

AUDREY NIFFENEGGER

The Time Traveler's Wife

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For

ELIZABETH HILLMAN TAMANDL
MAY 20, 1915–DECEMBER 18, 1986

and

NORBERT CHARLES TAMANDL
FEBRUARY 11, 1915–MAY 23, 1957

Clock time is our bank manager,
tax collector, police inspector;
this inner time is our wife.

—J.B. Priestley, *Man and Time*

Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

—Derek Walcott

PROLOGUE

CLARE: It's hard being left behind. I wait for Henry, not knowing where he is, wondering if he's okay. It's hard to be the one who stays.

I keep myself busy. Time goes faster that way.

I go to sleep alone, and wake up alone. I take walks. I work until I'm tired. I watch the wind play with the trash that's been under the snow all winter. Everything seems simple until you think about it. Why is love intensified by absence?

Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water, scanning the horizon for the tiny ship. Now I wait for Henry. He vanishes unwillingly, without warning. I wait for him. Each moment that I wait feels like a year, an eternity. Each moment is as slow and transparent as glass. Through each moment I can see infinite moments lined up, waiting. Why has he gone where I cannot follow?

HENRY: How does it feel? *How does it feel?*

Sometimes it feels as though your attention has wandered for just an instant. Then, with a start, you realize that the book you were holding, the red plaid cotton shirt with white buttons, the favorite black jeans and the maroon socks with an almost-hole in one heel, the living room, the about-to-whistle tea kettle in the kitchen: all of these have vanished. You are standing, naked as a jaybird, up to your ankles in ice water in a ditch along an unidentified rural route. You wait a minute to see if maybe you will just snap right back to your book, your apartment, *et cetera*. After about five minutes of swearing and shiver-

ing and hoping to hell you can just disappear, you start walking in any direction, which will eventually yield a farmhouse, where you have the option of stealing or explaining. Stealing will sometimes land you in jail, but explaining is more tedious and time-consuming and involves lying anyway, and also sometimes results in being hauled off to jail, so what the hell.

Sometimes you feel as though you have stood up too quickly even if you are lying in bed half asleep. You hear blood rushing in your head, feel vertiginous falling sensations. Your hands and feet are tingling and then they aren't there at all. You've mislocated yourself again. It only takes an instant, you have just enough time to try to hold on, to flail around (possibly damaging yourself or valuable possessions) and then you are skidding across the forest-green-carpeted hallway of a Motel 6 in Athens, Ohio, at 4:16 a.m., Monday, August 6, 1981, and you hit your head on someone's door, causing this person, a Ms. Tina Schulman from Philadelphia, to open this door and start screaming because there's a naked, carpet-burned man passed out at her feet. You wake up in the County Hospital concussed with a policeman sitting outside your door listening to the Phillies game on a crackly transistor radio. Mercifully, you lapse back into unconsciousness and wake up again hours later in your own bed with your wife leaning over you looking very worried.

Sometimes you feel euphoric. Everything is sublime and has an aura, and suddenly you are intensely nauseated and then you are gone. You are throwing up on some suburban geraniums, or your father's tennis shoes, or your very own bathroom floor three days ago, or a wooden sidewalk in Oak Park, Illinois, circa 1903, or a tennis court on a fine autumn day in the 1950s, or your own naked feet in a wide variety of times and places.

How does it feel?

It feels exactly like one of those dreams in which you suddenly realize that you have to take a test you haven't studied for and you aren't wearing any clothes. And you've left your wallet at home.

When I am out there, in time, I am inverted, changed into a desperate version of myself. I become a thief, a vagrant, an animal who

runs and hides. I startle old women and amaze children. I am a trick, an illusion of the highest order, so incredible that I am actually true.

Is there a logic, a rule to all this coming and going, all this dislocation? Is there a way to stay put, to embrace the present with every cell? I don't know. There are clues; as with any disease there are patterns, possibilities. Exhaustion, loud noises, stress, standing up suddenly, flashing light—any of these can trigger an episode. But: I can be reading the *Sunday Times*, coffee in hand and Clare dozing beside me on our bed and suddenly I'm in 1976 watching my thirteen-year-old self mow my grandparents' lawn. Some of these episodes last only moments; it's like listening to a car radio that's having trouble holding on to a station. I find myself in crowds, audiences, mobs. Just as often I am alone, in a field, house, car, on a beach, in a grammar school in the middle of the night. I fear finding myself in a prison cell, an elevator full of people, the middle of a highway. I appear from nowhere, naked. How can I explain? I have never been able to carry anything with me. No clothes, no money, no ID. I spend most of my sojourns acquiring clothing and trying to hide. Fortunately I don't wear glasses.

