

HEIGHTS & WOODHOUSE

When
the
PIRATE met the
PRINCESS



When the Pirate Met the Princess

Heights & Woodhouse

H & W Books

U.S.A.

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With gratitude to our readers

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Challenge Accepted

Bleecker Street

New York City

Thursday, October 17, 20—

Ray Cozart was late. It was a strategy. By running late, he hoped to avoid *her*—the smart, pretty girl with the intense green eyes. She was going to be at the meeting. He was counting on her arriving first with the other two—the hot blonde Angela and the hipster dude with the glasses, Damian. That would be the ideal scenario. He could talk to Angela, even the hipster. He was more on his game in a group. But alone with Natalie, what would he say? Her intense eyes made him nervous.

Natalie. Natalie Ashbrook. Ray slowed his pace as he thought of her name. A slim crescent moon appeared in the twilight sky over Washington Square Park. The air was crisp, but Ray wore no jacket, only a Henley shirt and his favorite Pittsburgh baseball hat. Utilizing such a strategy, some days he could trick himself into believing it was still summer and that he wasn't in school at all. But on this evening, he felt the change of seasons keenly. Natalie sat in the front row of his Fundamentals of Filmmaking class at the NYU School of the Arts. He couldn't help but think of her as an autumn girl.

At Bleecker Street, Ray paused, unsure which way to go. Navigating Manhattan wasn't like tooling around his native Pittsburgh. He didn't have all the routes memorized. Looking up and down the street to orient himself, he grew worried, thinking he might be extremely late to the meeting. What if Natalie got impatient and left? He'd look stupid. That'd be no good. Suddenly, he had an urgent desire to see her, to pick up his pace. But his indecision paralyzed him, and he just stood there, wondering how a girl could make him feel so at odds.

"Hey, Ray! Is that you? Where you goin'?"

At the crosswalk, Natalie stood holding her cell phone. She called to him again and waved. He sauntered over just as the signal turned, and

they scurried across the street.

“I was gonna cross over there,” Ray explained, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. This was a lie, but he didn’t want Natalie to think he was lost. Running into her thwarted his scheme. *She’s not supposed to be late too.* He pulled his hat down low and searched his mind for words. He didn’t find any.

“Well, you shouldn’t jaywalk,” Natalie said with an upwards glance. Her brunette hair fell in waves that hid half her face. She was slim and petite but wearing boots that made her look taller. “Aren’t you cold?” she asked. She’d zipped her distressed leather jacket all the way up, and she carried a book bag over one shoulder.

“What? No, I’m fine.” Ray jammed his hands in his jean pockets. In truth, without a jacket, he was a bit chilly.

They walked several paces in silence. Ray’s tongue felt thick. He could smell Natalie’s perfume, crisp but spicy, like an autumn night. Her lips were glossed, and her eyes lightly shadowed. In no way did he believe himself to be the target of her allurements. Quite the contrary. He suspected her efforts were aimed at the hipster, Damian. After all, the first time Ray had noticed Natalie—at Angela’s party—she’d sat on the sofa talking art with Damian for half the night. Ray guessed they were an item and tried to think of how to probe these secrets subtly.

“So, what’s this place Angela suggested?” Natalie asked. “Glass-Eye Willy’s?” She consulted a street map on her cell phone. “I guess it’s popular, but I’ve never heard of it. We could’ve met at the library and saved some time.”

“But that’s not much fun,” Ray said instinctively. In his periphery, he could see the top of Natalie’s head. He remembered his first impression of her at Angela’s party: that she was adorable, the kind of girl he could easily sweep up and carry, like a cheerleader. Her gait was short but quick. He tried to adjust his long strides to hers. “Glass-Eye Willy’s is awesome,” he said. “I’ve been there plenty.”

That wasn’t true. He’d only been to Glass-Eye Willy’s once for a beer pong tournament with Angela, her friend Staci, and some others. But it was true that he thought the bar was awesome. He exaggerated to encourage Natalie’s good opinion. “It’ll be great. They serve the best rum—the *best*,” he boasted. “They got all kinds. I drank a flight of four. You gotta drink seven shots to win the Merry Parrot.”

Natalie snickered. “Oh, really? Do tell.”

Ray detected an undercurrent to Natalie's laughter. "Like, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. It's just not a name you hear every day. Merry Parrot." She rolled her R's exaggeratedly.

Ray thought Natalie's voice sounded sexy, but he also suspected she was making fun of him. He carefully chose his words, lest he provoke further ridicule. "Yeah, well, it's the name of their mascot. You know Glass-Eye Willy is a pirate, right? The bar is all about that. If you take the Rum Flight Challenge, you gotta walk the plank to win the parrot."

Natalie smirked. "So, the place is kitschy."

Ray didn't know what that word meant, but Natalie made it sound like an insult. "I guess so," he mumbled without much conviction.

They shortly arrived at Willy's. A green neon parrot with one enormous eye glowed cheerily above the entrance. A server dressed as a mermaid led them toward a booth near the back. They passed an empty stage, its wall punched with portholes. Above the stage, plush toy parrots with striped candy-cane legs dangled from the ceiling.

"See, look, Merry Parrots," Ray pointed.

Natalie rolled her eyes.

Angela and Damian had already arrived; they sat on opposite sides of the booth. Damian's striped shirt was buttoned at the collar. Angela's blonde hair was up in a ponytail; she wore a stretchy pink blouse that exposed her cleavage. When she saw Ray, she threw her arms around him and kissed him noisily on the cheek. "Ahoy, Cap'n!"

Ray casually embraced her waist. "Yo ho ho! Shiver me timbers."

Next to the booth sat a plastic palm tree. Natalie slid under it next to Damian, lightly bumping his shoulder. Above them hung a fishing net filled with toy shrunken heads. "Your kind of place," Damian said to her ironically. Natalie shrugged and pulled a notebook from her bag.

Ray heard this, but he pretended not to. It was easy because Angela was talking nonstop—about the next beer pong tournament, and how she and Staci had already gotten the team together, and how they totally needed Ray to have any chance of winning. "Like, he doesn't miss," she explained to Damian and Natalie, "even when he's drunk." She swiped Ray's hat and mussed his chestnut hair teasingly.

Ray would've enjoyed Angela's flirting except he felt Natalie's eyes on him. "Give me back my hat," he said.

"But I like to accessorize," Angela giggled. To Damian and Natalie,

she added: “He wants to play the rum drinking game, win the buccaneer hat. He’d make a great swashbuckler, don’t you think?”

“You don’t win a hat. You win the Merry Parrot,” Ray said to Angela. He tried to grab his hat back, but she held it beyond his reach.

“Nuh-uh, silly. You walk the plank for a hat,” Angela countered.

“I’m not wrong.” Ray plucked a drink menu from the table and flipped to the back. “Look, see—the Rum Flight Challenge—you drink seven shots, one for each of the seven seas, and—”

“Guys, it doesn’t matter.” Natalie tapped a pen on the table to get their attention. “We’re not here to play drinking games. We gotta get serious. This assignment is due in a week. We haven’t even started.”

“I got an idea for the film project.” Damian adjusted his glasses.

“Good. Someone has to.” Natalie nudged him approvingly.

“Okay, so we’re supposed to film a cultural event, right? Tell a story about it. Okay, so like there’s this new art exhibition at Salon 88 on the Upper East Side. Like, the gallery is totally avant-garde. So, the exhibition is called Hoofscapes. One of my friends saw it. Get this—the artist paints in a barn, puts her canvas on the ground so farm animals can walk across it, like horses and goats and stuff. Isn’t that awesome?”

“Omigod, goats. They’re so ugly.” Angela wrinkled her nose.

“Interesting,” Natalie said to Damian. “It’s like landscape painting, but in a literal way. Like, the landscape itself does the work.”

“God, how do you do that?” Damian grinned at Natalie admiringly. “Instant analysis,” he said to Ray and Angela. “That’s her specialty.”

Natalie lowered her eyes in a sham show of humility.

Ray furrowed his brow. *She can’t really think horse hooves count as art. She’s just acting impressed for him.*

Damian stared at Ray smugly through the bottom edge of his glasses. Ray took this as a challenge. *Dude thinks he’s so smart. But he ain’t.* He didn’t like the way Damian talked over other students in class and had been ill-pleased to be grouped with him for the film project. He didn’t want to work with a guy like Damian. He wanted to defeat him.

A waiter in a sailor hat took their orders. Ray encouraged everyone to sample the rum menu, but only Angela was game. Natalie refused, insisting that alcohol made her lose focus. She ordered seltzer water.

“I don’t really like rum,” Damian said to Ray. “It doesn’t do anything for me, taste-wise. I’m a connoisseur of scotch.”

“Huh. Johnnie Walker Red or Black?” Ray asked.

Damian rubbed his chin as he considered his answer. “Black. It has a more distinctive finish. It stays on the tongue. Far superior.”

“Hmm. Ever tried their Blue? It’s premium.”

Damian hesitated. “I didn’t know Walker had a Blue version.”

“You don’t? A connoisseur like you?” Ray chuckled. “Trust me on it. Very pricy. Bars don’t even put it on the menu. You have to ask for it.” Damian’s face pinched, and Ray tried not to smile at his successful gamesmanship. *Strike one, dude.*

After the waiter brought them their drinks, Natalie said, “The only problem with Damian’s idea is that there isn’t much interesting sound to record at an art exhibition. Remember what our professor said.” She read to them from the assignment sheet: “Special attention should be given in your film project to the interplay between sight and sound.”

Ray snickered. “Ooo. Interplay.”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?” Natalie asked.

“Nothing. It’s just not a word you hear every day. Interrrrplay.” Ray tried to look serious as he rolled his R. He gazed at Natalie and waited.

She gazed back in perplexity, then dropped her eyes. But there was no hiding her pleasure. Ray was thrilled to see her enjoy his joke. He’d imitated her to get her to smile. She was so pretty like that.

Natalie unzipped her leather jacket. “What’s that in your drink?” she asked Ray.

Ray dipped his finger in his rum and Coke. “Willy’s glass eye, of course.” He lifted out a ping-pong ball with a red eye stamped on it. “They put them in all the cocktails and stuff. There are ping-pong tables in the back. Do—do you play?” He bounced the ball at Natalie.

She caught it, examined the red eye, then bounced the ball back to him. “I’m not very good at games.” She flicked her jacket off her shoulders. “It’s warm in here, isn’t it?” she said to Damian.

As Damian dutifully helped Natalie off with her jacket, he eyed Ray suspiciously.

Ray made a show of slurping his rum and Coke, pleased that Natalie hadn’t absolutely rejected his invitation to play ping-pong. Damian couldn’t have failed to notice. *Strike two, dude.*

“Hey, I got it—how ‘bout we film a fashion show,” Angela cut in loudly. “Like, my friend Staci is a model for—”

“When’s the show?” Natalie interrupted.

“I dunno. I’ll have to ask Staci. I may see her tomorrow. Or later

this weekend. She's been in L.A. for a modeling shoot." Angela had set Ray's hat on the table next to her. As she spoke, she played with its bill. "Omigod, Ray, you're right, this rum is so a-maa-zing. Like, you can totally taste the pineapple in it. Here, try it." She nudged his elbow.

Ray took a sip of Angela's rum. "Mm-mm, that's some sweet grog."

Angela giggled. "Maybe I'll take the Rum Challenge. I'll swab the deck with ye."

"Ye think ye can beat me? You're a landlubber," Ray taunted.

"And you're a bunghole." She popped him on the forehead.

Ray laughed and grasped Angela's wrist. "I'll keelhaul ye for that."

"Um, no offense, Angela," Natalie interjected, "but I think we need to settle what we're gonna film tonight. I mean, I don't think our whole project should hinge on, y'know, whenever Staci shows up."

Angela shrugged. "Whatever."

"Here's an idea." Ray pushed up the sleeves of his shirt and leaned toward Damian. "Talk about a cultural event—guess who Columbia plays on Saturday? Cornell!"

"I don't think that's what the professor meant by cultural event," Natalie instructed.

"It's totally cultural. It's like one of the oldest rivalries in football."

"It's not a home game for Columbia," Damian said. "It's in Ithaca."

"No, they played at Cornell last year," Ray said.

"Cozart, it's in Ithaca. My brother is an athletic trainer for Cornell. He sent me a ticket." From his wallet, Damian produced the ticket and showed it to Ray. "I wanted to go, but our class project takes precedence." He grinned at Natalie who returned to him a quick smile.

Ray couldn't believe he was wrong and flushed in embarrassment. He hoped Natalie didn't notice. He leaned back and sipped his rum and Coke. Damian made a show of tucking the ticket back into his wallet. Ray's eyes narrowed. *Game on, dude.*

"Oh no, Cap'n, it's mutiny," Angela teased.

"In any case, I don't think a football game fits the criteria of the assignment," Natalie said. She pulled a red flyer out of her book bag. "Here, what about this? It's on Monday night. I've been there a couple times. It's a cool venue. I already talked to the manager about it, and he said it'd be no problem for us to film that evening."

Damian took the flyer from Natalie. "The KGB Bar? You've been there? People have told me they can't get in, it's too crowded."

Natalie shrugged. "Guess I'm special."

"KGB?" Ray grabbed the flyer from Damian. "Like, commie spies?"

"That's not what it means," Natalie clarified in a professorial voice. "Not technically. It's short for Kraine Gallery Bar. But the place is decorated with Soviet memorabilia and stuff. The East Village used to be a Ukrainian neighborhood. The bar is a literary hub. People like Joyce Carol Oates and David Foster Wallace have been there."

Ray didn't like Natalie's superior tone. She spoke as if she knew these writers personally. Their names failed to impress him. He read from the flyer: "Love Whitman and Dickinson? Start your week with poetry. Every Monday night at KGB."

"Like, that to-tally rhymes." Angela's eyes looked glassy. She was buzzing with rum.

Ray snorted and dropped the flyer as if it'd tainted him. "Poetry? Are you serious?" he said to Natalie. "That's like so—so—"

"So what?" Natalie's eyes narrowed critically.

Ray was going to say "boring," but Natalie's face dissuaded him.

"A poetry reading—love the idea," Damian said to Natalie.

Ray rolled his eyes. Damian's enthusiasm made him want to oppose Natalie's idea even more. He launched into a mock oration: "Roses are red. Belts are made of leather. Poems are a bunch of words randomly smashed together." He elbowed Angela hoping she'd take his side.

Angela swept up the flyer. "Like, poetry? Oh, I love that stuff."

Ray's mouth gaped. He couldn't hide his disappointment.

"It's just like music," Angela said. "I mean, it's so raw emotionally and everything, y'know what I mean? Wait, listen!" Synthetic drums vibrated the bar's speakers. Someone had turned up the dance music. Natalie glanced above her; the net of shrunken heads swayed.

"Omigod, it's The Circling!" Angela grabbed Ray's arm. "I love this song, don't you? It's a punk classic." She grooved to the beat and sang: "My head's spinnin', seein' visions. Stars lift me up, I kiss the moon, leave earth below. Round 'n round we go."

Ray joined Angela on the chorus.

Natalie jerked the flyer from Angela's hand. "Poetry is *not* techno music from the 1980s. You guys aren't taking this seriously. We gotta decide what to film for the assignment, and your ideas suck. Look, it says here the poets are Heights and Woodhouse. A duo, I guess. So, we'll be able to record multiple voices. They'll be reading their chap-

book, *Sad Men and Lonely Women*, which—”

Ray guffawed. “*Sad Men and Lonely Women*? They think they’re gonna draw a crowd with that? Lemme see.” He reached for the flyer again, but Natalie held it beyond his reach.

“Wha? Wha’d I do?” he asked innocently.

“You’re just making fun,” she said crisply.

Ray rolled his eyes again. He knew he shouldn’t have, but he didn’t like the fact that Natalie’s idea was better than his. And Angela and Damian were going to outvote him. He didn’t like to lose.

“I’m not making fun, okay?” he said to mollify her. “It’s just—well, it’s like I said—poems are so random. Poets don’t even try to tell you what they mean. It’s just symbolism and crap. They don’t care if you don’t get it. I think they kinda like it when they confuse you. They act like they’re special when they can trick you into thinking their gibberish has some hidden meaning. But I can’t be tricked.” He crossed his arms over his chest, surprised by his own speech. He felt every word he said. And every word was true. It was the truest thing he’d said yet that night. He wasn’t a literary guy. Not by a long shot. Somehow, this girl with the piercing green eyes had discovered one of his secrets. Feeling himself under Natalie’s scrutiny, he fidgeted and looked away.

Natalie sighed and ran her hand through her hair. “Well, okay, like I see what you’re saying,” she began in a gentler tone. “Poetry is just a different kind of meaning, that’s all. Once you get the hang of it—”

“But anyone can pretend they mean something if they throw words together,” Ray interrupted. He wasn’t about to be instructed in the fine art of poetic analysis. Certainly, not in front of Damian. “Like, how ‘bout this—our interplay is merry, but the parrot is wary. See? It rhymes and stuff, but it doesn’t mean anything. If I claim it does, I’m suddenly a poet.” He nudged Angela. “A swashbuckling poet. Argh!”

Damian adjusted his glasses and muttered, “Such a cultural luddite.”

Angela snickered. “You’re sad, Ray. A real sad man.”

“Oh, yeah? Are you a lonely woman?” he asked mockingly.

“Not when you share my rum.” She offered him another sip.

Natalie opened her mouth, but a voice over the bar’s loudspeakers drowned her out: “Aho, mateys! May I direct your attention to the poop deck. We have a swabby who wants to take the Challenge.”

Cheers erupted. “Chug yo’ rum! Chug yo’ rum! Chug yo’ rum!”

Angela tugged Ray’s arm excitedly. “Omigod, someone’s taking the

Rum Flight Challenge.”

Damian leaned forward to view the crowd gathering at the foot of the stage. “Challenge? What’s that?”

“Oh, some drinking game,” Natalie said to him, but her eyes were on Ray. She appeared deep in thought.

Ray eagerly seized upon the change of subject. “The Challenge is to drink seven shots of rum in under seven minutes—like, rapid fire,” he said to Damian. “After that, if you can remain standing, they put a buccaneer’s hat on you and—”

Damian sniffed. “Doesn’t sound too difficult.”

“Dude, the hat’s just the beginning of the Challenge. See that beam of wood?” Ray pointed to an upright plank attached to the stage wall with hinges. As they all looked on, two servers lowered it into place. “You gotta walk the plank wearing the hat,” Ray explained. “If you can keep your balance without falling or dropping the hat, you win the Merry Parrot. And get your picture framed in a Porthole of Fame.”

The crowd surrounding the stage counted down from ten.

Damian scoffed. “Who’d want that claim to fame?”

Ray pointed at the stage wall dotted with portholes. “Lots of people, dude. Check ‘em out.”

“Ooo, they put the pirate hat on that guy,” Angela said breathlessly. “Let’s go see him walk the plank.” She pushed against Ray’s shoulder.

Ray stood up. He could see disappointment in Natalie’s eyes. “This will only take a minute,” he said to her quickly to justify his decision. “Come watch with us. It’ll be hilarious when the dude falls off.”

“No, don’t wait for us, Cozart,” Damian said. “Spectacles like this are, uh, more your thing.”

Ray resented Damian’s dig. *Jackass. He ain’t special.* But he couldn’t think of a comeback and swiftly pivoted to lose himself in the crowd.

Angela eagerly took his arm. “Those two are total downers.” She glanced back at Natalie. “They don’t know how to have fun. Not like us.” She leaned in confidentially. “Y’know what? I bet they don’t even do it. When they’re in bed, they just read books to each other.”

Ray guffawed. “Oh, you’re so mean.”

“Am I?” Angela giggled. She pulled herself close so that her breasts grazed his chest. “Do you like mean girls? Of course, I can be nice too.”

Ray smirked, not failing to appreciate Angela’s breasts. Of course, he knew she enjoyed appreciation from many others. Around them,

the crowd began to chant, “Walk the plank, walk the plank!” Angela joined in heartily, pumping her fists over her head in rhythm with the beat. The challenger struggled to balance himself on the beam. The buccaneer hat was too big and kept dropping over his eyes. Ray laughed loudly along with everybody else, but his enthusiasm felt a bit insincere. He was thinking about Natalie and what Angela had said about her. *Maybe she really is with Damian.*

“You—you know for a fact they’re together?” he asked Angela.

She gave him a look. “Isn’t it obvious? They’re both, like, total snobs. They’re literally perfect for each other.”

Imagining Natalie with Damian irritated Ray. He told himself he shouldn’t feel that way. He usually steered clear of smart girls. A guy needed to win a smart girl’s respect. Natalie’s quick wit intimidated him. But it was attractive too. He knew from eavesdropping on Natalie and Damian’s conversation at Angela’s party that Natalie liked Shakespeare. While Ray didn’t share Natalie’s interests, he was impressed by her easy expertise. He wanted to impress her. Had his rant about poetry ruined his chance? He chided himself for going off. He should’ve welcomed her ideas, played it smooth and exuded confidence. But he’d been too eager to beat Damian. Ray’s jaw tightened as he imagined Damian calling him a “luddite” again—whatever that meant.

To the crowd’s delight, the challenger inched forward to the center of the plank. Just then, his buccaneer hat slid to one side of his head. He had to use both his hands to catch it. Losing the use of his arms to stabilize himself made him teeter. He let go of the hat, but it was too late. Arms flailing futilely, he fell off the plank and flopped to his knees. The crowd hooted and jeered. Ray felt a flush of embarrassment, as if he were the one who’d failed the Challenge.

“Oh, no, not far enough,” announced the voice over the loudspeaker. “Nice try, but no Merry Parrot for a scurvy rat like you.”

When Ray and Angela returned to the booth, Ray noted that Damian’s arm was draped on the back of the seat behind Natalie’s shoulders. *I see your move.*

“Was the Challenge everything you hoped it to be?” Damian asked insincerely.

Angela seemed not to detect his irony and giggled as she slid into her seat. “Sure was!”

As Ray settled in next to Angela, he avoided Natalie’s gaze.

But Natalie leaned with her elbows on the table. “Can we get back to our film assignment?” She blinked up at him several times. Her eyes were intense and so pretty, as brilliantly green as the palm branches that hung around her. It was impossible for him not to stare. Slowly, she slid the Heights and Woodhouse flyer across the table to him.

He glanced at it but did not pick it up.

She took a deep breath and smiled. “You said you don’t get poetry. I think you’re wrong. I think you do.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh, really? Do tell.”

Natalie was undeterred by his sarcasm. “You made up that poem—our interplay is merry, but the parrot is wary. You said it’s gibberish.”

“Stark raving mad.”

“But it isn’t. It’s clear to me,” Natalie said. “In poetic form, you expressed your doubts about poetry. You used the symbol of a parrot because your poem repeated words from our conversation—just like a parrot. In mixing the words up, you express wariness about being understood. You’re not sure your meaning is getting through.”

“Are you calling me a parrot?” Ray was a touch offended.

Natalie smiled again. “No, I just said it’s a symbol. In fact, I think your poem is rather clever. The parrot may be suspicious, but it’s also having a good time. It’s finding merriment in the interplay.”

“I’m not even sure what interplay means,” Ray said.

“You don’t need to know what it means to have fun with it. You joked with me about the word earlier, didn’t you? Then you reused it to create your cute poem. That tells me you understand the joy of poetry despite your protestations to the contrary. Poetry is about picking precise words and structures to express yourself in new and surprising ways.” Natalie sat back with a satisfied look. “Any questions?”

Damian was the first to speak. “Wha’d I tell you? Instant analysis.”

Ray rubbed his chin. “So, you think my poem was clever and cute?” he asked Natalie tentatively. He couldn’t believe she’d taken his words so seriously. Most girls didn’t. Why was she interested in his ideas? He didn’t know, but he wanted to. It surprised him how good that felt.

Damian snorted in exasperation. “God, Cozart, you’ve just heard the most cogent explanation of poetry ever. And your inane ditty was the sole inspiration. Is that all you took from it?”

Natalie pointed to the flyer on the table. “Look, Ray, all I’m saying is that if you’re open to it, it’ll be fun. It says here Heights and Wood-

house's show is no less poignant for being kitschy. You're into kitsch."

Ray lifted the flyer and peered at a grainy image of a woman sitting serenely in a wingback chair. Standing behind her was a man wearing a Yankees ball cap and holding an uncoiled spring in both hands, as if he were offering it to some god. "Dude's got a Slinky," he said in surprise. "I used to have a metal one. Not one of those cheap plastic knock-offs."

"Ooo, the woman in the chair looks mysterious," Angela added.

"Trust me," Natalie said to Ray. "It'll be fine." This time, the intensity in Natalie's eyes seemed to be less of a challenge and more of an invitation. Ray still didn't know what kitsch meant, but if it had something to do with having fun with classic toys, then maybe filming the poets Heights and Woodhouse wouldn't be so bad.

"Okay, I'm in. Here's to poetry." Ray lifted his rum and Coke, and the four of them clinked their glasses. Natalie beamed up at him.

Ray felt inspired. "I got a great idea." He waved over their waiter.

"What's the plan, Cap'n?" Angela asked.

When the waiter came over, Ray jumped up. "Time to celebrate. I'm takin' the Rum Flight Challenge."

Angela squealed and threw up her arms. "All hands on deck!"

Ray pulled her to her feet. "C'mon, me hearties, it'll be awesome."

"Ahoy, mateys, weeee have another swabby," sang the voice over the loudspeaker.

Ray was led away to chants of, "Chug yo' rum! Chug yo' rum!"

"Are you comin'?" he called to Natalie. His voice was full of hope.

She didn't answer but chewed her lip. Damian whispered in her ear.

Ray wanted Natalie to watch him. If she didn't, then how could he win the Merry Parrot for her?

Once on stage under the spotlights, Ray almost regretted his decision. His confidence ebbed. Angela stood front and center cheering him on. He could win the parrot for her, but she wouldn't appreciate it the way Natalie would. Natalie would understand what it meant.

A waiter held a tray before him. The seven shots of rum were filled.

Ray took a deep breath. *Best do it quick.*

One shot. Two. Three. Four. "Blow me down!"

The crowd roared with laughter.

