

THE ACADEMY

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Flickering past Althea's right eye: the swirl and dash of a staircase; a chandelier's crystal spray; a blue wall splashed with oil paintings, whose creams and golds were certainly nymphs and men on horseback. As she walked quickly past they illumined the dusk like a glimpse of skin between two blue halves of a shirt-collar—suggesting the beauty of the rest, promising it.

She crossed to the south side of 80th street and walked beneath more glowing windows. *70th between Broadway and Amsterdam.* “*70th between Broadway and Amsterdam,*” he had said. She was walking quickly because her feet naturally kept pace with her pulse, and because she wanted to be there first, to have a moment to catch her breath before he walked through the doors (tall, emerald-eyed), and to spend a moment's thought on actions like breathing became as base as to clean your fingernails in the palace at Versailles.

Of course she shouldn't think of him like that. If he was Versailles, then he wasn't the Versailles of dreams but the Versailles of reality: Don't touch. No photographs. Last viewing at 5:00. In the Versailles of your dreams you lived there, and after dark you walked through the glittering rooms and picked up each object one by one—sliding your hands over the enamel bowls, laying a kiss on the oil-paint lips of a king, and your head on the embroidered pillows. You read in the state-bedroom, drank wine in the drawing room, and played Chopin on the gilded spinet. Imaginary, illegal, *that* was the Versailles that summoned tourists over oceans.

He was Emily's boyfriend. Althea was allowed the dinner because she hadn't known Emily all that long. But for the promise of this night to be fully realized, she would have to very thoroughly forget the fact that Emily and Jonathan were very much a couple—not casually dating, not “been together two weeks”—and that Emily would hate her with the deep hate of outraged gods, the hate that became a life's work.

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“It's just not fair to her. I mean, come on—*It's her friend,*” the buzz-cut one accompanied these last words with three increasingly ponderous taps

on the bar in front of them, which bordered the window.

The one with the shaggy black hair gazed out at the traffic speeding up Amsterdam Avenue. “Well, that’s the thing,” he said, and smoked.

The buzz-cut one stared at his friend with raised eyebrows, his eyes full of concern. “I mean, think how hurt she’d be.”

“That’s the problem. Exactly.”

“OK, think about *this*,” the concerned one said. “Imagine if she did that to *you*...” his eyebrows leapt higher.

“I know. Exactly,” the shaggy one said, smoking and gazing out, but still half-turned towards his friend, so that she couldn’t see his eyes.

“With one of *your* friends...”

“That would be awful.”

“I’m saying.”

Listening to these men talk, Isabel thought in equal measure: “how banal”, and “perhaps I should start dating business men.” She was waiting for her boyfriend. She was sitting on the barstool next to the shaggy-haired one (her coat resting on the barstool to her right to save it for Jake) pretending to write in her planner. The first thought was unfair; the second impractical. But there was something stock in the words of this buzz-cut man, whose round featureless face she could see so clearly; and the shaggy-haired, no-faced one stared out onto the street, smoking, nodding his head, never challenging, never engaging, never an “oh for Christ’s sake” on his lips. On the other hand, Isabel had never been happy with artists—too much failure; too much time on their hands.

A roar at the main bar made the buzz-cut man a mime, tapping some words away on the palm of his hand, reaching to put a hand on his friend’s shoulder as he said something with a wide-open mouth, followed by a roll of the eye and a laugh.

“Just....call...you’ve changed your mind,” he said, the roar simmering.

“I’m supposed to meet her in...”—the shaggy one checked his watch—“forty minutes.”

(Rarely did one, eavesdropping, catch the full import of the conversation. And if one did, rarely was it of any interest, thought Isabel.)

“Just say something came up. Say your boss asked you to stay late.”

“Hmm.”

“No one can argue with that. You had to stay late—that’s it. Then if she starts bugging you to meet—if she starts calling you and shit, you tell

her you're not interested, you just want to be friends, it's not fair to Emily, and all that..."

