(1) Nan

by Nathaniel Bellows

By the time Nan was a sophomore in college, she'd settled in—but only academically, which was what she figured would happen. Her teachers admired her—they said they respected that her ideas were based on her impressions rather than her speculations. She didn't know what that meant, but she never attempted to decode the praise of her professors—it was the delivery, the facial expression, how their hands moved in the air, the tone of voice, that seemed to communicate what she was meant to understand, like when she was at home, in Vermont, where the science behind the sunlight, the snow squalls, and the changing leaves seemed secondary to the fact that, more than anything, being in and among them made her feel alive.

Since she declared her major, never was this feeling of intangible appreciation more powerful than with her adviser in the English department. He looked like he was around forty, and probably was, except that he acted older—he had the warm, patient air of the elderly, which she characterized as an affectation of academia. She imagined his was the same demeanor of cultured Europeans, although she'd never been to Europe—except for coming to college in New York City, she'd hardly left her small town in the Northwest Kingdom. In high school, on the weekends, instead of going to the A&W parking lot to hang around in people's cars, or the pastures beyond the farms to get drunk and race tractors, she would sit with her parents and watch the few non-pornographic foreign movies the general store had in its video collection: *Wild Strawberries*, *The 400 Blows*, *Cinema Paradiso*. She had seen *A Room with a View* so many times she'd worn out the tape. Each time she walked into her adviser's office and found him raising a steaming mug of tea to his lips, or rubbing tiny circles into his temples with his long, bony fingers, she'd think: *He could have been in any one of those films.*

He had recently invited her to dinner at his apartment on Riverside Drive, across the street from a large bronze statue of a horse and rider that had oxidized to a robin's egg blue. In the kitchen his young wife, dressed in a sleek gray wool suit that looked like a designer's sketch laid perfectly over her thin frame, emptied all the white Chinese take-out food containers into separate serving dishes. Watching the glamorous woman forgo the inherent convenience of take-out food made her feel young and unrefined—more the rural scholarship student than ever, and it took all her strength to keep from running out of the place.

At the dining-room table their five-year-old twin boys joined them—appearing from a room she hadn't seen on the brief tour her adviser had given her. The boys had sandy hair, their mother's green eyes, and crooked white chips for teeth. They ate their food distractedly, but with admirable mastery over their chopsticks. Every now and then they abandoned their meals and dipped down from their chairs to play games on the rug. It was spring, and in an effort to look nice, perhaps even cosmopolitan, Nan had worn a skirt. But when she sat down for dinner, she noticed it rose up higher on her knees than she'd realized. So she stuffed her napkin into the crease between her thighs and turned her legs strategically away from wherever she thought the boys might be playing. She ate slowly, carefully, wiping her oily hands, only when necessary, on her socks.

A few nights later she saw her adviser at a deli on Broadway, and he insisted on paying for the coffee and buttered roll she'd ordered. To be polite, she accepted, not feeling too badly about it since it was such a cheap snack; he paid with all coins. Outside, on the street, he told her how much he'd enjoyed having her over for dinner, and how he believed his boys had developed competing crushes on her. This, she knew, was a lie, considering that boys her own age—at any age she'd ever been—had never had crushes on her. It was impossible for her to fathom that children might. She was not fat, but sort of

thick; not ugly, but plain, nearly non-descript. As an adolescent she used to gaze into the mirror searching for something that set her apart—*Maybe my eyebrows,* she thought. *Maybe my eyelashes.* She had limp beige hair and brown eyes the color of cake. Over the years she'd grown used to never being the object of anyone's affection. What she wasn't used to, however, was someone making the effort to convince her that she actually might be.

She thanked him for paying for the snack, and again for the dinner, and told him, nervously, needlessly, how she'd loved his home—the old Turkish rugs, the framed Picasso etching, and the built-in bookshelves in the living room.

“I'm glad you liked the place,” he said. “We're very happy there.”

“I would be too,” she said.

He looked at her and tilted his head, smiling. Over his shoulder she saw the M104 bus cruising up Broadway, and considered diving under it. Instead she took off toward the corner, in shame, and he followed. When they parted ways, he took her hand and kissed it gently, just above the knuckles.