Ray's head swam. Five. Six. He bent at the knees. "Oh, blimey."

"C'mon, Ray, you can do it—one more!" It was Angela's voice.

Ray straightened, reeled, tried to find Angela. The faces before him

were a blur. He saw a girl with brunette hair standing apart from the crowd. *It's Nat.* Eyes on her, slowly, he lifted the seventh glass.

"Chug yo' rum! Chug yo' rum!" the crowd chanted.

In one swift gulp, Ray downed the shot. He immediately dropped the glass. A big, fat hat was plopped on his head. It fell over his eyes. Everything went black. Disoriented, he reached for something to stabilize himself. He caught Angela's raised hand. "Time to weigh anchor and hoist the mizzen," he hollered. He had no idea what that meant.

"Our bucko is ready to walk the plank," a voice rang in his ear.

Ray thought that was very funny. "Bucko! I'm a bucko."

"That's right, you're the best bucko there is," Angela assured him.

The wooden plank seemed far away to him. It was six inches wide and six inches off the stage floor. He lifted his foot to step up on it and lurched sideways. When he lowered his heel, he missed the board and stood straddling it, his back to the crowd. He couldn't stop laughing.

"Dude, nice ass," someone remarked to uproarious cheers.

Somehow, Ray had to get turned around. But the stage was spinning. He didn't dare fall trying to step up on the plank. He'd forfeit his chance to win the parrot for Natalie.

Got to focus. Ray put one hand on the wall, then the other. Stepped up on the plank—left foot, right foot. Then, eyes locked on a Porthole of Fame, he crouched and took a step—backwards. Then another.

Eyes on the prize. Eyes on the prize.

"The ship is going astern," a voice bellowed over the loudspeaker. "Walking the plank in reverse has never been done, me laddies."

The crowd buzzed in amazement.

The buccaneer hat was heavy. And hot. Sweat poured down Ray's forehead. His legs trembled. *Eyes on the prize.*

"Omigod, Ray, you're almost there," Angela called to him.

Three more steps. Two. One.

Ray's heel caught the front edge of the plank. Quickly, he brought his feet and hands together and jumped backwards into the crowd as if leaping from a diving board. He fell into Angela's arms. "Cannon ball!"

"Oh, Cap'n, my Cap'n!"

Ray plopped his buccaneer hat on Angela's head.

The crowd converged, wildly cheering. Hands pushed Ray upright, propelling him back onto stage to take a bow.

"Lads and lasses, may I introduce to you the newest crew member

in the Porthole of Fame, buccaneer Ray Cozart, winner of Glass-Eye Willy's Merry Parrot!"

One of the toy birds with the candy-cane legs dropped from the ceiling. Ray raised his treasure over his head in triumph and looked for Natalie in the crowd. But he couldn't find her. *Where is she?*

When the crowd dispersed and Ray and Angela returned to their booth, Ray was disappointed to see Natalie seated next to Damian.

Angela still wore the buccaneer hat. "Omigod, did you see it? Such fun." She fanned herself with her hands as she slid across the seat.

"I saw it," Natalie said quickly, eying Angela's hat.

Ray was thrilled to hear this. "THE MERRY PARROT!" he shouted drunkenly. He sat on the table and held the toy bird out to Natalie.

"Very cute," she said. Her eyes fell to his hips.

"HERE, TAKE IT!"

Natalie pressed her lips together to stifle her laughter. "Oh, no. I couldn't. I mean, it's your pirate booty." She burst into giggles.

Ray snickered too. He flopped the bird up and down in front of her face as if making it fly. "NO, I INSIST, TAKE ME BOOTY!"

"Cozart, stop shouting," Damian demanded. "You reek of booze."

Natalie's eyes were bright and clear. She reached for the parrot.

Ray grinned broadly at Damian. *Strike three, dude.*

Before Natalie could take the toy, Damian snatched it from Ray's hands. "She doesn't want your stupid little parrot. Now, shut up and get off the table, would ya? You make my ears ring." Damian flipped the bird in the air. It caught above them in the net of shrunken heads.

"Ah! Wha'd ya do that for?" Natalie reacted in surprise.

Ray shook his fist at Damian. "You bilge-sucker! You couldn't win nothing if you tried." He swung his arm up at the net. Failing to reach it, he put one foot on the seat and one foot on the table. Oblivious to anything but retrieving the bird, he knocked over his rum and Coke.

Angela lunged for napkins as the liquid ran toward her.

"Ray, you better get down," Natalie advised. "Ask a waiter for help."

"No way that bilge-sucker hornswaggles me!" Ray jerked the net hard. It easily gave way. Unprepared for this, he lost his balance and fell onto the table with a great crash. Cups and silverware went flying.

Angela screamed.

The plastic palm tree toppled.

“Look out!” Damian cried.

Too late. Natalie was submerged in a deluge of shrunken heads.

A Most Peculiar Occurrence

KGB Bar

East Village

Monday, October 21

The sun peeked between swift-rolling clouds as Natalie exited the NYU School of the Arts carrying a bag of audio equipment on loan. She was way ahead of schedule. It was her new tactic. Purposely arriving fashionably late at Glass-Eye Willy's to avoid *him* had backfired. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice. If *he* was going to be late too, then she would be early. She calculated that Angela and Damian would arrive at the KGB Bar on time. They would be her safety net. She'd be able to start a conversation with them before he showed up. And when he did arrive, maybe she'd even pretend for a minute not to notice him. That would be a good strategy. Because when she did look at him, she became self-conscious and didn't know what to say.

Ray. Ray Cozart. She'd never met a guy who put her at such a loss for words. She couldn't figure out why this would be. Not knowing annoyed her. She told herself the problem was that they didn't speak the same language. They shared no common goals or interests. Good thing at Glass-Eye Willy's she'd come prepared to discuss poetry, one of her passions, or she would've been tongue-tied the whole evening.

At the intersection of East 4th and Lafayette, Natalie couldn't help but look for Ray while she waited for the light to turn. *Don't be stupid. There's no chance he's around.* She speculated that this time, Ray might even arrive at the bar with Angela. No doubt, he was dating her. He flirted with her freely enough. Of course, he flirted with lots of girls. Natalie recalled that at Angela's party, Ray hadn't once sat down but had roved from room to room with a kind of urgency. His stories about his adventures had made everyone laugh. From the moment Natalie had noticed him, she'd pegged him as a summer boy. He was buff and tan. She could easily imagine him shirtless at the beach playing

volleyball with a squad of girls in bikinis. Summer boys were never content to win just one heart. But they were happy to break many.

The audio bag was heavier than Natalie had anticipated. And she was walking against the wind. After crossing Lafayette, she adjusted the shoulder strap tighter. She could've asked Damian to pick up the recording equipment at the school's Film Production Center, but she'd appointed herself Sound Czar so it'd be done right. Group class projects made her nervous; one person inevitably fouled it up for the rest. Damian, she knew, would be utterly predictable. Angela could likely be suppressed—or, with any luck, erased entirely. But Ray . . .

She thought of his shin in her face as he stood on the table to reach his snared parrot. She remembered his knee hitting the table hard, and then everything crashed down. The tumbling shrunken heads had been harmless, like being pelted with balls of yarn. A plastic palm branch got tangled in her hair. In retrospect, it looked worse than it was. Unfortunately, they failed to find the parrot amid the heads before two bouncers threw them out of the bar. "You got me kicked out of Willy's!" Ray fumed at Damian out on the sidewalk. Natalie and Angela stood between them, or it might've come to blows.

Natalie caught herself smiling at the image of Ray urging her to take his booty. He'd been so drunk. Probably, he didn't remember saying that. The prospect that he might not share this memory with her made her a little sad. She'd been sincerely touched that he'd offered her the Merry Parrot. Watching him walk the plank, she couldn't decide if she was witnessing foolishness or courage. He'd thrown himself with abandon into something so silly. She might scoff. Or she could cheer. Either way, there was no denying it—Ray Cozart was strangely compelling. She worried that some new impulse might seize him. *Tonight can't be another Willy's*. Somehow, she had to channel his energy.

The KGB Bar was easy to spot from the street. The double doors were deep red, and above them blinked a red neon star, the symbol of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. An interlinked hammer and sickle, the emblem of proletarian revolution, was etched into the glass above the doors. Natalie climbed the steps with some difficulty, feeling the full weight of her audio bag. As she opened the door, a gust of wind caught her and pushed her across the threshold. Her hair was blown all around her face, which was why she didn't immediately see him seated in the near corner. He was dressed all in black, his face half-hidden by

his Pittsburgh Pirates ball cap and by a camera resting on the table.

She squinted at him, not believing her eyes. *What is he doing here?*

He waved meekly.

Natalie stood right where she was. Her mind went blank. She feared that her hair was a mess. She chewed her bottom lip. All she could think to say was the obvious: “You’re early.”

“Guess so,” Ray said with a look of chagrin. His eyes darted about as if looking for an escape. There wasn’t one.

She neared the table. There was an empty chair, but she didn’t sit.

He puffed out his cheeks in an exhale. “Um. I—I didn’t wanna be late. Y’know, ‘cause last time . . .” his voice trailed off.

“Right,” she said automatically as if she understood what he meant, but she didn’t. She averted her eyes, scanned the wall behind him. He was seated beneath a poster commemorating the October 1957 launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik. Against a deep blue field of stars, a colossal man proudly hoisted a shining silver orb over his head.

Ray took off his Pirates cap, ran his hand through his hair. He replaced his cap and studied her.

Natalie’s shoulder hurt; she wanted to set her bag down. She was headed up to the bar’s second floor. That was where the poetry reading would occur. She’d intended to study the acoustics of the room herself. But maybe Ray could help her. It’d be rude not to invite him.

“Is that heavy?” he asked suddenly. “Let me get that.” He stood and offered to take the equipment bag.

“Hmm? Oh. This. No, it’s not heavy,” Natalie lied. She pulled out the chair and set the bag on it.

With Ray standing, Natalie at once felt how short she was. She regretted that she wasn’t wearing boots, only sneakers. Her face wasn’t even level with his pecs. His black t-shirt was tight, his waist trim. She recalled the proximity of his hips and thighs when he’d sat on the table at Willy’s. He’d been close enough for her to touch. “Um. I—I wanted to say,” she stammered without looking up, “well, I wanted to tell you that I’m really sorry about your Merry Parrot.”

Ray said nothing, so she went on, needing to fill in the silence. Her words were crisp and quick—utterly rehearsed: “I mean, what happened at Willy’s wasn’t your fault really. It was Damian. And—and I’m not mad or anything about the heads falling on me and all that. It was sorta funny. But we should’ve made sure we got your parrot back be-

fore we left—er, I mean, before we were thrown out. And about that, I mean, that wasn't quite fair, in my opinion. You won the Challenge and everything. Like, you drank all that rum. They shouldn't have gotten so mad that you knocked over a stupid palm tree. What do they expect you to do? Ha-ha. So, like, anyway, I hope they let you back in and stuff in the future, 'cause, I know you really like that place."

Natalie felt much better about herself after this speech, even without her boots. Explaining things generally gave her a sense of stature.

"Well, thanks, but, like, the parrot was yours," Ray said plaintively.

She detected the touch of sadness in his voice and looked up. His eyes were shadowed under the bill of his cap. She'd not examined them before at any length. Ray never held still long enough for that. Framed by his hat, his eyes appeared gray. She couldn't quite tell. But she wanted to know.

"Oh. I guess so," she said, dropping her eyes again. *So, he does remember giving it to me.* This knowledge should've made her happy, but it didn't. She realized she'd not once thought of the Merry Parrot as hers. She hadn't even had a chance to touch it. Acknowledging that she'd left behind *her* bird filled her with regret. The feeling surprised her—plush parrot toys weren't her kind of thing. It was odd to miss it. Maybe she should've dug through the shrunken heads with greater urgency, insisted they not leave Willy's until the treasure was found.

"Well, I'm still sorry," she repeated, although this time when she said it, she really meant it. Nervously, she tucked her hair behind her ears. She'd never considered that Ray might blame her for leaving his gift behind. She sought to make it up to him. "Um, the poetry reading is on the second floor. It's called the Red Room. I was gonna check out the acoustics. You—you wanna come with me? I mean, like, since you're already here and stuff."

"Um. Okay," Ray said with a sudden grin.

His smile reassured her. She picked up her bag. Ray followed with the camera. They briefly conferred with one of the bartenders who pointed them down a hall to the manager's office. The manager, a squat middle-aged man, was on the phone. He spoke in Russian. A white-haired woman sat across from his desk reading a book. Natalie noticed that her feet barely touched the floor. The woman's shawl was immense. Tranquil blue and hand-knitted, it fell in waves over the arm of the chair. She peered at Ray and Natalie over her glasses. "Privet. You

students? Here to film, da?”

Natalie had never seen this woman before. “Er, that’s right,” she answered hesitantly. “From NYU.”

“You like hear poetry?” the woman asked. “Some nights, I listen. Is my English lesson. Ha-ha. After all dese years, Irina still learn. See, I show you.” She slid her glasses down her nose and recited from the book: “I vant to give you a gift, a siphon to my buried well.” She looked up at Natalie. “Vat is dis? Siphon. You teach me meaning, da?”

Unprepared for the question, Natalie searched for words. “Siphon. Er, well, it’s like—um, well, it’s sorta hard to explain—”

“A siphon is a device for transferring liquid,” Ray jumped in. “Like, if the water is in a well, then a siphon would be a hose for suctioning the water out.” He made a slurping noise as if drinking through a straw.

The woman nodded approvingly at Ray. “Ah. Irina understand.” Then to Natalie: “He bright boy. You stick vith him, da?”

Natalie flushed in embarrassment at this suggestion. But she was also embarrassed because she’d failed to think of a sufficient definition of siphon herself. Ray had come through, but Natalie felt he shouldn’t have had to. It irritated her.

Irina waved the book at them. “You know dis Heights and Woodhouse, da?”

Ray and Natalie shook their heads no.

“Ah, I vill tell you.” She leaned forward and cleared her throat, appearing not a bit concerned about bothering the busy manager. “Many years ago, my husband—he is good man—he come to me and say—people vant entertainments, but ve have no much money, vat do ve do? And I say to him—give entertainers free beer, maybe dey come. And if dey vant money and no free beer, then I say, nyet, vat good are you?” She leaned back in her chair and grinned.

Natalie was quite mystified as to the point of this story.

Ray snickered. “Like, you mean Heights and Woodhouse are just here for the free beer? That’s awesome.”

Irina leaned forward again, a twinkle in her eye. “I tell you secret now. Some entertainers, dey vant drink free beer before show, and I ask—vill it make your show better or no? Ha-ha!” She tossed Heights and Woodhouse’s book on the desk. “So, ve vill see. Ve vill see.”

Ray smiled at this.

But Natalie’s eyes widened in horror. She’d imagined Heights and

Woodhouse to be serious artists of grace and dignity, not drunks sure to ruin her perfect film. *Tonight can't be another Willy's.*

The manager was still on the phone; Irina interrupted him, and the two began arguing in Russian.

Natalie could make nothing of it; she grew even more worried. The afternoon wasn't going as planned. She glanced up at Ray, feeling fresh perplexity at his presence. Filming a poetry reading was her idea. If it didn't go well, then it would reflect badly on her. She earnestly desired to ace the film assignment. Ray wouldn't be impressed with her otherwise. She couldn't explain why she wanted to have his respect. After all, summer boys never had hers.

Irina threw up her hands. Muttering to herself in Russian, she gathered the swells of her blue shawl and stood. She was even shorter than Natalie had supposed. "You come vith me," she said, looking Natalie squarely in the face. "Irina show you." She grabbed a set of keys off the manager's desk and with surprising speed swept out of the office.

Ray shrugged and followed her out.

Natalie hesitated. When she caught up to Ray in the hall, she heard he was being treated to a disquisition on the meaning of perestroika.

"Who is Irina?" Ray whispered to Natalie as they followed the chaty woman up a narrow stairwell to the second floor.

"I think she's Irina," Natalie whispered back.

"Right. But who is she?"

"I don't know. Shhh!"

Irina unlocked a door at the top of the stairs. "My son, he fine manager," she said with a solemn shake of her head, "but sometime he—how you say in English?—not on the ball." She ushered Ray and Natalie into the Red Room. Natalie immediately spotted the curtained stage. On it sat a wingback chair, just as she expected to see. All that was missing was the poet Woodhouse sitting in it. Natalie sighed, feeling a tinge of relief. *Finally, something going right.* "Look. Just like the picture on the flyer," she whispered to Ray.

Tables and chairs surrounded the stage. Ray and Natalie set down their equipment and looked about. A bar with several stools comprised one wall. The other walls were painted red above the wainscoting and were crammed with posters depicting prominent personages. Natalie saw Lenin and Stalin, the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, famous Olympians, and many others. The Red Room was a mini museum of Soviet history.

Irina gave them a tour. Natalie listened politely, imagining the room filled with people. Bodies would create a sound cushion and diminish the echo. When Irina turned her back to point to a propaganda poster commending Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, Natalie felt the need to share her analysis. "The ceiling is low. And vintage tin," she whispered to Ray. "We should avoid holding the boom mikes high. Too much reverb. We should hold 'em low."

"Right. Or the sound will be tinny," Ray whispered back.

Natalie pursed her lips, but a giggle still escaped. "Is that a joke?"

Ray grinned. "What? It's a tin ceiling like you said."

Irina turned to face them. "Vat you two whisper, huh? You like little lovebirds, sing sweet nothings."

Natalie's face reddened. She backed away from Ray. "Oh, no, we—we were just—"

Irina stepped between them. "You no can hide from Irina. I see you looks." She chuckled. "You ignore talky old voman, make eyes at each other." With a grandmother's freedom, she patted Natalie's arm and leaned in close. "You know vat I say? I say you petite princess, like Anastasia. And look—here is your prince. He is cute one, da?"

Natalie could feel her heart palpitate. She shook her head. "You—you misunderstand. He's—he's—I mean, we're not—"

"Now, here is vat I do for you," Irina interrupted. She squeezed Natalie's hand in both of hers. "Tomorrow night is special night. Ve serve absinthe. You come to taste, da? Is green fairy drink. Strong and sweet. Vill open mind, make you see visions. Ve serve in the French method, vith cube of sugar on top. You like, da?"

Natalie's mind felt muddled. Irina's words were an elixir. Drinking them in, Natalie wanted to laugh. She couldn't hear of "the French method" without thinking of kissing. It surprised her that her thoughts had taken such a path, and she dared not look up at Ray.

Irina gestured for Ray to step closer to her. When he did so, she took his hand. "Now, you listen to Irina," she said to him. "I leave tickets for you at bar. You come. You bring petite princess. You ask for—"

Natalie sensed what was about to happen. All at once, her mind sobered. *Crazy woman. Don't let her do it.* She tried to pull her hand from Irina's. "No, please, I couldn't possibly accept—"

"Ah, ah, ah!" Irina wouldn't let go but grasped Natalie's hand harder and pressed it into Ray's open palm. "You no refuse. Is gift. Irina owns

all dis. She has plenty. She give to whoever she wishes. And she like the look of you. Two little lovebirds. So beautiful together.”

Natalie’s heart pounded. Ray’s palm was warm and smooth under hers. She could feel his fingertips on her wrist. At once she became conscious that, pressed into his palm, her own hand was small, like a little girl’s hand. She felt a pleasant but fleeting sensation of childhood, of warm summer days, cotton candy and lemonade. At the same time, she regretted feeling so small, for she didn’t wish to be a child.

“You see,” Irina said with conviction, “is good match. Very good.”

Natalie stared into Irina’s kind face searching for signs that this was a joke. But Irina’s eyes were quite sincere, even knowing. Natalie was both annoyed and intrigued by the woman’s presumption. As the bar’s owner, Irina was probably used to imposing her views. And yet, some small part of Natalie didn’t feel imposed upon at all. She felt this strange woman in blue was like a fairy godmother beckoning her into another realm. Her words were the open door.

Irina let go her hand. Natalie felt Ray’s thumb briefly caress her fingers. She looked up at him. His eyes were wide and unshaded. She decided they were deep blue, like a summer sky when the first stars have just appeared. Ray grinned at her—a lopsided, boyish grin.

“Wow, thanks,” Ray said to Irina, “we’ll be—”

Just then, Natalie heard footsteps on the stairs.

“Like, omigod, Ray? Ahoy, Cap’n!”

Angela rushed in, followed closely by Damian carrying a camera.

Ray quickly dropped Natalie’s hand.

Natalie turned from Irina—toward Damian. She felt both mortified and relieved to see him. She didn’t observe Irina silently slip away.

Damian set his camera on the table next to Ray’s. “What’s goin’ on?” He eyed Natalie suspiciously. “Who was that woman?”

Natalie wouldn’t quite meet Damian’s eye. “Hmm? Oh. Nobody,” she lied. “Glad you’re here. She wouldn’t shut up.”

Damian draped his jacket on a chair. On his white t-shirt was a red star. Across the star in bold black lettering was the word KOMISSAR.

“Like it?” he asked Natalie. “I thought it was appropriate.”

“Omigod, look—a stage, Angela announced grandly. She bounded up the two steps and pretended to emerge from behind the curtain. She twirled dramatically like a ballerina, then curtsied at Ray. “Ready for a challenge, Cap’n?” she asked with a bat of her lashes.

Ray joined Angela. From below the stage, he saluted, then took her hand and guided her to the wingback chair. “Not Captain. Comrade. I’ve always been a proud supporter of the people’s party.”

Angela plopped herself into the chair sideways and dangled her legs over the arm. She unzipped her pink jacket down to her breasts. “Oh, Comrade Ray,” she giggled, “I hear worrying reports about you. Best beware my spies. If I discover you’ve strayed from the party line,” she glanced in Natalie’s direction, “I’ll have to banish you to the gulag.”

“You shouldn’t sit there,” Natalie chided her. “That’s not for just anyone. It’s for the poets. For Woodhouse.”

Angela played with her ponytail and smirked. “You think so? Well, I believe in a classless society. Don’t you, Comrade Ray?”

“Hmph, you’re classless, all right,” Natalie muttered sarcastically to Angela, just loud enough for all of them to hear.

“Zing!” Damian whistled in awe.

Angela stared at Natalie in astonishment.

So did Ray.

Natalie too was amazed at her words. Usually, she kept her insults to herself. But Angela’s “Comrade Ray” was obnoxious. It irritated her to imagine Angela and Ray together. She met Ray’s eyes; they appeared troubled. Natalie decided to backtrack. If Angela was Ray’s girlfriend, then she’d accidentally insulted him by proxy. She regretted this.

“Oh, ha-ha. Sorry, Angie, I didn’t mean that,” she lied. “Like, not the way it sounded. It was just a joke.”

Angela sulked for a second, then swung her long legs in front of the chair and stood. “Oh, it’s totally cool,” she said glibly. “It was funny. I mean, I thought so.”

Argument averted, the four of them discussed the best way to film the poetry reading. But they soon found that they couldn’t agree. This time, an argument threatened to break out between Damian and Ray:

“Dude, it’s okay to establish the setting, but filming posters and stuff can only take you so far,” Ray said. “Then you gotta get real.”

“You can get some shots of the audience. I just don’t think they should be our focus. I wouldn’t trust ‘em to help us tell a story about the event,” Damian said. “They’re secondary. The poets are primary. Then the locale. The KGB Bar is famous. Natalie can tell you.”

“Dude, it’s not a cultural event unless an audience shows up. That’s what makes it an event. It’s nothing otherwise. Just a couple people on

stage yapping—”

“No way,” Damian said. “There’s no audience hall of fame. People in a crowd aren’t special. Only the performers on stage matter. I mean, it’s called a poetry reading. Not a poetry hearing, right? I think Natalie would agree with me.”

“But look, all the people here, maybe they care about poetry, but, like, maybe they care for different reasons,” Ray said. “Wouldn’t you like to know what some of the reasons are?”

“Not really. It’s irrelevant to the performance.”

“No, it isn’t. Everybody here will be part of the event.”

“Only as atmosphere. C’mon, Cozart, why do you think the audience sits in shadows? ‘Cause no one cares about them. They don’t even care about each other. They just wanna watch the show. How many times have you been shushed in a theater? Think about it. It’s best to focus on the poets. I’m sure Natalie agrees.” He turned to her. “Right?”

At the outset of this debate, Natalie had shared Damian’s opinion. But by the end, when he invited her to commit to his view openly, she vacillated. *Ray’s idea is smart*. An audience was essential to an event. Incorporating their perspective of the poetry into the film would be risky. People’s opinions were unpredictable. Creating the story for the film would be a greater challenge. But the challenge intrigued her. Ray’s idea would make their film more interesting. She decided she was up to the challenge. She wished she’d thought of the idea herself.

“Well, we could easily interview people in the audience before the show starts,” she said to Damian in a politic tone. “Um, y’know, could be interesting.” Then to Ray: “But, during the show, I think we’ll need both cameras focused on the stage. ‘Cause I’d rather use two microphones, one for each poet. So, you and Angela should record Heights, and Damian and I will record Woodhouse. How does that sound?”

This strategy was amenable to all. They broke into pairs. Damian and Natalie opted to get some shots of the street and the exterior of the bar. Ray and Angela chose to interview one of the bartenders.

As Natalie and Angela divvied up the audio recording equipment, Angela extended one of the boom poles and picked up a shotgun microphone. She pretended ignorance about how to attach the mike to the pole and begged Natalie’s assistance.

Natalie almost fell for it.

Angela lifted the microphone to her lips. She spoke in baby talk.

“Where does this go? Maybe you can show me.” She puckered her lips in a kiss, then snickered wickedly and jabbed the mike at Natalie. “Oh, never mind. Just kidding.”

Natalie dodged the thrust. “Don’t be stupid.”

Angela made a show of tapping the microphone’s tip with her forefinger. “I know you think I am.” Her eyes narrowed cruelly. “Where were you Saturday night? Ray took me to this a-maa-zing club. Like, we had to find a new place, y’know, since we can’t go back to Willy’s. Oh, and my friend Staci was there, and a bunch of other people. Ray is so much fun.” Angela caressed the microphone sensually and raised her eyebrows for effect. “Didn’t he invite you?” She tilted the mike erect and smirked, clearly relishing Natalie’s disgust.