He's going into business with his girlfriend's friend, and not telling his girlfriend about it, thought Isabel. How utterly ruthless.

* * *

Rounding the corner onto Columbus, Althea moved from homes to restaurants, delis and bars. The sky was darkening and there was a crowd coming from the park, from grass and wide avenues framed with trees. They were crossing the wide avenue, hailing cabs, pushing open the glass doors of restaurants. A thin woman in brown suede boots and a purple shawl with her hand to her long hair; a man in a blue suit and silver tie who looked like F. Scott Fitzgerald; businessmen with young faces talking on cellphones (this one cocking his head back with a laugh was speaking to a lover, not a client, she was sure). All these people hurrying past to meet lovers, to enter a bar (like the one on the corner there, copper-plated) drape their blue suit jacket over a hook and kiss their lover hello.

Althea had gone several times for drinks with Emily and Jonathan to a Spanish place near Emily's office, where they had leaned over low tables to talk and drank Sangria spiked with brandy. Twice they had moved on to a loud multi-level bar that would be a pub if it didn't have so many candles, and a lounge if it didn't have so much wood-paneling and so little wine. That first night she met Jonathan two images of him began to smolder in her mind, which the utterance of his name to coworkers ("I went out last night with my friend Emily and her boyfriend Jonathan"), the singing of his praises to his girlfriend ("Jonathan is *great*"), and the two other nights out with them, stoked until they glowed with a steady flame: One (A theory of his person): a blue-cuffed arm suddenly appearing over her head, lowering a small peach-colored drink onto the bar in front of her—"a present," he had said and smiled at her the smile people gave to people they had known from childhood, people whose faces were as familiar and perfect as their own; his green eyes glimmering high above her, through the black bar-air—not-so-distant planets. Two (A theory of his character): turning from a conversation with the bartender to see a stale-faced man touch Althea's shoulder and lean into her ear, he had put a hand on the man's shoulder and said, "This lovely woman is my brother's wife," a lie which had then turned into a fifteen-minute tale about the wedding, at the Plaza hotel, complete with maid of

honor (his own sister), lounge singer (Tony Bennett), and a toast given by Jonathan himself (“I couldn’t stop crying—can you believe it? A grown man, and I get up there, and I can’t speak I’m bawling so much!”)

Towards the end of that first night, Althea and Emily went outside for a cigarette. The street was quiet, away from the noise of the bar. Althea glanced inside but couldn’t see Jonathan through the heads and bodies and darkness. Emily remarked on how cold it was for March.

“Jonathan is *great*—totally charming!” Althea said, to bring him back, summon him into being until he fairly hovered over them.

Emily scrunched up her face, cocked an eyebrow and said with a laugh, “Jonathan is *ridiculous*.”

Jonathan had appeared to Althea in the ensuing weeks as someone to be taken quite seriously, however many jokes he had told; for beauty was always a serious matter. And she had often slipped this term “ridiculous”, like a suit, onto him, and found it didn’t fit—was too short at the ankles, too tight at the shoulders, and not at all a color that appreciated his complexion and eyes.

77th street and Columbus. 70th and *Amsterdam*. “70th and Amsterdam,” he had said. “Cafe Lumiere.” 70th street was now intensely beautiful—just as 23rd street, where her ex-boyfriend lived, had once been. She turned to see a bar lining the window of a restaurant at which faces glowed out towards the dusk, bending towards each other, or up towards a waiter—to order another round, another hour to sit under candles and move steadily closer towards each other. The steady stream of people flowed past her; flowed towards her. In the dusk everything lit up the streets; white shirts, blue eyes, the blue flowers beneath the trees became lamps, and like their cast-iron counterparts, they lit up the dark. Planetarium across the street, a red sun descended to earth. Trees darkening, while the sun glowed hotter. Mexican restaurant, couple seated—the man broad-shouldered, too big for the table, extended a soft, glowing hand towards a woman. Perhaps he belonged to someone else too.