Nan had cried on the day she received the acceptance letter for college in New York—alone, up in her room, while her parents were making dinner downstairs. A few days later, when she received the financial aid letter informing her of her fully paid scholarship, she burst into tears right in front of them, while they were playing Scrabble by the fire in the living room. She was not a crier, and her parents were alarmed. She showed them the letter, and once they had both read it through, they wept too, although not for the same reason she had.

“I don't want to go!” she said.

“You must!” said her mother tearfully, throwing her thick gray braid

over her shoulder to punctuate her certainty. “For God's sake!”

“You have to live your life,” said her father, putting his arm around her. She felt his worn chamois shirt against her neck. “We all do—we're trying; you're trying. This way, with this, you can do more—this is a gift.”

“It's not,” she said. “I can't!”

“You've worked too hard!” said her mother. “In school. Too hard to stay around here. You know your brother would want—”

“He would want you to go,” said her father.

“I know that!” she cried.

In January of her senior year, four months before she received the letters, her brother had fallen through the ice on the river, just below the covered wooden bridge near their house. He had finished his shift at the hardware store in town and stopped by the river to skate while the moon rose. He was alone, which was his custom—when he skated and in general. He had barely finished high school because he was uninterested and undisciplined in studying, and slightly dyslexic; he never even considered going to college. After graduation he moved into a semi-furnished apartment above a family friend's garage, but he mostly spent his free time at home, with his parents and with Nan, whom he believed to be the smartest girl in all of Vermont—something he told her all the time. She would often come home from school and find him in the kitchen, drinking cold coffee in a juice glass, with one of the cats on his lap, looking out the window. Sometimes it appeared that he had been waiting for her.

Nan's two—and only—friends in New York, Annabelle and Gina, her freshman-year roommates, had transferred to other schools after their fist year. Annabelle went to a women's college in

California, and Gina went to France, where her family had moved. Nan came back to school for her sophomore year, friendless and adrift, and instead of going back into the dorms, she moved into a two-bedroom university apartment on Claremont Avenue that she'd found through the housing office. She lived with a graduate student named Peter who was always in Chicago doing research in genetics. Eventually he moved out completely, just before Christmas, and for a week or so before the holiday break Nan had the whole apartment to herself, which she thought would feel exciting—like having a real life in the city, rather than the life of a student posing as a resident. But whenever she came in off the street and took the elevator up to her empty place, she felt an acute sense of loss; the loss of her self—stepping through the door was like entering a void unknown to anyone who might, by chance, be trying to find her. But no one, she knew, was trying to find her, and the barren apartment just made that fact clearer. So she called each of her professors and told them that she had to be home early because of “a complicated family matter”—an excuse that, since her brother's death, never seemed to wane in validity—arranged to take her exams early, and rushed back to Vermont.

After vacation—refreshed, stabilized—she returned to New York to find her apartment smelling strongly of sandalwood, women's deodorant, and a spice she couldn't quite place. Four lit scented candles in decorative glass jars were lined up on the living-room coffee table, and a lanky blond girl was asleep on the couch with a heating pad wrapped around her waist and a bright, peach-colored shawl covering her head. Nan peeked into Peter's old room and saw half a dozen suitcases that looked as if they'd exploded; clothing and shoes and underwear were everywhere. She went back into the living room and stared at the sleeping girl, who, she noticed on closer inspection, was only pretending to sleep—her breathing was erratic, her foot in spasm.

“Hello?” said Nan.

“Hey,” said a voice from underneath the shawl.

“Are you my new roommate?” she said.

“Yup,” said the girl. “The housing office hooked me up.” The girl pulled the shawl down from her face. She was pretty, with fine, symmetrical features that, nonetheless, looked haggard. “Do you mind that I have these candles here?” she said.

“I think they might be a fire hazard,” said Nan.

“I hope you're joking,” the girl said in an annoyed voice.

“Yes,” said Nan quickly, and with fear. “I am. They're nice. They smell really nice. What's the scent?”