Natalie made no answer. She grabbed her headset and spun away, glad to see Damian with his camera motioning her towards the stairs.

“What was that all about?” he asked her.

Natalie exhaled sharply. She didn’t want to explain. *Why does Angela think I care if she’s sleeping with Ray?* Clearly, Angela had sought to make her jealous. The joke was nasty, and it had hurt. Natalie tried not to feel it, telling herself she wasn’t jealous. Not for a second. “Oh, it was nothing,” she lied to Damian. “Just Angie being stupid. Let’s go.”

The two of them descended the stairs. Out on the sidewalk in front of the bar, Natalie tried to forget about Angela and Ray by concentrating on recording street noise. But Damian wouldn’t shut up.

“That Cozart—I don’t know how he got into film school, do you? Probably they needed to meet a quota. He doesn’t know the first thing about art. Like, did you even understand his rant in there? I doubt he believes any of that. He was just trying to argue with me.”

Natalie suggested they film up the stoop and through the door.

After several takes, Damian motioned for her to remove her headphones. He had something to say. “I don’t trust Cozart, do you? He could ruin the film. Like, he’s so undisciplined.” He waited for Natalie to agree. When she didn’t, he added, “We could’ve figured everything out at Willy’s if not for him. He totally ruined the planning session.”

“Well, you threw the parrot in the net.”

“He called me a bilge-sucker.”

“He was three sheets to the wind. Don’t take it personally.”

“Oh, so, now you’re talking pirate too?” he accused her petulantly.

“What? No, I was—I mean, let me focus on what I’m doing, okay?”

Natalie put her headphones back on. She and Damian recorded bar noise—sliding chairs, clinking silverware—nothing interesting.

They hiked back up the stairs to the Red Room. It was half-filled with people. Ray and Angela were interviewing a young man seated at the bar. Angela stood before the camera holding a microphone. Ray, behind the camera, said something that made them all laugh. Natalie couldn't hear what. *Ray is so much fun.* Those had been Angela's words. It irritated Natalie to recall them, to imagine what her Saturday night might've been like if Ray had invited her to the club instead of Angela.

Natalie knew exactly where she'd been Saturday night. She'd been to an off-Broadway production of *The Vagina Monologues* with Damian. Afterwards, at a pub near the theater, they'd spent several hours discussing it. Natalie mostly listened; Damian talked on and on, growing ever more granular with his analysis. It energized him to master some new detail.

They both agreed they were dating, though Natalie couldn't recall that Damian had ever asked her; it'd just happened gradually. He was precisely the sort of guy she believed she ought to like—cultured, erudite. But though she'd made out with him a couple times, she couldn't commit to sleeping with him. She wondered why. Something was lacking in him, but she couldn't pinpoint what and supposed if she gave the relationship more time, a spark would eventually ignite.

"Check out these posters of Stalin." Damian nudged Natalie's arm. "These are all vintage, not reprints. Probably worth money."

"I know. Irina showed them to us before."

"Who?"

"Um, er, I mean—" Natalie felt flustered. She'd been thinking about Ray, about Irina's tour. "Never mind. It doesn't matter." She shook her head to clear her thoughts, for she suddenly couldn't recall Irina's face, only how Ray's hand had felt in hers.

Damian observed her carefully through his glasses. "They say Stalin was a really great guy. I mean, in private life. A real family man."

"Oh? Who's *they*?" Natalie asked skeptically.

Damian shrugged, appearing offended that Natalie questioned his assertions. "Like, does it matter? I read about it somewhere online."

The two filmed the posters, then Damian set his camera on a tripod left of stage, near the wingback chair. The Red Room was now full. Ray and Angela had filtered toward the back and were still interviewing.

“Cozart better take his position, the show is about to start,” Damian complained to Natalie.

But Natalie didn’t hear him. She was peering at a poster behind his head. It celebrated the October Revolution of 1917. A woman carrying a sheave of wheat in one arm raised a sickle over her head. Next to her, a muscled man lifted a hammer. In his other hand, he held a molecule of atomic energy. The sickle and hammer met within the circle of a blazing sun, and the pair’s upturned faces glowed with white hot light. Beneath them was a slogan, but it was written in Russian. Natalie regretted this. The image resonated with her; she desired a translation. *I’ll have to ask Irina.*

“I like that one too,” Damian said to her abruptly.

“Oh? Why?” Natalie asked doubtfully.

Damian adjusted his glasses. “I just do. You like it, don’t you? It’s technically proficient, don’t you think? The sharp angles and lines.”

“I guess,” Natalie said. Angles and lines interested her but little.

“Why do you like it?” Damian probed.

“I—I’m not sure.”

“No way. I don’t believe that. You always have an opinion. Where’s your instant analysis?”

Natalie furrowed her brow. Usually, Damian’s appreciation of her intellect made her feel important, but this time his invitation for her to express her viewpoint sounded more like a demand. “I don’t perform on cue,” she said sharply. “And anyway, I don’t know Russian.”

“I’ll look the words up for you.” Damian reached for his cell phone.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’ll take one second.”

“No, really, you don’t need to explain it to me,” Natalie insisted. It was strange, but she believed the poster held some private importance for her. She didn’t want Damian interfering with her thoughts about it. Impatiently, she turned from him and scanned the audience for Ray. He and Angela had yet to set up right of stage. *Where is he?* She couldn’t locate him. She grew anxious thinking she’d have to record the audio for both poets by herself. Intuitively, she suspected that Damian couldn’t manage all the filming. She rubbed her forehead in dismay, suddenly aware she’d been counting on Ray to come through.

Damian nudged her elbow. “Found it. The words on the poster.” He showed her his phone.

Natalie read from the screen: "Create the future."

He winked and squeezed her arm. "Appropriate, don't you think?"

Just then, the lights in the audience dimmed. A hush fell. The red curtain parted, and a lone figure walked onto the stage.

Natalie fumbled for her microphone and headset.

"What should I do?" Damian hissed. "Where's Cozart? Didn't I tell you he'd ruin it? I can't carry everything."

"Just film!" Natalie commanded.

"Good evening," a deep voice said.

Natalie recognized the man's face. It was Irina's son—the manager.

"Tonight, we welcome two poets new to our stage," the manager began. "Their poems have appeared in periodicals such as *Jus' Vampin'* and *Free Beats*. They secured the coveted first prize in this year's Big Honey Poetry Slam, and their chapbook *Sad Men and Lonely Women* has been rated among the top, hot poetry books of the year by Chantelle Cloudy of the *New York Review*. May I now introduce for your listening pleasure, *Heights and Woodhouse!*"

There was muffled laughter behind him.

"Er, that was your cue," the manager called toward the curtain. "Are you two ready back there?"

"Just a moment! We've lost our Slinky," a male voice called back.

"No, it's there in your pocket," a woman said.

"Ah! Found it!"

A woman's hands parted the curtain, and *Heights and Woodhouse* strode onto stage. *Heights* was tall and carried a crate of props. *Woodhouse* carried a small foldable table. She set the table at the center of the stage, and *Heights* placed the crate on it. He bowed toward the audience and said, "My friends, shall we find out what happens when mourning embraces gladness? Perhaps we could be almost a poetry."

The audience applauded. A man at a front table said, "Sure."

Heights took *Woodhouse* by the hand, twirled her once and escorted her to the chair. "Would you mind—*Walking Away?* I love how you say it." Before he let go, he kissed her fingers.

Woodhouse pulled away her hand and with a melancholy air said to him, "I sit alone on the pier. There's solace in the waves. Seascapes have no face." *Heights* drooped his head and backed away as she continued: "I avoid the boardwalk, for I will search for yours. The breeze chills my feet. I pull my knees closer. It is no longer summer here."

Briefly, Woodhouse paused. Natalie's microphone hovered above the chair's armrest. Woodhouse glanced at it, then followed the line of the boom pole to Natalie's hands.

Natalie held her breath. Woodhouse looked right at her. Natalie could see her eyes were bright green, and her brunette hair fell in large curls past her shoulders. She was dressed all in gray and wore a beret.

"I remember summer well," Woodhouse said sadly. She closed her eyes. "But seasons change."

Hearing Woodhouse through her headset, Natalie had the sensation that the poet's voice was her own. She listened intently to the rest of *Walking Away*—and to the next poem, *Summer Love*. As Woodhouse recited it, Heights handed her a plastic bucket and spade, child's toys for building a sandcastle. Natalie wished she could ponder the poems, but Heights began reciting *Courage is Water*, and she had to scramble with her mike to record his voice in time. Hadn't she instructed Ray and Angela to record Heights? *Where the hell are they?*

For the next half hour, Natalie scurried from one side of the stage to the other. Heights wouldn't stand still. While reciting *Fragile Cover*, he wielded a toy sword, fighting off unseen enemies to reach his lady in the tower. Woodhouse didn't always sit in the chair. She stood to retrieve props from the crate—a plastic church, a wind-up dog, a yellow dump truck. As she recited *Sabotage*, she paced behind Heights. Natalie's mike wouldn't reach so far. Finally, Natalie spied Ray and Angela inching down the side aisle toward the stage. But Ray didn't have his camera on Heights. He was panning it to film the audience.

Woodhouse appeared to sense Natalie's distress. She motioned for Heights to join her at the chair. She sat on one arm of it and waited for Natalie to position the mike. Then she nodded to Heights. He leaned toward the mike and said, "My dear, I was thinking of *Everyday Petty*. Let's go out to eat. I know this great place. They'll give us free beer."

Woodhouse huffed. "Must we go out again tonight?" she spoke to him critically. "You always spend too much money. Haven't I told you to take your shoes off at the door, you leave marks on the carpet. It's Monday, you forgot to set the trash out again. I'm tired of reminding you. You need a haircut. That shirt does not look good on you. Stop talking so loud, you hurt my ears."

As Woodhouse continued her complaint, Heights backed away. He lifted a Slinky from his blazer pocket and played with it behind her

back, ignoring her. Woodhouse crossed her arms and raised her voice, “Are you playing that game on your phone again? You should be getting ready for work. And my car needs an oil change. You said you were gonna handle it a week ago, but you say things and don’t follow through. Why are you so quiet today? Is it something I said? Turn off the TV and kiss me. Let’s make love. Don’t you want to love me?”

Heights drifted to the other side of the stage, as far away from Woodhouse as he could get. He held his Slinky belt high. Gripping one end, he let the other end fall, then shifted his hips to make the uncoiled Slinky swing feebly. A few in the audience tittered. Heights gave them a look of exhausted anguish. Quite deliberately, he dropped the Slinky. A woman in the front row gasped as it hit the floor. Then the spotlights dimmed. Heights and Woodhouse retreated behind the curtain, and the manager emerged to announce an intermission.

Ray and Angela joined Natalie in front of the stage.

“Omigod, that droopy Slinky was so funny,” Angela said.

Natalie’s arms and shoulders ached; she set down her boom mike. “Funny? Did you record the sound of it hitting the stage?”

Angela shrugged and glanced at Ray.

“I didn’t think so. What were you doing?” Natalie asked testily.

“Filming the audience like we planned,” Ray said defensively. “You should’ve seen people’s faces when he let the Slinky go. Good stuff.”

“But that wasn’t the plan,” Natalie disputed. “You were supposed to film Heights during the show, not the audience. Don’t you remember?” Her voice was bitter with disappointment.

“I remember, but I made a last-minute decision. I was getting great footage. I’ll film Heights after intermission, okay? It’s no big deal. We just need to get the flavor of it.”

Damian joined the three of them. “Way to not show up, Cozart.”

“I was here. I just don’t set my camera on a freaking tripod like it’s a high school graduation,” Ray scoffed. He pivoted abruptly and took his position to the right of stage with Angela.

“Please, Ray, stick to our plan,” Natalie called after him.

She retreated with Damian to the left of stage. He grouched about Ray’s incompetence. Natalie only half-listened. She openly agreed that Ray shouldn’t have impulsively changed strategies on them, but privately, she couldn’t deny that she was curious to see his footage. She’d had no view of the audience herself, only of the poets. She regretted

making Ray defensive; she should've assumed the best about his intentions and played it cool in front of Angela. Ray's ideas challenged her. She'd believed she was up to the challenge. But maybe she wasn't.

For the second half of the performance, Woodhouse appeared in a flowing skirt with a wild safari print. And she'd taken off her hat. She smiled during her recitations, and sometimes while Heights spoke his poems to her, she laughed. For the sake of her aching arms, Natalie had hoped the poets would slow down, but their pace of performance ramped up. The wingback chair became an axis around which they danced. Woodhouse sat to begin poems but waltzed to the sides of the stage as her poems ended. When she vacated the chair, Heights would sit, but between stanzas, he'd jump up and twirl about like a top. The pair crisscrossed the stage in a choreographed ballet. Twice, Natalie, trying to mirror their dance, jostled someone sitting in the front row.

She soon gave up keeping tabs on the rest of the film crew. At first, she'd observed with satisfaction that Angela and Ray were stationary to the right of stage, as was Damian to the left. Damian gave her a quick thumbs up from his seat behind his camera. *Good. Everybody stay put and stick to the plan.* Yet no sooner had she thought this, than she faulted Angela for failing to stretch her mike closer to the stage to record Heights. *She's not gonna get good sound standing still.* Ray soon abandoned his post. With a flutter of anxiety, Natalie spied him in her periphery. He appeared locked in a tango with his camera, pirouetting and contorting his body to capture the poets from peculiar angles.

Suddenly, the stage lights dimmed; Heights and Woodhouse met by the crate of props. They spoke softly, with eyes only for each other. An intimate hush fell. As quietly as she could, Natalie shifted to center stage; Ray met her there.

Slowly, Heights lifted from the crate a delicate orb of pleated red paper. "A little Chinese lantern you said the evening of my twenty-first birthday."

Woodhouse caressed Heights's hand. "Isn't much, but you like fireworks, so . . ."

"My cupped hands felt the tissue paper, the cardboard, delicate, resilient," Heights said. "Should I light it, I asked, and, biting your lip, you shook no. You slid along the porch bench like a whisper, you whispered—"

"Not dark enough," Woodhouse spoke, completing his thought. She

gazed up at him dreamily, holding his hand.

“Your eyes widen—” Heights continued, but then he broke off in confusion, for at just that moment, Woodhouse flinched. She looked past him and tried not to giggle. Heights glanced over his shoulder.

There was Ray on his knees on stage, filming only a foot away.

Woodhouse sought to recapture the moment but seemed not to remember her line. She started to laugh.

“Whoa! Hey there, camera guy,” Heights said to Ray with a chuckle. “You sure like to get in close. Zoom lens broken?”

There was snickering in the audience.

Abashed, Ray tried to hide his face behind the camera, without success. “Oh. Um, heh-heh, no, it isn’t broken. I wanted to film your, uh, tender moment from a better angle, to see your hands touching.”

“How sweet.” Woodhouse put a hand on her heart. “Sorry I ruined it. I must say, I admire your passion for a scene.” She looked up at Heights. “Can you recall a cameraman ever crashing our party?”

Heights scratched his head. “No, the both of them are remarkable,” he said with a gesture that included Natalie. “We love your enthusiasm,” he said to her, “but maybe you got a little carried away with the mike? You do realize you’re blocking people from seeing our finale.”

Natalie’s face went red. With astonishment she realized that when Ray had sneaked onto the stage, she’d sat down on the edge of it to get closer herself. Totally absorbed in the moment, she’d not once thought of the audience. She lowered her mike and peered out into the room of dimly lit faces, horrified to realize that she’d become part of the show. A man in the front row smiled and waved at her. *Oh, my God, Damian was right. Ray—he’s ruined everything, just like at Willy’s.*

Heights addressed the listeners: “Isn’t this film crew something? You’re totally the politest poetry fans ever. Thank you! Let’s give them a round of applause, shall we?”

The crowd graciously obliged.

“Oh, Heights, what should we do?” Woodhouse said. “We can’t finish our show like this. We’ll have to improvise.”

“Right.” Heights tapped his chin theatrically.

Woodhouse drummed her fingers on the edge of the crate.

“I got it,” Heights said to her. “Fortune-telling. That’s always been a crowd-pleaser.”

Woodhouse contemplated Ray and Natalie. “Mmm, yes, together

their aura is strong . . . yes, I see great potential here, if only—” she broke off, “oh, young man,” she said to Ray, “why don’t you put down your camera. And that microphone,” she said to Natalie, “young woman, give your arms a rest. We have a request to make of you.”

Ray set his camera on the stage. But Natalie didn’t know what to do. She squinted up at Woodhouse. *Aura? With Ray? What does she mean by that?* Confused, she looked to Damian for guidance. He’d gotten out of his chair and was standing with his hands on his hips.

“Go on, just let it go,” Woodhouse encouraged Natalie.

Reluctantly, Natalie removed her headphones and let the base of the boom pole rest on the floor.

“Great! Now we need a finale,” Heights said to them, “and we want you to help us. What do you say? Are you up to it?”

“Absolutely,” Ray said.

“Oh, I—I don’t know,” Natalie answered. “What do we have to do?”

“Nothing much,” Woodhouse assured her. “Just stand here while we tell your fortunes, that’s all.”

“You can see the future?” Ray asked Heights in amazement.

“Absolutely,” Heights said, mimicking Ray. “Not only are we poets, we’re also officially licensed psychics. Every life is a book. We’ll just flip a few pages ahead in yours and read some random lines—in poetic fashion, of course.” Heights beckoned to Natalie. “Now, if you’ll just step up here, we’ll get the finale going.”

Natalie stared up at Heights. He was so tall, even taller than Ray. From her stance below the stage, she felt small. He held out his hand to her. She’d been listening to his voice through her headset. Without the support of her apparatus, his voice sounded different. It was personal, a summons. *No, don’t be stupid. He can’t tell the future. This is just a joke.* Natalie looked at Ray. He stared at her wide-eyed and expectant, a goofy grin on his face. She could only think that standing on stage with him wasn’t how the evening was supposed to turn out. It was the exact opposite of everything she’d planned.

“Dear princess,” Woodhouse asked her gently, “aren’t you curious to know what the future holds?” She leaned forward to bring her face more in line with Natalie’s. “It could be a great adventure.”

Woodhouse’s eyes were encouraging. Natalie took a deep breath; the two steps up to the stage were at her feet. A small part of her urged her to climb them. She looked at Ray again and experienced a sensa-

tion of her childhood, the first time she'd leaped from a diving board.

"Um, I—maybe I—"

"Pssst! What are you doing?" Damian hissed from behind Natalie. "You're here to record the show, not to get caught up in it."

Natalie turned around to locate Damian. His glasses reflected the stage lights.

He beckoned her to retreat. "You're just part of the audience."

Natalie gripped her boom mike. *I'm too important to the class project. I can't abandon it.* "No, I shouldn't. I can't get involved," she said to Woodhouse. "Hope you understand. Sorry we messed up your love poem." With no further word, Natalie scuttled back to the shadows.

"A pity," Woodhouse said as Natalie backed away. She straightened and looked at Heights. He was clearly disappointed.

"What about you, buckaroo?" Heights asked Ray. "Still game?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Good. Well, what would you like?" Heights asked. He rummaged in the crate. "We can read tea leaves. Do tarot. Even packed a good, old-fashioned crystal ball."

"Crystal ball," Ray said.

"As you wish." Heights cleared the table and placed the crystal ball on it. Woodhouse motioned for Ray to sit in the chair. When he did, she sneaked around the back of it and plucked off his ball cap.

"Hey! That's my favorite hat," Ray said in alarm.

Woodhouse tossed it to Heights.

He caught it and laid it on the crystal ball. "We need a precious object of yours. Your dusty hat will do," he said to Ray. "It helps the divination if your aura intermingles with the gods of destiny that lurk within the crystal."

"Really?" Ray asked.

"I made that up." Heights grinned. "But it does make our show more dramatic."

Woodhouse bowed to the audience. "Dear friends, with no further ado, we present to you our new grand finale." As the audience clapped, she joined Heights at the table. They intertwined their hands over Ray's hat. A single bright spotlight formed a halo about them.

"So, the princess ran from the pirate," Heights said loud enough for only Woodhouse to hear.

"I'm confident she'll still be listening," Woodhouse replied. "These

two are like the lines of a couplet. They need only to discover how they rhyme.”

They released their hands; circling the table, they began to chant:

“You’re a pirate lost in a Yankee sea,” Heights said to Ray.

“To our stage, you’ve drifted most dramatically,” Woodhouse intoned. “The poetry drew you with a Siren’s call.”

“Now your baseball cap’s on our crystal ball,” Heights said with a grin. “Clearly, you have a captain’s courage—”

“To endure the most peculiar occurrence,” Woodhouse said.

“For tonight, we reveal how your fortune falls.” Heights’s tone was ominous. He and Woodhouse ceased circling the table. They stooped over it, examining the crystal ball and Ray’s hat, waving their hands about like a sorceress and a warlock casting a spell.

“Tis sweat around the band I spy,” Woodhouse said to Heights.

“Because he’s constant motion, that I’ll testify.” Heights jerked his thumb in Ray’s direction. “The visor’s worn, bent by his own hand.”

Woodhouse peered sadly at Ray. “Regret will bend you, but you won’t understand. You will choose, but far too late, the unexpected.”

“Your other choices, though, will be poorly selected,” Heights said.

“You will run, but the past will trap you like quicksand.”

All at once, Heights jumped in front of Ray, who started from the chair. The crowd gasped in surprise. “You alone must jump into the breach,” Heights urged him.

“But can you save what’s beyond your reach?” Woodhouse asked. She took Ray’s hat off the crystal ball and cradled it in her arms. “What you hold sacred, you will lose.”

“You control the camera, yet miss the clues,” Heights said. “The search for truth will drag you into deep tombs.”

“As you chase men that obsession has consumed.”

“Your reservation’s set at a banquet for fools,” Heights said. He took Woodhouse by the hand and led her past Ray. She stopped at the very edge of the stage and peered into the shadows. Heights returned alone to stand next to Ray.

“At your journey’s end, when you open the last gate—” Woodhouse chanted.

“Will you find fame? Does vast wealth and power await?” Heights peered intently at Ray and added cryptically, “Flames roar within the chasm you’ll cross.”

“Your hand will reach for the one you lost,” Woodhouse said sadly. She held Ray’s cap up into the light. “Is love your treasure true? Or has it been all fake?”

In the shadows, Natalie watched transfixed. She’d not put her headset back on and her microphone was off. With a prickling at the nape of her neck, she realized that Woodhouse meant these words for her.

“This you’ll learn, as you plumb the depths of the dark lake,” Heights said to Ray.

“Will you drown? Will you rise? Will your gain be worth the cost?” After a lingering look at Natalie, Woodhouse turned and tossed Ray’s hat to Heights.

He caught it and strode to center stage. Woodhouse motioned for Ray to stand; she guided him to Heights. They positioned him facing the audience and flanked him on either side. Woodhouse kept her hands clasped behind her back.

Holding Ray’s cap by the bill, Heights gestured with it to mark the beat of his lines. “Our poem now concludes. We can say no more.”

“You’ll sail into storms when you leave our shore.”

“To meet the challenge, dear captain, this we confess—”

“Stay true to your heart,” Woodhouse warned. “It’s your map and compass.”

“For destiny’s winds, unpredictably they blow!” And with that, Heights flung Ray’s cap like a black and yellow frisbee into the crowd.

“My hat!” Ray cried. Panic passed across his face.

Before he could step off the stage to chase after it, Woodhouse grasped him by the arm. With a smile, she swung her other hand from behind her back and presented Ray his hat.

Ray’s mouth dropped open. “What? How did you—?” Relieved, he received the hat from her.

Woodhouse inclined her head as if in prayer. “Godspeed to the pirate—” she swung her arm in Natalie’s direction “—and to the princess, the stars of our show.”

The poets took several backward steps, leaving Ray alone with his hat at the center of the stage. They clasped hands, bowed to the cheering crowd, and silently disappeared behind the curtain.

Learning to Rhyme

*Film Production Center
NYU School of the Arts
Tuesday, October 22*

“You just had to be on stage again, didn’t you, Cozart?” Damian said sarcastically. To his left, Ray slumped glumly in his chair with his Pirates ball cap pulled low. Natalie, to Damian’s right, had scooted her chair back just far enough to avoid Ray’s eyes. The three were grouped before a bank of computers in the art school’s Film Production Center. For the last hour, they’d been watching Damian’s footage of Heights and Woodhouse. Despite her difficulties recording both poets, Natalie’s audio had turned out nearly flawless. Such an accomplishment should’ve made her happy. But she wasn’t happy with herself today.

“Maybe you should go into acting. Seem to like performing for a crowd,” Damian advised Ray insincerely. He clicked the pause button and froze Heights onscreen holding aloft the crystal ball.

“Wha’d you stop it for? Let it run,” Ray demanded.

Damian sniffed. “Think I filmed your stupid gag? That’s all there is. We weren’t there to be in the show. I turned off the camera. I still can’t believe you sneaked up behind them. What were you thinking?”

“You didn’t film the finale?” Ray asked in disbelief.

“No way. That wasn’t how it was supposed to end anyway. Natalie didn’t record any sound. Ask her.”

Ray leaned forward to look at Natalie. He said nothing. His mouth hung open mutely.

Natalie barely glanced at him. “I—I forgot,” she said guiltily. “After I left the stage, I didn’t turn the mike back on. I don’t know why. The whole thing just . . .” her voice trailed off. She was going to say “passed me by,” but she couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“Was a total embarrassment,” Damian said, presuming to conclude her thought for her. “That’s what you told me last night—how morti-

fied you were by the whole thing.” With a gesture, Damian invited Natalie to repeat what she’d said to him.

Natalie rubbed her forehead. She didn’t want to repeat her words in front of Ray. She hoped Damian would let it go. But he didn’t.

“Remember—when we were packing up our equipment, you said you thought you ought to apologize to the manager,” he went on. “Because he’d given you permission to film the show, and then Ray got in the way and ruined it for everyone.” Damian failed to hide a satisfied sneer when he turned to Ray and added: “Such a shame if future film students were no longer allowed in.”

