallery and they stood in front of one of Robert Mapplethorpe's photos of Patti Smith.

"That's what I want," he said. "I want to paint that - all those layers. All that history in her eyes. But I suck at it. That camera has way more talent than I've got. I can't put half that shit on canvas."

"Well, maybe it just takes time," Kate said, carefully. "And practice. Like any thing else, you know."

“Maybe,” James replied. “Maybe it just needs a worthy subject.”

Downstairs in the café, James returned to the table with their cappuccinos. They sat sipping separated only by a glass vase exhibiting a lone flower.

“Very pretty, that,” James said, referring to the flower. “It looks like something Georgia would paint.”

“It’s called a rubrum lily.”

“Figured you would know,” he said with a grin.

Kate ignored this. “They’re beautiful. Very fragrant, too. Smell it? These flowers were part of my wedding bouquet. That is how I know.”

“Cool,” was the response. “Now, I’ve been wondering. Why Art History?”

“Why?”

“Yeah, I mean - you’re not the archetypal art history major.”

Kate laughed. “I appreciate that - I think.”

“Absolutely meant as a compliment. Trust me, I know,” James assured her. “But why? What did you want?”

Kate sipped her cappuccino for a moment. “Because I loved art. I just . . . did. I wasn’t an artist. I couldn’t even draw worth a damn but . . . you know, I loved it. And I wanted to know more. You see . . .,” Kate wrestled with the words, “I liked what I liked. That was it for a long time. There was a great deal of art I didn’t respond to. Eventually I decided it was a flaw. That, if I really cared and schooled myself more, this whole, big world would open up for me! You know, I would understand Cubism and Neo-Classicism and Minimalists and Magic Realism and all that. I wanted to love it all as much as I loved more straightforward art, in particular

American art. Maybe even teach and always be in the company of the World's great artists forever."

"What happened?"

Kate shrugged. "I failed, I guess. It's just me. I like what I like. I do appreciate more abstract works . . . in a way. Someone like Cy Twombly I can appreciate. Understand. I can even vaguely explain his work. But I don't like it. So I failed."

"You didn't fail, Kate," James said. "Maybe the artist failed - for you. That's allowed. You know what draws you? People."

"People?"

"Yeah. You like human nature. Life. Faces. Emotions."

"Passion."

"Exactly - passion. I watched you up there. That's what pulled you toward a canvas. You look with your heart first. The heart's not usually the most reliable of organs, but with works of art - it's primo."

"Thank you," Kate said, going back to her cup.

James was searching the table top for something. Then he found it.

"Kate, I want to paint you."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to sit for me. Now. Today. My studio is just across the park. We can be there in ten minutes."

"I . . . I don't know. I . . . have to get back, you know." Kate's hands fluttered around her hair. Her eyes never left her cappuccino.

"Look, you said they went to the Nets game, right? That game isn't until seven-thirty and

won't end until after ten." He was serious. "I would mean a great deal to me."

She looked up at him. "At your studio?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I want to paint you."

"Paint me."

"Yes." James took a moment to look at her. "And, yes, I'm very attracted to you. I won't pretend. I very much hope to do more than paint you."

"Oh." She looked at him and saw someone who was young, honest, intelligent, and sexy. Who made her feel warm and open for no apparent reason. She was flattered. The past two hours or so had been more fun - almost rejuvenating - then she even imagined it could be. But, then again, his "old girlfriends" are probably legion and "I want to paint you" is a line if she ever heard one. So, she knew what she might be getting herself into. Might.

"It's your call," James said finally. He stood up from the table. "I can paint you and we could make love. Or I can just paint you. Or you can go home. I want you to be my Patti Smith. Be my worthy subject. And that sounds stupid, I know. But, I just . . ." The young man tried to read her silence. "Whatever you want. I'm going to go outside and smoke a butt. You can see out the window upstairs. If you come out before I'm done, great. If not . . .well, it's been an absolute pleasure, Kate. I mean that." He started to go. "Think of me occasionally, huh? Because I will think of you."

She watched James walk up the stairs, not looking back. She looked at her hands. They dallied on the table, her fingers lightly brushing the surface. Tracing patterns, over and over again. She smiled. Picking up the lily from its stand, she placed it to her cheek and closed her

eyes and breathed. For a moment, a very still, still-life.

When she walked upstairs, Kate quickly glanced out the window and took a breath. She gathered her things from the coat check. She buttoned and belted her raincoat, slung her purse over her shoulder and grabbed her umbrella. As she walked through the glass doors, James looked at her and flicked his cigarette into the gutter. She smiled at him, with a slight flush to her cheeks. Her face showed both her age and her light.

James offered his arm.

Kate accepted.

As a mist began to fall heavily, they walked together down 75th Street toward the park.

Oncoming headlights flashed on Kate's smile as she drove home. The rain had stopped and the moon shone full. In the damp darkness of the car, James' painting seemed to glow like a fierce ember. The painting was his last gift to her. He had said he didn't need the finished product. It was all in his fingers now. It was a quick sketch, really. Just pencils and watercolor. But she was very proud. Maybe someday Ray will see it. Someday.

As she reached the house, obviously no one was home. The game must have just let out considering the time. She stopped the car at the top of the driveway and stepped out to check the mailbox.

"Oh! Well.....shit." She had taken off her shoes to drive. With damp, stocking feet, she walked up to the mailbox, emptied its contents and flung the stack of bills, ads and other crap into the back of the car. She stopped. Walking around the car, back to the top of the lawn, she looked at the house. As big as it was to her - maybe the light had something to do with it - but she no longer felt at odds. The house was hers, and she felt capable and at peace. Even the lawn

was hers. The rain had fallen hard here and created puddles everywhere. With the moon shining across the ground, the whole place looked like a totally different country. The land of ten thousand lakes! Little ones, big ones, deep, and shallow. All lacing out, silvery in front of her. She couldn't resist! Kate grabbed the ends of her raincoat and jumped into the nearest puddle. Splash! Then the next one. Splash! And another! She ran like a madwoman from one side of the lawn to the next. Splash! Up one side then the other, stomping them all! Whooping and laughing so hard that tears started rolling down her cheeks! She jumped and ran, praying that the neighbors would see her and call the cops. Splat! She ran, from lake to lake, drenched and happy all over her yard.

She stopped, out of breath, when she was sure she had got them all. Little Ray would be proud. Then, with stockings, coat, dress, underwear all soaked in mud, Kate walked giddily back up to the car. Calmly, she activated the garage door opener and drove into her home.

Her home.