

*Mr. & Mrs. Hide*



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*Mr. & Mrs. Hide*

SPINELESS BOOKS



URBANA, ILLINOIS



# *Part One*



You have to choose sides.

She:

is difficult, intolerant, overly  
demanding,  
autocratic, easily loses her temper,  
constantly counting, adding,  
subtracting: footsteps, breaths,  
bathroom tiles;  
innumerable mechanical motions  
needed  
to wash hands, brush teeth;  
touching things, chairs, walls,  
doorknobs,  
in particular sequences, a particular  
number of times, one for her  
mother, one for the father, one for  
the sister,

He:

is shy,  
possessive,  
sex-obsessed,  
hates to exercise,  
eats too many sweets,  
enjoys being lazy,  
talks too much,  
likes to fool himself that people are  
essentially good;  
Mr. Know-It-All,  
rude to fellow drivers,  
doesn't say hello to neighbors,  
likes America,  
likes sex,  
is insanely jealous and stubborn.

peace, for all the people she  
knows, for all those she doesn't;  
lately thinking of having children,  
sensitive to dry skin, dry hands, the  
feel of dry feet on a carpet, allergic  
to dust, allergic to wool,  
argues with shop-attendants,  
distrustful towards strangers,  
when talking gesticulates wildly,  
like a scarecrow in the wind,  
gets annoyed easily, especially by  
him,  
fears sickness, fears death of people  
who are close to her, fears natural  
disasters, insists on living a healthy  
life,  
scratches uncontrollably when  
nervous,  
hates washing her hair,  
hates America,  
hates sex,  
is insanely jealous and stubborn.

## 2

A cartoon of a postal van pulls up in front of the red brick, two-story apartment building at 636 North Plymouth Boulevard, just south of Melrose and the main entrance to Paramount Studios' movie town. A fat, black postman works up a light sweat climbing some half dozen stairs. This was easier only the day before when he was a 103-pound Malaysian woman with a tropical hat. The door is locked but he lets himself in by reaching the inside doorknob through the tall, narrow window on his left. Quickly he releases the mailbox panel and starts feeding the boxes with letters, bills, offers one cannot afford to pass up. The hall is dark and musty, like a bottom of a neglected swimming pool. The draft from the



back exit pulls in the smell of an over-filled garbage container stuck in the corner of the small parking lot. The postman's face is stone-like and serious, his hand is just and sure. He'll stick a white envelope in every gaping hole except the one marked "103." But before he locks the panel back up, into that one, in an act of purely professional pity, he'll throw a leaflet with a missing child on one side and a discount dry-cleaning deal announcement on the other. Regardless of the rumors, the U.S. Postal Service never lets anyone down.

3

Days as clear as this one are rare. Days washed clean, when the world seems to be starting anew. Days when you can see the hills.

"Look, the Hollywood sign!" She points like a child, they see the Paramount water tower, white letters to the right of it spelling the word, a stamp struck on mortgaged realities and tired dreams, a cry for help that has never been answered. The parking lot behind their building is the place from where every Hollywood postcard was shot.

Nasia and Oren are not allowed to park here. One needs to come up with fifty bucks for the space or, alternatively, charm the manager. They are incapable of either so they park out in the street and the only chance for them to see the sign is when they come back here to throw out the trash. They do that together. Dispose of the waste. They do everything together. A family of rats feasts on a heap of rust-red hygienic pads in the corner. They dump a bag of orange peels, eggshells and bean cans in the container (he pushes the lid open, she throws in the bag).

"Look, the sign," she murmurs, "the sign." It's a chant, a ritual worship of the word arrogantly nesting in the hills, to show the Fame they are ready to be hit with a jab in the face, an uppercut straight to their twinned hearts. Then they go back in to check the mail (he unlocks the mailbox, she sticks her hand in), but there's nothing there, except for a lost kid; lots of them lately, lots of children lost in the city of Los Angeles.

She crumples the flyer, lets it drop into the waste bin.

The building is moving like a ship going down. Why come to Hollywood?

“Cheap seats get you the best view of a disaster.” She starts back to their place.

He doesn’t listen, reaches into the waste bin for the missing child, stuffs it in his pocket.

#### 4

She chops carrots in the kitchen. No one forced her—she volunteered. He reads out loud an article about a gunfight three blocks away, five months ago. The yellow newspapers make decent curtains, but are a bit unreliable when it comes to keeping one informed. He moves away from the windows.

As she presses on the knife, her behind shifts rhythmically. Hard and determined like coiled asps. He comes to breathe in her ear. She chooses to ignore him. Waits for his palm to slide between her thighs. He takes her hand, replaces a carrot with his penis. She puts the knife down next to it.

He’d like to get her a ring, at least a cheap one, the very idea makes him groan with delight: then it would be like fucking someone else’s wife. He pulls down her pants, frees one of her legs enough to allow him to press tighter against her. Maybe this time she’ll let him. A ring is a mark of submission. He wouldn’t mind wearing a ring, if she’d occasionally let him be in charge. But she doesn’t want one. The lady at the public notary’s office took it personally when they showed up without wedding bands. Apparently they had spoiled it for her, she had gotten dressed up and all. A golden midget Jesus around the old lady’s goitered neck stared mercifully (Jesus is always merciful) at their torn jeans and yellow rubber boots. They had gotten married on an island where people had sheep, ragged, rain-soaked, marked with red, green and yellow paint. The two of them considered staying a bit longer. Till death do them part. They got married in the wintertime, wind storms kept ferries in the harbors. They lost their nerve, took the first ship off as soon as the storm died down.