Hearing her own words in Damian’s mouth, Natalie winced. They sounded harsh—and unfair. It was true she’d blamed Ray in the moment, but later that night, she recalled that Woodhouse had claimed responsibility for spoiling the final poem. She hadn’t blamed Ray for distracting her at all. Nor had Heights. Both had welcomed Ray’s presence on stage—and hers—as a creative opportunity. It didn’t seem right to Natalie to blame Ray when the poets themselves had not.

“Did you apologize?” Ray asked Natalie accusingly.

She shook her head no. She’d only thought about it but hadn’t gone through with it. She was glad now that she hadn’t.

“Well, that’s good ‘cause I didn’t ruin anything,” Ray insisted. He snorted and leaned back in his seat. Natalie couldn’t see his face. “It was a freaking poetry reading. It was already lame,” he went on. “Like, that stupid fortune-telling didn’t mean anything, so I guess it doesn’t matter if you didn’t film it. What do I care? It was literally gibberish. Like I said before, poets love to trick you into believing there’s some deep meaning when there ain’t. Turns out I was right. Y’know what? I bet the two of ‘em were drunk, got their free pints on tap at intermission. Just like that woman told us. They were totally yucking it up and stuff the last half hour.”

“What are you talking about?” Damian asked.

“It’s not like filming poetry was my—” Ray cut himself off, then mumbled, “oh, never mind. At least I got my cap back.”

Natalie could tell Ray meant these words for her. She knew she couldn’t defend herself. All day she’d been thinking of Ray’s face, the way he’d looked up on stage. The poets had disappeared behind the curtain, leaving him standing there holding his hat in his hands. He looked so perplexed. Alone. It didn’t look right at all. The stage was in-

complete. Natalie had felt his isolation. And she had caused it. She'd told Ray at Willy's that filming the poets would be fun. She'd told him to trust her. And then, right when the poets had invited them both to join in the fun, she'd refused. *Why didn't I say yes?* The poetic finale had been meant for two. But she'd ruined it. Clearly, Ray had lost what little faith he had in her. Somehow, somehow, she had to backtrack.

She slid her chair forward so she could see Ray. "There's no way the poets were drunk."

"No?"

"No."

"How do you know? Don't tell me you're psychic too?"

Natalie ignored Ray's sarcasm. "I know because I—" she began in a rush, then stopped, conscious that Damian was listening. Suddenly, she wished that he weren't in the room. She wanted to tell Ray that the poetic fortune-telling had really stirred her. She'd *felt* it. Some of the prophecy, of course—the bits about tomb-raiding and sailing on a dark lake—were wildly fanciful. Natalie didn't like boats. But when Woodhouse had said, "Your hand will reach for the one you lost," Natalie had felt a pinprick of regret. That wasn't gibberish. Only words with meaning could affect the heart.

"Well, I can't explain it. I just know. Trust me," she said to Ray.

Ray snorted. "Heard that before."

This rankled her. "So, don't listen to me. Whatever. Just consider the facts, okay? The facts are that two drunk people couldn't have improvised all those rhymes." She paused, conceiving a tactic to bypass Damian and say what she wanted to say to Ray. "I—I was impressed by how dramatic, er, I mean, by how touching the conclusion—"

Damian sucked in his breath excitedly. "Here we go. This should be smart. I've been waiting to hear your analysis."

"What? No, I'm not analyzing—this is—this—"

"Y'know, I've been thinking," Damian interrupted her, "we could totally do an analysis of the poems for the film. Don't we have to tell a story about the event? Like, what is the story here? The story is literally the performance itself—how the poets used the props and all their choreography and stuff. Shouldn't be hard to explain what they meant to convey. It's nothing we haven't done before."

Natalie intuited that by *we*, Damian meant to exclude Ray. That was not her desire. "But we haven't even seen Ray's clips. We should wait

to make a decision until we've watched everything." With a flick of her wrist, she invited Ray to play his footage that was paused in front of him on the computer screen.

Ray sighed deeply and sat up in his chair.

"C'mon, if we do it the smart way, we don't have to watch his footage at all," Damian whispered to Natalie.

Just then, the door to the Film Production Center swung open.

Angela swept in, dressed for the gym except her hair was down and her face fully made up. Her yoga pants were stamped with the words MADE U LOOK across the butt. She sighed dramatically and tossed her purse in a chair. "Omigod, what a day! Like, did you guys finish it yet?"

"I think an analysis is all we need to do," Damian said to the group.

"Okay!" Angela giggled and posed theatrically. "From which angle?"

"We don't need a panorama," Natalie muttered to her.

Angela ignored this remark. She squeezed Ray's shoulders. "Oh, Mr. Director, I'm ready for my take." She begged to sit in the middle between him and Damian. To accommodate this request, Natalie was forced to slide her own chair further to the right.

"Is this what we filmed?" Angela pointed at the screen. "I'm super pumped to see it." She nudged Ray's shoulder with hers. "Let it roll."

Ray clicked a button, and the footage began to play, unfocussed at first. Then abruptly, the camera zoomed in on a mousy woman's face.

Angela gasped. "Yikes, she needs, like, a laser for that unibrow."

"Cozart, it's not the Blair Witch Project," Damian laughed.

"Just wait, okay?" Ray said impatiently. "It gets interesting . . ."

Slowly, the camera zoomed out. The woman—one of the bartenders—squinted at Ray sourly. "Is that on?" she asked him, glancing at a microphone dangling above her. "This isn't gonna take long, is it?" She looked quite Gothic—dressed all in black, her hair dyed dark, her eyes heavily lined. On her arms were tattoos of skulls and butterflies.

Ray turned up the volume. His voice buzzed through the speakers:

Ray: You know anything about Heights and Woodhouse?

Bartender: Nothing. Sorry.

Ray: (joking) We heard they're members of the Russian mafia.

Bartender: (deadpan) Yeah? Good for them.

Ray: You, uh, ever go to the poetry readings?

Bartender: (expressionless) Never. Wouldn't be caught dead.

Ray: Why not?

Bartender: (shrug) Don't like emotional manipulation. Stuff like that can get way too cheerful. So fake.

Angela: Do you ever worry that, like, Goth is out of style?

Bartender: (intense) No. Goth is always in. Goth never dies.

Angela: Really? Like, why?

Bartender: (humorless) 'Cause Goth is about death.

As they watched the interview progress, Angela played with her hair and gazed up at the fluorescent lights. Suddenly, the audio became nothing but giggles—Angela's. Then it cut out. Ray increased the volume to no effect. "Wha'd you do? Weren't you recording?" he asked.

"Huh? Like, yeah. I mean, I thought so," Angela said.

"Maybe there was a short in the wire," Natalie said insincerely.

"How do you record yourself laughing?" Damian asked. "You were supposed to be recording her voice."

"I dunno. Can't you just fast-forward the rest? That woman was literally as boring as death," Angela complained.

Ray dutifully complied. The scene shifted to the Red Room. Seated at a table were a smartly dressed middle-aged man and woman, both looking awkward before Ray's camera:

Ray: So, what do you know about Heights and Woodhouse?

Man: (assertively) They're Canadian. From Winnipeg.

Woman: (with acrimony) Winnipeg? No, no—

Man: I got tickets 'cause it's a special international event.

Woman: No, they're from Vermont. You don't—

Man: (to her) What? I heard they're from up north—

Woman: (exasperated) But up north doesn't just mean Canada. You don't know anything—

Ray: So, are both of you excited to see their performance?

Man: (to Ray) Yeah. It's rare for them to perform outside Canada. I wanted to do something, uh, special for our anniversary.

Woman: (to him) I told you Vermont! They go all over—New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York. This is nothing special.

Man: (to Ray) Sure I saw them interviewed on PBS.

Woman: (to no one in particular) So cheap. I wanted to see Phantom of the Opera.

“No, I meant keep fast-forwarding,” Angela said to Ray. “Like, who wants to listen to old people bitch? Past this part, it gets really good.” She leaned her elbows on the table, wholly blocking Natalie’s view.

“Angie, do you mind?” Natalie said with annoyance.

“Huh? Oh, I forgot—you’re so short.” Angela smirked and pretended to stretch her arms. Then she lazily draped her fingers on Ray’s shoulder. “Oh, here. Stop it here!” She gripped his bicep excitedly.

Ray let the footage play. Onscreen appeared Angela, posing like an on-the-spot-reporter next to an attractive young man seated at the bar:

Man: . . . sure, dude, I love poetry. (eyeing Angela) All kinds.

Ray: Yeah? Who’s your favorite poet?

Man: Er, uh, Heights and Woodhouse, of course. Yeah. That’s why I’m here. I like writers new to the scene. (smiling at Angela) Didn’t know they’re Russian oligarchs. Love to meet ‘em.

Angela: Oh? Maybe you’re in the mafia too. Are you and Heights and Woodhouse spies? Are you planning a coup?

Man: (ogling her) That’s top secret. Could tell you off-camera.

Angela: (giggling) I can keep a secret. Promise.

Man: Okay. (leaning in to show her his phone) Check out this app. It’s called HOOKUP. (tapping a button) It’s designed for spies. Like, only spies can use it, y’know, to meet each other.

Angela: (seriously) Omigod, really?

Man: You log in, you can view spy profiles. (showing her a pic)

Angela: (about the photo) Omigod, he’s hot.

Man: (laughing) That’s my profile.

Angela: (gasping) I’m stupid! Like, that is such a good picture.

Man: Everyone on HOOKUP is hot. Surprised you’re not on it.

Angela: (almost catching on) Oh. Well. Um, how would I get recruited? I mean, y’know, to be a spy . . .

Watching herself, Angela laughed loudly. “So totally amazing!” She turned to Damian. “Don’t ya think so? And, like, guess what? HOOKUP isn’t really for spies. I found out later. Ray, Ray, rewind it.”

Ray did not rewind the footage but kept it playing.

“Cozart, what’s with all the mafia stuff? Makes no sense,” Damian complained. “It’s got nothing to do with anything.”

“Dude, it’s an ice-breaker,” Ray said. “Gotta get people comfortable

on camera. You can't expect 'em to tell you anything just 'cause you ask. But they might tell you the truth if they think it's all a joke."

"But what is the truth?" Damian asked skeptically. "There's no story here that I can see. I tried to tell you the audience is irrelevant to the performance. That bartender didn't even go to the show. What—"

"There's a story," Angela protested. "The event was all about meeting people and stuff. That's what I think. People go places to socialize. And then post it on social media. You never know who you'll meet. Or who will see you. Getting noticed is super important. Like, who knew hot guys go to poetry readings? I'd never have thought to look there. I was literally blown away. And that he was into me and stuff was a total bonus. Looking back, I guess maybe meeting him was fate. I mean, we *were* the hottest people in the room. Anyway, my philosophy is—you always gotta be ready to shine, not shirk the spotlight. Meeting the right person could be your one big chance and—"

"That's not the story," Damian countered. "The story isn't about who you meet. It's about what you know. Shows like this are a chance to encounter new ideas. Expand your mind. To me, laying the performance bare afterwards is the best part. Artists gotta give you good raw material. I'm there to judge the body of work, take what's of use." Briefly, he touched his glasses. "Like, I read online a fascinating analysis of Woodhouse's poem *Walking Away*. I didn't know this when I listened to her recite it, but the poem is a sestina. Six stanzas, six lines each with a three-line conclusion. The poem isn't supposed to rhyme, but it's gotta repeat the same six words at the end of each line, and in a different order for each stanza."

As he spoke, Damian peered at Natalie. His eyes expressed desire that she'd invite him to flesh out these facts.

But she was intently watching Ray's footage and said nothing.

He fleshed them out anyway: "So, get this—according to the review, Woodhouse played fast and loose with the poetic form, was supposed to repeat the word *one* six times but used *stone* and *gone* a couple times instead. Like, she cheated on the sestina itself. And the critic caught her in the act. And the poem is about a woman leaving a partner who demands moral purity. Her poem is a love betrayal at its core—in both its form and content." He shivered in excitement. "The critic totally stripped Woodhouse's poem down naked. That level of analysis—so stimulating, don't you think? To get that close to an artist's mind—like

an intellectual embrace.” He closed his eyes and sighed with contentment. “We should do reviews of her poetry. Would love it if Natalie recorded my analyses. I could go all night with Woodhouse’s poems.”

Ray let out a tremendous grunt.

“What’s wrong with that?” Damian demanded to know. “All we gotta do is juxtapose a few scenes of Woodhouse and me.”

“What’s your obsession with her?” Ray asked.

“I’m not obsessed.”

“Well, your footage was nothing but a boring line-of-sight on her the whole hour. It’s like Heights wasn’t even on stage.”

“Yeah, like totally,” Angela agreed.

“How would you know?” Damian protested. “We watched my footage before you even got here.”

Angela snapped back. “What difference does it make?”

“Look, this assignment is due in two days,” Damian said to Ray. “I don’t hear you offering any ideas. Keep watching your random clips if you want to, but that’s all they are.”

“Just shut up and let me focus, okay?” Ray said.

The scene shifted to the stage. Woodhouse was reciting *Everyday Petty*. All at once, the camera swept in a dizzying arc over the audience, only to zoom in abruptly. The smartly-dressed couple appeared again—this time the woman was dabbing her eyes with a tissue. The man at the bar Angela had interviewed was texting. The camera swung back to the stage just in time to catch Heights dropping his Slinky.

Damian grew frustrated; he adjusted his glasses. “Cozart, watching your camera work is like riding the Tilt-A-Whirl at the county fair.”

Angela yawned and stood to stretch. She arranged herself in yoga stances—chair pose, tree pose. “Like, how long does our film need to be? Fifteen minutes? My interview with that guy is half that already. I think we should focus on what’s of visual interest.” She snickered and switched poses to bird of paradise. “Don’t you agree, Mr. Director?”

Ray kept his focus on the screen. He’d shot the audience once more after the intermission. Heights was reciting *A Bad Influence* with such melodramatic flair that he had Woodhouse in stitches. Suddenly, the view swerved to the back of the room. In the darkened corner, the Goth bartender leaned against the wall. She was smiling.

Angela couldn’t hold her pose any longer and stumbled. “Oh, whatever,” she pouted. “You guys figure it out.” She grabbed her purse and

eagerly checked her cell phone for messages. “Omigod. I gotta go . . . supposed to meet . . .” she broke off, her eyes shining with desire. She glanced at the back of Ray’s head, sighed loudly, and strutted out.

Damian checked his watch. “You come up with a story that’s better than mine, you let me know,” he said to Ray ironically. He pushed out his chair and stood. “Meet me here tomorrow so we can work out the analysis,” he instructed Natalie. “I gotta go study—exam in Professor Bergner’s class. Brutal.” He strode to the door.

As Natalie watched the door swing shut, relief and alarm seized her in equal measures. Between her and Ray were just two empty chairs. The room was quiet. Painfully so. She felt compelled to speak. But she didn’t have any words. She recalled that earlier, she’d wanted to tell Ray something—something important. Now was her chance. But in all the noise, she’d lost the thread of it. She couldn’t quite remember.

Ray glanced at her but said nothing.

She wondered if she ought to shift to one of the empty chairs to get closer to the computer screen. But she stayed right where she was.

The show was winding down; Heights lifted a little Chinese lantern from the crate of props. Then the picture went hazy. When the camera focused in again, Heights appeared from the reverse angle. Ray had sneaked up on stage behind him. The poets were holding hands. Ray zoomed in. Natalie heard Heights say, “Hey there, camera guy. You sure like to get in close.” The camera tilted erratically, then stabilized. Natalie sucked in her breath at what she saw next. *Is that me?* Quite without her knowing it, Ray had aimed his camera at her.

She was seated on the edge of the stage looking up at Heights. Her bulky headset and boom pole only made her look smaller. “You do realize you’re blocking people from seeing our finale,” he said to her. Natalie cringed to see her own face—shamed, afraid. And then, it was doubtful, wary, for Woodhouse said of them, “Yes, together their aura is strong. Yes, I see great potential here.” Natalie closed her eyes, utterly embarrassed to be watching this with Ray. She remembered at the time thinking that there were only two steps up to the stage, and she could easily take Heights’s hand and climb them. But she hadn’t. Blessedly, just then the computer screen went black. Her flight like a jittery bird from the light back to the shadows would only exist in their memories. Ray had turned off his camera.

That isn’t me. That’s not who I am. I’m better than that. And yet, no

sooner had she thought this, than an urgent desire to fly away gripped her again. She shifted in her chair, searching for an excuse to leave.

Ray sighed and dropped his hands on the table wearily. "I dunno. Maybe Damian's right. There's just nothing here."

Natalie was surprised to hear Ray say this. At the poetry reading, he'd been confident that he was getting great footage.

Ray kept his face averted. "Thought I had a plan. I don't remember now. These are just threads, but I can't tie anything together."

His discouragement prompted Natalie to speak. "There's . . . something," she said cautiously. She remembered what she'd wanted to tell him before—that the final poem had stirred her unexpectedly.

He faced her, but his eyes were shaded by his hat. "You think so?" His voice was full of doubt. "What do you think the story is?"

Natalie sat up taller. Questions shifted her mind into analytic mode. She was more than happy, even relieved to go there. Damian always encouraged it. He wasn't wrong about her: analysis was her strength.

"Well, I think the poems themselves tell us the story," she began cleverly. "A lot of them are about thwarted desires. Or cycles that can't be escaped, or if so, only with difficulty." She paused, waiting for Ray to be impressed by her observations as Damian always was. But he only rested his chin in his hand and said nothing. With his eyes shaded by his hat, she couldn't tell what he was thinking. This unnerved her.

"Or the poems—they—they try to connect—" she stammered, attempting to perform some other mental trick for him. But words fled from her. Ray appeared to be listening intently, as if he were making a sound recording of her voice. She grew angry by her inability to finish her sentence. *Dammit, why am I like this with him?* Sense impressions clustered in her like bits of colored glass: Ray's trim waist, the smoothness of his palm, the hand-knitted texture of Irina's shawl, the poster of the man and woman in revolt. Natalie couldn't assemble the mosaic; the colors remained abstract. Her shoulders slumped in defeat. Feeling again a prickling of regret over her stage fright, she confessed, "Oh, the day didn't go as I planned. The whole event—it was very revealing."

Ray pursed his lips in a frown. "Revealing," he repeated. He got up and began to pace behind the chairs.

Natalie watched his silent walk. She grew anxious; silence gave her nothing to analyze. Did he perceive the fear in her? Was he going to ask her to explain herself? She supposed humiliation must be emanat-

ing from her like an odor. Surely, he must detect it. Flushed with panic that she'd already revealed too much, she reached for her jacket.

"I should go. Maybe Damian is—"

"I got it!" Ray snapped his fingers and stared at Natalie.

She stared back, jacket in hand and with one foot toward the door.

"That's exactly the way to think of it. I can see it now—the people in the audience," he tried to explain to her, "how they reacted to the show, they revealed things about themselves." Quickly, Ray stepped to the computer to rewind his footage. "Like, that couple I interviewed—it was their anniversary, but they were arguing, and she said she didn't even wanna be there, but halfway through the show—"

"She started to cry," Natalie said.

"You saw it too?" Ray said excitedly. "That's awesome. Look, I shot 'em after intermission, saw 'em leave the room, thought they might not come back. But they did." Ray found the footage he wanted and paused it. "Check this out—they're holding hands."

Natalie blinked in surprise. "That's sorta amazing actually."

"Isn't it? And look at this—" Ray fast-forwarded a little, "that bartender swore she wouldn't be caught dead at a poetry reading. Claimed it was all so fake. But I saw her after intermission." Ray pointed triumphantly at the screen. "There she is standing in the back. Wonder what made her change her mind." He looked at Natalie as if for an answer.

Natalie shrugged. "Have to ask her, I guess." She clutched her jacket and eyed the door.

Ray observed this. "You—you're not leaving, are you?"

"I—I was going to."

"But I think we got a story now."

Natalie fiddled with the collar of her jacket. She wasn't sure she liked Ray's idea, principally because it was his and not hers. Did he secretly mean to criticize her, as he'd done earlier? *Where's he going with this?* She scrutinized his face, searching for a clue. "Well, what is the story—in your view?" she asked to test him.

Ray took off his hat and ran his hand through his hair.

Natalie had a clear look at his eyes. He appeared deep in thought.

Ray examined his hat briefly, then put it back on. "The story is about how people change," he said. "What do you think of that?"

Natalie averted her eyes. "Guess it's better than the boat we're in."

"I think so too. If you stay, we could work it out."

Natalie shifted on her feet. Ray's invitation for her to stay touched a nerve. She thought of the Merry Parrot, lost for lack of her effort. She thought of the poetic finale, incomplete for lack of her courage. There were already two strikes against her. *Dear princess, aren't you curious to know what the future holds?* She'd said no to Woodhouse. Ray was giving her a chance to backtrack. If she wasn't someone who ran from a challenge, then now was the time to prove it. She laid aside her jacket.

"Okay. Yes. I'll stay."

Ray grinned. "Awesome." He set aside the two empty chairs between them, and Natalie slid hers closer.

For several hours, they edited Ray's footage, clipping the segments of the married couple and the bartender. As they examined his footage again, they also discovered that the hot guy Angela had interviewed at the bar never appeared to be paying attention to the show. He was always on his phone texting. Then he left at intermission. "Dude told me he was totally into poetry. I knew he was a poser," Ray said.

Damian's footage of Woodhouse proved to be useful. Woodhouse had changed clothes at intermission. "It's like she was a different person the second half of the show," Natalie said to Ray. They decided to splice shots of Woodhouse throughout the audience sequences to emphasize their story's theme of change. When the married couple were shown arguing, Woodhouse appeared in gray reciting *Everyday Petty*. But when the couple held hands, she appeared in her safari skirt laughing at Heights's recitation of *A Bad Influence*. Ray and Natalie created similar juxtapositions for the segments showing the hot guy leaving the show and for the bartender arriving.

As they stitched together the scenes, several of their classmates showed up to work on their film projects as well. The Production Center grew noisy. Natalie had to lean closer to Ray to concentrate. Twice he jumped up to pace, to talk through an idea with her. She slid into his chair to perform several edits. He squatted at the table near her shoulder, bringing his face in line with hers to watch her work. Neither of them so much as hinted that they should re-watch his or Damian's sparse footage of the finale. In fact, Ray always paused or rewound the footage before it got so far. Natalie was happy to dance around the issue. She soon relaxed, trusting Ray wasn't going to go there. By silent agreement, they talked of nothing but the story they were creating.

Late in the evening, they hit a snag. Much of Angela's "laugh track,"

as Ray called it, was useless. She'd giggled over important bits of the bartender interview. Her audio of the arguing couple faded in and out, and much of her recording of Heights was marred by too much reverb. "I told her to keep the mike low," Ray complained. In addition, key segments of Ray's audience footage had no corresponding audio at all. Shots of the bartender smiling in the back of the room or of the hot guy texting during the performance were like scenes from an old silent film. Frustrated and hungry, they took a break.

Natalie retreated to the Student Lounge.

Ray went to get pizza.

Natalie sank onto a couch and tucked her legs under her. With surprise, she realized that for the last few hours working with Ray, she'd not once thought of Damian. Now, alone, she remembered something he'd said to her while they were at Willy's. Ray had just invited her to watch him take the Rum Flight Challenge. She'd hung back indecisively. Damian had leaned in and whispered, "He's so beneath you."

"Food!" Ray burst into the lounge; he held the pizza box over his head as if it were a prize. "Had to fight off three dudes in line for this," he boasted. "And one mean old biddy."

Natalie laughed. She almost quipped, "More pirate booty," but she didn't want to remind Ray about the Merry Parrot. She said nothing.

Ray set the box on the coffee table and pushed up a lounge chair.

As they reached for their second slices, Natalie returned to a safe subject—the audio problem in their film. "Any ideas about how to fix the sound gaps?"

As an answer, Ray produced a ping-pong ball from a pocket in his jacket. He bounced it methodically on the coffee table as he ate.

"Is that one of those eyeballs from Willy's?" Natalie asked.

"Yeah, I stole a bunch during the beer pong tournament."

They finished the pizza. Ray leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs. He flicked the ping-pong ball from one hand to the other.

Natalie leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees; she studied the deft movements of Ray's hands. Without warning, he bounced the ball off the coffee table to her. It pinged her on the forehead.

"Nice catch," he said ironically.

"Wha'd you do that for?" Natalie grabbed the ping-pong ball off the carpet and bounced it back at Ray.

He grinned and easily snatched it out of the air. "You asked me for

ideas, didn't you? I got one. Su-per sim-ple solution." He bounced the ping-pong ball back to her.

This time, she was ready to catch it. "Wow. You alliterate."

"That's right. Pretty poetic, huh? I got super-secret skills."

She smiled. "You gonna bounce your ideas to me, is that the game?"

"Yeah, and you bounce yours back."

Natalie shook her head. "That's super silly." Then, seized by a competitive urge, she grinned and bounced the ball hard off the table.

Ray reacted quick. He caught it just before it struck his knee. "Ooo, a wicked serve!" He shifted eagerly to the edge of his seat. "Okay, here's my idea to fix the gaps. For the Goth girl and the Hookup dude at the bar—I do voiceovers." He bounced the ball to Natalie.

She caught it and examined the red eyeball stamped on it. "Voiceovers? And say what? You gonna analyze 'em like Damian?" She flicked her eyes up at the ceiling. "I don't think so." With a shake of her head, she bounced the ping-pong ball back to him.

When Ray caught it, he pressed it against his eyelid as if it were his glass eye. He leaned over the coffee table and pretended to examine Natalie through the ping-pong ball's red pupil. "Me thinks the lassie did not like the bilge-sucker's idea to analyze Woodhouse."

Natalie snickered at his pirate talk. "Not really," she said truthfully.

"Nay?"

"Nay! Her poems are interesting as they are. An analysis of them wouldn't add much."

Ray made the ping-pong eye roll about in its socket. "Me thinks the lassie doesn't believe that horse hoof prints are art. What do ye say?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean the art show, Hoofscapes." Natalie swept her hair away from her eyes. "Well, if it is art, it isn't very exciting. Look, do you have any more ideas?" she said impatiently.