The girl eyed the candles suspiciously. “I don't know,” she said. “Something, though. They were expensive.”

The girl got up, rising like a large bird from the reeds in a pond. She was at least six inches taller than Nan and stick thin. The girl steadied herself against the couch before moving toward Nan.

“Are you okay?” said Nan.

“I just got out of the hospital,” she said drily. “So it's going to take a while to ‘get back into life.'” She made the air quotes gesture with her fingers when she said this, and rolled her eyes.

“Oh. Well,” said Nan, extending her hand. “I'm Nan.”

The girl took Nan's fingers against her palm. Nan thought the girl might start laughing, and she immediately recalled the girls in her high school that used to laugh at her, and the boys, too. She thought

of how disappointed the girl must be to move into a new apartment and find someone like her—as boring and dour as bad wallpaper.

“I'm Mimi,” said the girl.

“Hi,” said Nan. “Welcome.”

“Thanks,” said Mimi, releasing Nan's hand. “And don't worry about me invading your privacy—your space. No one knows how long I'll be sticking around.”

Her adviser called two days after they'd seen each other at the deli. He asked her to go with him to a lecture on Wordsworth, which was being held in a private residence on West End Avenue. Without thinking, she told him yes. When she hung up, however, she felt a pang of regret—and genuine fear—thinking of his voice, his tentative, stuttering invitation, stated nearly in a whisper. She sat and stared into space, feeling helpless. She had no one to speculate with about what the call might mean. Even when Annabelle and Gina were around, they mostly talked about books they'd read or movies they'd seen. If they talked about boys, they were usually characters in the books or movies they discussed. Sometimes they mooned over the unattainable graduate students who worked as teacher's aides or occasionally lectured in their classes, and sometimes they kept tabs on the alluring men they'd see walking around the neighborhood who they knew were not students, but about whom very little else was known. Of the three girls, none of them, over the course of their freshman year, had had a boyfriend, and only one—Annabelle—wasn't a virgin.

Mimi came out of the bathroom and leaned in the doorway to Nan's room. She was wearing a pink halter top and high-heeled sandals; her hip bones jutted out from above the elastic waistband of her shorts.

“You know, I feel that at all times,” she said, “I always have some

amount of urine in my bladder.” She looked at Nan thoughtfully. “I'm never just completely empty.”

Nan looked at her but thought only of the phone call. Did he call from his office? Was he at home? Was he on his cell phone, calling from the street? She had a memory of seeing him on campus talking on his cell phone beside the fountain—it was a sweet image, the tiny phone pressed up against his face; it seemed so weird, so out of place, like sunglasses on a baby.

“I've learned so much about my body over these last few months,” said Mimi. “That I feel like I could take myself apart and put myself back together again. Do you know what I mean?” She looked at Nan and cocked her head. “You're in a weird mood, aren't you?”

Nan took her hand off the phone. “No,” she said.

“Yes, you are,” said Mimi. “You are! You are! You can't hide it from me!”

“I'm not hiding anything—”

“Just by saying that,” said Mimi, “you're admitting your guilt.”

“No, I'm not,” she said.

“Everyone has guilt,” said Mimi. “Before I went into the hospital, I didn't think I had any guilt either, but when I got there, I realized that I was almost entirely comprised of it. And *then* we had to do something about *that*.”

“We?”

“That's how I was encouraged to approach it—a collective effort toward recovery,” she said. “*We've* made giant steps.”

“I'm glad.”

“I haven't really, actually,” said Mimi with a broad smile. “But I made them believe that I did so they would let me go.” She bugged out her eyes at Nan. “And now *you* get to deal with me!”

She pranced out the door and into the kitchen, where Nan heard her filling the kettle.

Nan picked up the phone and dialed.

“Hello?” said her father.

“Dad,” she said.

“This is your dad,” he said, his voice as warm as her adviser's, which made her think: *Oh, no! It was just the voice of a father. It's just a father's warm voice!*

“I know,” she said. “Hi. Is Mom there?”

“Where do you think she is?” he said.

“In her studio?” she said.