It's ironic, really. All my pleasures are homey ones: armchair splendor, the sedate excitements of domesticity. All I ask for are humble delights. A mystery novel in bed, the smell of Clare's long red-gold hair damp from washing, a postcard from a friend on vacation, cream dispersing into coffee, the softness of the skin under Clare's breasts, the symmetry of grocery bags sitting on the kitchen counter waiting to be unpacked. I love meandering through the stacks at the library after the patrons have gone home, lightly touching the spines of the books. These are the things that can pierce me with longing when I am displaced from them by Time's whim.

And Clare, always Clare. Clare in the morning, sleepy and crumpled-faced. Clare with her arms plunging into the papermaking vat, pulling up the mold and shaking it so, and so, to meld the fibers. Clare reading, with her hair hanging over the back of the chair, massaging balm into her cracked red hands before bed. Clare's low voice is in my ear often.

I hate to be where she is not, when she is not. And yet, I am always going, and she cannot follow.

I

**THE MAN OUT
OF TIME**

Oh *not* because happiness *exists*,
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.

.....

But because truly being here is so much; because every-
thing here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some
strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.

.....

. . . Ah, but what can we take along
into that other realm? Not the art of looking,
which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened
here. Nothing.
The sufferings, then. And, above all, the heaviness,
and the long experience of love,—just what is wholly
unsayable.

—from *The Ninth Duino Elegy*, Rainer Maria Rilke,
translated by Stephen Mitchell

FIRST DATE, ONE

Saturday, October 26, 1991 (Henry is 28, Clare is 20)

CLARE: The library is cool and smells like carpet cleaner, although all I can see is marble. I sign the Visitors' Log: *Clare Abshire, 11:15 10-26-91 Special Collections*. I have never been in the Newberry Library before, and now that I've gotten past the dark, foreboding entrance I am excited. I have a sort of Christmas-morning sense of the library as a big box full of beautiful books. The elevator is dimly lit, almost silent. I stop on the third floor and fill out an application for a Reader's Card, then I go upstairs to Special Collections. My boot heels rap the wooden floor. The room is quiet and crowded, full of solid, heavy tables piled with books and surrounded by readers. Chicago autumn morning light shines through the tall windows. I approach the desk and collect a stack of call slips. I'm writing a paper for an art history class. My research topic is the Kelmscott Press *Chaucer*. I look up the book itself and fill out a call slip for it. But I also want to read about papermaking at Kelmscott. The catalog is confusing. I go back to the desk to ask for help. As I explain to the woman what I am trying to find, she glances over my shoulder at someone passing behind me. "Perhaps Mr. DeTamble can help you," she says. I turn, prepared to start explaining again, and find myself face to face with Henry.

I am speechless. Here is Henry, calm, clothed, younger than I have ever seen him. Henry is working at the Newberry Library, standing in front of me, in the present. Here and now. I am jubilant. Henry is looking at me patiently, uncertain but polite.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he asks.

"Henry!" I can barely refrain from throwing my arms around him. It is obvious that he has never seen me before in his life.

"Have we met? I'm sorry, I don't. . . ." Henry is glancing around us, worrying that readers, co-workers are noticing us, searching his memory and realizing that some future self of his has met this radiantly happy girl standing in front of him. The last time I saw him he was sucking my toes in the Meadow.

I try to explain. "I'm Clare Abshire. I knew you when I was a little girl . . ." I'm at a loss because I am in love with a man who is standing before me with no memories of me at all. Everything is in the future for him. I want to laugh at the weirdness of the whole thing. I'm flooded with years of knowledge of Henry, while he's looking at me perplexed and fearful. Henry wearing my dad's old fishing trousers, patiently quizzing me on multiplication tables, French verbs, all the state capitals; Henry laughing at some peculiar lunch my seven-year-old self has brought to the Meadow; Henry wearing a tuxedo, undoing the studs of his shirt with shaking hands on my eighteenth birthday. Here! Now! "Come and have coffee with me, or dinner or something. . . ." Surely he has to say yes, this Henry who loves me in the past and the future must love me now in some bat-squeak echo of other time. To my immense relief he does say yes. We plan to meet tonight at a nearby Thai restaurant, all the while under the amazed gaze of the woman behind the desk, and I leave, forgetting about Kelmscott and Chaucer and floating down the marble stairs, through the lobby and out into the October Chicago sun, running across the park scattering small dogs and squirrels, whooping and rejoicing.