Ray pretended to pluck out his eye; he gasped in simulated pain.

Natalie couldn't help but laugh at such theatrics.

Ray stood and began to pace. Using the back of his hands like ping-pong paddles, he batted the ball back and forth. After a minute, he announced grandly, "I got another idea."

Natalie raised a brow. "I hope so, 'cause you're down 15-love."

Ray's jaw dropped in mock outrage. "What? Why am I the loser? You didn't suggest a winning idea."

Natalie shrugged. "You invented the game. I invented the rules."

Ray smirked and tossed the ball to her. “Okay. This one’s a winner. Guaranteed. Ever see one of those adventure flicks from the ‘80s? Like Ghostbusters or Karate Kid?”

“I’ve seen Back to the Future.”

“Good. So, you’ve seen how they accelerate time with a quick montage, like showing the hero doing a bunch of stuff. Like in Karate Kid, they show a whole karate tournament in two minutes. The dude Daniel punches one challenger and wins. Cut to Daniel kicking another opponent. Cut to a third match, quick block and counter—” Ray acted out the scene with his own karate kicks.

Natalie was highly entertained. “Where are you going with this?”

“Well, they use music for the tournament sequence—Joe Esposito’s You’re the Best. The song describes Daniel’s personal journey and gets the audience pumped for his final fight against his archnemesis.” Ray stood on one leg, mimicking Daniel’s famous crane stance from the film. “So, all we need to do is bust out some awesome rock anthem.” He shifted on his legs and pulled off a mega-kick. “Boom!”

Natalie rolled the ping-pong ball on the arm of the sofa. “Ra-ay, we didn’t film some—oh, some battle.” As she said this, she suddenly thought of Angela jabbing the shotgun mike at her.

“Well, it doesn’t have to be rock. How ‘bout some R&B?”

Natalie pressed down on the ball with the palm of her hand. “No.”

“What’s wrong with this idea?” Ray sounded disappointed.

“For starters, we don’t need to compress time so much in our film. What climax are we rushing towards? That technique works in action movies because the characters are straightforward. Good guy fights bad guy. Our film’s not like that. Who’s our hero? Who’s the villain?”

“That older couple were arguing,” Ray said.

“Only at first. And what about the Goth girl and Hookup? Your clips show how they all reacted to the poetry. When you interviewed them, they gave you one story—” she picked up the ball and rotated the blank side toward Ray “—then during the show, their stories changed.” She turned the red eye toward him. “All three reveal some truth about themselves. This moment of revelation is what unifies all the action in our film.” Briefly, thinking of her own behavior during the show, she turned the eye toward herself. With a deep sigh she said, “So, however we fix the sound gaps, we should draw attention to the disjunction between what people said before the performance and

how they acted later.”

Ray doffed his cap and bowed exaggeratedly. “Awesome idea. Definitely a three-pointer from downtown.” He flipped his hat upside down in his hands and held it before him like a basket.

Natalie readied to shoot the ping-pong ball but held back. “You’ve changed the game. Do I lose if I miss?” she asked.

“You make the rules.”

She smiled and slung the ball at him. It banked off his shoulder. Ray deftly adjusted the position of the hat to catch the ball as it fell.

“You weren’t gonna miss,” he said with a sly grin.

Natalie blushed. Two impressions struck her simultaneously: that Ray was flirting with her, and that she liked the way he looked without his hat hiding his eyes. Flustered, she looked down at her hands, wishing she still had the ping-pong ball to distract her. Quickly, she tried to invent an alternative distraction: “Er—um—where did you get that hat? It’s the Pittsburgh Pirates, isn’t it? I’ve never seen one like it.”

Ray gently traced his finger around the logo—a parrot’s face. “Yeah, it’s Pittsburgh Pirates. Not the real logo, though. The real one is a yellow letter P. This is one of those cheap, generic hats. But I like it. I won it! Picked the prize out myself.”

“How did you win it?” Natalie asked. She glanced up at Ray. He was looking at his hat and not at her, which left her free to study his face.

“I beat a pitching game. Played it all the time. It was at an amusement park near Pittsburgh called Kennywood. I went there every summer when I was a kid. In the game, you gotta throw a baseball three times and guess your speed right on the third try. A speed gun measures it and stuff. If you guess right, you win a hat—all the prizes are hats. A lot of guys don’t try to win. They just wanna see how fast they can throw. But I learned the trick to guessing right.”

“So, you must’ve won lots of hats.”

“No. Just this one. This is the one I wanted.” He put the hat back on. “One summer—I was fifteen—I was determined to win. Practiced my throwing motion. I played baseball. I could control my speed. The key for me was not to throw too hard. I always aimed for thirty-five miles per hour. You gotta throw the ball against a tarp. There’s, like, a catcher painted on it. You aim for his mitt. My first two throws, I always nailed it exactly. But my guess on my final pitch was always off. I’d guess thirty-five but throw it thirty-three, even thirty-eight.” As Ray

spoke, he pantomimed his pitching motion with the ping-pong ball.

“Was the speed gun rigged?” Natalie asked.

“No, not the gun,” Ray said. “The baseballs. The third one they gave you was always a little bit lighter or heavier. Easy to overlook. But they sound different when they hit the tarp. And that’s how I figured it out.” Ray wound up and threw the ping-pong ball against a couch cushion. “Thwap! Man, hear that fastball snap! Ha-ha—I made a rhyme.”

Natalie laughed and retrieved the ball. It hadn’t made a sound at all.

“Thwap is the sound a real baseball makes,” Ray said. “A heavier one sounds sharper. A lighter one sounds muted, more of a thud than a thwap. The weight difference changes the speed. Once I realized the sound of the third baseball never matched the sound of my first two throws, that’s when I beat the game. When I won my hat, I had a heavier baseball. I guessed thirty-three.” Ray turned his hat backwards on his head and dropped into a crouch like a catcher. “Buzz that strike in here. Throw me a curve.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. Nevertheless, she readied herself to pitch the ping-pong ball. “You can’t keep changing the game,” she complained. Ray didn’t seem to hear her; he was intent on her pitch. As Natalie stood looking down at him, she suddenly felt how remarkable it was to see the top of his head. She was so short. Everyone always looked down at her. She always had to look up.

“C’mon, it’s the bottom of the ninth,” Ray encouraged her. “World Series, game seven. Two outs, two strikes. One more, we win!”

Natalie made no move to pitch. She just stood there contemplating Ray as though she were examining him through Willy’s glass eye. This funny guy crouched down inviting her to toss him a ping-pong ball was nothing like the summer boy she’d assumed him to be. He was smart, creative. He had great ideas. Once he got going, he had plenty to say. *Is Damian right about Ray?* She wasn’t sure anymore.

“What’s the matter?” Ray asked. “Don’t you wanna win the game?”

“I—I’ve changed my mind.” Natalie couldn’t believe what she was saying, but a new thought had occurred to her. “I like your ideas.”

“Yeah? Which one?”

“Both! I think I know how to fix the gaps in the film.” She tossed him the ping-pong ball, then beckoned him to follow her as she rushed out of the Student Lounge.

Back at the Production Center, Natalie tapped a few buttons on the

computer keyboard. Her audio recording of Heights and Woodhouse began to play. “You suggested a voiceover or a song,” she said to Ray as he sat down next to her. “Let’s do the equivalent—except use poetry. Heights or Woodhouse can speak over those scenes of Hookup and Goth girl. I recorded plenty of good audio that we’re not using.”

Ray’s eyes widened; he was thinking through her idea. “So, we combine my footage of the audience with your audio of the poets.”

“Exactly. We could work it a couple ways. Like, we could pick some poetic lines that describe literally what Hookup or Goth girl are doing visually. Like, when you threw the ping-pong ball at the couch, you said in voiceover—thwap! hear that fastball snap! It’d be just like that. Or we could make the audio ironically comment on what the audience is seeing, totally undercutting the visuals. Either way, my audio can reveal the truth of what you saw through the camera.”

Ray jumped out of his chair in excitement. “You’re the Best!” He swung his leg in a karate kick. “We can do it like the song in the film. It reveals the truth about Daniel—like, it’s a total summary of the scene.”

Natalie snickered at his karate moves. “Maybe our next film should be action-adventure,” she said without thinking. Her face instantly went crimson. How could she have presumed that Ray would want to work with her on another project? With amazement, she felt a pang of sadness over the likelihood that this story would be their last. Quickly, she turned up the volume to the speakers in hopes that Ray hadn’t heard her remark. Or if he had, to discourage his reply.

“. . . you caught me in a love song,” Woodhouse was saying mournfully, “chorus was your bridge to a soul in need of singing, but your heart was off a beat.”

“Hey, rewind that,” Ray said. “I—I thought of something.”

“Oh?” Natalie asked uneasily. She hoped the “something” Ray had thought to say wasn’t about her.

Ray cleared his throat. “Well, it just occurred to me . . .” He fidgeted and pulled the bill of his hat down to shield his eyes. “Promise you won’t say this is stupid.”

“Um. Okay. I promise.” Natalie held her breath.

Ray exhaled sharply. “So, we need audio for the part where Hookup leaves the show, right? Um, couldn’t those lines we just heard work? ‘Cause when Angela and I interviewed him, I kinda caught him trying to pick her up—like, right in front of me. He was singing her a song,

trying to build a bridge to her. But her heart was off a beat—like, she didn't quite sing along, and so he struck out with her and left early."

Natalie breathed out in relief. "Actually, that's not half bad," she said matter-of-factly. "I'll make a note of it. Why don't we keep a list of possibilities? Then we can choose the ones we like best."

Ray sat back down. "Okay. So, any weird or stupid idea is fine?"

"The weirder the better," Natalie said. "This'll be fun!" She immediately regretted her words. Because she'd said that to Ray once before. And that time, it hadn't turned out to be fun.

An hour later, they consulted their list of usable poetic lines.

"For Goth girl in the back of the room, I like this section from Behind the Cocktail," Natalie said. "It undermines her blasé attitude about poetry from the interview." She cued up Woodhouse's recitation: "Pay no attention to the woman behind the cocktail. Ignore the tears in her sad green eyes. She has just taken a pill and claims she feels nothing. Her jokes are so deadpan. Do not be deceived."

Ray rubbed his chin. "Yeah, it's good. But I like that one where Heights says—You tell me you'll stay. Oh, sweet merciful God, she will stay, she will stay, she will stay."

Natalie waited for Ray to go on. But he didn't say anything else.

She chewed her bottom lip. "Um, so, why do you like that one for this scene?" she asked.

Ray shrugged. His hat shaded his eyes. "Just do."

There was an awkward silence.

All at once, Natalie realized that the other students in the Production Center had already left for the night, and she and Ray were alone. It was well after midnight. She glanced at him but couldn't see his face clearly beneath his hat. Not knowing what to say, she consulted her notes and tapped her pen on the table.

"I don't think either one is enough on its own," Ray said.

Natalie considered this. "What if we . . . stitched the two together? Like, blended the voices?"

Ray slowly nodded his head. "A fine plan, Chief Engineer," he said in a poorly mimicked British accent. "Make it so."

Natalie looked up from her notes.

"This is Captain Jean-Ray Cozart of the U.S.S. Movie-Enterprise," Ray went on in the same vein. "Captain's log, October 23, wee morning hours. Our film's been snagged by a troublesome fluctuation of the

sound-time continuum. Chief Engineer Ashbrook has just devised an ingenious plan to free us and save the known universe.”

Natalie guffawed. “This accent is much worse than your pirate one.”
“Indeed. But it’s just as fun!”

Natalie smiled at his rhyme. She stitched the two bites together. “I think we should call this—done.” They played the audio with the video. Her edit made it sound like Heights and Woodhouse were talking with each other about the Goth girl hiding in the back of the room.

“Awesome. To the next galactic crisis,” Ray said. “Warp speed ten.”
“Pretty good. A near rhyme.” She gave Ray a quick smile.

With a look of satisfaction, he leaned back in his chair and rested his head in his hands.

“Oh, no, wait, I forgot—we still have one more scene to fix,” Natalie said with a groan. “Hookup texting.”

“Cue that poem *The Cycle* again,” Ray said. “I got an idea.”

“Can’t we finish it tomorrow?” Natalie whined. “It’s so late. I—I get giddy after midnight.”

Ray cocked an eyebrow. “Is that a promise?”

“What? No, that’s not what I meant.”

“We just need a couple lines.”

Natalie checked her notes again. “How about that passage from *This Memory of Wool, Cardboard, and Thread*?”

“I don’t remember that one.”

“I’ll cue it up quick.”

The poem described a man losing his hat. They heard Heights slowly say, “I sweep my arm up and—this bird must find its own flight. This wool, cardboard, and thread must find their own places to rest.”

“What’s the connection?” Ray asked.

“Hookup is like the bird who finds his own flight. He leaves the reading,” Natalie explained.

Ray shook his head. “No, that line makes him a sympathetic figure, but he’s not. He comes on to Angela during our interview. Look at how bored he is during the performance. He smirks when he reads his texts messages. Plus, I don’t get that poem. Dude throws away his baseball cap.” Ray reached for his own hat as if to check that he still wore it. “Heights likes to throw away hats. But a guy would never do that—especially if the hat means something to him.”

“Well, *The Cycle* isn’t gonna help us.”

“It might. Cue the part about the lights being low, mood is right . . .”

With a visible frown, Natalie cued the poem. It was distinct from all the others; it was the only poem Heights and Woodhouse had sung:

Woodhouse: (moodily) Out on my own, no cash, no car, just the flow. Friends call, let’s hit the beach. Sun no fun, no, can’t take a trip, drip, drip, drip.

Heights: (strumming a toy guitar) Don’t like it, don’t like it, no, no, no! Can’t stop it, can’t stop it, oh, oh, oh!

Woodhouse: Got a hot date, it’s about time. One more day, woulda been fine. Lights are low, mood is right. Sorry, babe, can’t tonight.

Heights: (with feeling) Don’t like it, don’t like it, no, no, no! Can’t stop it, can’t stop it, oh, oh, oh!

Woodhouse: (with ire) Mother phones, she got big plans, set me up with just the right man. He’s a doctor of gynecology, but he can’t fix me ‘tween the knees.

Woodhouse and Heights together: Can’t stop me now, I’m in the flow. Wait next week, I’ll be ready to go. Wish I could come, but I’m on the run—

Natalie intentionally stopped the song before it was over.

“C’mon, let it run,” Ray said. “I wanna hear it to the end.”

Natalie snorted. “Oh, what for? They just repeat the refrain.” Nevertheless, she resumed the track:

Woodhouse: Don’t like it, don’t like it, no, no, no! Can’t stop it, can’t stop it, oh, oh, oh!

Heights: (wearily) Not again, not again.

Ray laughed and urged Natalie to replay the song. “Man, that’s so on the money. It’s like Woodhouse is texting Hookup herself. She wants to dump him, and he replies—don’t like it, no, no, no. Don’t you think that’s funny? Like, the refrain is him whining and stuff about getting rejected. What a total loser!”

Natalie cringed; she leaned away from Ray and clasped her hands between her knees. “Oh, I dunno,” she said noncommittally.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Do I really have to explain?” she said evasively.

“Explain what? It’s self-explanatory. I mean, to me, it is. Trust me,” Ray went on confidently, “poem describes it perfectly.”

“Describes . . . what?”

“The cycle! Girl pretends to be into you, then changes her mind for whatever mysterious reason and says she just wants to be friends.” Ray snorted sarcastically. “But then, guess what? She starts liking you again, and then you’re back with her. It’s like, y’know, a merry-go-round.”

Natalie pursed her lips tightly.

Ray squirmed in his chair, a little less confident. “Y’know, it’s an emotional cycle . . . kinda thing.” He twirled his finger in a circle.

Natalie could no longer suppress her laughter.

“What?” Ray crossed his arms in sudden defensiveness.

“That’s not what The Cycle is,” Natalie said. “I—I dunno how to explain it to you with any decorum . . .”

“Use a British accent.”

“No, that’ll make it worse.” Nonetheless, mustering her best princess impression, she said, “Oh, very well. If you must know, your interpretation is rubbish. The poem describes a woman’s period.”

Ray’s jaw hung slack in astonishment.

Seeing his face, Natalie melted into giggles; she’d never felt so silly.

“DUDE! Women write about that stuff?”

“Evidently,” Natalie said, trying to restrain herself. “She complains in every stanza that her period is getting in the way of her fun.”

Ray stared into space. “I thought she was calling her ex-boyfriend a drip. I didn’t think she was—” he could not go on.

Natalie wiped tears of laughter from her eyes.

Ray started to join in the joke. “So, the gynecologist—he—he—”

“What did you think that part meant?”

“Well, he, can’t fix her between the knees, right? So, I thought that meant he was, like, y’know—bad in bed.”

“Omigod!” Natalie doubled over in laughter. “I can’t believe what you just said.”

Ray jumped up and cued the song to replay. Natalie protested that her side ached. Ray listened with wide eyes. When he heard the puns on “come” and “run” at the bridge, he fell out of his chair laughing.

They could not finish the film with any seriousness. They agreed to

use the second stanza of *The Cycle* for the scene with Hookup, only because it'd made them laugh, which was as good a reason as any. "It'll be our private joke," Ray said. For the final scene, they cut to the anniversary couple—formerly fighting but now holding hands. The image of the pair faded into black as the sound of Heights and Woodhouse's laughter faded into silence.

But after timing the film one last time, they were disappointed to discover that it was three minutes too short to meet the requirements of the assignment. Bleary with sleepiness, they agreed to meet the next afternoon to figure out what to add.

Despite this obstacle, Natalie left the Production Center feeling dizzy with happiness. Regrets she'd felt earlier in the day were like all of Angela's sound bites—worthless and deleted. No need to be revisited. This time, she hadn't run. She'd been up to the challenge. She'd stayed.

Ray was more than impressed with her.

And they'd had so much fun.

I fixed everything.

When her head hit her pillow, she lay awake thinking about Ray. Drifting at the shore of sleep, she envisioned herself at the beach as a child. She'd always liked to jump into the waves, to be lifted and carried, to feel bigger. For hours she'd play alone with the waves, until she forgot how small she was and thought only of the water, the sun, and the thrilling sensation of weightlessness.

She fell asleep dreaming of blue waves and green horizons, and feeling quite intoxicated, like she'd just tasted a potent liquor.

The Parrot Takes Flight

*Film Production Center
NYU School of the Arts
Wednesday, October 23*

Ray woke up thinking about Natalie. Nothing specific. It was a general pleasantness, a curiosity to know if she too was awake. He realized he was looking forward to seeing her later that afternoon. This desire surprised him, since twice before, he'd gone out of his way to avoid her.

But he didn't want to avoid her anymore.

Something had changed.

He got out of bed feeling in a bit of a stupor and stumbled through his morning routines. He almost felt like he had a hangover, but he didn't remember drinking. Every now and then he found himself grinning at the memory of Natalie's laughter. She was so funny when she'd explained The Cycle to him. Given his first impression of her as a serious girl, he'd not expected to have so much fun with her. There was something about her laughter that made him want to hear more of it. Some girls—like Angela—giggled all the time. After a while, hearing it wasn't special. But when Natalie laughed, it was like being given a gift.

Ray put on his Pirates hat and stood before his mirror. He'd never told Angela the story about how he'd won his favorite hat. But then, she'd never been curious to know. He was surprised that he'd wanted to tell that story to Natalie. But he'd believed that she was sincerely interested. Talking to her came much more naturally than he'd expected. It was just like their work on the film—not intimidating at all.

He was glad that she'd decided to stay.

It occurred to him that for the full eight hours he'd been at the Production Center with Natalie, he'd not once missed Angela.

Thus, he was surprised to suddenly get a call from her.

"Like, Ray, where are you?" Angela whined. "You were supposed to meet me at the gym this morning."

“Oh. I was?” He had sincerely forgotten.

“Like, yeah. It’s Wednesday. We always meet on Wednesdays.”

“Is it? I must’ve lost track. I mean, I was up all night with Natalie—”

“What? Natalie?”

“Yeah, we were working on the film. You and Damian left, so—”

“Is that why you never texted me back?”

“Well, I didn’t check my phone. We were really into it—”

“Into it?” Angela sounded aghast.

“That’s not what I meant.” Ray became flustered. “I mean, like, we just hit a groove, er, um, like, the creative energy was flowing between us, y’know what I mean?” As he spoke, he realized with a touch of regret that Angela didn’t know what he meant. He’d hoped to connect with her artistically, but it just hadn’t happened. He didn’t feel creative with her. “So, uh, I thought it was best to go with it, get the film done since the assignment is due tomorrow,” he added, trying—and failing—to suddenly sound indifferent about Natalie. He launched into a technical explanation of the montage he and Natalie had devised.

There was a pause. “I see. Who knew Natalie was so . . . interesting. That’s just great you got it done so quick.” Angela’s tone was aggressively insincere, like when someone says they’re sorry, but they aren’t.

Ray detected her displeasure and added quickly, “Oh, well, it’s not totally done. We didn’t get it quite right. It’s short three minutes—”

“Oh, really?” Angela suddenly perked up. “Tell you what—I want to help. Really help! I’m, ah, gonna make some notes. Got an idea you’ll love. It’s super easy. Meet me at the Production Center in an hour.”

As Ray prepared to leave to meet Angela, his gut warned him that he ought to call Natalie and tell her about this strange turn. But a different instinct, one much more primal, urged him to entertain Angela’s whim. He couldn’t help but be curious. No harm would come from letting Angela watch the film and make suggestions. After all, it was a group project. And hanging out with Angela would be fun, as it always was. He and Natalie could do the serious work later. But maybe Angela really did have a good idea. He hoped so. It’d be the ideal scenario—a hot body with hot ideas. He decided he should give that body a chance.

Angela’s body did not disappoint. She wore a Halloween costume: a satiny black dress with a plunging neckline, thigh-high boots, and a witch’s hat. She’d also brought with her a crystal ball. “I told you I like to accessorize,” she explained to a befuddled Ray. “This’ll fix that little

problem—trust me.” All Ray had to do—according to her plan—was recite a poem with her in imitation of the poetic fortune-telling performed by Heights and Woodhouse. Together, the two of them would create a new finale, one “way better” than the original. “Like, I literally composed the poem myself. I even looked up rhymes on the internet.”

Ray’s gut warned him to reject this idea. Natalie, he was sure, would not like it. But dressed as a witch, Angela was just so smoking hot. He couldn’t stop staring. Her breasts persuaded him. Plus, gazing at her, he felt his mind turn mushy. He couldn’t conceive even one counter-scheme. Angela wasn’t interested that he should. A fear arose in him that he and Natalie might get stuck for an idea to fix the film. Maybe Angela’s intervention was necessary. *Good to have a backup plan.*

This in mind, Ray set about rearranging the Student Lounge into a makeshift version of the stage at the KGB Bar. Angela took the elevator down to the Theater Department to borrow a curtain from the Props Room. They draped it over a bookcase and set a lounge chair in front. Angela arranged herself on it, and Ray slid the coffee table before her, the same table he’d used to bounce the ping-pong ball to Natalie. Angela placed the crystal ball on it. “This is so exciting! It’s just the way it should’ve been, don’t ya think?” Eyes shining, she gazed up at Ray.

Ray positioned a microphone on the table, then aimed his camera at Angela and zoomed in on her arms undulating over the crystal ball. The effect was nothing like his close-up of the poets holding hands. He frowned, disliking what he saw through the lens. He couldn’t have said why. He got down on one knee to try a different angle, just like he’d done on stage at the poetry reading.

Angela leaned over the microphone for a sound check. “This is a poem you’ll never forget,” she spoke into it breathlessly.

“How does the poem go?” Ray asked.

Angela continued to lean over the microphone. She was so close, her lips almost grazed it. “I can’t tell you. We have to say it together.”

“What for?”

“Because it’s our fortune. Me and you.” She smiled wickedly.

Ray caught her smile with the camera. A sudden nervous tension made his gut clench. He tried to backtrack a bit. “Um, maybe you should just recite it by yourself.”

“No, it won’t work that way,” Angela said.

“Why, is it a spell?” Ray joked, but he felt a little uneasy.

Angela didn’t immediately reply. She seemed to be enjoying a private joke. “If we say it together, it will fix the little problem, that’s all. It’s the way it’s meant to be. Trust me.” She fluttered her lashes.

“But I can’t film and recite it at the same time.”

“Yes, you can. Just put the camera on a tripod.”

“But that’s not my style. I like to move the camera around.”

“Look, this is *my* idea,” Angela snapped. “That means we’re gonna do it *my* way. And *my* way is for you to recite the poem with me.” Angela’s eyes were darkly fierce. “You may be Mr. Director, but I’m Ms. Producer. Don’t forget that.” She smiled again—that wicked smile.

Ray gulped. He’d never seen Angela angry. “I thought you were the star,” he said, trying to appease. “Shouldn’t the camera focus on you?”

Angela softened slightly. “That’s true. I should always be the focus.” Just then, her eyes widened. She looked past Ray toward the door of the lounge. Her face contorted with gleeful cruelty. She laid her hands on the crystal ball and chanted loudly: “Crystal ball, crystal ball, I’m the fairest one of all. Tell me how my destiny falls!”

Ray didn’t understand these sudden theatrics and had no time to react. “Wait, you’re gonna have to start over,” he told her. “I wasn’t ready with the camera.”

“What . . . the hell?”

Ray recognized that voice. *It’s Nat. What’s she doing here so early?* Quickly, he got up off his knee. When he turned to look at her, he realized how stupid he’d been not to follow his gut and tell her about Angela’s idea. Her face looked so stricken. The effect was even more heightened because the last time he’d seen her, she’d looked so happy.

“Cut, Mr. Director,” Angela said with an eye roll. “We’ve been interrupted.”

“What am I interrupting . . . exactly?”

Before Ray could speak, Angela exclaimed, “Our grand finale!” She arched her back and threw up her hands. “Isn’t that so, Mr. Director?”

Ray swallowed hard. He didn’t want to meet Natalie’s eyes, so he yanked down on the bill of his hat. “It’s no big deal,” he started to say.