He frees himself from her hold. Looks her straight in the face. Her eyes are closed.

Right now, she’s fucking a big fat nanny in the park. She makes her take off her uniform, spread it on the grass, lie on her back. The pale flesh spills

over. At the touch of a hand her breasts and belly wobble like jelly, her small triangular cap bobs up and down on blond silky hair, like a paper plane lost in a rosebush.

He picks her up, performing a fancy balancing act with her left nipple between his teeth, but as he's about to insert himself, she presses the icy blade of the knife against his stomach.

"Jesus Christ!" Oren jumps as if bitten, puts her down.

Nasia pulls up her pants.

"Keep it out, I told you!"

They don't fuck. That's the rule. Not each other or anyone else. Not since they came here. She goes down on him, he sticks his tongue in her, sometimes a finger, but that's it. No risky business till they make some money. She's allergic to pills. He's allergic to her being allergic. She's lying, but he lets her. Because of what happened. That's why he agrees. To be her lesbian friend.

5

Afterwards, Nasia and Oren walk over to Kinko's on Vine. She humors him by guessing along the way which people have just had some kind of sex. But it's just the two of them and the mulatto transvestite prostitute. In oil-stained green stilettos the mulatto balances on the curb waiting for his next ride. Stretches his leopard-patterned skirt over angular hips. Anxiously licks a freshly split lip. A waft of warm wind picks up a plastic bag. Nasia and Oren follow it intently as the distressed polyethylene pirouettes through the air. At Kinko's they copy their stories. It makes them feel like writers.

6

*Car pulls up, girl gets in. The car is a beat-up 1978 Buick Electra with many-colored layers of hand-applied paint flaking off in scabs. The girl is a kind of a girl who gets into any car that pulls up in front of her. But before she starts to recite the price list, the driver says, Tyrone, mom's in the hospital. The girl adjusts her skirt, the driver is her brother. Is it bad, she asks. Bad enough for you to go and see her. Okay, I'll go see her, she says. Yes, you will, I'm taking you right now.*

No, you're not, she says, I can't go like this. There's some clothes of mine in the back seat. I can't change in here. Well, I'm not stopping. Fuck you, says the girl and peels her top off. Her breasts are oversized mounds of chocolate pudding. Her brother looks at them out of the corner of his eye. Remembers how they used to shoot hoops when they were kids. Your tits are the size of basketballs, he says. Your brain is the size of a pea, she says. She gets into a plaid shirt and a pair of oil-stained coveralls. The clothes smell of sweat and beer and Old Spice. Here we are, the driver says pulling up in front of the hospital. It's room 301. You're not coming? I'll wait here, good luck. In room 301 an old woman sits alone in her bed next to the window. Two other beds are empty, waiting. The woman looks out; all she sees is a square of blue sky. When the girl in coveralls comes in, the woman moans, my baby, you came! She's acting both feeble and strong, stricken and serene. How you doing, momma, the girl asks. She stops at the old woman's feet. Oh, I'm old, that's all, just old and tired. But come here, she makes room on the bed, sit next to me. The girl comes near. The old woman hugs her. Hard. Oh, my baby! The girl piles up on top of her. I'm here, momma. Baby? I'm here, momma. What's this, baby? The old woman grabs the girl's breasts. What did you do to yourself, Tyrone? Momma, stop it! Tyrone? When the girl manages to break loose, her shirt is wide open. Oh, my baby, what did you do? It's okay, momma, now don't get upset. The old woman is terribly pale. Her eyes bulge and nostrils widen. Momma? Oh, my God, I'm think I'm gonna die. You cut it off, didn't you? No, I didn't, says the girl. Yes, you did. No, I didn't. Yes, you did. No, I didn't, look. The girl unzips her coveralls and takes out her penis. The woman stares at it mesmerized. Come closer, she says. She reaches for it. Her dry, wrinkled hand encloses the girl's shriveled scrotum. Praise the Lord, says the woman, praise the Lord! Her eyes swell up with tears. The window fills up with bright light as if an angel chose it for a resting place.

## 7

Their desk is a foldable square table with a black imitation leather top they had bought along with four foldable Euro chairs at the K-Mart on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. It still isn't very clear what makes the chairs European, but the whole set had been only \$39.99, and it adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the hasty, camping-trip style in which their apartment is predominantly decorated.

The work area is situated where the TV would be, beneath windows adorned with curtains fashioned from pages of the first issue of the *Los Angeles Times* they bought upon arrival. The table itself is far from reliable. Only one book is allowed on it, the one with their names on the cover squeezed in between a too-long title and nine bare behinds. Nothing sells a book like a naked ass, at least that's what they thought. So for their first and thus far only book they had to have nine, but it proved to be a flawed sort of mathematics.

Heavy dictionaries end up on the floor, but even then, the table is cluttered with computers whose keyboards have five extra keys for characters no one uses this side of the Atlantic, and scraps of paper with thoughts that couldn't wait for Windows to load, all of it announcing: Serious writers at work!

