

THE COLLECTOR

This is my apology.

There is no other word for it. It is a true account, but it's my truth alone. I tell you this at the start, for while I regret the end, I will no doubt justify the means and this must not move you. I have come to see I'm incapable of drawing clear moral distinctions. For me the question of what can or cannot be done has never been an ethical one. There is no line I cannot smudge with my thumb.

I have always been undone by beautiful things, and it might be said that beauty itself was my quarry. The intangible made flesh. I never set out to "abduct" anyone. I find the very word distasteful, for it establishes so gross an imbalance between subject and object. Beauty and the beholder are complicit in their crimes, you see. And I have been slave to my nature as much as master.

Ah, but what would I be if not for that day? For February, it was tantalizingly warm along the bay, the sun returning with renewed ardor after days of fog and rain. To think that one's fate rests upon the weather—upon a sky so very blue and clouds so starchy white. To think that it rests in the movement of sunlight upon a silken dress.

It was 1979. I was by then thirty-four years of age and found myself in a Ritz-Carlton suite in the city of San Francisco for a short trip that turned quite long. It was her city. I wanted her as soon as I saw her. And I took her.

I should state that I'm as sane as the next man. I bear no traces of the illness that plagued my father. Nor was I unduly traumatized by childhood. Paris was the setting of my formative years, and I inherited its paradoxes as well as those of my parents. My father: staunch Catholic *noblesse ancienne*, my mother a Breton, with bloodlines saturated in magic and druidry. I was their only child. A second son was stillborn—all I remember of him is a tiny, somber coffin—and thus my childhood was both cloistered and wildly indulgent.

From the start I felt a conscious dislocation from the world around me. We were an aristocratic family in a time when aristocracy was meaningless, living in a city made magical by history at a time when history had no following. The Paris into which I was born had been crippled by the war, and the great houses in the quarter of Saint-Germain-des-Prés stood apart like guests who arrive overdressed to a party: silent and self-conscious, the subject of murmuring curiosity but no understanding. In 1945, we were not supposed to exist.

I went to no proper school at all before university but took lessons at home: an opulent, sensual arena in which visitors came and went like audiences to the seasonal programme: artists and poets, musicians and professors, art dealers and collectors. All were in our employ, more or less, jesters eager to please the king. Papa was termed “eccentric”—a man of less privileged birth would have been committed. I found his mania intoxicating, and even his melancholy seemed romantic to a child who did not understand the blackness at its heart.

As a result of his condition and of many a neglectful nanny, I had early access to a variety of mind-altering drugs, so that there are events of my childhood I'm not entirely certain weren't drug-induced visions. I had many intricate dialogues with God that I'd like to believe were real, as they proved quite enlightening—and of course rather flattering—but which I tend to believe were not, as I haven't yet been able to reengage Him.

As I was growing up, my heroes were all madmen of a sort. Madness, my mother said, defined great men, just as fear defined weak ones. It seemed wise to adopt her opinion. My ancestors range from the visionary to the criminal, and I am named for a good many of them (Tristan Leandre Jourdain Mourault III). My surname is a dignified one in my native land, translating roughly to “little dark.” I've always thought of

this as dusk, just before night and beyond the normalcy of day. It is where we have always existed.

My obsession with beauty began in infancy. I was mesmerized by pictures, by flowers and faces, by the lovely symmetry that even the indiscriminating eye terms beautiful. Though Papa was heir to a fortune in impressionist art, Maman was the true aesthete. I often think of the Mourault Collection as hers alone. She took the paintings like lovers and knew all their stories: the gentle, arthritic Renoir, the tempers of Degas, the humiliations of Lautrec, and the infidelities of Monet. She wove wondrous tales around them, audacious and certainly fictive. Maman knew that the power of a painting, of any beautiful thing, is not in itself but in its afterlife. Not the thing of a moment but a perpetual quest.

My own quests began at the age of five. At my birthday party, I cornered the lovely Yvette Desmarais in the garden. Never was there a more satisfying game of *cache-cache*, or as you say, hide-and-seek. Those wide eyes, the color of ice on a gray day, and the lines of her bow-tie mouth. She began to scream yet in subsequent years took to writing me love letters. The paradox was instructive.

Later I exercised more discretion but found great delight in spying upon one of our maids, Martine, at her bath. I did so guiltlessly; it was not so very different from gazing upon the creamy flesh of Renoir's nudes. Only I preferred my art living.