HENRY: It's a routine day in October, sunny and crisp. I'm at work in a small windowless humidity-controlled room on the fourth floor of the Newberry, cataloging a collection of marbled papers that has recently been donated. The papers are beautiful, but cataloging is dull, and I am feeling bored and sorry for myself. In fact, I am feeling old, in the way only a twenty-eight-year-old can after staying up half the night drinking overpriced vodka and trying, without success, to win

himself back into the good graces of Ingrid Carmichel. We spent the entire evening fighting, and now I can't even remember what we were fighting about. My head is throbbing. I need coffee. Leaving the marbled papers in a state of controlled chaos, I walk through the office and past the page's desk in the Reading Room. I am halted by Isabelle's voice saying, "Perhaps Mr. DeTamble can help you," by which she means "Henry, you weasel, where are you slinking off to?" And this astoundingly beautiful amber-haired tall slim girl turns around and looks at me as though I am her personal Jesus. My stomach lurches. Obviously she knows me, and I don't know her. Lord only knows what I have said, done, or promised to this luminous creature, so I am forced to say in my best librarianese, "Is there something I can help you with?" The girl sort of breathes "Henry!" in this very evocative way that convinces me that at some point in time we have a really *amazing* thing together. This makes it worse that I don't know anything about her, not even her name. I say "Have we met?" and Isabelle gives me a look that says *You asshole*. But the girl says, "I'm Clare Abshire. I knew you when I was a little girl," and invites me out to dinner. I accept, stunned. She is glowing at me, although I am unshaven and hung over and just not at my best. We are going to meet for dinner this very evening, at the Beau Thai, and Clare, having secured me for later, wafts out of the Reading Room. As I stand in the elevator, dazed, I realize that a massive winning lottery ticket chunk of my future has somehow found me here in the present, and I start to laugh. I cross the lobby, and as I run down the stairs to the street I see Clare running across Washington Square, jumping and whooping, and I am near tears and I don't know why.

Later that evening:

HENRY: At 6:00 p.m. I race home from work and attempt to make myself attractive. Home these days is a tiny but insanely expensive studio apartment on North Dearborn; I am constantly banging parts of myself on inconvenient walls, countertops and furniture. Step One:

unlock seventeen locks on apartment door, fling myself into the living room-which-is-also-my-bedroom and begin stripping off clothing. Step Two: shower and shave. Step Three: stare hopelessly into the depths of my closet, gradually becoming aware that nothing is exactly clean. I discover one white shirt still in its dry cleaning bag. I decide to wear the black suit, wing tips, and pale blue tie. Step Four: don all of this and realize I look like an FBI agent. Step Five: look around and realize that the apartment is a mess. I resolve to avoid bringing Clare to my apartment tonight even if such a thing is possible. Step Six: look in full-length bathroom mirror and behold angular, wild-eyed 6'1" ten-year-old Egon Schiele look-alike in clean shirt and funeral director suit. I wonder what sorts of outfits this woman has seen me wearing, since I am obviously not arriving from my future into her past wearing clothes of my own. She said she was a little girl? A plethora of unanswerables runs through my head. I stop and breathe for a minute. Okay. I grab my wallet and my keys, and away I go: lock the thirty-seven locks, descend in the cranky little elevator, buy roses for Clare in the shop in the lobby, walk two blocks to the restaurant in record time but still five minutes late. Clare is already seated in a booth and she looks relieved when she sees me. She waves at me like she's in a parade.

"Hello," I say. Clare is wearing a wine-colored velvet dress and pearls. She looks like a Botticelli by way of John Graham: huge gray eyes, long nose, tiny delicate mouth like a geisha. She has long red hair that covers her shoulders and falls to the middle of her back. Clare is so pale she looks like a waxwork in the candlelight. I thrust the roses at her. "For you."

"Thank you," says Clare, absurdly pleased. She looks at me and realizes that I am confused by her response. "You've never given me flowers before."