8

"What does it say?"

His gloomy face is answer enough.

Bank of America ATM on Larchmont. The two of them a regular pair of pagan worshipers in front of the oracle. It's a weekly ritual, and the news is never good. They've managed to transform ten thousand dollars into seven thousand, seven thousand into six. Now they have five. \$5,064.78 to be exact. None of it is even their money. It's her parents'. The subtle similarity between what they're doing and a bank robbery is intensified by the sound of the distant sirens.

"Okay, so how much this time? Forty?"

She fidgets. "Sixty."

"We'll need to buy gas." He opens his palms like a checkbook.

"Okay, a hundred, but you'll have to make it last."

The ATM squeaks and growls in protest but coughs out the dough. As he crumples the twenties and stuffs them into his pocket, the sirens fill the street. It's only firemen.

**9**

A silvery black crow jumps from the curb and runs across the street, like a chicken that has stolen a piece of luck from somebody's back yard. The heat stills the afternoon into an oil painting, colors melt and mix from too much light. The crow moves fast, it's a secret agent in a black raincoat, only it never rains in Southern California, and things remain secret only if they are worthless to all parties concerned. Yes, like little Sonny Bono in a black silk kimono the crow crosses the street, too lazy to fly, or too proud. On the other side, in the shade of a magnolia tree, the crow will lull itself to sleep and dream what make of a car it would drive if it were a man. Or a woman. Something slick and shiny, something foreign—a Lexus, no, a Mercedes...

**10**

O: Stop it.

N: Stop what?

O: Stop scratching yourself.

N: I'm not.

O: Stop it, you hear? I'm not telling you again. (*yes, he is*)

N: What?

O: Stop scratching. Your legs will be covered with scabs like last winter.

N: No, they won't.

O: Stop it, you'll get blood poisoning, your sores will get infected, they'll have to cut off both your legs to save you.

N: Shut up, you idiot!

O: Stop it, you hear?

N: Why don't you give your mother a call.

O: Stop scratching.

N: You haven't called her since we got here.

O: Yes, I did. (*no, he didn't*)

N: You're really weird, you know that. What's the big deal, why don't you call her?

O: You're weird. Stop scratching.

N: You should call her.

O: Okay, I will. (*no, he won't*)

## 11

It's a Californian house, meaning one cannot describe it by using those simplifying names one finds in art history and urban architecture books. It's made of red bricks and if it weren't for the evergreen palm trees across the street one might think it's an old eighteenth century Bostonian building, maybe the very one in which, one gloomy fall around five in the afternoon, the Tea Party plot had been conceived. But if you look a bit closer you'll notice the bricks form a thin skin over the prosaic wooden frame (pine from Canada, or California redwood). There is a gothic porch and a rococo chandelier at the entrance. The hall is adorned with giant pseudo-Van Gogh bowl-headed sunflowers, khaki-colored carpet, twenty creaky stairs to the upper floor. Plastic flowers in the vase, humidity in the spent air, a line of doors with gilded numbers on them, like cells in a meticulously arranged correctional facility. The nervous sound of a deadbolt unlocking. A black Labrador jumps out and barks at the empty hall. There's no one to stop him. The dog notices the main entrance is open and slowly, very slowly, shifting the weight of his heavy dark body from one leg to the other, in a repeated four-step sequence, exits the building.

Dogs observe the world only in black and white, maybe that's why he's so unimpressed with the view. Because it's a nice neighborhood, every half-decent real estate agent would tell you so, it's ideal for people who don't have money for a place of their own and yet can't afford to live in a poor neighborhood. A stretch of two-story houses with eclectic gardens and solid second-hand cars. Only a couple of hundred yards down south spreads the rich area of Larchmont villas. But not here. People are modest here, the only expensive things are their dreams.

Hey, what's that? A big fat orange cat perched in the middle of the sidewalk. C'mon, dog, what are you waiting for? C'mon, man!

The cat spots him. But doesn't move.

Neither does the Labrador, he just lifts up his hind leg and waters an

abandoned cigarette butt. The amber fizzles out with a hiss.

The cat yawns. The dog returns to his apartment. He's colorblind.

The very next moment a person enters the building from the back exit. The iron door is stuck open with black pebbles by people who regularly go out for a smoke at the parking lot or let their pets out for a walk. A flower box filled in with these pebbles is right next to the exit, nothing's been growing in it for years. The man, it must be a man, otherwise it's a too tall and ungraceful woman, the man walks in like nothing but a dark, disfigured shadow, his sides torn by the sun's radiance pouring in from the end of the tunnel-like hall behind him. Walks up to one of the apartments, presses his ear to the door. Listens. After awhile, after he's heard all he wanted to hear, or after he makes sure there's nothing to be heard, he skulks away the same way he came in.

## 12

"Jagua!" A male voice, as British as popcorn, croons over the radio. "Bo'n to po'f'om!"

Up till a moment ago Oren was singing to Nasia how she makes him feel *like a natural woman*. It's their third time around the block in search of a parking space, but the sun is still high enough in the sky—they have time. People are funny animals. Good times are never as memorable as the bad times. Never as intense. A person has to win the lottery or give birth to a child to remember. Other good times just dissolve in time, like aspirin in water. They are never as sharp as the bad things. Good things are like a mild summer day. Bad things are the coldest day of the winter, they don't compare. Good things don't stand a chance of being remembered. It's the bad ones you remember. Good ones you either live or you don't.