She saw Jonathan and herself seated at that small table, over a tiny little oil lamp; saw herself in his eyes; then saw him leaning into her slowly, until his face was so close that she could no longer see it and only feel it—that face she had observed so often, at the other end of the bar, chatting to others, his eyes gleaming towards her, house-lamps up the road; or, when suspended high above her (pink drink; for her number), green planets in the night sky. That face that had become the face of every hero in every

book she'd read since she'd met him—did he know that he was Zola's bon-vivant and Tolstoy's Russian soldier? That he was capable of time travel and arrived in each epoch eloquent in the native tongue and resplendent in the local fashions?

76th street. She passed another restaurant, and again she saw him sitting there, leaning towards her; saw it both as actor-in-the-scene and as passerby peering in. What a picture! Notice how she captures the play of light upon their faces; the sensitivity with which she renders his gaze: *Two Young Lovers*—formally accomplished, conceptually sound work of art—how it fills the viewer with emotion!

And then Emily passed by this picture. For Emily, peering into this restaurant window, seeing them there, kissing, this was the ugliest; the most tasteless, yet also the most clichéd, vulgar without having anything interesting to say about human nature; a Hogarthian caricature of immorality. Oh the unfairness of it! One woman's pleasure was another woman's pain. She couldn't do it.

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The buzz-cut watched the shaggy-haired one look at his watch, take a sip of wine. The buzz-cut one took a sip of beer, and continued to watch his friend, who, turning his profile to Isabel, followed with his (she now saw) green eyes a young woman in a pink terry-cloth tracksuit run past the length of the window and then vanish.

"Anyway, I'm not convinced," the green-eyed one said.

* * *

Mike Larson made his way up Broadway, past 63rd street. He passed a window within which people, crowded around a bar, drank to forget their misery; surrounding themselves with lots of "friends" they'd probably known all of a week, in order to conceal how totally isolated they really were. In a place that hid people's worst faults in darkness, and drowned their petty gossip in a thumping techno beat, they handed over their money and received their poison. People came at him on all sides: cutting across his path, headed monomaniacally to the crosswalk, not caring who they tripped up; from behind, hurrying past him; head-on, their eyes never meeting his. And when they did let their guard down long enough to meet your gaze

(like this woman in the cashmere sweater), they looked away quickly (her eyelids blinking in irritation), as though to say, “How dare you soil my face with your gaze?” Young faces and old; people in suits, people in jeans—all looking up at the strip of sky, or down at the pavement, or at your cheek or ear, anything not to look you in the eye. There was something unnatural in being surrounded by all these people, touching their shoulders, the sleeves of their windbreakers, hearing their voices, smelling their perfume, and not so much as acknowledging that they existed. Theirs was that deep loneliness that becomes a disorder: they have been without family and community of any kind for so long their bodies now rejected it when it was offered them. They no longer know how to look their fellow human beings in the eye. Women with dark circles under eyes; green-faced men: all these people walking alone, heading home on a Friday night to collapse in bed, too tired even to stare at the ceiling. All orphans, come from far off places, working just to pay rent when they could live like kings anywhere else. In their hometowns they were considered radicals, when they were all just followers—Mike as much as the rest. But he wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for professional considerations.

A child was crying, standing near the street, clearly upset by the noise and jostling of the crowd, afraid he has lost his mother, who Mike could see trying to make her way to him through the businessmen on their cell phones. Nobody notices the child; everyone stares ahead, bombarded by advertisements, seething hordes, sirens, cab drivers with no respect for human life: the only way these people can survive is to shut.