“Naturally,” he said. “She's got forty bowls to make for a wedding in June.”

“Whose wedding?”

“I don't know,” said her father. “Some assholes from Connecticut.”

“Are you making anything for it?”

“A bower,” he said. “They want a damned bower to get married under. So I'm making that—out of cherry. Can you believe that? They want cherry.”

She pictured him sitting on one of the stools in the kitchen. He'd made most of the furniture in their house, plus a carved headboard for her ninth birthday, decorated with birds and leaves, and a tree house for her brother that had a tar-paper roof and a fireproof pedestal for his camping stove. Except for the glassware, her mother had made most of their dishes and all the vases they used for wildflowers. “How's school?” he asked.

“It's fine,” she said. She didn't want to tell her father about her adviser. She wouldn't have told her mother, either, but she would have alluded to it—substituted “boy” for “adviser,” and “coffee” for “poetry lecture”—just to get her ideas. She couldn't do that with her father. He'd always seemed happy with the fact that boys, and now men, had never seemed to take any hold on her life.

“Maybe I'll call you guys back on our regular day,” she said. “Sunday.”

“Is there a reason you're calling, this not being our regular day?” he said. “Is something wrong?”

She didn't know how to answer that. So many parts of this situation could be considered wrong—her adviser's kiss, her inability to gauge the nature of his invitation, the low-grade thrum of interest she felt somewhere behind her heart, her curiosity secretly piqued.

“I'm just confused,” she said.

“Well, that's not very like you,” he said.

And with that she had no choice but to tell him—because it *was* like

her, it *was* her. If she let the comment go, she'd be lying to him, or to herself. She didn't know—she was a ball of confusion, unruly and tangled like the contents of her hairbrush. “I think a boy asked me out for coffee,” she said. “But I can't tell if I should go.”

“Oh, dear,” said her father. “You will be needing your mother for this.”

“No, Dad,” she said. “Please try.”

“Okay,” he said, sighing. “I'll give it a shot.” He paused, and in the silence before he spoke again she could hear birdsong coming from his end of the line. On her end there were police sirens and loud, harsh blasts from the tugboats on the Hudson River. She felt a wave of raw longing to be there in their sunny kitchen, or in their yard, where the magnolia was most likely blooming—to be back at home, to be safe, far away from these new ambiguities.

“Well, do you and this boy know each other?” he asked. “Have you spent time together?”

“I know him,” she said tentatively. “I've spent time with him. Not a whole lot of one-on-one time. Actually . . .”

“Does it come as a surprise that he would call you?” he asked. “Or that he would ask you out on a date?”

“We've had dinner,” she said. “Once.”

“Alone?” he said, his voice rising slightly.

“No,” she said. “Other people were there.”

“Well,” he said. “I guess this would be different because it would be just the two of you.”

“Yes,” she said. “That's the part that would be different.”

“Going out for a cup of coffee isn't exactly serious,” he said. “It sounds very casual to me. I'd say go.” He sounded conclusive, relieved. “You're young and you're in the city. I'm sure Mom would agree. Things should be fun for you. You should live your life.”

“Okay,” she said after a few moments.

“I get the feeling that you would have rather had me say something different.”

“No,” she said. “It's fine.”

She wanted to say: “I just want to come home. Why can't that be an acceptable thing to want? I wasn't ready for this—to come here, to move on, to begin a new life. Why can't you just tell me to come home? Why can't you tell me that, in your mind, this was a mistake, and it's not my fault, but that I should just come back?”

“I'm just still a bit confused,” she said.

“Well,” he sighed. “I tried.”

“I know,” she said. “So did I.”

She said good-bye and hung up; Mimi appeared in her doorway, grinning.

“I heard everything you were talking about,” she said, doing improvised ballet stretches, pointing her toes toward Nan. “And now I know why you're in such a weird mood. You have a date!”

“I don't have a date,” said Nan, staring hard at her bedspread.

“Don't lie to me!” said Mimi, bouncing from foot to foot. “I heard it with my own ears! I have very acute hearing! It's the one part of me left that's actually still working right!”

“Well,” said Nan. “I'm not going to go.”