I slide into the booth opposite her. I'm fascinated. This woman *knows* me; this isn't some passing acquaintance of my future hegirlas. The waitress appears and hands us menus.

"Tell me," I demand.

"What?"

"Everything. I mean, do you understand why I don't know you? I'm terribly sorry about that—"

"Oh, no, you shouldn't be. I mean, I know . . . why that is." Clare lowers her voice. "It's because for you none of it has happened yet, but for me, well, I've known you for a long time."

"How long?"

"About fourteen years. I first saw you when I was six."

"Jesus. Have you seen me very often? Or just a few times?"

"The last time I saw you, you told me to bring this to dinner when we met again," Clare shows me a pale blue child's diary, "so here,"—she hands it to me—"You can have this." I open it to the place marked with a piece of newspaper. The page, which has two cocker spaniel puppies lurking in the upper right-hand corner, is a list of dates. It begins with September 23, 1977, and ends sixteen small, blue, puppyed pages later on May 24, 1989. I count. There are 152 dates, written with great care in the large open Palmer Method blue ballpoint pen of a six-year-old.

"You made the list? These are all accurate?"

"Actually, you dictated this to me. You told me a few years ago that you memorized the dates from this list. So I don't know how exactly this exists; I mean, it seems sort of like a Mobius strip. But they are accurate. I used them to know when to go down to the Meadow to meet you." The waitress reappears and we order: Tom Kha Kai for me and Gang Mussaman for Clare. A waiter brings tea and I pour us each a cup.

"What is the Meadow?" I am practically hopping with excitement. I have never met anyone from my future before, much less a Botticelli who has encountered me 152 times.

"The Meadow is a part of my parents' place up in Michigan. There's woods at one edge of it, and the house on the opposite end. More or less in the middle is a clearing about ten feet in diameter with a big rock in it, and if you're in the clearing no one at the house can see you because the land swells up and then dips in the clearing. I used to play

there because I liked to play by myself and I thought no one knew I was there. One day when I was in first grade I came home from school and went out to the clearing and there you were."

"Stark naked and probably throwing up."

"Actually, you seemed pretty self-possessed. I remember you knew my name, and I remember you vanishing quite spectacularly. In retrospect, it's obvious that you had been there before. I think the first time for you was in 1981; I was ten. You kept saying 'Oh my god,' and staring at me. Also, you seemed pretty freaked out about the nudity, and by then I just kind of took it for granted that this old nude guy was going to magically appear from the future and demand clothing."

Clare smiles. "And food."

"What's funny?"

"I made you some pretty weird meals over the years. Peanut butter and anchovy sandwiches. Pâté and beets on Ritz crackers. I think partly I wanted to see if there was anything you wouldn't eat and partly I was trying to impress you with my culinary wizardry."

"How old was I?"

"I think the oldest I have seen you was forty-something. I'm not sure about youngest; maybe about thirty? How old are you now?"

"Twenty-eight."

"You look very young to me now. The last few years you were mostly in your early forties, and you seemed to be having kind of a rough life. . . . It's hard to say. When you're little all adults seem big, and old."

"So what did we do? In the Meadow? That's a lot of time, there."

Clare smiles. "We did lots of things. It changed depending on my age, and the weather. You spent a lot of time helping me do my homework. We played games. Mostly we just talked about stuff. When I was really young I thought you were an angel; I asked you a lot of questions about God. When I was a teenager I tried to get you to make love to me, and you never would, which of course made me much more determined about it. I think you thought you were going to warp me sexually, somehow. In some ways you were very parental."

"Oh. That's probably good news but somehow at the moment I don't seem to be wanting to be thought of as parental." Our eyes meet.

We both smile and we are conspirators. "What about winter? Michigan winters are pretty extreme."

"I used to smuggle you into our basement; the house has a huge basement with several rooms, and one of them is a storage room and the furnace is on the other side of the wall. We call it the Reading Room because all the useless old books and magazines are stored there. One time you were down there and we had a blizzard and nobody went to school or to work and I thought I was going to go crazy trying to get food for you because there wasn't all that much food in the house. Etta was supposed to go grocery shopping when the storm hit. So you were stuck reading old *Reader's Digests* for three days, living on sardines and ramen noodles."

