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IN 1976, WHEN I was 25, I moved from my *Father Knows Best* Los Angeles suburb to FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD New York. I scored a premium, \$90-a-month apartment in the East Village; premium, that is, because the toilet was actually *inside* the three-room, fifth-floor walk-up. The two apartments at the back shared a facility in the hallway, and at night, when I couldn't sleep, I'd hear the occupants pad down the Italian tile floor, unlock the door, splash into the bowl, sometimes even flush. At the rear behind me was a skinny, bespectacled young guy with an old man's name, Wendell (or was it Walter?). Wendell would spend way too much time in the hallway john. He was also tied in with the Church of Jesus Christo, the storefront Pentecostal worship hall next door on East 11th Street run by Mr. Strump, the silver-stubbled, near toothless soul who lived on the second floor and owned the whole building.

Next to Wendell (or Walter) was a retired Eskimo seaman who spoke no English. He peed like a fire hose. All else I knew about him was that he never said hello, just grunted in the hallway, and that he welcomed a bone-thin junky prostitute to his place a couple times a week. After I'd been living there for nearly a year, the worst smell I'd ever come across suffused the narrow hall—so vivid and unexpectedly dark in its implications I gagged and nearly threw up—and later that day the Eskimo was carried out in a heavy black rubber bag by two gray-uniformed men.

Late that night I heard a loud mewling from behind the dead Eskimo's door. I didn't know he'd had a cat, but a cat was sure making a desperate ruckus now.

I went down and knocked on Mr. Strump's door to see if

I could get a key. He was in a yellowy-white nightshirt down past his knees and looked bemused by sleep, but when I mentioned the cat, he fetched a large ring of keys and led me back up to the fifth floor.

Inside the door was a skinny, tight-jawed gray tabby with pale purple eyes and a profoundly wary face. A sharp, hard-knocks New York City cat. I was immediately intrigued, yet when I reached to pick him up, he hissed at me, then swatted at my hand with his paw.

Hungry, I figured. I opened up the Eskimo's refrigerator, but immediately shut the door on the rotten, gassy smell that flooded out. I had fresh milk in my place, and cans of tuna fish—I'd recently read a financial book that said stockpiling cans of tuna when they were on sale was the best investment you could make, and, hey, it was a move I could at least afford—and went and got the food.

When I got back, the cat was settled in Mr. Strump's worn hands, body stretched over his chest, his head turned back, those savvy eyes gazing at me.

I fed the cat, and he immediately calmed down. I found that surprisingly satisfying. The thing was, I'd been seriously allergic to cats since I was a boy, and I told that to Mr. Strump. He shrugged, then muttered, "What would one more matter?" (When I paid my rent, I found his place crawling with cats, probably close to a dozen.)

"You sure?" I said. Part of me wanted to give the cat a try, but I could already feel my nose sniffing up.

He nodded, locked the apartment door, and that was that.

* * * * *

A WEEK LATER Slater Martin moved in.

The first time I saw Slater he was leaving his new digs. The first thing I noticed was how short he was, a good four, five inches shorter than me (I'm five-ten), and bone-skinny except for his arms and shoulders, which were muscle-bound. He had long sandy hair, cut bowl-like to his shoulders, murky

blue eyes, sharp cheekbones. He looked a lot like the surfer dudes I'd grown up with in L.A., but harder, as if ever he went surfing, it would be through a sea of garbage—or steaming molten metal. He had a tight, punchy chin, a hint of a dimple, and when he led with it, his chin gave him the look of a small boat braving angry surf. That, I came to know, was all Slater Martin: Bow first, he sliced through whatever was in front of him.

Today Slater was wearing an oversized leather jacket, studded with metal stars and glittery zippers. Even so, I could make out dusky blue-black tattoos on his neck and around his wrists. I was running out, late to work as always. I smiled at him, he grunted at me (in tones not unlike the dead Eskimo's), then cut me off to lope down the five flights of stairs two at a time.

I was thinking, What a rude asshole, when I got to the bottom of the rickety stairs and found him waiting there.

“Hey, I’m Slater.” He held out a hand, thin and more delicate than I expected. I took it. His motion was unexpectedly wan, a ghost of a shake. His voice was surprisingly soft, gentle, though his eyes stayed wary, harsh. “Where you off to, bro?”

“Um, work.” I gave my head a shake, surprised to be talking to him.

“Work? What’s that?” He smiled, but also looked genuinely puzzled.

“You mean, what do I do?”

“You shittin’ me?” Slater threw a shoulder toward me.

I blinked, didn’t get what he meant. I felt my chest swelling, though. I’d blundered into the best publishing job in New York, my dream job, and—

“Listen,” he interrupted, “why don’t ya come with me?”