But Angela vigorously interrupted. “Ray told me our film is short three whole minutes. So, I just offered to help. And Ray was so glad. I mean, we got to talking and stuff and just decided that adding a finale would be the best way to fix it. Like, I love the montage you guys put

together—and the theme of change and all that. I can so totally relate. And we just thought, like, what could be better than changing the finale from what it was?” She smirked. “You didn’t wanna be part of it—remember? Heights and Woodhouse asked you, and you said no. So, Ray and me—we’re fixing that. We’re making our own finale—with me instead of you. I get to replace you. And that’s the best change of all.”

Natalie looked perplexingly at Ray. “Replace me?”

Angela picked up a piece of paper and waved it at Ray. “Shall we get back to it, Mr. Director? We were about to recite a poem together. As I recall, you were so eager.”

“Whoa—wait just a minute,” Ray said to Angela. He set the camera down on the coffee table. “No one is getting replaced.”

Angela pouted; she pressed her shoulders back into the chair. “Yes, she is. What do you think all this is about, silly?” she said to Ray. “It’s about putting the right girl in the spotlight.” She huffed. “I mean, what were those freaking poets thinking? Like, I was standing there right next to stage too. They could’ve asked *me* to join the show. I dunno why *she* gets to be asked and *I* don’t.” She gestured at Natalie. “Especially when I would’ve said yes. Like, I’m not stupid.”

“But that isn’t how you explained your idea to me,” Ray said to her.

“What difference does it make?” Angela snapped back. “You liked it, didn’t you? It should’ve been me and you getting *our* fortune read. So, we’re fixing that at the same time we fix our film project. Like they say, fortune favors the bold.” Angela smirked at Natalie and crossed her arms over her breasts as if that settled the argument.

Ray sighed heavily. “Look, this wasn’t my idea,” he said to Natalie. “Believe me. None of this was my idea.”

Natalie stood with her hands on her hips, too angry to speak. Her eyes darted from Angela to Ray and back.

Just then, they all heard a voice in the doorway.

“Oh, hey—there you are. I was looking—” Damian entered the lounge. When he spied Angela in her costume, he sucked in his breath.

Seeing Damian, Natalie’s face changed. The anger was still there. But it was supplemented by a tinge of guilt. She did not look at Ray.

Ray observed this. “What are you doing here?” he asked Damian.

“Fixing the film,” Damian said. “What are you doing?”

“Fixing the film,” Angela mimed.

“But this wasn’t the plan. What’s going on?” Damian asked Natalie.

Then quickly to Ray: “Look, Natalie told me the film was short three minutes, so we decided to film me doing analyses of several poems. I mean, we thought your montage method was ultimately too limiting. It just made it difficult to use all our footage. And your theme of change? Well, it’s a bit naïve. Natalie agrees we should rethink it, add some complexity, replace some of the scenes.”

Ray looked wide-eyed at Natalie. “Replace the scenes?”

Natalie appeared distressed. Her eyes darted from Ray to Damian and back. “Well, Damian is exaggerating about—”

Damian cut her off. “No, I’m not. You told me you were worried you’d run out of ideas. And Cozart with his Karate Kid mash-up didn’t have a solution either. You wanted a fresh, mature perspective—”

Natalie shook her head at Damian. “But I didn’t say it like that. And analyzing the poems was your idea, not mine—”

“But you agreed to it, and I’ve got more than enough material to fill three minutes.” He held up a thick set of notecards. “You’ll have to delete something to add me in next to Woodhouse—”

“No, nothing is getting replaced,” Natalie said to Damian. “I don’t wanna take anything out. That wasn’t how you explained it to me.”

“So, you wanna go with Parrot Head over there?” Damian gestured at Ray’s hat. “Copy some scene from the Wizard of Oz?” He waved at Angela’s witch costume dismissively.

“It isn’t the Wizard of Oz,” Angela cut in. “I’m a fortune-teller, duh! This is our grand poetic finale, and you’re ruining it.”

“I’m ruining it? I’m doing my part to save the project.”

“No, I’m saving it,” Angela countered.

“Neither of you are saving it,” Natalie said heatedly. “Ray and I did most of the work.”

“Dude, what’s wrong with my hat?” Ray asked Damian angrily.

Damian smirked. “It’s the perfect emblem for you. A parrot. No original ideas whatsoever. All you can do is imitate. Don’t have the maturity or guts to think on your own.”

Ray’s jaw tightened; he was too furious to speak.

Damian went on: “What you plan to do? Dress Natalie up as Dorothy? Maybe I get to be the Scarecrow, huh?”

“No, you’re the Tin Man,” Angela said. “And Natalie’s not Dorothy. She’s a Munchkin.”

The argument would’ve further degenerated except several of their

classmates trying to work in the Film Production Center poked their heads into the Student Lounge and told them to shut up.

Damian and Angela briefly consulted.

Natalie and Ray retreated to opposite sides of the room.

Ray was so mad. He could see how it'd gone down. Now he knew the truth. He'd been foolish to believe he and Natalie had shared a creative vision. She'd only humored him, used him to get the assignment done, but she didn't think much of his ideas and had run to Damian to fix the film as soon as she could. Her laughter with him over *The Cycle* he saw in a much different light. No doubt, she'd been laughing at him. Had probably told the whole story to Damian. *She thinks I'm stupid but is such a coward, she won't tell me. She let Damian do it for her.*

"We've reached a compromise," Damian announced to Ray and Natalie. "Angie will read Woodhouse's poem *Sabotage*, and I will offer an analysis afterwards. How does that sound?"

"Whatever," Ray said. "Let's just freaking get it done."

Damian and Angela swapped the lounge chair for a loveseat. They retained the curtain, the crystal ball, and the coffee table. Angela read *Sabotage* as if she were observing the events of the poem in the crystal. Natalie handled the microphone while Ray filmed; neither spoke.

". . . Finally, one can see how smoothly Woodhouse utilizes personal complaints early in her dramatic monologue to establish the groundwork for the poem's ultimate observation on the nature of personal psychology. Woodhouse calls her car a piece of crap and an old hand-me-down from her brother. She mentions that the radio is unreliable. She misses an exam in her psychology class because the car's transmission fails, almost leading to an accident on the highway. Woodhouse, at the end, mentions that she is learning so much about Freud's concept of the death drive—that is, essentially, the impulse we have that enables our own sabotage. She implicitly compares the death drive to her defunct car. Why? First, the car is bequeathed to her from her family, and as any Freudian knows, all our psychological hang-ups derive from our family relations. However, the deepest connection is her commitment *to the car itself*. She knows it's terrible, yet she keeps driving it. She has money saved to buy another, but she insists on a Jeep—rather expensive. That's her excuse to keep the old junker she knows will break down, and thus, ensure her academic failure. She has learned about the death drive, yet she remains within its grip. The les-

son here is that no matter what anyone learns to improve themselves, *no one can ever change*. This is the summation of the meaning of Heights and Woodhouse's work. What we—"

"Cut!" Ray ordered. He motioned for Natalie to turn off the mike.

"But I'm not finished," Damian complained.

"Seriously, dude, you've talked for over six minutes. We'll have to edit it down as it is."

The four of them went to the Production Center and took their positions before the computers as they'd done the previous day, with Angela and Damian sitting in the middle. Damian argued that his analysis of Sabotage was perfect as it was and refused to edit it. Together with Angela's recitation of the poem, their new footage was a total of eight minutes and thirty-two seconds.

"Guess we'll have to cut something," Damian said. With slapdash imprecision, he sliced off the last five and a half minutes of Ray and Natalie's montage, including the scenes of Hookup leaving the show, the Goth bartender arriving, and the anniversary couple holding hands. Which meant that Damian and Angela's part in the film was now over half of the total fifteen minutes.

They were both quite pleased by this.

"Maybe the transition could be smoother," Damian admitted, "but it doesn't matter. It's not like we're gonna win an Oscar. It's just a class assignment. I hear Professor Travers is an easy grader."

Ray slumped silently in his chair.

Natalie rested her elbows on the table and massaged her forehead.

"You think my analysis sounds intellectual?" Damian prodded her as he stood to leave.

"Hmm? Oh. Sure."

"Ooo, the crystal ball was just the right touch," Angela cooed to Ray. "Don't you think I look a-maa-zing on camera, Mr. Director?"

"Sure. Fantastic."

Angela planted a big kiss on Ray's cheek on her way out. She was still in costume, and several people whistled at her in the hallway.

And just like that, the film was finished.

All that remained between Ray and Natalie were two empty chairs.

The pair sat stone silent.

Damian had left the film running. Onscreen appeared Angela finishing her recitation of Sabotage: "Hope you'll give me another chance. It

wasn't my fault, and I'm not the kind of person who fails. Please, I need a chance." She simpered and winked at the camera.

Natalie pushed her chair back forcefully and stood. "Ugh, turn that off! You didn't need to ask her to get involved. I've never seen anything so ridiculous. How the hell could you think dressing her up as a witch would fit with our montage? She said you were replacing me!"

"I didn't ask her," Ray defended himself. He jabbed angrily at the computer keyboard to stop the film. "And what about you? Go behind my back to meet up with Mr. Analysis. Was that always your plan? Do the ol' switcheroo—his boring speech in, our clever montage out? You told me last night you didn't like his ideas. Guess that wasn't true. You certainly were quick enough to change your mind."

"No! There was no plan. I didn't lie. Whose idea was the freaking crystal ball? I bet you always meant to redo the fortune-telling finale to get Angela on stage. You could've just told me. You didn't have to go out of your way to—to stick it to me."

"I didn't! What are you talking about? I told you—that whole thing was her idea. Not mine. I thought you and me were gonna finish the final three minutes together."

"So did I!"

"Then what happened?"

The two of them glared at each other mutely.

With a groan, Natalie sank back down on her chair. "Oh, I dunno. Damian called me, wanted me to meet him to film his analyses. I told him we—" she gestured to indicate herself and Ray "—had already finished the film except it was short three minutes. Had some great ideas, and it just came together so well. He didn't seem happy to hear that, insisted on contributing. Guess I—" she ran her hand through her hair "—well, I did tell him I was worried about us coming up with another idea. But only because our montage is good the way it is. I didn't wanna tear any of it up to try to stretch it for another three minutes. And—and sometimes Damian does say smart things. I got curious, wanted to hear what he'd come up with. Thought maybe we'd put it at the end of the film. It felt like a smart idea, but . . ." she stared down at the floor.

Ray listened intently to this speech. "But . . . that's exactly what happened with me and Angela."

"You didn't wanna replace me?"

"No, why would I? You're good at this. But Angie . . . well, it's no

secret—she’s just not creative. And I wanna make great films. But when I told her the film was short three minutes, she said she had an idea for a new finale. Seemed like that might make things easier. Guess I didn’t trust—” Ray broke off. He took off his hat and ran the back of his hand across his forehead.

“No, I guess I didn’t either,” Natalie said quietly.

The pair were silent for a minute.

Ray examined his hat critically, then placed it back on his head. “So, you didn’t wanna replace our montage?”

Natalie looked up at him. “No! I liked what we created together.”

“So did I,” Ray said. He hit a button and resumed their film footage. Damian was in the midst of his six-minute analysis. “Guess that means we can get rid of this crap.”

Natalie’s face brightened. “Really? What we gonna add instead?”

“Dunno. Just gotta trust we’ll think of something.”

“Right.”

Ray quickly set about removing the eight minutes of Damian and Angela from the film and adding back in the sections Damian had cut out. Natalie got up and began to pace. That wasn’t like her. Ray was a bit distracted by it. In his periphery, he saw her stop every now and then and gaze at his head.

“Look, I just wanna say,” she suddenly blurted out, “that I think you have great ideas, and if anyone tells you otherwise, well, you shouldn’t believe ‘em, and—and, oh, I should’ve known it was Angie’s idea to redo the finale. She was the one trying to stick it to me. I know that wasn’t you. You couldn’t have known. I—I didn’t tell you.”

Ray stopped what he was doing and looked at her.

Natalie took a deep breath and went on. “Angie—she knew exactly how to get to me. She just had to point out that I ran from stage that night. I wish now that I hadn’t. I should’ve said yes. It would’ve been fun standing up there with you. But I dunno, I got scared. I didn’t wanna take a chance. Woodhouse asked me if I wanted to know the future. I guess I didn’t. I’m not good at improv, at trusting my gut. I—I need to think things through, have a plan. So, I lost out on the moment. Just like I lost your Merry Parrot. It was stupid. I feel stupid about it. I wish I could’ve done things differently.”

Ray rubbed his hat in contemplation of this speech. He looked down at the floor. Something Natalie had said connected with him, ex-

pressed exactly how he'd felt that night. He couldn't have put it into words until now. *I got scared. I didn't wanna take a chance.*

"Don't let Angie bug you. Her witch act was stupid," he said. "And you didn't really miss out. Just because I went up on stage . . . well, that didn't mean I felt great about it. Like, the trick they did with my cap was cool. But when Heights flung it away, I thought for sure I saw it disappear in the air over the audience. I thought I'd lost it forever. I panicked. I felt exposed or something, it's hard to explain. It was like I'd lost control of my future. Whatever was coming my way," he looked up at her, "I knew I wasn't ready for it."

Natalie smiled. "If you'd lost your hat, would that have been so bad? I think you look better without it."

Ray grinned—a lopsided boyish grin. "Really?"

"Yeah. Sometimes you use it to hide your face. You don't need to."

Ray adjusted the bill of his hat higher. With a British accent, he said, "Okay, Chief Engineer Nat, I'll make a note in my Captain's log. Er, you mind if I call you Nat? Natalie is, like, so formal or something."

Natalie wrinkled her nose. "People called me that all the time when I was a kid. I stopped liking having a shortened name. It's always Natalie now. Think I wanted to feel . . . more adult."

"I get that."

Natalie sat back down, and they consulted their notes from the previous day. But they discerned no obvious path forward for completing their project. Ray even pulled up the master file containing all their footage and audio from the performance. This time, he let it run up to the very end when he'd turned off his camera. Natalie cringed when she saw herself again sitting on the edge of the stage.

"Oh, maybe Damian's right," she said in frustration. "Our theme is naïve. Just look at me—things don't go as planned and I panic. How can I make a film about people changing? Maybe I don't even believe in it."

"Don't say that," Ray reacted strongly. "You want Damian to win? What he said about people being dead set on failure was depressing. He was happy to say it too, and that's what makes me so mad. I don't think Heights and Woodhouse would agree with him." He looked Natalie in the eyes. "Listen, if someone ever told you that you couldn't change, you shouldn't believe 'em, okay? I think you've changed."

"Oh, really? How?"

Ray tapped the bill of his cap, searching his mind for evidence to

prove his instincts about her. “Okay, how ‘bout this—you said you’re not good at improv. But remember when we played ping-pong? You went with the flow even though I kept changing the game. You played tennis, basketball, and baseball with me all in one night.”

“That’s so silly. That doesn’t count.” Natalie looked unconvinced.

“Okay, okay, how ‘bout this—you were gonna leave and not work with me on the film at first, and then you decided to stay,” Ray said.

Natalie pinched her brows, thinking.

Eagerly, Ray went on: “And—and you got up to watch me walk the plank at Willy’s, even though you weren’t gonna at first. When I was up on stage, I saw you standing in the back. You must’ve changed your mind at the last second. Maybe these are little things, I dunno, but they count. Like, people change just by letting down their guard for a moment and revealing their true personality. Y’know, like the Goth girl enjoying the poetry performance.”

Natalie looked a bit embarrassed. “I didn’t wanna be noticed.”

Ray cocked his head in curiosity. “Really? Why did you get up to watch me?”

Natalie bit her lower lip. “I’m not sure. Damian didn’t want me to. But I just had a feeling. I got up because—because—well, I believed you’d win the parrot.”

Ray’s eyes widened. “You did? You believed in me?”

Natalie smiled shyly. “Yeah. I guess I did.”

Ray grinned. He suddenly felt inspired. Natalie’s eyes—so green, so earnest as usual—were shining with a new, radiant energy, like when a shaded flower finds the summer sun. If he’d had a camera, he would’ve filmed her to remember her looking just like that.

A camera.

“I got an idea!” Ray exclaimed.

Quickly, he clicked through their audio file to find a particular poem. “Here, check this out.”

He turned up the volume. Heights’s voice sounded loud and clear: “Three years ago, my birthday party, you gave me this ballcap, your final gift to me. You tried to flick it onto my head, a silly cuckoo spinning into my face, into my ears—over and over—your giddy laughter. I wander into the field, reeds and rushes grown thick to the thighs. I sweep my arm up and—”

Ray cut Heights off with a sharp tap on the keyboard.

“That’s This Memory of Wool, Cardboard, and Thread. We cut that poem out,” Natalie said hesitantly, unsure what Ray was thinking. “You disliked it, remember?”

Ray smiled mischievously. “Well, maybe I’ve changed my mind. If you can change, so can I, right? Why should I let you have all the fun?”

Natalie raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Yeah? What’s your idea?”

“Well, you said you wished you’d gone up on stage at the show. You’d do it differently now if you could. All right, so let’s give you that chance. For our film’s final three minutes, we’ll put you on stage.”

Natalie gasped.

“Angie wanted to star in the finale, but let’s do the ol’ switcheroo,” Ray said. “I think you should be the star in our show.”

Natalie’s mouth gaped. “You wanna film me? Oh, I dunno . . .”

“You and me together, just like it was supposed to be. No costumes, no crystal ball. No goofy poem of destiny. We’ll do our own poetic recreation, in our style.” He glanced at his watch. “We gotta hurry—we’ll need some daylight. Get a microphone, and I’ll get a camera, okay?”

He jumped out of his chair.

Natalie protested. “But, Ra-ay, where are we goin’?”

“On an adventure!”

Once out on the street, Ray directed a taxi driver to take them to Central Park.

“What’s in Central Park?” Natalie wanted to know.

“The Harlem Meer. It’s a lake. I was there for a concert. It’s the perfect setting.”

“For what?”

“Our grand finale.”

On their way there, Natalie begged to know more about Ray’s plan.

“No way,” he said with a laugh. “This adventure is all about you doing something different. You’ll have to trust me.”

Natalie sulked. “Fine. Whatever. But I don’t like it.”

“Well, you can’t stop it.”

The two of them looked at each other and laughed.

“I’m so glad The Cycle is back in the film,” Natalie said.

“Me too.”

The Harlem Meer was tucked into the northern corner of the park. Ray selected a scenic spot where reeds and rushes emerged from the water’s edge. They set up the camera on a tripod to overlook the lake.

Beyond it, on the opposite shore, red and orange autumn leaves shown beautifully against a crisp blue sky.

“We’re all set. Hold the boom mike and stand in front of the camera,” Ray said to Natalie. “I gotta focus in.”

“What sound do you want me to record?” she asked.

“Nothing. It’s just a prop. Stand pretending like you’re using it.”

Natalie huffed. “Okay, but I feel really silly.”

Ray adjusted the lens to a wide angle. Natalie was wearing a plain cream sweater. But the autumn colors all around her made it a brilliant focal point. Her brunette hair was crowned by a bright reflection off the water. When Ray saw her through the camera, for a second he held his breath. He’d always thought of her as an autumn girl as if that were a strike against her. But maybe it wasn’t.

“Will you tell me what we’re doing already?” Natalie pleaded.

“I will in a minute. Ready? One, twooo—”

“Ra-ay, I don’t know what’s going on!” Natalie squealed.

“—three, action!” Ray set the camera to auto record and quickly stepped in front of it with Natalie.

Natalie stood nervously, trying to hold the boom mike still.

Ray said gently. “Okay. This is our moment. Remember that night, we were up at the stage, they asked us to be part of the show. Woodhouse said to you—Drop that microphone, give your arms a rest. I have a request to make of you.”

Natalie’s face turned quizzical, but then she nodded and lowered the mike to the ground.

Ray grinned. He took off his hat. “Here,” he said, offering it to her. “Go ahead. Take it. It’s not quite the Merry Parrot, but it’s what I got.”

For a second, Natalie hesitated. When she reached to take the hat, briefly their fingers touched.

“So, that night, they played a game with my cap,” Ray said. “We can do that too. Just like in the poem *This Memory of Wool, Cardboard, and Thread*. I’ll stand here, and you try to toss the cap onto my head.”

Natalie nodded. “Oh, I get it now. Okay. But—I’ll never make it. You’re too tall. And I’m way too short.”

“That’s nothing to worry about.” Ray dropped to one knee several feet from her. “How’s this?”

“Better.”

“Okay. Now, toss it on my head.”

Natalie took a deep breath. "What if I miss?"

"You won't miss. Just gently frisbee it in the air. Ready? Let it fly!"

"Eeeek!" Natalie flicked the hat way too hard. The bill of it plunked Ray right on the nose. He fell backwards in mock agony.

"Ha-ha! So, maybe you will miss," he said. "But it doesn't matter. All you need to do is try. It doesn't have to be perfect. Use more arch."

On her next attempt, Natalie flung the hat too high and Ray had to leap to catch it.

"Yowza, I'm three feet away," he laughed. "Give it a light touch. Like this." He softly spun the cap back to her.

She caught it and held it for a moment. She examined the parrot face and lightly traced the outline of it with her fingers.

"Go on. Give it another try," Ray encouraged her.

"Maybe I better not," she said with a serious face. "I almost threw it in the lake last time."

Ray guffawed. "You're not gonna throw it in the lake. Just believe you can do it, that's all."

She nodded.

They kept at it for twenty minutes. Natalie improved with each toss. They decided it worked better if Ray held still and didn't try to help her by ducking under it. She landed it once with the bill facing sideways. Ray pronounced this a smashing success, but they played the game for another ten minutes just because it was fun, and Natalie wanted to see if she could land the hat with the bill facing forward.

The sun met the tree line and shadows stretched across the ground.

"Okay, this is the one. I feel it," Natalie said, preparing a final toss.

Ray held very still and closed his eyes. When he felt the hat drop out of the air and land squarely on his head, he had the strangest sensation. In a singular flash, he saw the Merry Parrot toy drop from the ceiling at Willy's, he saw the Red Room at the KGB Bar, and Irina placing Natalie's hand in his. And then, at the same time, he saw himself as a boy at Kennywood, taking aim at the pitching game. There had been no one present to cheer that boyhood victory.

"We did it!" Natalie cheered.

Ray opened his eyes. Natalie had thrown up her hands and was staring up at the sky. She was so happy.

"Victory," he said.

They checked the camera. Natalie thought they looked very silly.

“Some fun adventure, huh?” Ray said. “Aren’t you glad we recorded it for posterity?”

Natalie giggled and glanced at the camera. “I guess so. Yeah.”

She went to retrieve the microphone abandoned in the grass.

Ray was about to pack up the camera when a new thought took hold of him. *It’s the perfect emblem for you. A parrot. No original ideas whatsoever. All you can do is imitate. Don’t have the maturity or guts to think on your own.* Damian’s words had made him so mad. Ray took off his hat and gazed at the face of the smiling, goofy bird. He saw himself on stage at the KGB Bar, stricken with panic when it appeared that Heights had thrown his hat away. *No. That’s not me. That’s not who I am. I’m better than that.*

Natalie observed him contemplating his hat. “What is it? Something wrong?” she asked in alarm. “Don’t tell me I messed it up.”

“Can—can I ask you something?” he said.

“Um. Okay.”

“You told me you like me better without my hat.” He paused and studied her face. “Did you really mean that?”

“Yes.” Natalie lowered her eyes. “I did.” She looked up at him.

Ray let out a deep breath. “Okay. Then that settles it.”

“Settles what?”

“Will you do something for me?” he asked her. “I’m gonna stand in front of the camera. I want you to focus it on my hat.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Just . . . whatever happens, keep the camera on the hat, okay?”

Natalie appeared apprehensive.

“Can you do that?” he asked.

She nodded and took aim.

Ray stood before the camera. He put his hat back on. Then he took it off and held it so that the parrot faced the camera. “You see the parrot head?” he asked her.

“I see it. Now what?”

“Okay. Get ready,” he said, but more to himself than to her.

With a big sweeping arc of his arm, he cast his cap into the sky over the Meer. It fluttered there for a moment in the air, then with a final twirl, sank into the water.

“Omigod! Ra-ay! Your favorite hat!” Natalie’s eyes were wide with amazement.

“Did you get it on film?”

“Yeah, but—but—I just don’t—I mean, are you sure? I can’t believe you did that.”

“I gotta be sure ‘cause I ain’t going in the water to fish it out.” He inhaled deeply and stared at the spot where his hat had vanished. “It’s no big deal. I can let it go.”

“But it was your prize.”

“Yeah. It was.” He glanced at her. “But there’ll be other victories. You felt bad you lost that Merry Parrot. I just lost my parrot hat. So, you can let that regret go.” He smiled. “And anyway, if our film is about people changing, then I gotta step up to the plate to show I’m changing, too. I once wore a hat.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Now I don’t.”

They packed up their equipment in silence. The sun had dipped below the trees. The indigo tincture of the sky indicated the day was ending fast. The streetlights came on as they rode in a taxi back to the Production Center. Natalie was quiet. She sat gazing out the window in evident contemplation. Ray’s scalp tingled. Twice he instinctively reached to adjust his hat. But it was gone.

Really gone.

Late that night, after finishing their final edits, they sat watching the last scene of their film fade into black.

“So, what do you think?” Ray asked. “Our adventure at the Meer looked good, especially considering we did it on the fly.”

“Yeah, that scene meshes with the poem perfectly. I think it’s really creative. Hopefully, Professor Travers agrees. But—oh, never mind. It’s so late. We should go.”

“But what?”

“Oh, well, I wonder about that last image of Heights and Woodhouse holding hands.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No, it’s not that.” She paused and seemed to study her own hands. “It’s a great moment. I don’t wanna change it. I kinda forgot you even filmed that. And maybe that’s my question—like, why did you go up on stage? I guess I’ve wanted to know.”

Ray rubbed his chin. “I dunno, really. I had a feeling, that’s all. Heights moved so slowly toward Woodhouse. He created so much anticipation—so much desire—for a single moment of connection. It

made my skin buzz. Like in that soothing way when someone lightly caresses you. I—I wanted to capture that. Does that make sense?”