“Oh, yes you are!” said Mimi, kicking up her leg. “You're going to go! You're going to get out of this freaking apartment, and you're totally going to get laid!”

Nan fled the apartment while Mimi was in the bathroom, and went to pick up her paycheck at the language lab. Her boss had tacked it to the corkboard above the punch clock, along with a note asking her to pick up two additional shifts for someone who was going on vacation. Just by his asking, she knew he expected her to do it. She read the note over and over, reflecting on what a dependable and trustworthy person she'd always been—and she was happy to be that way; it was never a burden for her to be kind or willing to help those in need. But sometimes, especially in moments like this, she worried she might have missed the chance, the opportunity, to try being something else—not to be the opposite of who she was, but perhaps someone slightly different. This idea, she knew, had been born in New York, but it was always attended by the image, sudden and unbidden, of the frozen hole in the river ice—not of her brother falling in and struggling, but of the scene after he was gone, the empty silence, the sound of what would never be recovered.

She left the language lab without responding to her boss's note. The check in her hand was for $145.35—one week's worth of work sitting behind a desk, handing out tapes and CDs, showing movies in the screening rooms, and archiving language primers and course materials. Looking at the check, she knew that she could do one of two things: go to the bank and deposit the money directly into her account (what she always did), or cash the check at student services

and go to the boutique on 112th street and buy the Indian-print skirt—cut above the knee, ruffled at the hem, yellow print on blue fabric—hanging in the window (what she'd never do). As usual, to stave off reckless spending, she reviewed the terms of her scholarship: it paid for her tuition, books, and the most basic food and living expenses; it helped her get one of the higher-paying work-study jobs on campus, which supplemented other things—groceries, personal extravagances like movies and bakery items, bus tickets to and from Vermont. She rarely spent her money on new clothes—she wore what she'd brought from home, which she'd picked up with her mother at yard sales or dry-goods stores or thrift shops. When she first arrived in New York and saw all the well-dressed students in school and on the streets, a new, unexpected inadequacy had bloomed within her and settled neatly alongside her other insecurities. Sometimes she saw homeless people wearing similar items of clothing that she owned, or sometimes she recognized a blazer or sweater or scarf on the elderly residents of the nursing home on Amsterdam Avenue when the nurses brought them out in their wheelchairs to sit in the garden by the sidewalk.

As she walked through campus toward her bank's branch on Broadway, it began to rain. She hustled toward the library and waited under an eave as the storm poured down. A man ran by, soaked, yelling into a cell phone. She thought of her adviser—his voice on the phone. Had he been calling from home? *I've seen his house, where he lives,* she thought. Was he there now?

Why did he feel the need to show me his collection of Proust first editions? she wondered. *Or the cloth doll with the leather hat and vest that he'd bought in the Lake District? Or the erotic mono print of a couple languishing—exposed, aroused—hanging in his study?* The image of his young wife flashed before her eyes: fashionable in an almost alien way, sharp shouldered and gaunt like a mantis.

She took off through the rain toward the student center, her

paycheck clutched in her hand. She felt the cold raindrops pelting her scalp through her hair as she threw open the door and headed for the cashier. *I'm a fool,* she thought. *I'm a fool.*

When Mimi came into her room that night, it was late, but Nan was not asleep. She was staring at the digital display on her clock radio and listening to the sound of the garbage collectors throwing cans around the alley.

“Are you sleeping?” said Mimi, tapping Nan gently on her foot.

“No,” she said.

“Good,” said Mimi. “Me neither.”

Nan rolled over and faced the wall, preparing herself for what might be hours of passive listening. It was always the same with Mimi—she only wanted someone to direct her voice at and needed little more than a nod or slight murmur of acknowledgment to keep her talking. Nan felt like a piece of furniture during these talks—used and disregarded at the same time. Except she genuinely felt sorry for Mimi, who, after all, had almost died—last fall an ambulance drove onto campus with all its lights flashing and retrieved Mimi from her art history class, where she'd collapsed. In one of her divulging narratives since she'd moved in Mimi had confessed to Nan that she'd been starving herself since she was in the tenth grade, and up until the point when she was hospitalized, her daily intake of food had been little more than half a can of corn Niblets and ten cups of Sanka.