“What?”

“It’s a lovely day, man. May. It’s not May that often here, you know.” He lifted a hand and waved it into the perfect

slate-blue sky, then pointed at the just-budding Callery pears and honey locusts on our block. "It's no day for ... *work*."

"Why're you—"

"Cuz we're neighbors, bro." Slater's eyes lit up. "What's wrong with bein' neighborly?"

For somebody as slight as he was, the wraithlike body in rail-thin black jeans, a torn white T-shirt underneath the smothering studded jacket, Slater had that forceful way about him, like a spinning tornado ready to whisk you up and deposit you God knows where—probably not Kansas, Toto. A lot of it was in his blue eyes, murky yet strong, piercing, compelling. And of course his anvil chin, bursting through anything boring. As long as I knew Slater Martin, I was always surprised by how he could get me to go along with whatever madness he came up with.

But not that first day. I begged off, telling Slater maybe some other time, then headed to Union Square to the subway, taking it uptown to West 43rd Street.

My job was at *The New Yorker* magazine. I'd been there nine months, in the typing pool—Walden's Pond, named after Harriet Walden, the lovely older woman who presided over it—and it was such a great, unexpected place to be that I was still startled that I could get off the elevator on the 20th floor and be buzzed in. I was also not at all the type to play hooky—at least not then.

And besides, I had a lunch date with Emily Prosser, the elegant, ever-surprising girl I had a total crush on.

One of the cool things about working at *The New Yorker* was that literary New York took the job, and thus callow me, seriously. Including Emily Prosser.

Emily was recently out of Yale, with center-parted blonde hair, a Mickey Mouse Club cute nose, and glittering pale-blue eyes (I know, she'll hate me when she reads this), and those chunky black glasses that weren't yet universally sexy on smart girls—just damn sexy to me.

Emily worked at Farrar Straus & Giroux, the book publisher equivalent in prestige to *The New Yorker*, a junior editor, looking for authors (me! me!), and attending every bookish cocktail party in town. That's where I met her, at a soirée above the Gotham Book Mart on West 47th, standing there along with tweedy old guys like George Plimpton, Gordon Lish, and Roger Straus. There were other kids my age, but it was Emily who struck me hard as I walked into the party.

She had on a turquoise sweater, perfectly curved, a pleated skirt just above her knees—nice knees—black ballet flats, around her neck a string of genuine pearls, and those thick black frames that set off her delicate blonde loveliness, making her look just a little dangerous. For all her bookish quality she sent off a definite meet-me-out-back sexiness.

I moved up close to her elbow. She was talking to a short man with cuffs two inches too short and a tall, owlish woman in huge lavender glasses I later learned was Joyce Carol Oates. I stood there, smiled—O.K., it was that I-don't-know-anybody-and-I'm-not-sure-I-belong-here party simpler I'd yet to turn into mysterious confidence (if I ever did); and even though none of the three looked at me, I was so drawn to the blonde woman about my height, with her wide shoulders and perfect skin ... and those black, in-your-face eyeglasses ... that I stood there, sipping the cheap white wine, shuffling side to side, waiting for—

“No, I think Sontag is brilliant writing about photography,” Emily said. “You know, we're doing a collection of her pieces soon.”

“I don't like that silvery stripy thing in her hair,” the short man said. “Seems pretentious.”

The tall woman just rolled her eyes.

“I've been reading her pieces in *The New York Review*,” I said, seeing a way in, “and I love them. Learned all kinds of things about photography I never even thought of.”

“See!” Emily said, turning to me for the first time, and smiling.

The short guy, who I later found out had published a well-received novel ten years earlier but hadn’t done much since but attend parties, shook his head distastefully: these children, these *upstarts*. He took the tall woman’s elbow and steered her away, saying, “So, Joyce, how many books are *you* going to publish this year?”

“Hi, I’m Cole,” I said as soon as they were gone. I held out my hand.

“Emily Prosser.” Emily’s gaze followed her former interlocutors. “Pretentious?” she said, making a cute-as-the-devil chipmunk face. “Where does that windbag get off saying that Susan Fricking Sontag is—”

“I love her stuff,” I said, and meant it, though I didn’t always know what Sontag was talking about. Heck, I’d only been reading the *New York Review* since I’d moved to the city those ten months back.

“I know, I know.” Emily shook her head. “Some people.”

We stood there, just the two of us for a moment, till in that severe yet curious New York way she looked at me and said, “So, what do you *do*, Cole?”

“I work for a magazine,” I said. I’d learned pretty quickly that was the way to start off—just say “a magazine.” So who was pretentious? My only defense: What could this former barefoot wannabe L.A. surfer boy do but pretend!

“Oh, which one.”

“*The New Yorker*.”