I hesitate to say I was sex-obsessed. I had not so much an unquenchable appetite as an exacting one, and as a result my cosseted world soon grew confining. I elected to spend summers with relatives in Brussels, Edinburgh, and Munich. My seasons had new names: Jennifer, Adela, Genevieve, Anna. With conscious deliberation I collected them, yet these women were not conquests, they were studies. I soaked in their scent, memorized their outlines, colored them in. Nothing approached the ideal of my vision. And so I sought visions everywhere, following them to their lovely end. And then one came that did not end.

I called her Gisèle.

She was barely fifteen, and she looked it. But I did not think of her age when I saw her. In the bland tourist milieu of Fisherman's Wharf, it was her dress I noticed first: plum-colored and made of silk; the light moved

upon it like a shimmering hand. The skirt flared and stopped, and my eyes followed the smooth line of her thigh down to the lovely knee and the childish round of her calf, down further still to the hollow of her ankle where it met her dress shoe. She had soft curls with the sheen of a coffee bean, a pert nose in profile, baby-smooth pale skin, cherry lips moistened with lip gloss. . . .

Into my mind crept lines of Rimbaud, unbidden, memorized long ago:

*I've been patient so long
I've forgotten even
The terror and suffering
Flown up to heaven,
A sick thirst again
Darkens my veins.*

I stepped in behind her. Embroidered on her shoe was a sunflower.

I reached my own parking lot first and paid, craning my neck to keep her in sight. Navigating the congested lanes, I followed her as she walked to a lot farther down and to a repugnant American car. A Chevrolet Vega, it was. I slowed almost to a stop, as if I desired her space, and slid my window down. An older woman in the driver's seat—her mother, I supposed—called the girl “Karen” in a nasal voice. The name did not suit her. It lacked *l'apesanteur*, a weightlessness, which she possessed. How I longed to cart her back to the bay and it was only then that the obstacle of her youth struck me, like swallowing a mouthful of gravel when one anticipates champagne.

She removed a gift box from the faded fabric seat and slid in, disappearing from view. The back door was open to let in a breeze, and a child lay sprawled there; from my vantage point I could see only the sunlit crown of a dark head and a ragged pair of tennis shoes, laces loose and dangling.

I circled round, and they backed out before me. I followed them onto the Embarcadero. Their destination proved an affluent neighborhood bordering Golden Gate Park. Karen was deposited before a stolid Colonial brick house with a white door, red-shuttered windows, and an American flag. She walked up the narrow brick path, stopping on the third stair to wave. Yet once the car had disappeared, she turned abruptly

and descended the stairs again, walking briskly down the path onto the street and toward the park, without a backward glance.

Curiosity piqued, I parked and sauntered along some distance behind her, shielded by the inky shadows of the trees. The brightly wrapped gift went into the trash. She slipped off her shoes and walked barefoot through the grass along the duck pond.

When it was safe to do so, I plucked the box from the bin and ripped it open—anxious to have something she had touched. Inside, I found a battered stuffed bear in tartan hat and scarf, one button eye sagging in a lascivious wink. From the wear, it was clear he'd been loved by her once. Yet it seemed she'd sacrificed him as a decoy—to give the package weight? A made-up gift for an imagined party. It was a fascinating caprice: our first secret shared.

I found Karen in the sunshine, moving with a daydreamer's oblivion past the vast flower beds, the Gothic stone manor and Old Dutch Windmill. She spoke to no one and relished her solitude, an unsettling quality in one so young. I followed as though tugged along by an invisible string.

At the Temple of Music, I watched from behind a great column as she roamed the empty amphitheater, trotting the stage, utterly unaware she performed for a rapt audience.

At last—too soon—we returned to the stately brick Colonial. Had she walked through the neighborhood and imagined being invited to such a house? Watched long enough to know that it was vacant for the weekend, or perhaps the season? Tightness appeared in her posture as the ungainly Chevy materialized at the end of the street. On her face she fixed a bright, buoyant smile. Gone, it seemed, was the autonomy of the park. With a hollow clang of the rickety car door, she disappeared, and the color drained out of the day.

I followed her home but was not to see her again. The car vanished into the single garage of a dilapidated mint-colored Victorian. Her neighborhood was marked by poverty: peeling paint and crooked, half-drawn shades, graffiti on the curb. I shuddered to think of her there.