"Sounds salty. I'll look forward to it." Our meal arrives. "Did you ever learn to cook?"

"No, I don't think I would claim to know how to cook. Nell and Etta always got mad when I did anything in their kitchen beyond getting myself a Coke, and since I've moved to Chicago I don't have anybody to cook for, so I haven't been motivated to work on it. Mostly I'm too busy with school and all, so I just eat there." Clare takes a bite of her curry. "This is really good."

"Nell and Etta?"

"Nell is our cook." Clare smiles. "Nell is like *cordon bleu* meets Detroit; she's how Aretha Franklin would be if she was Julia Child. Etta is our housekeeper and all-around everything. She's really more almost our *mom*; I mean, my mother is . . . well, Etta's just always there, and she's German and strict, but she's very comforting, and my mother is kind of off in the clouds, you know?"

I nod, my mouth full of soup.

"Oh, and there's Peter," Clare adds. "Peter is the gardener."

"Wow. Your family has servants. This sounds a little out of my league. Have I ever, uh, met any of your family?"

"You met my Grandma Meagram right before she died. She was the only person I ever told about you. She was pretty much blind by then. She knew we were going to get married and she wanted to meet you."

I stop eating and look at Clare. She looks back at me, serene, angelic, perfectly at ease. "Are we going to get married?"

"I assume so," she replies. "You've been telling me for years that whenever it is you're coming from, you're married to me."

Too much. This is too much. I close my eyes and will myself to think of nothing; the last thing I want is to lose my grip on the here and now.

"Henry? Henry, are you okay?" I feel Clare sliding onto the seat beside me. I open my eyes and she grips my hands strongly in hers. I look at her hands and see that they are the hands of a laborer, rough and chapped. "Henry, I'm sorry, I just can't get used to this. It's so opposite. I mean, all my life you've been the one who knew everything and I sort of forgot that tonight maybe I should go slow." She smiles. "Actually, almost the last thing you said to me before you left was 'Have mercy, Clare.' You said it in your quoting voice, and I guess now that I think of it you must have been quoting me." She continues to hold my hands. She looks at me with eagerness; with love. I feel profoundly humble.

"Clare?"

"Yes?"

"Could we back up? Could we pretend that this is a normal first date between two normal people?"

"Okay." Clare gets up and goes back to her side of the table. She sits up straight and tries not to smile.

"Um, right. Gee, ah, Clare, ah, tell me about yourself. Hobbies? Pets? Unusual sexual proclivities?"

"Find out for yourself."

"Right. Let's see . . . where do you go to school? What are you studying?"

"I'm at the School of the Art Institute; I've been doing sculpture, and I've just started to study papermaking."

"Cool. What's your work like?"

For the first time, Clare seems uncomfortable. "It's kind of . . . big, and it's about . . . birds." She looks at the table, then takes a sip of tea.

"Birds?"

"Well, really it's about, um, longing." She is still not looking at me, so I change the subject.

"Tell more about your family."

"Okay." Clare relaxes, smiles. "Well . . . my family lives in Michigan, by a small town on the lake called South Haven. Our house is in an unincorporated area outside the town, actually. It originally belonged to my mother's parents, my Grandpa and Grandma Meagram. He died before I was born, and she lived with us until she died. I was seventeen. My grandpa was a lawyer, and my dad is a lawyer; my dad met my mom when he came to work for Grandpa."

"So he married the boss's daughter."

"Yeah. Actually, I sometimes wonder if he really married the boss's house. My mom is an only child, and the house is sort of amazing; it's in a lot of books on the Arts and Crafts movement."

"Does it have a name? Who built it?"

"It's called Meadowlark House, and it was built in 1896 by Peter Wyns."

"Wow. I've seen pictures of it. It was built for one of the Henderson family, right?"

"Yes. It was a wedding present for Mary Henderson and Dieter Bascombe. They divorced two years after they moved in and sold the house."

"Posh house."

"My family is posh. They're very weird about it, too."

"Brothers and sisters?"

"Mark is twenty-two and finishing pre-law at Harvard. Alicia is seventeen and a senior in high school. She's a cellist." I detect affection for the sister and a certain flatness for the brother. "You aren't too fond of your brother?"

"Mark is just like Dad. They both like to win, talk you down until you submit."

"You know, I always envy people with siblings, even if they don't like them all that much."

"You're an only child?"