That hooked her, as I knew it would. She gave me a second look, then a slow, easy smile.

“What do you do there?”

“Oh, I’m an editorial assistant.” I smiled quick, thinking the faster I smiled, the better chance I had of slipping past my actual job.

“So you’re in the typing pool.” A sly smile. “I heard they were hiring men now.”

I sighed, then laughed. “You know about Walden Pond?”
“A girlfriend of mine from Yale worked there for a while. She moved up to fact-checker.”

“Who is she?”

“Annie Gottfried?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. The fact-checkers were the exalted young folk at the magazine. They actually got to work on copy, not just retype it. As a rule, they didn’t mix that much with us.

“So, Cole, do you write?”

“Um, yes.” I shifted from side to side. “Mostly fiction.” Then I held my breath; I knew where this was going.

“That’s nice.” Emily was still smiling, and I found I was falling harder and harder for that smile, the way her lips held little wisps of joy in their corners, her perfect teeth gleamed. “Where have I seen your work?”

“Well—” I exhaled. That was the thing I was learning about the literary world: It was all points and credits. If you didn’t have any. . . .

“You have a novel yet?” she said, a sudden flood of kindness in her eyes. She was not going to cut me off because I had no quick answer to the publishing question. Emily was going to be sympathetic. “I mean, anything close to being finished?”

“I am writing a novel. Working away, and, well, it’s already the third draft, and—”

“Want to send it to me?”

I pulled my head back. Farrar Straus, along with Knopf, were my dream publishers. I didn’t think I could get close to them without an agent, and I didn’t yet have an agent.

“Just like that?”

“Yes, sir!” Emily laughed. “I mean, whenever you’re ready, Cole. I want to be the first person to see it.” She lifted that fine-chiseled chin. “I insist!”

I stepped back. It wasn’t that I hadn’t gotten encourage-

ment for short pieces I'd shown one of the fiction editors at work, but an out and out request to see my novel, my day-in, day-out, typing, obsessing, tearing up paper, feeling brilliant one moment, hopelessly stupid and kludgy five minutes later ... my baby, my sole reason to exist ... all this without even asking what the damn thing was about? I was flabbergasted.

Emily kept smiling, but I was self-consciously wracking my brain for some idea of what she might be seeing in me. A guy who had trouble tying a tie well (back in California, a clip-on got me through any event demanding one). A guy who went to a public university. (O.K., it was Berkeley, but they had to let me in with my GPA; I didn't pass any "You're Yale or Harvard material" test.) A guy who still walked around the glorious big city with eyes agog?

"Can we have lunch sometime?" I blurted out, then half-froze. "I mean, talk more about it or ... or something?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Cole, please, it's not that big a deal."

"No, I—O.K., that'd be great. Next week?"

"Sure." She was rooting into her purse, pulling out a pen. "Here's my number. Give me a call, I can check my calendar, but next week it is."

So Emily and I became lunch pals. And ... only pals.

I'd decided to hold off on showing her any of my book. If I'd learned anything yet as a writer, it was to *not* show work to anyone till it was ready. But talking about writing and the literary scene certainly gave us a start at that first lunch; and then it was mostly my crushing on her hard, and Emily trying not to acknowledge that—and most definitely not responding.

How bad was I? I thought about Emily a lot (not all the time, she wasn't exactly my first thought in the morning—fortunately, that was still the fortunes of Peter Strohmeier, the hero of the novel I was writing, *Negative Space*), but I'd

daydream at my typist's desk at *The New Yorker* about what Emily was up to, wonder way too much whether I'd waited enough time to call her up again, and plot—fruitlessly yet obsessively—how to make her my girlfriend.

Her just-friends friend, that was easy. We *were* friends; she seemed to really like having me wander the city with her on a Saturday, or meet her in Chinatown for an impromptu noodlefest on a weekday night, then stroll uptown through the then desolate land between Canal and St. Marks talking about anything and everything.

Emily really dug the Bowery. This was true skid row Bowery back then, not much else on the street but winos crumpled into doorways and ragged panhandlers spilling out of the Bowery Mission. Emily pressed coins, even bills into their hands, then turned to me, laughing.

"I love this city," she'd cry, twirling like Audrey Hepburn in some old movie. "I love everything about it."

Everything but me. I could be a fool with girls, for sure, and over the years I'd blundered passes and kisses with more of them than I want to recall, but I knew better than to make a move on Emily. There was just something there, a vibe, a tacit implication, a field of privilege and specialness I understood I'd better not breach. Did this make me want her any the less? Of course not. I panted for Emily, desired her the first moment my eyes sprung open in my lonely bed, and kept waiting for an opening—a way through her force field to what I passionately wanted: to be her boyfriend, her lover.