* * *

76th street. Through the darkening air a man fixed her with blue eyes and vanished. Hadn’t the betrayal occurred already? Perhaps it hardly mattered what happened tonight—from a moral, if not a dramatic point of view. What difference did it make if she met him at restaurants or began visiting him at his apartment, when she already visited him several thousand times each day—when thousands of times a day he brushed her shoulder with his arm, clasping a pink-colored drink as emerald eyes gleamed above her from his towering frame (tall, stately, blue-collared). When thousands of times a day he leaned towards her, over the restaurant table, his face becoming vaguer and vaguer the closer he got and vanishing when he met her lips. The only way she’d stop seeing him was if he touched her.

But of course, it was not thinking but acting that counted. But what was action? When Althea said to Emily, “What sort of work does Jonathan do?”, she wasn’t looking into Emily’s eyes but into Jonathan’s. “What sort of work does Jonathan do?”

Then again, there was no outside to the text. The woman who lay in bed thinking of him, the woman who had seen those forbidden pictures vanished when Althea uttered those words for Emily’s ears. It didn’t matter what Althea’s inspiration had been. Althea had said, “What sort of work does Jonathan do?”, and not, “Jonathan is a god, a fairy king”—that was what after all mattered. Her heart didn’t soak her words in its true color, therefore it didn’t matter what one thought. Because we were capable of lying, of saying one thing and meaning another—were in fact born to it—thought wasn’t as meaningful as action. Having been found untrustworthy, it was dismissed from the proceedings of human interaction. Far from being sanctioned by absolute truth, morality wasn’t even a cultural construct: it was a physiological inevitability.

A woman and an older man in a wrinkled brown suit passed by. “I disagree,” the woman said. The man pressed his lips tightly together.

What if instead we were transparent? What if our thoughts were as nakedly visible as our faces? What if every idea, every association, every image, every memory (every face, moment, and word) that flitted through our minds, played, literally, upon our countenances—infusing them, as might a cold breeze, or a glass of wine, or an illness, or a smack on the face. Then people would respect the power of thought. “What a beautiful memory!” a woman might say, awe-struck by a man in the throes and spasms of recollection. “What a bitch,” Emily would say.

But perhaps she wouldn’t. If thoughts were considered as involuntary and uncontrollable as facial features, or height, or the color of one’s complexion, then people would accept them, in a way they had never accepted action; would judge them purely on aesthetic terms.

Althea headed down 75th street, through streams of people flowing towards the massive shops on Broadway. She glanced across the street. In the upper windows of a brownstone, a pale marble column was a warrior’s thigh. Two teenagers brushed past her, eating ice cream. At the corner of Broadway she passed a Starbucks; in the window a girl sat reading a book with her elbows on a counter littered with cups and tea bags and half-eaten muffins, as an employee mopped around her ankles. Now it doesn’t even have cleanness, thought Althea.

When she reached Broadway the crowd steadily thickened and faces surrounded her. The woman in a beige '30's dress-suit who cut her off, forcing her to come to a full stop and allow other people to rush past her, annoyed her, but then she reflected that they were all in a hurry, anxious like herself to get to their would-be lovers.

Bad enough that she wasn't turning back this instant; that she was still pulling down her silky tank-top beneath her black velvet jacket, so that it revealed enough but not too much of her breasts; that she was asking the eyes of every man and ultra-fashionable woman to sound the tone of her person. But that she could even think that anything could happen that night. No, she said to herself (catching from about ten paces away the eyes of a man with soft brown hair and quickly looking away); no, nothing beyond conversation. (When the man had gained her side she shot him a quick glance—yes, he was still looking. They passed each other. His brows had winced with the pain of attraction.)

* * *

“What do you mean ‘convinced’?”

“By what you’ve said.”

This was remarkable.

“What do you mean?” (People only pretended to be dense, only circled around an issue, to prolong the ecstasy of revelation, thought Isabel).

She stole more glances at the shaggy-haired guy, who kept his profile upon her. “Well I mean, you’re forgetting...” He tapped his cigarette against the glass rim of the ashtray, “I asked for her number.” He smoked the last of his cigarette and put it out. “See what I mean?”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t change your--”

“I approached *her*...”