"Yep. I thought you knew everything about me?"

"Actually I know everything and nothing. I know how you look without clothes, but until this afternoon I didn't know your last name. I knew you lived in Chicago, but I know nothing about your family except that your mom died in a car crash when you were six. I know you know a lot about art and speak fluent French and German; I had no idea you were a librarian. You made it impossible for me to find you in the present; you said it would just happen when it was supposed to happen, and here we are."

"Here we are," I agree. "Well, my family isn't posh; they're musicians. My father is Richard DeTamble and my mother was Annette Lyn Robinson."

"Oh—the singer!"

"Right. And he's a violinist. He plays for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. But he never really made it the way she did. It's a shame because my father is a marvelous violin player. After Mom died he was just treading water." The check arrives. Neither of us has eaten very much, but I at least am not interested in food right now. Clare picks up her purse and I shake my head at her. I pay; we leave the restaurant and stand on Clark Street in the fine autumn night. Clare is wearing an elaborate blue knitted thing and a fur scarf; I have forgotten to bring an overcoat so I'm shivering.

"Where do you live?" Clare asks.

Uh oh. "I live about two blocks from here, but my place is tiny and really messy right now. You?"

"Roscoe Village, on Hoyne. But I have a roommate."

"If you come up to my place you have to close your eyes and count to one thousand. Perhaps you have a very uninquisitive deaf roommate?"

"No such luck. I never bring anyone over; Charisse would pounce on you and stick bamboo slivers under your fingernails until you told all."

"I long to be tortured by someone named Charisse, but I can see that you do not share my taste. Come up to my parlor." We walk north along Clark. I veer into Clark Street Liquors for a bottle of wine. Back on the street Clare is puzzled.

"I thought you aren't supposed to drink?"

"I'm not?"

"Dr. Kendrick was very strict about it."

"Who's he?" We are walking slowly because Clare is wearing impractical shoes.

"He's your doctor; he's a big expert on Chrono-Impairment."

"Explain."

"I don't know very much. Dr. David Kendrick is a molecular geneticist who discovered—will discover—why people are chronoiimpaired. It's a genetic thing; he figures it out in 2006." She sighs. "I guess it's just way too early. You told me once that there are a lot more chronoiimpaired people about ten years from now."

"I've never heard of anyone else who has this—impairment."

"I guess even if you went out right now and found Dr. Kendrick he wouldn't be able to help you. And we would never have met, if he could."

"Let's not think about that." We are in my lobby. Clare precedes me into the tiny elevator. I close the door and push eleven. She smells like old cloth, soap, sweat, and fur. I breathe deeply. The elevator clangs into place on my floor and we extricate ourselves from it and walk down the narrow hallway. I wield my fistful of keys on all 107 locks and crack the door slightly. "It's gotten much worse during dinner. I'm going to have to blindfold you." Clare giggles as I set down the wine and remove my tie. I pass it over her eyes and tie it firmly at the back of her head. I open the door and guide her into the apartment and settle her in the armchair. "Okay, start counting."

Clare counts. I race around picking underwear and socks from the floor, collecting spoons and coffee cups from various horizontal surfaces and chucking them into the kitchen sink. As she says "Nine hundred and sixty-seven," I remove the tie from her eyes. I have turned the sleeper-sofa into its daytime, sofa self, and I sit down on it. "Wine? Music? Candlelight?"

"Yes, please."

I get up and light candles. When I'm finished I turn off the overhead light and the room is dancing with little lights and everything

looks better. I put the roses in water, locate my corkscrew, extract the cork, and pour us each a glass of wine. After a moment's thought I put on the EMI CD of my mother singing Schubert lieder and turn the volume low.

My apartment is basically a couch, an armchair, and about four thousand books.

"How lovely," says Clare. She gets up and reseats herself on the sofa. I sit down next to her. There is a comfortable moment when we just sit there and look at each other. The candlelight flickers on Clare's hair. She reaches over and touches my cheek. "It's so good to see you. I was getting lonely."

I draw her to me. We kiss. It's a very . . . compatible kiss, a kiss born of long association, and I wonder just exactly what we've been doing in this meadow of Clare's, but I push the thought away. Our lips part; usually at this point I would be considering how to work my way past various fortresses of clothing, but instead I lean back and stretch out on the sofa, bringing Clare along with me by gripping her under the arms and pulling; the velvet dress makes her slippery and she slithers into the space between my body and the back of the sofa like a velvet eel. She is facing me and I am propped up by the arm of the sofa. I can feel the length of her body pressing against mine through the thin fabric. Part of me is dying to go leaping and licking and diving in, but I'm exhausted and overwhelmed.