"Look, there's one!" He swerves into an empty slot, right front wheel humping the curb.

She just says. "We won't remember this tomorrow." Taps the dashboard with her fingernails, he's trying not to notice it, it's that Morse code of hers, right now she's in the middle of sending a message to the universe and the radio booms. "Free world! Free world!" with a cartoon cackle, "Well, if it's free, then eeeeeverybody should join in!"



## 13

When they get home there's a message on their machine. "Shalom, Nasia and Oren..." It's just Elad. Inviting them to his show.

"Cool." They respond with fake enthusiasm. One should never try to contact a pair of writers with any news other than that of a publication contract.

But then they feel ashamed. Elad's okay. They met him when he tried to break into their '93 Nissan Altima. He had mistaken it for his own Altima—it's beige like theirs, only a year older. They thought it was some sort of a sign and decided to immediately become friends with Elad. It was just after they had bought their car, and they were proud and nervous. They had bought it from a nice Russian Jew by the name of Greenberg. Elad was a nice Hebrew Jew by the name of Gilbom. It was a sign.

Only later did they discover there are thousands of beige Altimas in L.A. At least a half of those are driven by nice Jews whose last names start with a "G." Nevertheless, they had decided to be friends just with Elad.

## 14

She has no idea, when did it actually start, at what precise moment of her life did she develop this need, this irresistible yen to touch, chairs and tables, doorknobs, bedposts, shelves, books. She'll cover the whiteness of a wall with the drumming of her dancing fingers, imbuing it with the music of inner imbalance, looking for the right sequence, golden pattern, seeking the equilibrium of non-existing truths. As if with a built-in Geiger counter she's detecting loose radioactivity to feed her mind, calming it.

## 15

Sitting on the toilet, he reads Fante's *Ask the Dust*. After a couple of pages he comes across the line where Fante worries about going blind like Joyce. He flips to the last page of the book. Fante did go blind, from diabetes. His wife's name was Joyce. Oren starts to worry about his own eyes, thinks he might develop diabetes—maybe it's caused by something transmitted through words, thoughts?

**16**

There's a Modigliani exhibition at LACMA. Nasia and Oren have never seen any of his original work. As they stand in front of the portrait of a servant girl, a broken whisper reaches them from a small hallway to the right. It's hard not to overhear.

"Now don't get upset. Let's be honest. You want to be honest, right?"

The male voice creeps over the marble like spilled honey.

The woman wheezes in agreement.

"Good." The man is pleased. "Then let's be honest. I... it's like this, the whole thing reminds me of this place, a museum, lots of beautiful memories, but there's nothing alive here any more. I'm sure you feel this way too."

"What do you mean?" The female voice quivers in anticipation.

"But you know, you understand, I mean, how much longer can it go on, let's not make a scene, I'll... I'll always be there for you, but, and I'll need you to return my keys, after all..."

Here Nasia rolls her eyes in disbelief, Oren points with two fingers to his mouth as if he'll force himself to vomit.

"Oh, it's all so sudden, do you think—"

"Please, you're, eh, too good for me anyway, and here I am making an ass of myself, really, I hope no one's listening, but—"

The servant girl in the painting is slanting her head to the point where it appears it might fall off her bottleneck. What depressive brew does she contain, Nasia thinks. Premature and phthisical, Modigliani's women are melancholic containers of life about to go stale, new wine going sour without ever reaching its rightly deserved age.

There's a subtle rattle of keys.

"Would you let go, would you, please, let go?" The man strains to keep his voice down. "I need those. Okay, suit yourself, it's been, whatever."

Brutal sound of steps dissolves towards the main exit.

When they turn there's a Modigliani woman sitting on a museum bench, her knuckles white from clenching a set of keys in the black nest of her lap, her head slightly cocked, her eyes canceled with a sadness one could frame and sell for a million.

17

Law and order. How to get by?

First day of the week, one side of the street gets cleaned. Park your car on the other. Nine till eleven a.m. Next day, the other side gets cleaned. Park on the side that got cleaned yesterday. Nine till eleven a.m.

Lock the door, unlock the door.

Eat three meals a day, fewer if you're past twenty-five.

Wash the dishes, dry the dishes. Wash the clothes, dry the clothes. But not before you break your dollar into quarters. Or before others do their laundry.

Pay your bills. Electricity. Phone. Internet access. Car insurance. Water. Something else that escapes your mind right this moment.

Listen to complaints: it's not poetry, got no rhythm. Not prose either. Needs firm ideas, concept, structure, plot.

Buy newspapers to cover your head. Tell everyone you're sleeping. Disconnect.

Let the ocean hum in the distance. Even if you can't hear it.