Was anyone else getting through? Emily was private in manifold ways, and part of staying her friend was not asking the wrong questions or pushing too hard. But still I had my ideas. Her class, her uptown sensibility, the simple fact she could go anywhere—any salon, fancy restaurant, elite gathering—and be right at home made me believe she was looking for a similar kind of Upper East Side guy, someone named Chance or Brock, say. I knew almost nothing of where

she was from other than Yale, but my picture of her was of somebody who aspired to an expensive life—an East Coast version I had no understanding of. Polo? Why not? Brock's or Chance's grandmother's pearls? They'd look spectacular on her long, perfect neck.

Still, Emily *liked* me. And I more than liked her, though I did well tamping down that fire I felt when I looked past her sexy black frames into her silky blue eyes. It's just that they were ... rich girl's eyes; Over the Hill eyes—that's the way this San Fernando Valley kid thought of the Beverly Hills/Bel Air chicks he couldn't score with in high school. And if Emily had to keep herself pure to marry a man worthy of her—or with enough old-money worth *for* her—well, that seemed to be the way it was.

To Emily's credit, she never played me or made me feel emasculated. And she did unhesitatingly take me along on her rich-girl adventures, which as an aspiring writer was a godsend. A party at a huge apartment on Park and 71st? At first I felt klutzy and out of place, but she introduced me around and finally I felt almost accepted. I also kept my eyes open and made notes and notes and notes....

So, lunch today. At the Mary Elizabeth Tea House, this old-fashioned joint on East 37th Street right off Fifth, that I enjoyed going to just because for this California boy it was so exotic. Hmmn, lunch today? Sushi, Mexican, Chinese ... no, how about 1940s food?

Emily liked it, too. A cheese-and-olive nut-bread sandwich, with iced tea and cream, and banana royale for dessert? The chow reminded me of my grandmother.

So there we were at the starched-white-cloth table, heavy silverware in hand, dipping into cups of sorrel soup, when Emily said, "I have to move."

"You what?"

"Yes, get out of where I am. It's—" and she gave a pretty-as-a-picture shudder.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Cole, it’s ... it’s em-bar-ras-sing.” Emily looked down at the white tablecloth. I don’t know if I can remember her looking cowed like that. “Can I just tell you I need to find a new place to live?”

“Sure, I mean—” The thing was, I’d never been to her home, didn’t even know where she was living. I’d always assumed it was some fancy Eastside digs at the least. “Anything I can do?”

“Keep your eyes and ears open.” She gave me a steady nod.

“Sure.”

“Can’t be very expensive, you know.” Up rolled her eyes. “Lit-er-ar-y publishing.”

Was Emily really living on her salary? She dressed immaculately, I’d seen clothes certain to have come from Bergdorf’s or Saks. As you can imagine, she fit right in at the Mary Elizabeth Tea House, as she fit in everywhere.

“You know,” I said, a most unlikely thought springing into my head, “there’s a lot of flux at my building on East 11th Street. A guy on my floor ... well, there was an unexpected opening, though it’s taken now.” I thought for a second of the short, studded-leather-jacket guy who’d asked me off on his lark this morning, then shook my head.

“Cole, what’re you saying?” Emily’s voice went up, no doubt noticing my head shake.

“Oh, well, I’ve heard there’s another open apartment.” Emily hadn’t been to my place, either. Ours was a pal-ship of phone conversations, lunches, and parties. But East 11th Street? It seemed utterly unlikely that she’d have any interest in my tenement building. Still, I added, “At least it’s in the front, but I...”

“With a view?” she said quickly.

“Well, it’s the third floor. There’s a two-story school across the street—”

“So there should be some decent sky, right?” Her enthusiasm startled me.

“Well, um, I can see the whole top of the Empire State Building from my place,” I said, nodding, “but I’m at the top. This is on the third—”

“How much is it?”

“I’m paying ninety a month, can’t imagine it’d be more than that. I can always ask the old coot who owns the building, Mr. Strump, I mean, if you’re really . . .” My voice trailed off, still laden with disbelief.

“That would make things really simple, wouldn’t it?” Emily said. “Have somebody I know right upstairs. In case I need a cup of sugar or something.”

“Yeah, I guess—”

“Might be good,” Emily went on, giving me her sly smile, “to have somebody around who actually *has* sugar in their place.” An eye-sparking wink I had no idea how to take. “You know, if I ever *need* some sugar.”

Turned out that was that. Mr. Strump didn’t even have to meet Emily, was happy to have the apartment rented, I guess, though he was a genuinely *laissez-faire* landlord. He didn’t even ask if she had a job; most of the people at 340 East 11th didn’t.

And so on Saturday, still full of disbelief, I helped Emily move in.