That night she dominated my dreams with a feverish urgency. I slept restlessly, and when I woke, she was there. An irascible itch, an ache. I was pulled again to the drab Victorian. At a quarter past seven, she emerged—no

longer a sprite but a street urchin carting a beaten-up backpack—yet walking with the same wistful, evocative air that was to be my undoing.

I followed her down three blocks and over one, to the school bus. That afternoon I was there to meet it. I followed her to a café and then down to the bay.

Had no one told her she shouldn't be alone on the pier as the sun starts to fall? She was perhaps five feet tall, a waif with a cagey stance. The girlish curves I'd memorized that day in the park were hidden now beneath thrift-store jeans and an oversize hooded jacket. She didn't take up the space entitled to her; she had not been taught how. And who were these people who looked after her? They didn't see the beauty I saw. If I had done nothing, she would not have seen it either. She would be like everyone else, do you understand? She would be only "Karen."

At a newsstand she paused to pick up a magazine—some nonsense about supermodels and movie stars—but the longing on her face as she paged through it was striking. She was at that transcendent age: old enough to sense her power and too innocent to use it. I moved closer. My eyes owned her.

I stepped forward; I would simply walk past her, buy a paper. . . . She was near enough to touch. Cloaked in her hood, she looked up at me, and I looked down at her. Her eyes were a clear aquamarine—free of all variation, without flecks or impurities—and then they were gone, back to her magazine. But it was enough.

Obsession, you see, requires neither audacity nor courage, but only servitude. I became a constant companion to her wanderings. In the mornings I met her school bus, endured the hours in mindless torpor till the clock struck three and I could seek her after school. On the fifth day, I gained the nerve to approach her home, at that time when dusk falls but people do not realize they can be seen in their well-lit kitchens and living rooms.

It was a relatively easy matter to maneuver my way into her dilapidated backyard, though remaining there unseen proved a trickier thing. There was a tiny rusted shed, which offered me refuge on a few uneasy occasions. Yet it was too far from the house to offer an adequate view. I was forced to take cover beneath the elderberry tree. From here a bay window revealed the cramped eat-in kitchen, and a tall, narrow window on the second story

gave onto Karen's room. I saw her there, seated at her desk, that first night. There was also a side window into the living room, in which family activity was centered. The window was covered with heavy curtains, but they were haphazardly hung and rarely closed so tightly that they did not provide crack into Karen's world. It was not without cracks of its own.

I confess it was my first real glimpse of petit bourgeois American life, and I was perhaps overly sensitive to its shabbiness. A dim gloom permeated the house and emanated from her father, who had no apparent occupation beyond watching television. In the window of my observation, he restricted his outings to the corner bar. An attractive man, he was of good height with dark hair and regular, if not strong, features.

La mère de Karen masked her disappointment with industry. Her job occupied her until late in the evening, and when she wasn't working, she was cleaning—dusting while the television droned on around her. She was a petite blonde, with wide eyes that seemed to anticipate doom. It struck me that doom had already arrived.

There was also a sister—the untied tennis shoes I'd glimpsed—who was by all appearances a good sort, laughing and lively and nearly as tall as Karen, though a good deal younger. She was called Mandy and was usually twirling about in the living room or up the stairs.

It all meant for me only one thing: Whilst little Mandy was at ballet, Maman at work, and Papa at the bar, Karen was mine. The more I observed her, the less she belonged to them. And it was a night some ten days into my vigil that gave me the temerity to act.

In Karen's bedroom, the flimsy curtains provided little concealment. I stood below to watch the wisp of her form pass before her window now and then, like a wraith. You mustn't think I was ever so lucky as to see her undress. I satisfied myself with her outline, shivering in my heavy, dark coat and scarf. It was nearly spring, but port cities are cold year-round—the fog worse, I think, than the snows of my childhood, creeping like icy fingers through your clothes to your skin, through skin even to the bone.

I had resolved at last to retreat to my empty hotel room when I saw a strange figure materialize above me. Clearly visible through the sheer linen, the shadow of a man loomed in her window. I jumped from my vantage point below—for a moment I thought him an intruder. Then I recognized the shadow.

Karen passed before her father, shaking her head. He pulled her to him, gripping her shoulders with such violence I thought he intended to strike her. His shadow engulfed hers, a sepia mass, inching her backward. The chair butted against the desk and stopped; I imagined it catching the small of her back, pinning her there. Sweeping her hair aside with a clumsy hand, her father bent drunkenly to kiss her neck.