“You know when you can't sleep because your mind is racing and it won't stop?” said Mimi, leaning back over Nan's extended legs. Nan felt Mimi's sharp spine against her shins. “That's how it is with me

right now.”

“Maybe you should get up earlier,” said Nan after a few moments. “So that at night you're more tired.” It was something her father would have suggested, and she smiled, thinking about what he might say knowing she was using his words of advice on a person she knew he would find completely perplexing.

“I'm not a morning person,” she said. “I used to think I was a night person, a night bird—”

“A night owl,” said Nan, picturing the barn owl that lived and hunted near her home. It would leave the carcasses of voles and mice on the paving stones on their front walk, picked apart, emptied, and yet somehow still intact, so whenever she found them, she'd think, at first, that they were still alive.

“Owl,” said Mimi. “Right. Night owl. But I don't think I'm that, either.” She sighed heavily. “Sometimes I don't think I'm a person at all.”

Nan felt Mimi's body shudder against her legs. In the shadowy room she heard her begin to cry.

“At least in the hospital,” she said in a watery voice, “they gave you pills to sleep. You didn't have to try—you didn't have to convince your brain to stop working. It was automatic, like unplugging a light—it just goes out. You take a pill and you're gone.”

Nan was quiet. It wasn't that she lacked the ability to be comforting and sympathetic, but she doubted if her approach to empathy—forged by her sole pastoral tragedy—could apply to these new urban realms: starvation, self-hatred, the bankruptcy of an Upper East Side childhood, which, over the months, Mimi had recounted. In one story a driver shuttled a lonely girl to and from

school in a limo; in another a loving Caribbean woman raised the girl like her own child and then one day disappeared; in another, when the girl was twelve, she lost her virginity to her mother's personal trainer, on a towel in the laundry room.

“At night, I think,” said Nan, “things always seem harder.”

This is what her mother had told her after they finally found her brother, two days after he'd been missing. The police and rescue teams had melted portions of the river with gas torches, near the bends and narrows and shallow pools, until they finally found the body, about a quarter mile from where he fell in, snagged in the branches of a fallen birch.

Once they had buried him, Nan would lie awake in bed at night and picture the river in her mind; she would follow its course, floating above its surface like a ghost. She would begin at the glassy, black hole where he had gone in, and continue downstream to the place where they had found him, in the white tree. Then she would return, against the current, to the hole, and then she would go back to the tree—all in her head, back and forth, flying through the evening in the same frozen circuit.

“I think you're right,” said Mimi. “It is always harder at night.” She pulled up her legs, and Nan heard her clogs fall to the floor. She curled up on the end of the bed. “But why is that?”

Nan thought about how she would explain this without telling Mimi about her brother. Over the four months of living together she had told her virtually nothing about herself, and Mimi, being who she was, had never asked. As time went by and the one-way conversations continued, Nan grew territorial and proud of what she'd withheld in the face of so much desperate confession.

Mimi started to cry again. “Seriously,” she said. “Why?”

“Because, I think,” said Nan quickly, her pity surpassing her will, “it's when you're most alone. It's when you realize how alone you are.”

“But you're always alone, Nan,” said Mimi, sniffing. “Night and day—all the time.”

She had an uncontrollable urge to shove the spindly girl off her bed with a quick kick of her heels; it wouldn't take much. She had been suckered, her innocence abused. And yet there was something different about this—something about how Mimi had said what she did; it lacked her usual blasé ignorance and expressed, instead, an authentic concern—an abundance of the same empathy Nan herself was so hesitant to dispense. Mimi, whose eyes might as well have been set backwards in her skull, had noticed her—and Nan felt accounted for and, therefore, disarmed. “I know,” she said.

“But why?” said Mimi, adjusting closer against Nan's legs.

“I don't know,” said Nan. “It's just the way it's always been.”

“How can that be?” said Mimi. “You can't always be alone. I mean, do you have family?”