18

*Superheroes are always alone. Heroes too. Defying challenges inconsiderate fate throws in their path. Darah cleans her refrigerator, gets rid of all the half-full cans and packages. What do they think, how many beans can a sane person stuff herself with? Why don't grapefruits grow in halves? All too big: half-empty carton of milk gone sour, half-eaten sushi—grains of rice thick as worms, cut-in-half cucumbers. And all the while she's supposed to feel guilty for the starving people in Asia and Africa. She should sue the manufacturers for constantly depressing her. She should. Start simultaneous class-action suits on each continent.*

*Darah basks in her solitude. Especially evenings. She lies on the couch with feet scooped up and lets her fancy run with sweet little children about to be eaten, ogres and ghouls of the Grimm Brothers' stories. Happy endings make her laugh, but laughter echoes strangely in an empty home. Darah noticed, it's much easier to be sad or even cry, more natural. Must be because of the silence. It's interfering with her reading. It's too loud. She can hear the grandfather clock from the apartment next door, steps in the hall, washing machine drone, furniture creaking, TV on.*

*Someone's having someone over. Not her. Silence rolls like a steel marble across a table of glass. Can you imagine what laughter would do to it? It would break the glass into thousands of hissing pieces, melt the steel into quicksilver.*

*It's all part of the plan. The walls around her are erected with a dark, destructive design. To keep her away, as far as possible from fellow beings, spiders and termites included. They let you have everything: clothes, lots of food, the newest DVDs, a deep, dark radio voice you can happily masturbate to, uninterrupted, in private, safe. Occasionally there are spectacular fireworks to observe from your balcony, but for someone else's birthday. They give you things, you work for things with things, smooth, shiny, reliable (people aren't nearly as reliable). It's a positive feeling, to work and live with a purpose, get paid for your time and effort, in attainable beauties and useful objects. Yes, you understand it's because they want you under their control, they want you addicted to comfort and security. They want you alone and in need of a human touch, it's perfectly normal, just go talk to your shrink, he'll break it all down for you. It's good to want, to yearn, to necessitate, it makes you shop better and keeps you happy, keeps shopkeepers happy, keeps Dow Jones happy, that's your function: you're a regular little happiness dispenser.*

*When Darah gets exhausted by the persistent silence and its overbearing noise, refrigerator purring, air conditioner crackling, computer sighing, she turns on the TV so the babbling men and overbearing women can molest her with their affordable stories.*

## 19

*"And now, ladies and gentlemen, give a warm triple-C welcome for... Elad Gilbom!"*

There's a sort of welcome, but it's hardly warm. It's near the end of the talent show and the crowd has grown tired of stale jokes, stale air, stale beer. One of those nights when the excitement just never blooms from that first bottle of Bud conveniently included in the price of the admission.

But Nasia is clapping, so Oren claps too.

The *Crummy Corona Café* is dim, dull and wooden. Faux leather whimpers and crackles as people shift their behinds in uneasy expectation, the stained brass-studded bar glows like the yellow teeth of a dead man, a jangle of ice loosens the air for the comedy to work its magic.

Elad Gilbom enters the stage and women in the first row immediately giggle. It's easy to see that he who never wears suits has dressed up just for the occasion. He considers himself a professional. Professionals wear three-hundred-dollar, pure-wool suits, white shirts and drowned-blue ties.

Elad starts with his standard opening joke. "First let me explain what a sit-down comedian is. It's the sort of comedian who stands up for awhile, before he gets his chair and sits down."

From outside of the wall of spotlight he pulls in a chair and takes a seat. Now he's got everyone's attention.

He looks tired, but his face shines with a kind of dogged determination. The corners of his lips point downwards giving him a timid, almost frightened expression. People think he's going to cry. But then he speaks, just soft enough to make all in the club bend slightly towards the stage:

"Tonight I'm going to talk about politics."

One person bursts into nervous laughter.

"Do you have any idea what the government you voted for is doing to you right now? No? Well, let me tell you. First of all, they are washing your brains squeaky clean by using your deepest fears and the cheapest dish-washing liquid."

Silence takes a deeper bite of the auditorium. People hold on to the drinks that have to last them till the end of the act. Fear shrinks the brain to a raisin of reason. Liquor keeps it nice and soft and swollen.

"In the cold war era they used the bomb on you. Today they are using the credit card."

More than one hand flies involuntarily towards a pocket, purse or a wallet.

Nasia and Oren chuckle in anticipation. They've seen Elad's act before, never uses the same material twice, doesn't have to, at least that's what he says, the woeful ways of a morally bankrupt administration provide him with more than enough.

"You think you're supposed to be afraid of the terrorists? No, the terrorists are just comic relief! The real fear is whether you'll have a job tomorrow. And if you do, will you have to go find a second job anyway? The real fear is that you work to stay alive, but you stay alive only in order

to work. The real fear is that you'll get sick, and what'll cover you won't be your medical insurance but a white sheet pulled up over your face. You'll scream, I'm not dead, I'm alive, I'm alive! But they won't care, they'll be just doing their job, happy to have one."

By now some members of the audience are getting up to leave, peeling away like guilty shadows; others are pinned like brittle butterflies. Elad Gilbom owns the place.

"Think about it, what's a credit card?" The crowd is dumbstruck. "A gamble. The money you never had with which you're buying things you don't own. All this time you're hoping you might win, you just might end up holding some cold, hard cash in your hand. But you never do, because you're spending money you never had, buying things you don't own, which automatically prevents you from ever really having that money you never had in the first place. A gamble, the dice are loaded. And you end up working all the time and making money, but never seem to have any, and you don't own the car you're driving, or the house you're living in, you're just taking care of them for the bank. When you look at it, you're just taking care of yourself for the bank, 'cause they own your ass, and all you have for your very own are your fears. Why? Because they let you have them! But not for free, mind you, there's no such thing as a free lunch, and eventually you have to pay, even for your fears."