"Poor Henry."

"Why 'Poor Henry?' I'm overcome with happiness." And it's true.

"Oh, I've been dropping all these surprises on you like big rocks." Clare swings a leg over me so she's sitting exactly on top of my cock. It concentrates my attention wonderfully.

"Don't move," I say.

"Okay. I'm finding this evening highly entertaining. I mean, Knowledge is Power, and all that. Also I've always been hugely curious to find out where you live and what you wear and what you do for a living."

"*Voilà.*" I slide my hands under her dress and up her thighs. She's wearing stockings and garters. My kind of girl. "Clare?"

"*Oui.*"

"It seems like a shame to just gobble everything up all at once. I mean, a little anticipation wouldn't hurt anything."

Clare is abashed. "I'm sorry! But, you know, in my case, I've been anticipating for years. And, it's not like cake . . . you eat it and it's gone."

"Have your cake and eat it too."

"That's my motto." She smiles a tiny wicked smile and thrusts her hips back and forth a couple times. I now have an erection that is probably tall enough to ride some of the scarier rides at Great America without a parent.

"You get your way a lot, don't you?"

"Always. I'm horrible. Except you have been mostly impervious to my wheedling ways. I've suffered dreadfully under your regime of French verbs and checkers."

"I guess I should take consolation in the fact that my future self will at least have some weapons of subjugation. Do you do this to all the boys?"

Clare is offended; I can't tell how genuinely. "I wouldn't dream of doing this with *boys*. What nasty ideas you have!" She is unbuttoning my shirt. "God, you're so . . . young." She pinches my nipples, hard. The hell with virtue. I've figured out the mechanics of her dress.

The next morning:

CLARE: I wake up and I don't know where I am. An unfamiliar ceiling. Distant traffic noises. Bookshelves. A blue armchair with my velvet dress slung across it and a man's tie draped over the dress. Then I remember. I turn my head and there's Henry. So simple, as though I've been doing it all my life. He is sleeping with abandon, torqued into an unlikely shape as though he's washed up on some beach, one arm over his eyes to shut out the morning, his long black hair splayed over the pillow. So simple. Here we are. Here and now, finally now.

I get out of bed carefully. Henry's bed is also his sofa. The springs squeak as I stand up. There's not much space between the bed and the

bookshelves, so I edge along until I make it into the hallway. The bathroom is tiny. I feel like Alice in Wonderland, grown huge and having to stick my arm out the window just so I can turn around. The ornate little radiator is clanking out heat. I pee and wash my hands and my face. And then I notice that there are two toothbrushes in the white porcelain toothbrush holder.

I open the medicine cabinet. Razors, shaving cream, Listerine, Tylenol, aftershave, a blue marble, a toothpick, deodorant on the top shelf. Hand lotion, tampons, a diaphragm case, deodorant, lipstick, a bottle of multivitamins, a tube of spermicide on the bottom shelf. The lipstick is a very dark red.

I stand there, holding the lipstick. I feel a little sick. I wonder what she looks like, what her name is. I wonder how long they've been going out. Long enough, I guess. I put the lipstick back, close the medicine cabinet. In the mirror I see myself, white-faced, hair flying in all directions. *Well, whoever you are, I'm here now. You may be Henry's past, but I'm his future.* I smile at myself. My reflection grimaces back at me. I borrow Henry's white terrycloth bathrobe from the back of the bathroom door. Underneath it on the hook is a pale blue silk robe. For no reason at all wearing his bathrobe makes me feel better.

Back in the living room, Henry is still sleeping. I retrieve my watch from the windowsill and see that it's only 6:30. I'm too restless to get back into bed. I walk into the kitchenette in search of coffee. All the counters and the stove are covered with stacks of dishes, magazines, and other reading material. There's even a sock in the sink. I realize that Henry must have simply heaved everything into the kitchen last night, regardless. I always had this idea that Henry was very tidy. Now it becomes clear that he's one of those people who is fastidious about his personal appearance but secretly slovenly about everything else. I find coffee in the fridge, and find the coffee maker, and start the coffee. While I wait for it to brew, I peruse Henry's bookshelves.