“Of course I have a family,” she said. “My parents live in Vermont.”

“But no siblings?”

Nan stopped and thought, considering the risks at hand. “No,” she said. She was about to say “not anymore,” but Mimi interrupted her.

“Were your parents totally freaked out about you coming to New York by yourself?” said Mimi in a tone that suggested that such a response would be superhuman.

Nan remembered a story Mimi had told her about her parents forgetting her on vacation, at the airport, and how she had to fly back from San Juan by herself. Or when she and her younger sister were left in the care of the doorman of their apartment on Park Avenue for the weekend, while their mother entertained a man they didn't know in their house in the Berkshires.

“No,” said Nan. “They were excited for me. I think they're hoping this is where my life will begin.”

“That's funny,” said Mimi. “It's where my life almost ended. Twice.” “Twice?”

“We don't have to talk about it,” said Mimi, crawling up the bed to lie parallel with Nan, her head on the other pillow. “Let's talk about something else.”

Nan said nothing.

“Let's talk about your date tomorrow.”

“No, let's not,” said Nan, recoiling slightly from Mimi's face, a few inches away from her own. “And it's not a date.”

“Well, whatever it is,” said Mimi, her voice softening with sleep, “maybe your parents' wish will come true, and your new, exciting life will begin.”

When Nan got home from her day of classes, the apartment was empty. She had not seen Mimi that morning because she had left the bed before Nan woke up—there were only a few strands of blond hair spanning the length of the pillow.

Nan took the skirt, still in the shopping bag, from her bottom dresser drawer and laid it over her bedspread. It looked thin and

flimsy, like a rag. She stared at it and prepared the lie she would tell Mimi when she saw her next. She would say that the date was a disaster and would describe it in Mimi-speak, saying something like “He was a nightmare” or “He was hideous” or “He was too stupid to live,” and that she ran out after a half hour, inventing some lame excuse designed to make him feel unworthy. She knew she only had to capture a fraction of Mimi's attention regarding the topic, because within minutes Mimi would be on to something else: summer plans in Amagansett, her mother's hairdresser, a new line of expensive handbags. But she would have to bluff her, she would have to lie, because, looking at the skirt—this flag of surrender to her curiosity and weakness—Nan had made up her mind that she could not go to meet her adviser.

She balled up the skirt in her hands and threw it down on the bed. The receipt flew out of the fabric like a tiny white leaf and fluttered to the ground. Retrieving it, she peered at the total—$65. It was as if the price itself were appraising her moral character. The city had lowered her value in imperceptible ways—how did people like Mimi survive here? She was not cut out for this new life, she thought. She had no place in this new world.

And neither did her brother—a fact that was unwavering no matter the gradations of her confusion. She sat down on her bed, weakened by the vividness of her memory of him: his mop of black hair, his talc-like smell, the deep drawl of his voice. She had spent too much time imagining his final moments, what went through his mind when the hole widened under his hands, when the current wouldn't surrender him. Held up against her brother's fears, her own felt empty, hollowed out by inexperience. Every day, by squandering the simplest aspects of her life, she felt she was dishonoring him.

She took off her sneakers, socks, and jeans and pulled on the skirt. She was pleased that it was not so tight that it caused her stomach to spill over the top of the waistband. She went into the living room

and looked at herself in the full-length mirror Mimi had set up. The skirt fit well; it looked good. The color in the print and the clean white T-shirt she was wearing seemed to bring out the subtle ivory of her pale skin. She pushed her bland hair back behind her ears. She didn't know that, later, when she arrived on campus to meet her adviser, she would actually be one of five students that he had invited to the lecture. And that although he would smile at her and say he was happy that she'd come, he would say similar things to each of the other students, both male and female alike. She didn't know the mixture of disappointment and humiliation she would feel, unable to concentrate on the speaker, and unable to engage in any kind of discussion at the tasteful reception that followed the lecture. She knew nothing of what was to be, nothing of her imminent mortification, as she turned from side to side, watching herself closely, staring into the mirror as she had stared into the hole in the river ice in her dreams, searching the empty aperture for some sign of life.