Natalie gazed at Ray. “Yes. You think like a great director.” She stood to leave. “But don’t expect me to call you Mr. Director.”

Ray wrinkled his nose. “No way. I don’t really like that anyway.”

At the door, Natalie paused. “Oh, um, earlier I told you—” she broke off, then all in a rush said “—well, when I was a little girl, it was my friends who called me Nat. So, since we’re friends, right, I guess that means you can call me that too.”

Ray grinned his lop-sided grin. “Okay.”

She opened the door.

“Hey, Nat,” he called to her, “maybe we can make our next film action-adventure.”

Natalie flashed him a big grin as the door closed.

Ray sat for a moment thinking. He scratched at his head. His hair felt thick and unkept. *Hmm. Guess I’ll have to get haircuts more often.*

Saying Goodbye

Fundamentals of Filmmaking

NYU School of the Arts

Thursday, October 24

Natalie was nervous. She told herself she shouldn't be, that she should trust in the work she and Ray had done. The film was good, better than she'd ever hoped it could be. But somehow, somehow during the week, the stakes had been raised.

Something in her had changed.

Like the streetlights that had winked on one by one to illuminate their return journey from the Meer, this change had happened so quietly she'd almost missed it. But there was no mistaking it now. At the beginning of the week, her focus had been so limited. All she'd wanted was to get an A on the film project.

Now, she wanted more.

She kept her eyes trained on Professor Travers. But Ray, seated to her right, shifted forward and pushed his hands against his knees. Natalie was distracted. *Is he wearing cologne?* She couldn't be sure; maybe it was Damian. He was seated to her left, scowling sourly at the movie screen at the front of the classroom. Their film was playing; the lights in the classroom were dimmed. *No, it can't be Damian. It smells like summer.* She glanced at Ray's hands, then willed her attention back to Professor Travers. Angela sat on the other side of Ray. She was texting.

"Where's my analysis of Sabotage?" Damian eyed Natalie accusingly. "You let Cozart convince you to cut it?"

She waved away his complaint. "Shhh, I'm listening to the film." She and Ray had whittled down Angela's and Damian's face time to precisely thirty-seven seconds. But she didn't want to tell Damian this.

Their film was the last to be viewed that class period. Professor Travers had yet to make a comment. His silence worried Natalie. Earlier in the period, with unconcealed grimaces and mutterings in French,

he had interrupted their classmates' films to lecture them about their shoddy storytelling techniques. Natalie anticipated a similar harangue. Every time Travers reached to stroke his manicured goatee, she held her breath. But he merely stared wordlessly at the screen. With growing alarm, she imagined their film must be so bad, Travers couldn't even bear to pause it midway to deliver his fatal diatribe. Clearly, he was saving all his wrath for the end.

Natalie fidgeted, crossed and re-crossed her legs. Damian's pinched face was hardly consoling. Angela wasn't even paying attention.

"Relax, Nat. It'll be fine."

Hearing Ray's whisper near her ear, Natalie took a deep breath and held it. But this time, she did so because she felt a much different kind of tension. Since the room was dark, she risked looking Ray in the eyes. Without his hat, his face was so open, so inviting. He was no longer hiding. But strangely, when she looked at him without his hat, she felt she could not hide either.

Ray gave her an exaggerated wink and two thumbs up.

Despite her seriousness, she snickered. She couldn't help it. Ray's show of confidence was so goofy. "Don't make me laugh, I'm trying to focus," she said, but she didn't quite mean the part about the laughter.

Their film was nearing its climatic scenes. Ray and Natalie both turned their eyes toward the screen:

Hookup sauntered out of the Red Room as Woodhouse sang, "Can't stop it, oh, oh, oh!" and Heights sang, "Not again, not again." The scene shifted to the curtained stage. Natalie appeared wearing her headset and holding up the boom pole. Offscreen, Heights said, "We love your enthusiasm, but maybe you got a little carried away with the mike? You do realize you're blocking people from seeing our finale." A close-up shot revealed Natalie's anxious face. Then Woodhouse stepped before the camera. Smiling graciously, she said. "Oh, young man, why don't you put down your camera. And that microphone, young woman, give your arms a rest. We have a request to make of you."

Woodhouse's face faded away, and another scene appeared of Natalie holding the boom pole in front of the Harlem Meer. She carefully laid the pole in the grass as Angela's voice in overlay said, "I'm not the kind of person who fails. Please, I need a chance."

Ray entered the frame and offered his hat to Natalie. The two began playing their hat-tossing game. Heights could be heard in voiceover

saying, “Three years ago, my birthday party, you gave me this ballcap, your final gift to me. You tried to flick it onto my head, a silly cuckoo spinning into my face, into my ears—over and over—your giddy laughter.” The scene ended with Natalie successfully landing Ray’s hat with the bill facing forward and raising her arms in victory.

Abruptly, the scene cut to Ray showing off his cap to the camera. At the same time, Heights said, “I wander into the field, reeds and rushes grown thick to the thighs. I sweep my arm up and—this bird must find its own flight. This wool, cardboard, and thread must find their own places to rest.” Ray flung his hat over the water. His throw and the hat’s spinning flight were slowed so that the hat splashed the water as Heights spoke the word “rest.”

The scene shifted to the anniversary couple holding hands as Angela breathlessly said, “This is a poem you’ll never forget.” The image of the couple faded and another emerged—the delicate, paper Chinese lantern cradled by the intertwined hands of Heights and Woodhouse. In the background, Damian said, “This is the summation of the meaning of Heights and Woodhouse.” The image of the lantern faded into black. Briefly, out of the darkness echoed Angela’s muffled giggling.

When the film ended, still Professor Travers did not speak. The classroom remained in silent darkness. Around her, Natalie heard the shuffling of feet and papers. Students were prepping to leave. Someone coughed. She glanced at Ray; he didn’t look quite so confident now. Finally, Travers flipped on the lights; he immediately scanned the room for Ray, Natalie, Damian, and Angela. When he found them, he swung his arm dramatically toward the movie screen. His eyes looked wild. “You—you did this?” he demanded to know.

Natalie scrunched down in her seat to hide behind someone else’s head. *Oh no. Please no—*

Professor Travers looked at the rest of his students. “What are you all waiting for?” He vigorously clapped his hands to encourage general applause, but he only roused a begrudging smattering.

This didn’t deter his own enthusiasm. “Finally! Students who understand interplay!” He raised his hands and eyes toward the ceiling as if offering a film god a prayer of thanks. “Too many make the sound the slave of the video. Too many make the video serve the audio. Here the video and audio are unique entities, each providing distinct messages. Yet they touch each other—unify on key images. Oh, that final

image of the paper lantern—a pale flame that haunts the mind! Yet the audio tells us this delicate thing is the sum of meaning. You have put the sound and video in a dance.” Here, Professor Travers himself pirouetted. “The mixture of interview and montage—brilliant! You give us the poets on stage. You give us the audience. Most of all, you give us yourselves. I see the truth in everyone. You go beyond teaching me about poetry. I *believe* in poetry.”

As she listened to Professor Travers, Natalie slowly realized she wasn’t about to be humiliated. She peeked out from behind her classmate’s head. Suddenly, she heard Ray’s voice.

“The poetic voiceovers were Nat’s idea,” he told the professor.

“What! No, they weren’t,” she adamantly denied.

Ray’s face was incredulous. “Yes, they were,” he said to her. “You should take credit.” Then to the professor: “Her attention to detail is, like, so awesome—especially with sound.”

“But—but your ideas were the inspiration,” she said to Ray. “All I did was vamp.” Then to the professor: “He—he has such a unique way of looking at things. His creative vision underpinned the whole thing.”

“Don’t listen to her, professor,” Ray said. “She’s the smartest person and has so many great ideas.”

Professor Travers chuckled at this quarrel. “And what about you?” he asked Damian and Angela.

Angela was unprepared to speak and nearly dropped her phone. “Er, um, like, I hoped I’d be in it more, but like, I guess that scene at the lake was sorta last-minute,” she said with a sulky look at Ray.

Damian lifted his chin and peered out of the bottom edge of his glasses. “I regret the film couldn’t have been longer. We had so much great analysis. Cozart is an aggressive editor. Another ten minutes, and I could’ve added several layers of intellectual complexity.”

“The poets seem interesting,” Travers said. “I commend your courage in getting involved so deeply in their performance. What was it like to work with such artists?”

“They were unpredictable,” Natalie said.

“They were clownish, if you ask me,” Ray said to the professor. Then, with a grin at Natalie: “Sorta kitschy.”

With that, the class broke up. A few of their classmates congregated around to congratulate them and ask questions. This session was the last of the week, so weekend plans were made and invitations extend-

ed. Angela almost immediately disappeared. Ray, Natalie, and Damian lingered with Professor Travers. He suggested that if they were interested in pursuing the potential of cinematic montage, then they should sign up for an independent study with him on the famous montagists Vorkapich and Siegel. Damian, clearly flattered, instantly said yes.

Ray and Natalie stepped aside as Damian continued to talk with the professor. Natalie slung her book bag over her shoulder and wandered toward the door. Ray put on his coat and followed her out into the hall.

“I knew we’d nailed it,” he said.

“I know. You were right. I’m so relieved,” Natalie said. Yet as soon as she said this, the tension she’d felt earlier when Ray had whispered to her returned. Looking up at him, she suddenly felt embarrassingly shy and didn’t know what else to say. She bit her lower lip.

Ray put his hands in his coat pockets.

“You’re wearing a jacket now,” she said, trying to be funny.

“Huh?”

“Remember, when we met in front of Glass-Eye Willy’s? You didn’t have a jacket, but you tried to act like you weren’t cold.”

“Oh, right. Thought it was time to get real. That . . . seems like a long time ago.”

“I was thinking the same thing. But it’s only been a week.”

“Funny how things change.”

Natalie bit her lip again. That day, when she’d met Ray on the street, she’d been trying to avoid him. Now, she hesitated to say goodbye. “What were you doing in there giving me so much credit for everything?” she asked him to delay their parting.

“Trying to make sure you got an A.”

“Well, you shouldn’t exaggerate . . . but what you said was nice.”

Ray scratched his chin. He seemed to be searching for words. Suddenly, he blurted in a rush: “Hey, I was thinking—like, next week, we got that big exam in the History of European Cinema. You—you wanna study together? Like, Monday maybe? I could meet you at the library.”

Natalie smiled. She felt sure she must be blushing, but she couldn’t help it. *Not goodbye*. “Sure. Yes, absolutely! Like, maybe six-ish?”

“Great, then we can take a break and get pizza or something.”

At that moment, Natalie was so happy, she just didn’t care when Angela swept down the hall and wrapped her arms around Ray.

“There you are! Like, a bunch of us have been waiting. You know

we're headed to Glass-Eye Willy's, right?"

Ray gave Angela a puzzled look. "We are?"

"Like, yeah! Duh! Time to celebrate my first A in film school. My friend Staci will be there—I was texting her before—she asked about you specifically." Angela turned to Natalie as if she'd only just noticed her. "Oh. Um. You can come too if you want," she said grudgingly. "I mean, like, it is *our* A, I guess."

"Thanks," Natalie said almost sincerely. After all, Angela had just given her the nearest thing to a compliment her loathing would allow. No doubt, it would never happen again. Accepting the invitation felt to Natalie like it might even be a kind of victory. She looked from Angela to Ray, searching for a sign that he desired her presence at Willy's.

Just then Damian joined them in the hall.

"Don't think Natalie is interested," he said. "We already have plans." He stepped between her and Ray.

"We do?"

With a big grin, Damian produced two theater tickets from the interior pocket of his coat. "Wanted to make it a surprise. A reward for finishing the film. Here—look."

Natalie took one of the tickets. "Vagina Monologues . . . Part Two."

"Opens tonight. These beauties are front row." He took the ticket back from her and returned them to his pocket. "I knew you'd love it."

"Suit yourselves," Angela said to them. "Come along, Cap'n. The crew's set to sail." She eagerly tugged Ray toward the elevator.

Natalie shifted on her feet indecisively. She looked from Ray to Damian and back. Watching Ray leave filled her with regret.

Before the elevator door closed, he called back to her: "Ah, I'll see you next week, okay?"

Natalie couldn't reply in time. The elevator door closed. She sighed and ran her hand through her hair.

"What was that about?" Damian asked her suspiciously. "You and Cozart got a date?"

"Oh, he—he just means he'll see me in class," Natalie lied.

They walked toward the elevator.

"You didn't have to get the tickets," she said to him. "I mean, you could've asked me first." Her tone was a bit perturbed, but she was mostly perturbed at herself—because she'd lied to Damian about Ray. She should've just told him that, yes, she and Ray did have a date—a

study date at the library on Monday. Why was that hard? Why was it easier to lie? What kind of power did Damian have over her mind?

“You have such a way with words,” he said to her. “I can’t wait to hear your analysis of the play afterwards.”

The elevator door opened, and they stepped inside.

Natalie closed her eyes. She felt gravity pull her down, down, further and further. The elevator seemed to be falling fast. Then all at once she had the strangest sensation. In one flash, she saw Ray’s parrot hat flying in the air over the Meer. She felt Irina lifting her hand to place it in his. She saw the poster in the Red Room of the man and woman, arms raised in triumph and faces uplifted toward the light.

Damian had insinuated to her that the image on the poster represented the two of them.

But it didn’t.

Create the future.

The elevator doors opened. Natalie walked slowly through the lobby. Damian urged her to hurry so they could eat before the show. She followed him out of the building and turned with him up the street.

As they walked, Damian talked nonstop about *Vagina Monologues, Part Two*. He had read an analysis somewhere that aligned the various feminine erogenous zones with corresponding rhetorical strategies.

But Natalie wasn’t listening. She was thinking about Ray. She’d been so touched, so moved when he’d thrown his hat away. He’d thrown it away for her—for them. Despite all its ups and downs, that day had truly been the best day of her life. She’d never felt so strongly that someone believed in her. With Ray at the Meer, she’d felt the most genuine connection she’d ever experienced with another person.

Ray was real.

It was Damian who was the imitation.

They stopped at the street corner to wait for the signal to cross. When it turned, Damian took hold of her elbow to guide her forward.

But she resisted. “No, I—I’m not going that way.”

Damian was stunned. “What? But the show—”

“No. I’ve changed my mind. I’ve got a headache. I just don’t feel like discussing vaginas tonight.”

“Oh, is that all . . . well, er, I’ll exchange the tickets. We’ll go some other night—”

Natalie shook her head. “No. I’m not going at all.” She looked him

squarely in the face. “Do you really need me there to analyze it?”

Damian opened his mouth to protest, but then he looked away as if ashamed to give an answer.

“I didn’t think so.” Natalie shook her head sadly. “You see, I’m just not into the monologue anymore.”

She turned on her heels and walked away.

Almost at once, she felt her eyes sting. Sadness over this goodbye surprised her. She didn’t love Damian. But she’d wanted to, and she’d tried. It just hadn’t happened. It never would. She wouldn’t miss him. But giving him up was like giving up a cherished idea.

The sun had set; streetlights were winking on.

She wasn’t sure what the future held for her.

But that was okay.

For now, it was enough to have created a path.

T H I S S T O R Y E N D S . . .

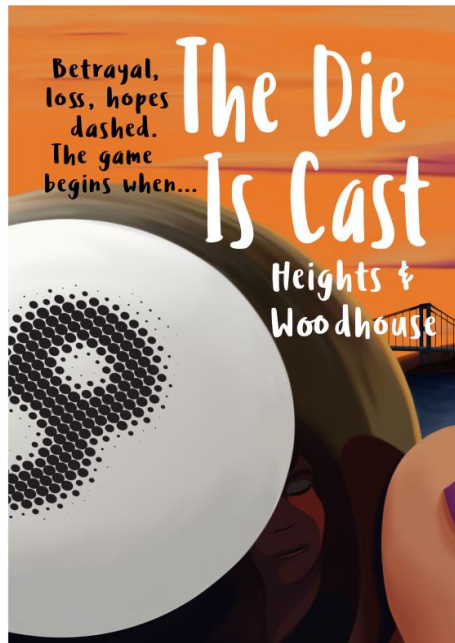
If you enjoyed our tale, then please consider leaving a review. We had a great time putting this story together, and we have much more in store for Ray and Natalie. Your positive reviews will help us send them on their journey.

Their Story Continues . . .

Ray and Natalie's journey begins. But we have forecasted stormy seas ahead for the fledgling filmmakers. Find out where the winds of destiny will carry them in *The Die Is Cast*. When a film project becomes a chance to solve an ancient mystery, Ray and Natalie must decide at what cost they are willing to dig up the past. Powerful schemers are primed to foil their quest, ruin their film, and shipwreck their love. A betrayal now would strand them.

The mystery beckons. Will the film crew spot the clues? They are about to join an ancient contest, one filled with many strange players. Be warned, Ray and Natalie! Betrayal is the name of this game. To learn more, please visit our website:

<https://heightsandwoodhouse.com/books/the-die-is-cast/>





**HEIGHTS &
WOODHOUSE**

Lifeblood, USA

Ugly sky
black-brown layered
clouds of
phosphorus
carbon monoxide
chemical iron ash
soot and dirt

Steel fortresses
where the fathers enter
bound by
gravel pits
asphalt streets
throbbing
harsh hum of piped
hissing steam

Dead downtown
concrete sidewalks
benched bus stops
smelted into
jagged horizons
corrugated sheet metal
and smokestack-
belched smog

An Umpire Sees

Fact: An umpire sees, on average,
250 pitches during a game.
He must judge, each time,
between success
and failure.

The baseball rises into the afternoon
and the pitcher's body, as if pulled in its wake,
unravels toward right field.
Soon the ball will hail the grove of ashes
10 feet beyond the fence.
I stare at my shoes and remember pitch #249:

Explosion of dust in the catcher's mitt
2 and 2 fastball, mincing the knees, outside corner—
the batter peeks over his shoulder, he knows it's
perfect so perfect—
"Ball."

I leave on my heavy, blue mask,
watch the batter hop on home plate.
I avoid the pitcher's face,
flushed and pinched,
against tears.

You Were Our Mule

You were our mule, Ray Fosse,
bridled like clouds drawn over Lake Erie.
Upon your back we strapped
a history of mud and slush soaking Municipal Field.
And you carried us all to Cincinnati

from the minors in Reading, Pennsylvania,
where your brash torso crouched in the summer
and your hand hummed
with every fastball's arrival.
With legs and chest hidden
behind plastic and leather,
you remade your stubborn body
into a promise that each man would bend before home.

But we never knew Pete Rose,
as he barreled down Cincinnati's third base line,
would carry the curse
which had blinded Herb Score, had orphaned Rocky Colavito,
and, now, splintered your left shoulder.
We never knew the years
your arm dragged across frozen thorns for every catch
while doctors stabbed your muscles with cortisone between innings.
So, we fed you with our jeers
until your promise sagged, swollen and numb.

Our spring mornings in Cleveland are still empty
but for the rain that chills like icicles
you still rub from your arm two decades later.

After an Argument Between a Teenager and His Parents

Coils of bundled iron
lie
rusting under
rainy gray clouds

Green weeds and crabgrass
rise
searching for sun
beneath steel pillars

Dusty winds
blow
through the chain link fence
borders of this town

Construction zones
flash
barring the way
into anywhere else

Note from Donnie Moore

When I die, I hope I land in hell
so I can look for the forkball I threw Dave Henderson.
He drilled that pitch over the left field wall,
over Anaheim, through the burning gates.
When 65,000 screamed for my head,
I understood shame.

I know you prayed for me, Tonya.
Always after fights over bills, in bed,
your bruises and prayers rose like smoke,
small yellow stains that darken and grow.
Wrapping the linen around my fists,
I thought about my dead arm, my fingertips, my palms.

When I remember the end of my career, I see
Gene Autry leaning forward in his owner's box,
binoculars pressed to his dusty skin,
lenses glinting sunset as they track my fading pitch.
I want to believe he prayed for me, even after I lost that game.

This morning, Tonya, you wake in another house,
in a different bed, with white sheets.
I sit in the kitchen, no longer ours, cleaned for the realtor now.
On the counter, the .45 waits, black, like a pot of coffee.

* * * * *

One strike away from the 1986 World Series, Angels pitcher Donnie Moore gives up a game-tying homerun to the Red Sox's Dave Henderson in the 9th inning. The Angels would lose in extra innings, and the Red Sox would eliminate the Angels from the playoffs two games later. In 1989, after shooting his wife several times, nearly killing her, Moore commits suicide.

Courage Is Water

and, by God, he was the smartest man I ever knew.
Never look 'em in the face, or your gut'll grind up, stop you flat.
You can do anything, my pap said, if you keep courage,
but courage runs away like water, once you look.
Precious courage, dam it up, water in a well.
Shut your eyes and you can do anything.
And my pap practiced what he preached
since he was the richest tradesman in Jerusalem.
He even tipped his scales against my own gramma.
He never flinched, never looked her in the face. Not once.

But I shouldn't have tweaked the scales against a Roman inspector.
I pleaded and pleaded, all my youthful bravado evaporating.
Even offered a bribe for him to forget it ever happened. Nothing doing.
He pushes to check my scales, I hold him back, and stare right into his
skinny face. My dam breaks, the courage gushes away.
That grinning inspector drinks my entire well, punches my ticket to
prison. By God, pap warned me. He was the smartest man I ever knew.

The centurion says it'll be easier if I don't look 'em in the face.
Even if he screams—especially if he screams.
Don't look up, just keep pounding. Imagine I'm building a nice house.
Good advice, but it doesn't make my mallet any lighter.
Nervous, I grip the nails in my palm, heft their weight.
They are dull things. God, can they make them any rougher?
Thick and hot—didn't the smithy douse 'em when he was done?
I rub the tip of one against my wrist, pretend, passing the time,
and my courage dries up, boiled away by the hot air hanging over this
cursed hill.

I see the condemned trudging toward us. They made him carry that
plank of wood himself? He's already a bloody mess.
And they expect me to build a house on his damn arms?
Don't look 'em in the face. Please God, don't let me see his face.

A Little Chinese Lantern

“A little Chinese lantern,” you said
the evening of my twenty-first birthday.
“Isn’t much, but you like fireworks, so. . .”
My cupped hands
felt the tissue paper, the cardboard,
delicate, resilient.
“Should I light it?” I asked,
and, biting your lip, you shook no.
You slid along the porch bench
like a whisper; you whispered,
“Not dark enough.”

Your eyes widen
as I give you that same Chinese lantern,
as I retell this story
the evening of my forty-first birthday.
And I slide along our sofa
like a whisper; I whisper,
“Was never dark enough.”

This Memory of Wool, Cardboard, and Thread

This ruined thing hops and totters
across the center line of State Route 11,
like a dying bird wanting to catch the midnight breeze
with only one bent wing;
it cannot escape the headlamps of my parked car.
I quickly gather this bundle
that once was my favorite ballcap.
I retraced the remote lanes for half the night
searching for my memory of wool, cardboard and thread.

A small chest hides beneath my bed.
I opened it earlier this afternoon.
Among the folded notes in magic marker,
the concert playhouse ticket stubs, and
the poems that cling to your perfume,
is my favorite ballcap.
I rarely wear it, but
today is my birthday.
And I would be up late, restless and driving.
I wanted something that once touched your hands
to touch me.

Along the roadside I stand, shivering,
cradling my memory.
My fingers scrabble
to reshape the crushed crown,
to reflaten the broken bill,
to restitch the loosen and wayward strings.
I jam it on and hope my head
can pump life back into my memory.

Three years ago
my birthday party
you gave me this ballcap
your final gift to me
you tried to flick it onto my head

a silly cuckoo
spinning into my face
into my ears
over and over
your giddy laughter

I wander into the field,
reeds and rushes grown
thick to the thighs.
I sweep my arm up and

This bird must find its own flight.
This wool, cardboard, and thread must find
their own places to rest.

I should feel lighter and stronger.
That's what the poems you liked always say.
But my hands will not stop shaking.
I fumble with the lock but manage.
If only my hands could recapture the past,
instead of pushing it back
beneath the bed.

Song of Sadness

I sing my song of sadness,
Of absences, empty rooms.
Never do I sing of gladness,
I prefer to stick with Gloom.

Of absences, empty rooms,
I could sing quite by heart.
I prefer to stick with Gloom,
She has taught me from the start.

I could sing quite by heart
Of empty words, empty friends.
She has taught me from the start
It is quite futile to contend.

Of empty words, empty friends,
She has sung to me the best.
It is quite futile to contend
When I hear her in my head.

She has sung to me the best,
Sings her sorrow day and night.
When I hear her in my head,
I'm sure her voice is mine.

Sings her sorrow day and night,
I swear I need a different Muse.
I'm sure her voice is mine,
Till I tell her I refuse.

I swear I need a different Muse,
Never do I sing of gladness.

Till I tell her I refuse,
I sing her song of sadness.

Sabotage

Dear Professor, I'm in your PYSCH201 class at 3:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You may not know me, I sit in the back. I missed the test today because of my car, a total piece of crap. An Oldsmobile and it sure is. Got to be fifteen years or more, a hand-me-down from my brother, so couldn't refuse, but I was saving for a Jeep. Car's got no radio. Just one AM station until you hit a bump or slam the door, and then is only static. Today, he stranded me on I95. The transmission just fell out, I don't know, but had to steer through three lanes of traffic to get to the berm. Cars and semis just zooming by, no one stopped for me. I could've been killed. I say 'he' because when I got it, I named it Pete's Sake 'cause it looks like a car a grandmother would drive. Mine knits me sweaters I don't want, but I wear them anyway. I mean, what can you do? I just want you to know I really like your class. I almost took astronomy because I'm such a stargazer, but your class fit so well in my schedule. I'm learning so much about psychology. I'm sure to face—I mean, 'ace' the questions about Freud. Took lots of notes about the death drive. Like, that's what I drive every day. Hope you'll give me another chance. It wasn't my fault, and I'm not the kind of person who fails. Please, I need a chance. Sincerely, —

Affairs in Order

You caught me in a love song,
chorus was your bridge to a
soul in need of singing, but
your heart was off a beat.
You loved to sing your gigs,
croon your song to every
girl. It's the only one you got,
confusion of fluff and punk,
repetitive as hell. Your
follow-up was no better.
"Sorry, honey, see you later,"
you strummed on your guitar.
You weren't sorry. Today,
I threw all your notes away,
beat time from every measure.
Tomorrow, the dreary ditty
you taught me, I'm sure
I won't remember.