“—Right, but still--”

“...So obviously, I...?” he inflected this like a question he was waiting for his friend to answer.

“What?”

The green-eyed one continued to stare out the window, occasionally following a woman or man as far as the window afforded and then staring dead-center once again. “I came up close to her, while Emily was outside smoking. I put my hand against her back, I asked if I could call her...” he turned partly towards his friend, leaving Isabel a quarter profile (oh, she

thought; oh, this was *far* better!)—"So obviously, I..."—he put up his hands.

The friend scrunched his eyebrows.

The shaggy-haired man held his pose (palms up, shoulders shrugged), but the friend continued to scunch his eyebrows.

"*Wanted* it?" he finally said, putting the cigarette to his mouth. "*Want* it," he said, puffing the cigarette.

"Well..." The friend gripped his beer, sipped it and put it down.

"That sounds obvious, but." Oh, she'd have to put this in her next article. The understated eloquence of businessmen. That could even be her title.

"Look, *wanting* it isn't the problem," said the buzz-cut one.

"I mean there's no *difference*—" began the shaggy-haired one. "If I *want* it, then already—"

"Look, it's Ok to want other women; it's totally natural. You just can't *act* on it, you know? There's nothing wrong with you being attracted to this girl, I mean hey—I *want* to sleep with Angelina Jolie, but I'm not going to!" he broke off, laughing. Isabel pictured his fat round face above Angelina Jolie's, lathering her taut skin with sloppy kisses. "Look, I'm your friend. I know it's no fun to hear it, but what kind of friend would I be if I wasn't honest with you? What are you really going to get out of it, right? I mean it's not like you're going to *date* her." The shaggy-haired one was silent, and the buzz-cut one continued. "You'll make out with her, maybe you'll sleep with her. But you'll feel like shit the next day—you know that."

The shaggy-haired man was fully turned towards his friend and though Isabel could tell he was speaking by the slight movement of his head and the hand gestures, she couldn't hear what he was saying (a group of people had just come through the door and were standing around, loudly deciding whether to stay or leave).

The buzz-cut man looked at his watch. "How about I go to the bar; get us another round. Ok, Jonathan? You're gonna stay here with me, have another round or two, then we'll go get a bite around the corner, at that Japanese place."

The green-eyed one's profile was visible once again; he was silent, staring dead ahead, smoking. The buzz-cut man watched his friend's still green eyes fixed on the darkening street; while Isabel eyed his parting lips. He put his cigarette out, folded his hands on the bar, and parted his lips further—but then his turning head swept his words away. Leaning forward, she strained

to catch them on the buzz-cut one's face, but was checked by the hot pressure of a hand upon her back.

* * *

74th street. Only four more blocks 'till 70th street, the name of which rang through the darkening city like a Christmas chime. "70th and Amsterdam"—he had said on the phone. It was like a simple text transformed by a world-class actor. Her English friend Cynthia once called New York's grid-named streets prosaic; Henry James had said that New York streets were "fatal to the imagination". But what could be more poetic than the attempt to distil beauty from a number! The heroic attempt to reveal the arbitrary nature of the signifier. Cynthia liked "Piccadilly" because she had once met someone she loved on that street, or something like that. "70th Street" was inherently no less beautiful than "Piccadilly"—it was just that no emerald-eyed fairy king had ever intoned it for her.

A woman in a green raincoat was walking beside her on a cell-phone: "I mean... *Yes!*—he's *so*...I just could *never!*..." she pulled ahead. In the windows of a café Althea could see a woman showing another woman photographs. In the pale yellow window of a diner a young man and woman were seated, elbows on the table, talking. The man shook his head and stood up. Coming up from behind Althea, a girl with dreads draped her arms around the neck of a tall long-haired man; as they tried to make their way through the crowd, he removed her arms, and they disappeared among a few fast-walking middle-aged women. "I know what the money's for," one said.