With this his set ends. He walks off the stage carrying his chair. The only one clapping now is Nasia, since Oren is too embarrassed. The spell Elad Gilbom put on the club slowly eases up. People come around blinking like children, they stagger for the bar, the toilet, the exit.

"So, how did you like it?" Elad pops up at their table in black T-shirt, jeans and bright smile, miraculously transformed, looking as refreshed as if it was one of his other multiple personalities using his body up to a minute ago leaving the real him enough time to rest.

"I hope you have your get-away car parked near." Oren grins. "Soon as they take a piss people will be calling the cops."

"You were great!" Nasia never has a problem giving a compliment.

"Okay, then let's get out of here!" Elad snaps his fingers and they hustle out into the ignorant Hollywood night.

20

Wooden poles stapled to death—slim punk poles with pieces of flyers helplessly fluttering in the wind. A forest of stapled trees, that's L.A. Stapled poles—cacti in the human desert.

Lost, kitty? Not to worry, momma's gonna put your picture up on the pole and you'll be found within a week, unless you get run down by a Chevy Impala.

Moving sale, everything must go!

Everything must go? Okay, but do we really have to? We just got here.

21

"You shouldn't have come here." A parrot-like voice greets them from rows of bottles and candy. A two-note electric bell agrees in a sad, belated welcome. Al's Liquor is a true Ali Baba's cave of alcohol, walls covered in liquid ambers, emeralds and rubies, refracting the light, keeping it imprisoned.

"Don't mind, Grandpa," says Al, "he's harmless."

But the clinking of the bottles comes from the belly of the store to contest this allegation.

Al's probably the only shopkeeper in the neighborhood who doesn't mind breaking five-dollar Lincolns into laundry quarters. Oren picks up the papers, Nasia goes among the racks to investigate.

"I shouldn't have come here." The voice leads her deeper into the dark, away from refrigerators filled with beer wrapped in cold luminescence. She knows what it's saying. It's cold here, intentions and thoughts stored away behind thick glass doors, nothing relayed, nothing passed on except looks, glances, people communicating in a language of nuisance, not a language of necessity, a supermarket existence with emotions packaged in plastic vacuum, frozen, dehydrated. What are you people thinking, you can't microwave yourself into feeling when you just happen to feel like it!

The voice turns into a cough when Nasia corners it between fruit-flavored vodkas and martini mixes to discover it belongs to a four-foot old man clad in clean white. His sleeves are too short, making his arms, fingers, hands appear even more odd, gnarled, knotted, monkey-like as he

skillfully sorts bottles of wine in what is obviously the wrong section of the store.

"This is my punishment." The old soul chants, white cap plugged with his brown skull shaking. "For selling poison to the children."

"That's not true, Grandpa." Al winks at Oren. "We never sold liquor to kids."

"Yes we did, Ali, yes we did, all of them are children of Allah." Grandpa wipes his nose with a handkerchief he could fly off on.

"I've led a shameful life," he whispers to Nasia. "And this is a horrible place, I can see that now."

Then he scurries away pushing an empty cardboard box with his feet. Nasia follows. Oren's waiting, papers in one hand, change in the other, when the old one runs into him.

"Horrible, horrible place. Tell me the truth, are all women in your country as beautiful as she is?" Nasia is right behind him. The old man looks up impatiently; his eyes poached blind as egg whites, dead under the thick film of cataract. He explains, "It's time I leave America."

"Do you think we should start drinking?" Oren asks once they're outside. "Do you think it would help us with our writing?"

She gives him a blank stare, then moves ahead of him. "I think you should call your mother."

## 22

*It started with vodka. Mikhail Daneevich wanted a matryoshka bottle holder. Zarko came up with a doll so lovely Mikhail ordered a dozen for the entertainment room of his five-million-dollar home. They were all masterfully crafted, painted and japanned. Fat and fertile, wide and welcoming, faces shining with different degrees of imbecility or wisdom, all much alike except for the one Mikhail wanted to show her bare left breast. The dolls were lined with cork and big enough to hold a bucket of ice. Mikhail, a bear of a man, admired Zarko, even if he was a Catholic. Good carpenters are hard to find. Like a good priest or a good woman or a good car. Something one can rely on. Bottle holders Zarko made for him made Mikhail think big. Zarko objected. In an inconspicuous manner. He tried to excuse himself with too much work at the college where he was a full-time campus handy-*