You drew me to your beauty,
painted me a scene. Put you
and me together in a meadow
lush and green. I posed for
my portrait, a study in trust
and hope, but your brushes
painted another face. I didn't
know myself. Colors dripped
and smeared, the canvas tore,
you packed the palette and your
oils, found another studio.
Yesterday, I found a new
stain, and a silver vase
that used to hold a rose,
what is left of our meadow.
I had only been ornamental.
Today, my rooms are white

and crisp. I eschew color
and all bric-a-brac.

You lured me with desire and
with a brazen gaze, with hands
and lips and a secret kiss,
begging me to say yes.
You were so lost, so fallen,
so eager that I should win.
I could be your salvation,
but you would bear the sin.
You would do and be all that
I would ask. A perfect cast,
greatest stage, a love story
for the ages. I would be
the star. But today my name
is not on the walk of fame.
Yesterday, your stage show
hit the road. Tomorrow, I
will take a bow,
draw the curtain,
turn out the li—

Everyday Petty

“Must we go out again tonight? You always spend too much money. Haven’t I told you to take your shoes off at the door, you leave marks on the carpet. I just cleaned the bathroom,

you got toothpaste on the mirror. It’s Monday, you forgot to set the trash out again, I’m tired of reminding you. The thermostat is not your personal furnace. Who

is it who pays the bill every month? You need a haircut. That shirt does not look good on you. Stop talking so loud, you hurt my ears. You always leave the lights on when you leave

a room. You need to shave, your face is scratchy. Can’t you turn off the wipers? It’s stopped raining. The squeak is maddening. Thanks for making dinner, but where’s the green vegetable?

Are you playing that game on your phone again? You should be getting ready for work. And my car needs

an oil change. You said you
were gonna handle it
a week ago. But you

say things and don't follow
through. You forgot the milk,
I made a list for you
and everything. Aren't
you coming to bed yet?
It's late. You drink too much.
Why were you out so late?

I was worried, you could
have texted me at least.
Why are you so quiet
today? Is it something
I said? Turn off the TV
and kiss me. Let's make love.
Don't you want to love me?"

Round 'n Round

(lyrics from The Circling, a one-hit-wonder techno '80s girl band)

My head's spinnin'
Seein' visions
Stars lift me up
I kiss the moon
Leave earth below.
Round 'n round we go.

Our lines recited
I do, you do
The stage is set
We wear our roles
This little show.
Round 'n round we go.

The curtain drops, I
wanna hide, stars
align, they chase
the sun, earth runs
away, say yes, say no.
Round 'n round I go.

Breaking up
breaking out
spinning apart
round 'n round
I gotta stop.

Insomnia, a Diary

11:00pm

It begins. A thousand times over it has begun. I lie tightly tucked in my queen bed in the master bedroom. Moonlight creeps about the curtains, drawn to darkness like ants to sugar. Night will be slowly consumed while I sleep. At least, I hope to be asleep.

11:30pm

It's been three days since I last slept. I roll over, slide my hand under the pillow on the other side of the bed. The sheets are cool to my touch. My guy is not yet come to bed. Up working late again. He's a night owl.

11:57, 11:58, 11:59pm

(I watch the minutes pass on my clock.) Now, it is midnight. Tomorrow has begun.

I lie awake in my future. I am alone. My lungs squeeze against my heart, push a sigh into my throat. My eyes close tight, squeeze back to keep it down. Not again, not again. Not insomnia, my old friend.

12:45am

A light on in the hall. Is that my guy? I have told him not to do that. Light wakes me. I see a dark spot on the ceiling. Is it a bug? No, not a bug. A shadow. My guy has turned out the light, retreated down the stairs. I keep very still and pray. I always hope for mercy. Hope for change.

1:30am

If only I could dream, forget myself. DaVinci slept in 3-hour shifts. Oops, I

meant “shifts.” (I’m not wearing my glasses.) He was so special. I must be a genius too. People really learn from me. Like my guy, for instance. I have instructed him to put a pinch of salt in the coffee grounds to eliminate bitterness. He brews it for me. I have taught him that as well.

2:00am

My grandfather lived to 106. Never took a day off in his life. Must run in the family. Did my guy take the chicken from the freezer to thaw? I put on my robe and slippers, go down to the kitchen to check. I have a snack. Must re-brush my teeth. I feel born again. Princess needs her beauty rest.

2:15am

He hadn’t taken the chicken out. My guy sat at his desk. I told him—I always do—to come to bed, let work go until tomorrow. He is a public defender, a true servant of the people. The sheets are very cold now, and so are my feet. I always tell my guy he must sleep with socks and stay on his side of the bed. I need space. I don’t understand why he doesn’t listen, especially when I love him so much.

2:30am

They say Churchill slept little but kept a bed in the Palace of Westminster. He took naps at 5:00pm after drinking whiskey and soda. I put Jack Daniels in my tea. Must be fit to rule. My pillow needs fluffed, the sheets are twisted, and this comforter is misnamed. My guy has not come to bed. I tell him every night to be quiet

when he does, to set his alarm clock and
put his clothes out for the next day ahead
of time. I see he has forgotten to
set his clock. Must I do everything?
Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

3:30am

They say Emily Brontë walked in circles
around her dining room table to tire
herself out. I've not tried that. Of course, I've
seen a doctor. I don't like to take pills.
They mess with my mind. I wear ear plugs and
run a fan to drown out noise. My guy does
not like the fan. I've tried chamomile tea,
warm milk, wine, listening to ocean waves,
and rubbing lavender oil on my breasts.
My guy does not like lavender. The *Sleep
Encyclopedia* counsels avoiding
all stimulants. *Ladies Home Journal* says
to keep a routine and avoid naps. I
bought luxury sheets and shams. Each night my
guy tells me he will soon come to bed.
But he doesn't. I don't understand why. We
have fought over why he can't stop working.
I only want him to get that promotion
because I love him more than anything.

4:00am

What has all this infernal help and advice
accomplished? Nothing is wrong with me. It's
them. Society. Who decided when
it was the right time and wrong time to sleep?
What are these repressive distinctions which
impose and compel? Who created the
binary *awake, asleep*? I say down with
alarm clocks, so-called night and day, and dinner
time! Down with bedtime, rush hour, and afternoon!
They are right to say we insomniacs

are awake, for we know it is time for
revolution! Hooray! That's the spirit!

4:05am

"Please, God, please, oh, please, oh, please, oh, please
let me sleep. I know you can hear me, and
I know I have prayed this many times before, and
I don't understand why you don't answer.
They say you created a day of rest,
and in Eden caused a deep sleep to fall upon
Adam, and so asking you for sleep is
right up your alley. I don't ask for much."

4:30am

I get out of bed to read, to make myself
sleepy. "In vain you rise early and stay
up late, toiling for food to eat—for God
grants sleep to those he loves. Psalm 127:2."
Oh, shit, am I one of the damned? That's not fair.

5:00am

I've dozed, but my heart was awake. I grope
the pillow beside me. I am still alone.
Always alone. Why? I don't want to be.

5:15am

My guy comes to bed. "Did I wake you?" he
whispers as he slips on his socks. I roll over,
far away from him. He snores. I could kill
him, drain his life away. But I have already.

6:00am

Sunlight creeps about the curtains. Last bits
of sugar will soon be dissolved. Oh, God!
I didn't want to see this. My guy always
says living the big life will cost you big
eventually. My eyelids are heavy,
my heart, my head. I beat the crown against

the headboard. Watch it shatter into pieces.

The Cycle

(B-side song from the techno '80s girl band, The Circling)

Out on my own
no cash, no car,
just the flow.
Friends call, let's
hit the beach.
Sun no fun, no,
can't take a trip,
drip, drip, drip.

Don't like it,
don't like it,
(no, no, no!)
Can't stop it,
can't stop it,
(oh, oh, oh!)

Got a hot date,
it's about time,
one more day,
woulda been fine.
Lights are low,
mood is right.
Sorry, babe,
can't tonight.

Don't like it,
don't like it,
(no, no, no!)
Can't stop it,
can't stop it,
(oh, oh, oh!)

Mother phones,
she got big plans,

set me up with
just the right man.
He's a doctor of
gynecology, but
he can't fix me
'tween the knees.

Can't stop me now
I'm in the flow.
Wait next week,
I'll be ready to go.
Wish I could come,
but I'm on the run.

Don't like it,
don't like it,
(no, no, no!)
Can't stop it,
can't stop it,
(oh, oh, oh!)

Not again,
not again . . .

Walking Away

I sit alone on the pier. There's solace in the waves;
seascapes have no face. I avoid the boardwalk,
for I will search for yours. The breeze chills my feet.
I pull my knees closer. It is no longer summer here.
I remember summer well. But seasons change.
Sand has no memory, and the waves need no one.

The sun sets. This is what I'm waiting for, the one
moment when sky becomes identical with waves,
and night gathers to itself all borders, and I too change,
becoming sand and water. It will not matter where I walk.
There will be no more search, no matter where my feet
take me. I will have no memory. I will leave you here.

Night falls. The waves rush in, they are all I hear,
not your voice. I leave behind the pier, take one
last look. I pick up a stone, wash it clean in the waves.
Yesterday, I paused by a blanket, but he had only your feet.
I burrowed deep, for the sand was as soft as your instep.
Our feet fit so well together—why should that ever change?

Is this wrong? Should I kick against change
as against your shins, hoping you'll be here
to kick me back? I must throw away this stone.
This will be my last memory. I will dig in my feet
until my footprints are washed away by the waves.
I will throw you far into the sea. And then? Walk.

Walk away. As far as I can walk
from last summer when I knew you were gone.
Your last words to me were not necessary, like waves
mixed with seaweed and grit. I cannot change
where I've been—on our blanket, touching your hair,
your breath on my neck, caress of your feet.

I turn over my palm, drop the stone at my feet.

Your question echoes to me in the waves:
“Don’t you want to be a good person?” Our walk
by the bay ended in silence. I stoop to retrieve the stone,
hurl it into the sea. An answer only I hear,
for I am sand and waves, and they forever change.

Dawn. Light shines on our bed where our feet first met.
I walk to the window, listen to the waves, hear a lone
gull call to me. It changes flight—dips, soars, glides.

Almost a Poetry

My love, shall we find out what happens—
when mourning embraces gladness?
Perhaps we could be—
almost a poetry.

Fragile Cover

My favorite novel would have knights
damsels dwarves dungeons towers treasures
quests retreats dark alliances faithful friendships
unexpected love daring rescues singing celebrations
and it would never have a last page, but that
stirring climax I could read over and over and
grab my soul make me live life with more
sensitivity more courage more hope more faith more
love and the language would be so subtle so
perplexing so challenging I couldn't read
it would read me fulfill me free me from
myself

please.

caress the fragile cover
draw fingers through delicate pages
kiss every illegible word
your return kiss
the promise of adventure and mystery

Tour of My Heart

WARNING:
Entering
construction
zone.

Authorized
personnel
only.

KEEP
OUT.

Safety shoes,
eye
protection, hard
hats, and
reflective vests
MUST
be
worn
on site
at all times.

The Breath of Autumn

Countless texts
cannot define beauty
adequate to you.
The coy mistresses
of the poetic masters
are thin, dry leaves.
You cannot be set in ink,
on this dry leaf.

You are a mystery
whose riddles turn
my answers into questions.
My learned definitions
of love are
wrinkled leaves
whisked by your breath.

I am newly fallen
from my stable twig,
plunging into you—
twirling and turning—
dancing with you,
the breath of autumn.

Panic Attack

Dear Heights, I suspect you are
trying to make me happy.
Here is a list of all your
undoubtedly calculated
subversions as of Friday:
Number one—the weak-kneed
and short-of-breath ‘gushing.’
Two—the phone call of last night
which I know was totally
rigged so I’d have to tell my
friends who had called me
without blushing or betraying
any secrets! Three—the sorry
attempt to try to see me yet
again today by concocting
a lame-ass, smoke-screen excuse
about some supposedly
helpful book you need for class.
What do you have to say for
yourself? You might as well
confess to these stratagems
and more because I’ve already
assumed you’re guilty, guilty,
guilty! I can only hope that
recognizing your schemes for
what they are, I can keep a
critical distance because
I can’t be with someone who
makes me so happy, that’s
just not me, but I guess you
can come over (6:00-ish?) to
borrow the ‘important’ book,
and I mean that sincerely
except I think I’m falling in
love, Woodhouse

Her Unexpected Stories

Sometimes

I don't appreciate
your little stories
about nature.

I'm sorry.

Keep telling me your stories,
because I like to smell a flower
or watch ants crawl
or listen to birds sing
a little more now.

Behind the Cocktail

Never mind what's going on over here.
Pay no attention to the woman behind the
cocktail. Ignore the tears in her sad green eyes.
She has just taken a pill and claims she feels
nothing. Her jokes are so deadpan. Do
not be deceived. Desire is a bull story
for public consumption, but love is
secret, and she has one. She will
not even tell it to herself. Not
yet. Let her swirl her glass,
take another sip. It will
sweeten and sour
her tongue for
your kiss. Salt
plus sugar,
just how
she likes
it. Pain is
power,
but she
will give
it up.
For you.
One last
draught.
She may
tell you
with all
gravity
that she
is at the
end of all
the stories
she ever loved. She will not
say they were all happy endings.

Note to Self about Investing

Quit hoarding your penny ideas.
Let him enrich you. Unclench
your fists. His vision is ten-grand.
Your nickel and dime fears are a
waste of energy. Money grows
on his tree and is ripe for harvest.
Bring your bushel basket. Your nest
egg is empty, let him set you
up for life. His heart is bullion,
vault secure. Will you open it?
That's the million-dollar question.

Summer Love

You are a summer day, smell of cotton
candy and lemonade, beach breeze blowing
away my shade. Sun bleaching my hair, like when
I was a girl, water slide, sunburned nose,
just one more time. Ice cream and swing sets, with
you I play again. I hide and you seek.
I let you find me. Picnic basket, baseball
game, my autumn doubts fall away, I laugh
again, light and fluffy, drifting in blue sky.

Ponytail, movie night, sneak a kiss before
the show, and during, and after. Regrets like
winter thaw in the heat. I have become
your summer girl, lithe and tan, string bikini,
skin to touch, sugar rush. Carnival, high
up on a Ferris wheel, sweet, merciful
God, I am blessed again. You take my hand.
I will dance with you, sing our song, radio
on, caught in your arms in the rain. Let it rain.

You are a summer night, full moon, planets
aligned, midnight blue, and fireflies. I'm
amazed by the wizardry of your mind. I
camp in your woods, explore your stars. Under
your enchantments, I dream again. I do
not fear the witching hour, the haunts and shades
in the shadowlands. I take your hand. You are
my summer boy. Out till dawn, take a dare,

steppingstones, a skinny-dip, light a fire,
and a smoke, off-color jokes. Wind in the trees,
forge a path, up the valley, across the tracks,
sneak a beer, or two, or three. Your love is
sorcery. Breath in my ear, your hands on my
waist, you whisper, "stay," and suddenly, I
am shy again. Am in your command. You

wrap me in your blanket, I shelter in
the crook of your arm. I have no words, only
my heart beating young and in love again.

Birthday Gift

I want to give you a gift,
a siphon to my buried well
where my emotions swirl and seep
through my brain to the nerves,
those taut strings shimmer and vibrate,
triggered by your face, your hands, your voice.

If any gift would dip into my well,
I'd drench you with my visceral story of

thecandlesthecolorofsunset
ourdinnertablethesmellofItalianmeals
youtellmeyou'llstay
ohsweetmercifulGod
shewillstayshewillstayshewillstay

a memory tied
to the wet tingle at the edge of my eyes.
But no gift lets you touch my eyes.

So we stand in the kitchen
discussing books and religion.
You move away as I clean dishes,
I sniff at the sink and you laugh
and run for air freshener
as we tell each other off-color jokes.
How can I make you understand
this comfortable intimacy
on your birthday
a gift of yourself to me.
How can I make you understand
the moistness I feel behind my eyes when we laugh,
as we pun on the word "rear."

A Bad Influence

Dear Woodhouse, I have received your letter of resignation. I must confess I am quite astonished at you. If I were not a Muse, I would be without words. Truly, I cannot fathom an artist of your merit even conceiving such a scheme, let alone executing it, especially when I was the one who gave you all your merit. You are profoundly ungrateful. I deserve better for taking you under my wing.

We have always gotten along so well. I do not understand your reasoning. You say, 'I'm tired of sadness sitting on her big, fat throne.' My dear, those were always the terms of the contract. I can't be other than what I am. A Muse without a throne does not exist. And what do you think artists are for if not to be ruled? Really, I can't believe the tone you are taking with me. It is so disrespectful. Quite unlike you. You have forgotten your first love. Don't you recall the thrilling agony of Madame Bovary's suicide or of Rhett's desertion of Scarlett? Two of my masterpieces, right up there with Anna Karenina's death by train. You told me you wanted to write masterpieces, didn't you? My dear, those don't exist in comedy. I fear this funny man you have taken up with recently is a bad influence. I can read between the lines. You write in your letter, 'I won't sing the same sad song. There is more to life than tears. Frankly, you need to lighten up.'

I see what you're trying to say—you think

I'm boring! You think I'm a one-trick pony!
How dare you presume to instruct me. This
cheerfulness is such an affront. It doesn't
suit you at all, little lady. And you're
crazy if you think a few smiles and laughs
is all it will take to hold on to your
comedian. They are fickle people.
You won't get anywhere with him. I've told
you a thousand times—comedy is for
a moment, but tragedy is forever.

Comedians! They are but one step above
beggars. Lowly court jesters telling low,
common jokes—no one remembers their names.
But I would've made you immortal. I would've
made you a Queen! But, no, you want to throw
yourself away for some ordinary
happiness. I can't stop you. I don't care.
I don't need you. I got plenty other
girls lined up. But just know this, Woodhouse: when
you come crawling back to me in heartbreak
and despair, rest assured that I will find a
creative end for you. Death is, after
all, my specialty. Not once in all our
prior collaborations did I ever
imagine a simple bullet would be good
enough for you. Oh, no. Not with your flair
for the dramatic. No, I often thought
of driving you off a bridge. That'd suit you
quite well, I think. Until then, Tragic Muse

Boy Dreams

Took a summer drive, country callin' me.
Wind in my hair, Jeep itchin' to be off-road,
turned off State Route 11. Marshes thick,
grasses high, blackbirds fussy, give me a
scoldin'. But I don't care. They don't know I
belong here.

Jeep turns me right, she never lets me down.
I get out, feet hit the ground. It's dusty
here, like an old ball field. Red dirt crunches
beneath my shoes. I follow little-boy
footsteps, hear the crack of a bat, an echo
of hope, ball high in the air, a child's delight,
little-boy dream. Can't catch this one, it's
outta here.

Sun hot on my shoulders, weeds grabbin' my thighs.
Don't know where I'm goin', but I got a
feelin' somethin' is gonna find me here.
Red-wing blackbird takes to flight. I look up
high. An old oak tree lookin' down at me,
branches thick and green. Somethin' blue dangles
way up high. I'll never reach it, but I
gotta try.

I get my Jeep, she never lets me down,
park her just so and climb the roof, one foot
on metal and one on bark, I stretch up high,
pluck old blue from its lonely height. Ballcap
is threadbare, in sore need of care. Maybe a stitch
here and there. I brush away webs, cradle
it close 'cause no way in hell I'm leavin'
him here.

See, you let it go, but it found me. So,
I will give it back to you. I know this

belongs to you. Its crown is crushed, but I
will set it on your head. In this new life,
you will be my king. When you look into
my eyes, I see your boy dreams. I can take
the heat. I will score for you, win the game,
me and my Jeep, 'cause she never lets
me down.

Old blues—they are lonely men, but your kiss
tells me you want a fan in the stands. I will
cheer for you, make you feel lighter, stronger,
pump life back into your memory. We'll
retrace your little-boy steps if you'll take
my hand.

I turn my Jeep back to the road, birds are
glad to see me go. I think you and I
could fly. I'm driving for you, will drive all night,
wind in my hair. Got your wool, cardboard, and thread
on my passenger side. When I arrive, hope
you're ready
to go.

Rich at Last

Sold my soul to Justice,
was forever in her debt.
She always charged me interest,
sent her landlords to collect.

Weary of my poverty,
I pawned myself to Hope.
Got a dollar and some pennies,
and a little bit of rope.

Put my pennies on deposit,
banker was so kind,
he knotted up the lid
with my little bit of twine.

Hope got a little crazy
waiting for dividends,
bet on a pair of eights
decided to go all-in.

Love embraced the risk
decided to up the ante,
he undid my knotted lid
“Why not say you love me?”

My fingers shook, I poured
my pennies in his hand,
every one of them was gold.
I cried for joy, astounded.

“Oh, I’ve been a little fool!
Here, all I have is yours.
And more! I do love you,
wish I’d said so at the first.”

Heights

Winding roads and rivers, yellow-brick homes,
smoke stacks tall as nearby mountains filled with
deer and falling ash from valley steel mills.
Small church, small house, both with big hearts proud of
where they've been and where they went on their
adventures. Little children, little rooms, not
always happy, mostly fighting, wanting
more. Like bigger name recognition and
big prize money, big-time championships,
living big dreams. Taking winding roads to
get there, smoke in our eyes from the bridges
burning under our feet. Finding a new one
spanning our hearts, hidden in a river
valley—golden, peaceful, trajectory up.

Cathedral Window

Threads of metal
delicate curves of strength
frame inky hues of blue
the Jordan forever flows

Shards cut thin and fine
burnished by the sun
into milky pinions of warmth
the Dove forever flies

Lights dance upon
shoulders mantled in sanctity
arms groomed in silver
face veiled by gossamer

Fingers intertwine
bright gold bands
Two become like

glass
wedded
to steel

Home

With every picture we hang,
every sofa we arrange,
I am amazed
at my new home.
With every shelf we build,
every cabinet we fill,
I am shocked . . .
this is my home.

A few rooms are still undone,
and our bed remains in the foyer.
This home teases us
with its potential.
We have marked the paint of a few walls,
scratched the hardwood floors.
Try not to think of these as accidents.
They are growing pains.

When we discovered this house,
we saw immediately
the her spaces
the his spaces
the our spaces,
and they beckoned to us.
For the first time in my life,
I can come home
to my home,
to our home.

Behind the Scenes with
HEIGHTS & WOODHOUSE



“That was a nifty sleight of hand, Heights. Throwing Ray’s ballcap away. You almost even fooled me.”

“Ha-ha! Like that, Woodhouse? I had the notion he was gonna let it go. So, I prepared him. He should thank me, really.”

“I’m not sure he appreciated your gesture.”

“Of course, he did. Who doesn’t love a good magic trick? I know you do.”

“Yes. But only because you always let me in on the secret.”

“You know I couldn’t perform them without you.”

“Oh, stop, you embarrass me. Well, where’s the next show?”

“It’s the big one—Istanbul.”

“So soon? Can’t we just let Ray and Natalie enjoy their cozy little love story for a while?”

“Don’t get squeamish now, Woodhouse. We promised a big adventure. Everyone wants a big adventure.”

“I suppose Natalie did take one step down the path. I want to see how she and Ray end up.”

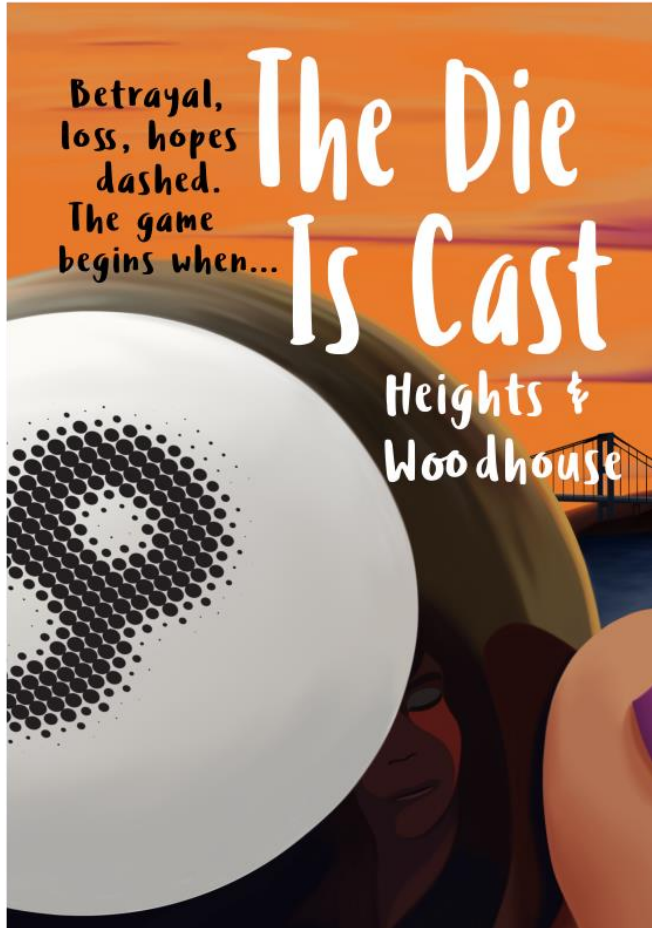
“Exactly. And what about all the other interesting characters ready

to take the stage? I mean, we can't cancel on the Pope. And what about the young heiress and her cute, teacup Chihuahua?"

"Hmm, that's true. And I do like solving the dramatic problems you conjure up. Your mind is full of mystery and mayhem."

"Aw, shucks, Woodhouse. Now I'm the one who's embarrassed."

<https://heightsandwoodhouse.com/books/the-die-is-cast/>



If You Made It This Far . . .

We thank you with sincere gratitude. If you enjoyed our tale *and* our poems, then please consider leaving a review at your preferred online retailer.

We would love to hear from you!

<mailto:hw@heightsandwoodhouse.com>