Here is the Henry I know. Donne's *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*. *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe. *Naked Lunch*. Anne Bradstreet, Immanuel Kant. Barthes, Foucault, Derrida. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. *Winnie the Pooh*. *The Annotated Alice*. Heide-

gger. Rilke. *Tristram Shandy*. *Wisconsin Death Trip*. Aristotle. Bishop Berkeley. Andrew Marvell. *Hypothermia, Frostbite and Other Cold Injuries*.

The bed squeaks and I jump. Henry is sitting up, squinting at me in the morning light. He's so young, so *before*—. He doesn't know me, yet. I have a sudden fear that he's forgotten who I am.

"You look cold," he says. "Come back to bed, Clare."

"I made coffee," I offer.

"Mmm, I can smell it. But first come and say good morning." I climb into bed still wearing his bathrobe. As he slides his hand under it he stops for just a moment, and I see that he has made the connection, and is mentally reviewing his bathroom *vis-à-vis* me.

"Does it bother you?" he asks.

I hesitate.

"Yes, it does. It does bother you. Of course." Henry sits up, and I do, too. He turns his head toward me, looks at me. "It was almost over, anyway."

"Almost?"

"I was about to break up with her. It's just bad timing. Or good timing, I don't know." He's trying to read my face, for what? Forgiveness? It's not his fault. How could he know? "We've sort of been torturing each other for a long time—" He's talking faster and faster and then he stops. "Do you want to know?"

"No."

"Thank you." Henry passes his hands over his face. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were coming or I'd have cleaned up a little more. My life, I mean, not just the apartment." There's a lipstick smear under Henry's ear, and I reach up and rub it out. He takes my hand, and holds it. "Am I very different? Than you expected?" he asks apprehensively.

"Yes . . . you're more . . ." *selfish*, I think, but I say, ". . . younger."

He considers it. "Is that good or bad?"

"Different." I run both hands over Henry's shoulders and across his back, massaging muscles, exploring indentations. "Have you seen yourself, in your forties?"

"Yes. I look like I've been spindled and mutilated."

"Yeah. But you're less—I mean you are sort of—more. I mean, you *know* me, so. . . ."

"So right now you're telling me that I'm somewhat gauche."

I shake my head, although that is exactly what I mean. "It's just that I've had all these experiences, and you . . . I'm not used to being with you when you don't remember anything that happened."

Henry is somber. "I'm sorry. But the person you know doesn't exist yet. Stick with me, and sooner or later, he's bound to appear. That's the best I can do, though."

"That's fair," I say. "But in the meantime. . . ."

He turns to meet my gaze. "In the meantime?"

"I want. . . ."

"You want?"

I'm blushing. Henry smiles, and pushes me backward gently onto the pillows. "You know."

"I don't know much, but I can guess a thing or two."

Later, we're dozing warm covered with midmorning October pale sun, skin to skin and Henry says something into the back of my neck that I don't catch.

"What?"

"I was thinking; it's very peaceful, here with you. It's nice to just lie here and know that the future is sort of taken care of."

"Henry?"

"Hmm?"

"How come you never told yourself about me?"

"Oh. I don't do that."

"Do what?"

"I don't usually tell myself stuff ahead of time unless it's huge, life-threatening, you know? I'm trying to live like a normal person. I don't even like having myself around, so I try not to drop in on myself unless there's no choice."

I ponder this for a while. "I would tell myself everything."

"No, you wouldn't. It makes a lot of trouble."

"I was always trying to get you to tell me things." I roll over onto my back and Henry props his head on his hand and looks down at

me. Our faces are about six inches apart. It's so strange to be talking, almost like we always did, but the physical proximity makes it hard for me to concentrate.

"Did I tell you things?" he asks.

"Sometimes. When you felt like it, or had to."

"Like what?"

"See? You do want to know. But I'm not telling."

Henry laughs. "Serves me right. Hey, I'm hungry. Let's go get breakfast."

Outside it's chilly. Cars and cyclists cruise along Dearborn while couples stroll down the sidewalks and there we are with them, in the morning sunlight, hand in hand, finally together for anyone to see. I feel a tiny pang of regret, as though I've lost a secret, and then a rush of exaltation: now everything begins.