man. He even considered inventing a serious health problem for Ana, his wife, something delicate, an awkward female ailment even Mikhail wouldn't want to discuss. But he decided against it. Too superstitious. So, Mikhail started coming around for fittings to the wood shop Zarko had set up in his garage. He'd bring a bottle of vodka and a problem or two, of the kind Zarko didn't want to know anything about but was forced to nevertheless. There was this incident with the Armenians. Most of them were born here, in America, in L.A. They were too soft, too used to having it easy, Mikhail would say, there's nothing worse than a good life. I want to do business with people who are hungry, he said. It made Zarko decide to skip dinner from then on. It also made him work faster, spend sleepless nights finishing up the project. And it was a masterpiece. Almost eight feet tall, its surface not only painted, but carved with the most delicate detail, the inside lined with rich red velvet. But Mikhail inspected it with a scowl. It wouldn't do. They would have to start all over. So they did. To ensure everything was as agreed upon, Mikhail dropped by every evening. Two sinister looking Lincolns and a limo would be parked in front of Zarko and Ana's mortgaged Glendale home. Because now Mikhail Daneevich wanted a TV set with a DVD player in his matryoshka. He wanted an alarm system, a mini bar, a phone and a fax machine. He wanted to be able to sit in it. Eternity's a long time to spend on one's feet. So he sat in it, in its stifling womb, at times for hours before coming out with new suggestions, like peepholes in place of eyes, or a portable toilet. Zarko despaired, but to no avail. Did I tell you my grandfather lived to be a hundred and three, Mikhail would ask. Yep, I'm only fifty-three, won't be needing this baby for a good while! Then he'd pat the coffin playfully, and reach for the bottle.

## 23

Nasia and Oren identify their neighbors by the noises they make. There's Tom from 106 who, when stoned, goes around the building knocking on everyone's door like a wound-down woodpecker collecting coupons for pizza or Thai food deliveries. Dimitri, a black guy directly above them, is a DJ, takes his work seriously, usually on Saturdays. Kristy and Maureen at the end of the hall share a birthday, share parties, and tend to monopolize the laundry facilities. Harvey from across the hall doesn't speak to anyone in the building, just talks to his dog, a black Lab named Manic, and smiles a lot.

Of course there are the Taters from the next building, main vegetables of the neighborhood, and the Arabs who are moving in more and more. The rest of the people never stay much longer than it takes to carry bookshelves and pianos up the staircase and down again. Although the names on the mailboxes never change, some of them belong to people who haven't inhabited the fair city of L.A. for years. Or our beautiful planet, for that matter. Which gives the building a sort of metaphysical or supernatural atmosphere. Makes it a halfway house, as in between here and the next world. People move in, people move out. People change. All that is left, all that's the same is the noise they used to make.

Nasia comes into the room carrying her socks like two dead fish, water still dripping. "Go tell Dimitri he flooded our bathroom."

Oren's on the bed, eating yogurt-covered raisins with a spoon. "I'm busy, you go tell him."

"I don't think so, it's your turn." She lets the socks dribble on his naked feet.

## 24

They learned that the offices of *The Divisions* magazine are right in their neighborhood. Why waste money on postage, they just turn up at a tiny second-floor ex-apartment on the corner of Beverly and Van Ness, only to discover that it harbors the giant ego of Holden Heckler, the magazine's youthful editor. They catch him right in the middle of what he usually does. Must be the secretary's year off, the cleaning lady's five-year unpaid leave. Heckler sits alone doing an impression of Marlon Brando from *Apocalypse Now* surrounded by a jungle of manuscripts, back issues and dust divided into neat coke lines. Keeps scanning the first page of their story about zoo animals building a spaceship to escape from Earth.

"I must say I'm distrustful of writers who change their mother tongue like a dirty shirt."

"So are we." Nasia refused to sit. In the story the animals fashion the craft out of soda cans, disposable cameras and left-behind baby carriages. They distill fuel from elephant dung.

Holden looks up. "For a writer, it's suicide."

"Don't worry about it, it's *our* rope." Oren pretends he's bored. A young zookeeper discovers the plan just before the takeoff. He blackmails the animals into taking him along. Uses his spare key to let them into the food storage to prove he's worthy. Lions and tigers eat him up before they reach Jupiter. Lions and tigers eat the last elephant before they reach Uranus.

"But you had a good thing started, I mean, you published a novel and all."

"Who told you that?" Nasia frowns.

"You did, in your cover letter." Holden reads the last line again: *There they run out of fuel.*

"I wouldn't know anything about that, she wrote the letter." Oren shrugs his shoulders.

"Liar," Nasia cuts in, says to Holden, "You shouldn't believe everything you read."

Their next story is about a married couple taking a walk. A car runs into them at the crossing. The wife dies at the site. The husband lives to find out there was no one driving the car. Just one of those freak accidents. He buys the car at the police auction, fixes it up, drives off a cliff. The end.

"Look, guys, I can't promise anything, you're just too ordinary to be strange, and too strange—"

"We won't beg." Nasia clenches her fists. "We need money."

The two of them aim their stares like double-barreled shotguns, Holden blushes. If only he had a buzzer now, like in James Bond movies, to summon Miss Moneypenny.

Finally they're leaving. Holden walks them to the door because he's too embarrassed. For them. He promises to get back to them within a week. He promises he won't forget them. It sounds like a threat.