In a rage I stooped to pick up a stone and threw it at the lit square above, heard the flat ping as it met its mark. He looked up, startled, and Karen eased away. Her father came to the window and peered out. And I hid beneath my elderberry tree, watching helplessly as the lights went out above me.

Up to then my fixation was undefined, without form. I might yet have changed course. But now, perversely, Karen's circumstances justified my voyeurism. I was compelled to act.

I will not lie and tell you I considered a more ethical route—perhaps a rush to the division of social services that handles such “family matters.” I wonder, what would they have done? Even in the dark days when one could do just about anything one wished to one's children in one's own home, they would have taken her from her family, I think.

How much better that the task should lie with me.

The choice of our first rendezvous was a simple one: a café called the Daily Grind. Karen went nearly every weekday after school for an olallieberry muffin and a large mug of French roast, into which she deposited two packets of sugar and a watershed of cream. She ate her muffin in highly ritualized style, pulling the top off in pieces with her fingers, then unwrapping the bottom and eating it in a circular fashion with her fork, saving the soft center for last. She made the muffin last exactly as long as the coffee, finishing the final sip with the final bite of muffin. As she went through all this, she read, covering her coffee with the cardboard coaster so it wouldn't get cold during the good parts. I found the whole thing rather charming.

It was only here that she seemed to relax fully. She was so consumed that she seemed not hear the flurry around her: the people who ducked in and out of the rain with a rustle of umbrellas and raincoats, the lively

conversations circulating through the air and punctuated only by the sounds of the espresso machine.

I chose a busy time; no tables were vacant. She was alone, reading Hemingway's, *The Sun Also Rises*. "Excusez-moi," I said lightly. "May I share your table, mademoiselle, until one opens up?"

Her expression told me she preferred I did not, but the hesitation, as I'd hoped, indicated she was too polite to say so. This is a curiously American feminine trait in my experience: too polite to simply say no. Frenchwomen know it is the best answer on all occasions, even when one wishes to say yes.

"All right," she said.

I pulled out the chair, and she dipped her head again to her book, newly self-conscious. I could tell she was reading the same line again and again, for her eyes did not travel the page. Her muffin was midway through the ritual sacrifice: it had been beheaded but not yet defrocked. She would be too embarrassed to eat it in her usual way, I supposed. I was ruining her rite.

Just as the thought passed through my mind, she set down her book, straightened slightly in her chair, lifted the cardboard coaster from her coffee, and eased it discreetly beneath, as it should be. She settled back in her chair and met my eyes. "Excuse me . . . what is your accent?"

"French."

"I thought so." After a moment, "I'm Karen. What's your name?"

I looked at her book and thought of Jake Barnes and the lovely Brett Ashley, then smiled slightly. "Jacques. Jacques Barnard."

"Hello, Jacques. I wanted to take French, but I heard that Spanish is easier. At least in the beginning. And you only have to take a year of it, so . . ."

"So Spanish is the easier year."

"Language isn't my favorite subject."

"Is Hemingway also for a class?"

"Huh?" She glanced down at her book. "Oh, no, we're supposed to be reading *Catcher in the Rye*, but I've already read that, and I thought I should see what's so great about Hemingway." She faltered. "I'd sort of like to write someday."

"You say it like an apology."

“Well, I’m not very good.”

I laughed and sipped my cappuccino. “I see. What do you think of Hemingway, then?”

“I miss the adjectives.”

“Some would say they merely muddy the waters.”

“Maybe.” She gave a slight shrug. “But at least you can tell the water’s muddy.”

I laughed. “*Oui*.” I had hardly allowed myself to expect anything from the conversation. Imagine my elation at finding her so perfectly enchanting.

“What is it you do?” she asked tentatively. “For a living, I mean.”

The inevitable American question. “I live for a living.”

“But don’t you have a job?”

“*Non, non*.”

“Wow.” She crinkled her brow, clearly dubious about so well-dressed a bum. “You must have an awful lot of money.” She didn’t appear to realize the rudeness of this assessment, which I found delightful.

“*Oui*,” I replied easily. “My father’s father’s father was rather successful at his job.”

“But you must do *something*.”

“*Oui, bien sûr*. I do a bit of everything. I paint, write, play piano. . . .”

Her eyes sparked, and she leaned forward across the table. “You mean you’re an artist?”

If you wish, I thought.