73rd street. And as she looked to her right at the people talking behind the windows of a wine bar, hands flying in the flickering candlelight, she thought of all the declarations she had made from similar bar-stools. "I think I'm in love with Fred," she had declared to her best friend in high school from a bar stool like that. All these people chatting in cafés, strolling down the street on phones, talking of anything and everything. Soon she and Jonathan would be seated in a café, talking in the public space of a restaurant, overheard by waiters who stood near them opening their bottle of wine, by the couple at the table next to theirs (she and the tables were indeed close); by whoever walked by their table. That was the amazing fact about life in New York: Life's most important confessions, declarations and romances weren't stifled behind the brick or clapboard siding of a house—they wafted in the open air of a sidewalk café, hovered over the close tables of a

brasserie, over the copper surface of a bar, whose bartender was not a foot away. On the corner of 14th street and 3rd Avenue; in a subway car beneath Broadway; on tree-lined 13th street; in a rowboat in the Central Park pond; in a restaurant on 70th and Amsterdam—at any given moment someone you knew was pouring their heart out in a public place, declaring a desire or despair that it would rock your world to hear. In some Italian restaurant, someone was betraying your confidence; in some corporate café, in some tiny dive bar, someone was declaring their love for you between foamy sips of chai tea latte or Guinness. If you could only know where, you could take the subway there, walk through that metal door, sit yourself at the bar and hear it. There was no question of overhearing things in the suburbs: declarations made from the living room sofa were absorbed into the plush carpets; confessions were silenced by the wood of the church confessional. And even though most New Yorkers generally didn't find themselves in the position to overhear something touching themselves or anyone they knew, the fact that you *could* (that if you were in that bar, or passing by that open-air café, you *would*) hear, was something quite exhilarating.

How tender and vulnerable this publicity made them all. They gave themselves away to every stranger who passed by. Waiters or passing pedestrians were welcome into their private lives more readily than certain friends; and the pavement on Broadway or the square tables in Cafe Lumiere were as intimate as your living room couch.

72nd street. She glanced at her watch and quickened her pace; she was running later than she thought and might only be there on time. But perhaps that image of Emily peering through the restaurant window, horror-struck would suddenly come over her and make her turn back—the fear that would pass by, whether literally or figuratively (what was the difference?—the fear was the same because the horror was). Perhaps when Althea got to 70th and Amsterdam she would take one look at the restaurant (which she knew to be a very dimly-lit, sexy place) and turn back uptown.

A stale-faced man looked her up and down; an elderly businessman on a cellphone eyed her sternly.

But why did she have to account for every passerby? Why did she have to have anything to do with one biased critic's opinion? Morality was essentially the belief that another person's point of view mattered: that if God wasn't any longer watching with the gaze that gives meaning to all that passes within it, other people were now watching (this man with the bifocals and stringy hair), and their gaze altered the meaning of events. There wasn't

just Jonathan and herself seated at a restaurant table; there was every single passerby that peered into the restaurant. To most passersby (to this young woman in a blue puffy jacket headed towards her) there was nothing wrong with two people sitting at a restaurant, over a bottle of wine, holding hands. Peering into the window as she passed, that woman would find the décor to her taste or not, the couple attractive or not; every judgment she passed for those two seconds would be aesthetic, or perhaps artistic. But if that passerby was Emily, then her point of view, her belief that this was wrong colored the scene: it became wrong. Never mind the countless spectators who might have been charmed or moved by it—one person's pride was offended, one person couldn't leave her prejudices at the door, and so the whole thing had to be shut down. As moral people we have to anticipate every potential viewer and censor our work accordingly.

She stopped short to let a biker pass.

She would sit back and talk of politics. "No, just a glass," she'd say. "I have to work tomorrow." "Emily's wonderful," she'd say. "I haven't known her that long, but I just think she's so wonderful," beaming at him with selfless good will, her face warm with the warmth of fellow feeling.