25

*Mary Simmons hadn't gone out of her house for the last five years. Actually, the last time she had seen her house from the outside was the first time she had seen the house from the outside, the day her husband brought her here, to Los Feliz just under the Griffith Observatory, showed her the place, and informed her he had bought it. For them to live in. With their children.*

*Five years had given Mary plenty of time to get to know the inside of the house. Five years had also given her time enough to realize she didn't want children. But they stayed in Los Feliz anyhow.*

*It's a big house, most of the time. A bit less big when Mary's husband is around. Only he works too much. But as big as the house is, it is still much smaller than the world. And it's the world that kept getting bigger and bigger for Mary until she decided it would be safer to confine herself exclusively to the house.*

*Mary's world began growing when she met her husband. Soon after they got married, his job made them move to the West Coast, to San Diego, then L.A., first West Hollywood, then here, Los Feliz. Their home grew, from a rented apartment to a villa, their car grew too, grew and multiplied. The whole world grew tenfold in less than two years, scared the hell out of Mary, made her wary, especially because in that time she had met a lot of people she didn't trust.*

*It made her be on her toes, all the time, the size of the world. Made her order self-motivation tapes, and fitness tapes, and martial arts tapes, and old movies with Charles Bronson, in one of which he makes a deadly dart-gun out of a lamp, some paper and nails. Mary developed a routine, working out, eating right, swimming in their indoor pool, watching maybe too much television. But she's fit, she's in great shape, women admire her figure when they have people over, men have involuntary erections around Mary's body. Makes her self-aware, extremely self-aware.*

*Usually during the day Mary puts herself in a scenario. There's an intruder in the house. A burglar. A murderer. Maybe a rapist, a man with a violent erection. She'll hide behind the couch and barely breathe, both hands clutching her dart-gun. There'll be some slight noise coming from the kitchen. That's the passage she prepared for the intruder. A pan she placed on the floor rattles. The man shows up at the kitchen door. Mary blows a nine-inch nail dart in his direction.*

*That's what had happened when Mary's husband tried to surprise her on their anniversary. She shot him clean through the right earlobe. He bled so much it took two hand towels to stop the bleeding. But her husband is a reasonable man. Mary hovered above him like an angered school teacher while he whimpered on the floor. She convinced him not to go to the hospital. Persuaded him not to call the police, too. In fact, she made him quit his job and stay home with her to prepare for the*

*impending intruder attack. In return he made her promise if no intruder shows up in the next three months, she'll start going out again.*

*"Hell," says Mary, propped on her dart gun, "if no one rapes either of us in the next three months, I'll run the fucking L.A. marathon!"*

## 26

Oren is taking a shower. Nasia is reading. The only difference is he can shower without the help of a fat red Webster. The dictionary is lying in her lap, it's heavy and it never opens to the page it's supposed to. She's not sure what book is she reading, but it's supposed to be fun. Only there's no fun with Webster around. So smug, so calculated and so damn patronizing, it makes her feel stupid. She hates Webster. Next time she has to look for a word, she'll rip out the page and eat it.

*... and I resent your officious deportment!*

What the fuck is *officious*?

It pisses her off. Strange sounds with no meaning, fragmenting her thoughts. Bloody language, foreigners are supposed to stutter, lisp, mumble, sound retarded, tongue-tied. One is limited to the use of only the most modest set of words, the simplest, most frequent ones. Yes, no, thank you. And maybe *maybe*.

She clutches the dictionary to tear it in half. But it's an aged and stubborn book, refuses to give in, so she reaches between hard red covers, grabs a dozen or so pages, pulls them out like strands of gray hair. The paper shreds with a mournful purr but gives her no satisfaction, it's the blood she's after. So she takes a pen and stabs it into the heart of the old vampire, turns it inside the volume's innards for a better effect, plows with it over the covers till it breaks in her hand, bleeding ink all over books, shirt and bed. There, it's done. She kicks Webster's body under the bed. Frantically rubs her hands with paper tissue while trying to take off her shirt. Picks up the phone. Marches to the bathroom. Pushes the wet plastic curtain aside. "Your mother died."

He's standing under the steaming stream, foam in his armpits, in his hair, under his balls. Her face bare of clues, she points at him with the phone as black as a nightstick. "They just called."

"Who called?"

"Zoran. Your father was too weak. They're afraid for him too. We'll have to go back now, for the funeral." Hot water sprays on the phone still extended in her hand.

"I'm not going back." He's fighting nausea with clenched teeth. It doesn't seem to be working. The black phone grows into a hole offered to him to disappear in. Sweat breaking across his forehead gets immediately washed away by the rush of water, and with it any trace of thought or coherence.

"I told you to call them, I was feeling something was going on, I did, in here." She pokes at her chest looking at him with bright, sincere eyes. His feet squeak in the wet bathtub, his head drops, sways uncontrollably, his mouth fills with water, soap bubbles.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're right. You're always right. That's the most important thing, you being right. You're right. You're right."

"I understand, just let it out, it's alright."

He fumbles with the tap unable to turn it off. She crosses her arms. "She was waiting for you to call, and now she's dead."

He looks up in time to catch her face dry, disinterested. "You, you—"

The sudden attention bothers her. "What? What? It could happen. I told you, call your fucking mother!" She pushes the phone at him, but he knocks it out of her hand. It drops on the floor, hits the tiles breaking in two, baring red and green, blue and yellow electronic intestines.

"You sick little bitch!" He throws a sponge at her.

It bounces heavy off her forehead leaving it wet. It looks as if she's been crying. But she just takes a towel, dries her face, then crouches, gathers the pieces of the phone. "It's okay, we'll tape it back together, it'll be as good as new again."