“That’s wonderful.” Her eyes took on the wistful expression I loved. “I like to paint.” She added ruefully, “I’m better at it than writing. Everyone says so. But I don’t like to just copy what I see. It should mean something, shouldn’t it? It’s finding the meaning of things that’s hard, and—” She broke off abruptly, gazed out the window onto the street and back again. “Have you ever heard the saying, Jacques”—It was exquisite, this use of my “name,” delivered with such shy hesitation in her self-conscious American accent—“that if you sit long enough in a café on the Champs-Élysées, the whole world will pass by? Do you think it’s true?”

“Ah, *oui*. But think how many muffins you would have to consume.”

She laughed, a light, lilting sound that made my stomach rise in euphoria. I’d made her laugh.

“But such a thing is true of Paris. I was born there.”

“Oh!”

I drank in this exultant exclamation along with my cappuccino and settled back in my chair, determined not to look too pleased with myself. Had I won her already?

“So you were born in Paris and you’re an artist.” In her voice she gave “artist” a capital A. “What art are you most fond of?” One could tell she was being her most adult; she leaned forward as she spoke and became subtly more vulnerable.

“Like you, I find painting is what I do best. Unlike you, I find it a comfort to be limited to what I see. But to write, to paint pictures with words . . . that is what I love.” It was not true, of course, but we were all at once kindred. She smiled at me, resting her lovely chin on her small fist. “Now tell me what you write so badly about.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she demurred. “People. Tragic things.”

“With happy endings?”

“No. Mostly happy beginnings with tragic ends.”

“But why is that, *chérie*?”

She evaded me with her laugh. “It’s silly to talk about. I haven’t written anything much.”

“To whom do you show your stories?”

“Well. No one. My little sister . . .”

“Then you will show me.”

She stared, started to laugh. “I . . . well, yeah, Jacques, I guess I could show you. If you want me to.”

And so we arranged to meet again at the coffeehouse in a few days. But it is a failing of my character that I find it impossible to wait for something I desire. Having met her, I could no longer follow her movements and stay removed from them. And so it was that the next day I followed her to the park, and “happened” upon her sitting on a bench with Hemingway.

“Karen? *Quelle surprise!*”

My hard-won nonchalance was met with a startled jump. “Jacques.” She shifted on the slatted wooden seat and bit her lip. “What are you doing here?”

“*Comment?*”

“I just mean . . . well, it’s kind of weird the way you pop up everywhere.” But it was a halfhearted protest; a blush still colored her cheeks and her eyes were bright.

“I’m not sure about everywhere, *chérie*, but I do come here quite often,” I replied. “I don’t often run into people I know.” Smiling my most charming smile, I added, “I am a stranger in a strange city. When I saw you, *naturellement*, I had to say hello.”

“Well. Hello.” She stared at me a moment and then stood. “You can sit here if you want, but I’m just going to . . . you know, walk.”

“I prefer your company to my own, *ma petite*. Perhaps I could . . . you know, walk with you?” My flat American pronunciation produced a slight smile. She had tried to feather her hair but failed. The fog had reduced it to the curled tendrils I longed to touch.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Jacques,” she said as we walked. “But you’re not some kind of pervert, are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

We continued to walk.

“Well, what is it you want?” She plunged her fists into her pockets. “I’ve seen you before, you know. At the café, lots of times. And I saw you on the pier once, watching me—”

She had a marvelous memory. And it seemed I hadn’t been as discreet as I’d thought.

“Was I? Or perhaps *you* were watching *me*.”

She had no reply for this. Her fair cheeks grew flushed again.

“It could be that we simply share the same taste: coffee, the pier, the park.”

“uh-huh.” She really was very cagey today. “Maybe. But what is it you want?”

I gazed at her then, wanting nothing more than to do so for hours on end. What did I want? I want to rescue you from your father, your future, your fate. I want to touch you. I want to treasure you and pleasure you and disturb and frighten you. I want to possess you. “Your company,” I said lightly. “I just like your company, Karen.”

“But you’ve got to be, what, *thirty?*”

I hesitated to tell her I was even older than that advanced age. “Thirty-four,” I said gently. “But you must be, er . . . eighteen, yes?”

She merely laughed.

“Eh, bien. Seventeen, then.”

It is so tempting for the young to lie about their age. I granted her the opportunity, and she took it, by omission. “That’s just it. I could practically be your daughter.”