To her right were the window-framed tables of a white-walled, brightly lit Greek restaurant at which a man was lifting his fork to his mouth, as, across the table, his date peered into her open purse. Perhaps all the people Althea had seen in restaurants had gone out and met up with people because they were hungry, and were tired of take-out; or because they felt like the relaxation of company after a day of paper-work. Perhaps they walked calmly to the restaurant, greeted their friend, ordered a Diet Coke, and looked immediately at the menu.

She wouldn't go. No, she wouldn't go at all.

* * * *

Mike crossed 67th street, heading towards the subway, which he knew would be hellishly hot and stifling, and where he would behold dejected people staring straight ahead, their pale complexions proof that human countenances needed fresh air to thrive.

A woman sat on the step of a deli putting on make-up, like it was her bedroom; a guy with headphones on was rapping, beating the rhythm on his thighs, trying to impress every one around him, even as he pretended to shut them out. People were sitting in cafés by themselves, pretending to

read as they eavesdropped on the couples around them. Children walked with their parents—children! How could the best virtues of childhood be nourished here? In a place where one couldn't see the stars! Not one. The skyscrapers and the smog conspired to blot out the heavens. This was not a place for the innocent.

People were swarming around Broadway, brushing past him from all directions. A man in a suit who was used to people doing his bidding cut Mike off—oh yes, your time is of more value than mine!, thought Mike, as the suit hurried towards the doors of a restaurant, in which people were packed like sardines into tiny tables, paying a fortune to avoid being in their homes more than the seven hours it took to sleep. People at work went out to dinner, but he did not go. He didn't want to sit like that (*those* tables were even closer!) trying to hear his companion speak, unable to see them in the dark. Back home a friend would invite you over for dinner. You would drive the ten minutes to get there in your comfortable car, with pleasant music on, and you would sit in their comfortable kitchen or chairs with their family and friends and eat a good home-cooked meal in the warmth and spaciousness and privacy of a home. If it was summer you would sit on the porch, chat with the neighbors at the next house—you actually knew the people near you—and drink lemonade. There were always people over, always people to talk to.

Perhaps he hadn't given New York a fair chance; perhaps if he had met someone he loved here...but how was that possible! Everyone was in their own world, no one cared about anyone else. Still, there might be *someone...*

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Under the darkening sky Althea crossed Broadway, which was cut across by wide 72nd street. Looking back towards the west, 72nd street was a long silver carpet laid over the avenue and through the buildings, leading regally to the park. She looked up at the blue slab of sky, by the towering stately building on the corner (whose tiny upper windows were like fires lit in a hilltop town to show pilgrims or weary travelers the way). She had stopped; people brushed past her on all sides. She took in the pale strips of sky, such a pale blue they were almost green. The cold breeze widened her eyes to drink in this cool green purified by the cold. The blue-green light transfixed her to the pavement, while the sky poured its cool blue liquid into

her eyes and down her throat. How could she turn her face from beauty? How often did it come along? How many chances did she think she had? She glanced at her watch. She would only make it just in time!

She walked very quickly. He might already be there, standing by the bar, a smile upon his lips, his eyes gleaming out at her like a beacon from a tower. She shot forward; turned her body sideways; slowed when surrounded on all sides, then shot off through an open space on the right. The people were so many dragons she had to fight to get to the beautiful prince—ducking under umbrellas, charging between people lost in conversation, breaking into a run to escape the cabs speeding towards her, landing safely on pavement—71st street; charging on...

* *

Not meeting Mike's eye for a moment, her face calm with the indifference of one who has no love for anyone or anything, and thus has nothing to lose, she hit his shoulder, jostled him; he almost fell back. He turned around, cursing her. She sprinted ahead, so deadened she didn't even know she had struck him; her back a receding black speck of indifference, dissolving through the glass doors of a restaurant. With outspread arms he flung invisible fire-bolts at her, and with her all of New York fell.