“Practically,” I agreed. After a moment, “I had a daughter. Once.”

Her suspicions were for a moment forgotten. She echoed, “Once?”

“Oui. She died in a car accident when she was just three.” The words sparked an unexpected tingling in my fingertips, as if the feel of Marie-Gisèle’s silken baby skin were encoded there.

A sliver of guilt snuck in with her memory. Had my daughter lived, she would have been Karen’s age. With this startling realization came my only hesitation. I had a fleeting impulse to murmur a witticism and a careful good-bye and leave San Francisco forever. But Karen, knowing none of my plans for her, was murmuring appropriate apologies. I could see she hadn’t slept well. There were shadows in the hollows of her eyes, I longed to smooth away. And as unexpectedly as my conscience crept up to tap me, it tiptoed away.

“You’re married, then?” she asked tentatively.

“Non. My wife was also in the car. It all happened long ago.” The topic irritated me now.

“Oh.” She searched my face. “That’s awful. I’m really sorry.”

“Thank you. It was a very long time ago.”

“Did you love her very much?” Her curiosity, it seemed, wasn’t to be deterred by propriety.

I sighed. Love Sabina? “Not as much as I should have. We married because she was pregnant. In those days one did the proper thing.”

“I don’t know why people get married at all. They only end up hating each other.”

“You sound as if you speak from experience, but you are too young to be so cynical about love. Is it observation, then?” I paused. “Your parents?”

“No, it’s just . . . Well, yes, I guess.” A slight melancholy frown. “They got married because of me. They think I don’t know, but it’s not exactly complicated math.”

“You have no hope for love because they are unhappy? But that is foolish, *ma petite*. I have been unhappy, and still I have hope.”

I felt her stare but looked casually ahead as if we discussed nothing personal to me, a careless matter. The path turned onto the green. She rushed ahead to a large pond where there were ducks, and, sauntering behind, I watched her go. I learned to do this with her, as in some formal Victorian dance: a quadrille, in which one toys with touching and rarely touches. We walked toward each other and pirouetted away.

After that we planned our meetings: the wharf, City Lights, the Museum of Modern Art and the Planetarium, the gallery on one corner and the bookstore on another. Always we met in the park at three o'clock. It was our safe haven. We spent every afternoon together except Tuesdays. Tuesdays, she explained, belonged to Mandy. Weekends, too, were out. It was never suggested I meet her parents. Perhaps she was ashamed of them or knew that I was not merely after her company. And, too, she was "nearly eighteen." So, you see, we were complicit in it from the beginning. I was her secret, and she was mine.

I knew that even in our short precious moments together we must be wary: the petite young brunette should not be noticed with the well-to-do Frenchman. Do not think me heedless of the risk. When she "disappeared," every clerk at every business she frequented would come forward to say they recognized her, and it was quite crucial that they not recognize me as well. The guilty are prone to paranoia, and I had the sensation many times that we were followed. I'd turn and quiz myself on the crowd. The spare, dark-haired man with the camera—had we seen him the day before? Was the old woman squinting at us for a reason?

I was careful to alter my appearance subtly with a hat or glasses (wire-rimmed with clear glass, though for some time afterward Karen thought I needed them; now, fifteen years later, I find I do). Once I put a dark rinse on my blond hair that washed out after a few days, and I went through various stages of unshaven. But I could never bring myself to dress poorly. I rationalized this bit of snobbery with the fact that a shabbily dressed person would almost certainly be suspected first. I did set aside the showier labels and attempted, chameleon-like, to blend into my surroundings. To Karen I played it all up as a manifestation of my creative nature.

I found, at last, a use for my education. At galleries and museums,

I condensed my years of art history for her and introduced her to real music, albeit not in a concert hall but in the car. We haunted bookstores and libraries, and I bought books for her to read, carefully chosen novels about runaways and rebels, writers on personal odysseys for their craft, romantic tales of Europe and New York and the Orient.

I told her selective stories of my own upbringing and the collection of paintings to which I was heir. She did not believe me at first. She had the quaint notion that such things could not be owned privately—that all the famed pieces in the world were held in public museums, as if there were an international ordinance to enforce such a thing.

I did not tell her that on my annual sojourns to Paris my family home felt very like a museum to me. With Maman and Papa gone, there remained only the paintings to animate the place. And they were tainted by their inaccessibility. A tenet of the family trust held that the paintings could not be removed from France. And so, on my visits to Paris, I sat before them for hours on end, intent as a Sufi monk at meditation, as if the memorization of strokes might make them mine. I knew that my obsession sprang less from the paintings themselves than from the inability to fully possess them. But even that frustration seemed trivial now. The collection served only to entertain my new masterpiece.

For her part, Karen showed me her poems and stories, dismissed with a self-conscious wave of the hand (“The best ones aren’t finished yet”). They were as amateurish as one might expect. She possessed a sharp mind and a flair for words, but there was no sign of plot: semiconfessional sketches, they were, and tragic all. She couldn’t bear to watch me read them, and so she’d lend them to me for a night. I’d sleep with them on the pillow beside me. I found the poems particularly poignant. Written in feminine cursive on flowery stationery, they staggered under complicated meter and adolescent anguish, in vocabulary clearly palmed from a thesaurus. Yet it was their exposed imperfection I loved, their stumbling.

Having proclaimed my own passion for the written word, I was forced to play the role creditably. In truth, I’d written little of merit and had never taken the trouble to seek validation for what I’d written. But I phoned my apartment in New York and asked Henri to send out some of my stories. My butler and aide, Henri Dupré, was the only reminder

of Paris I had in America and well accustomed to strange requests. I received a package the next day. I had a few dark, clever tales à la Poe and de Maupassant, with the dramatic twist at the end that is so appealing at Karen's age. Others were arcane to such a degree that I myself have no idea what they meant or what I meant in writing them. The sound of certain words strung together in certain ways appealed to me, a Joycean collage of ideas without any particular beginning or end.

Yet for the first time in my life, I was an artist. I was creating myself for her.

She had begun to do the same: dressing more and more as she had the day of the fictive party and discarding the habitual sweatshirt and jeans for dresses and sandals. Her makeup was more artfully applied. She ran her hand through her hair frequently as we spoke and was very conscious of me as a man, blushing when I held her eyes too long, when I caught her watching me, when I opened the car door for her. She was terribly curious about me, and so I cultivated mystery.

"How come there are New York plates on your car, Jacques?"

"I had it shipped before I flew out. I can't bear a rental car."

"Oh." A weighted syllable. "So you'll be going back there, huh? To New York?"

"*Oui*, eventually. But for the moment I live here. In a hotel."

"They let people live in hotels?"

"Certainly."

"Do you have a real house in New York?"

"I have several houses, *chérie*. My family estate includes a house in Paris and a country house in Normandy. But I spend little time in France these days. I've lived in New York for years."

"I'd like to see New York City one day. I think it's a good thing for artists to go there."

"Ah, *oui*," I agreed. "Very good."

"All the books are published there. Have you ever noticed that? And lots of artists live there, don't they?" (So earnest, so very charming.) "Not the Hollywood kind, but real artists. In New York you have to struggle to survive."

I glanced down at her, and the worldly air wobbled.

“Anyway, that’s what I’ve heard.”

I tried not to smile. “I live on the Upper East Side, so I’m afraid I miss much of the struggle.”

“You must have a lot of friends there.”

From her tone she meant the female sort. “*Oui*.”

“Are any of them writers?”

“Yes, a few. Mostly they are painters. And French expatriates, like me.”

“Hmm. How come you left France?”

“It is good to leave the place one is born, *ma petite*. Otherwise it stays the same for you, and you stay the same with it. When I visit, I find we’re both pleasantly changed.”

“I like that.” She glanced at me wistfully. “I’ll leave here one day.”

Yes, I thought. *Sooner than you think.*

The next day I brought up the topic of her family. “You never speak of them, Karen. I know only that you have a sister named Mandy who doesn’t have dance class on Tuesdays. You never mention your mother. What is your father like?” I let her uneasy silence stretch. I wanted her to tell me about him, you see. Then we could begin to plot her escape.

But she wouldn’t meet my eyes and said finally, “Let’s not ruin it, Jacques.”

“Ruin what, *ma petite*?”

She smiled, a touching smile, entirely unmeasured. “Everything’s so easy for you. For me, too, when I’m with you. It’s like the rest of the world doesn’t even exist.”

I touched her beneath her chin, tilting it up to me. “It exists only for us.”

And to my immense surprise, she stood on tiptoe to kiss me. It was a very quick, uncertain kiss. Stepping backward to gauge its effect, she had never looked so lovely to me—eyes faintly wild, like a kitten when it’s playing. She murmured, “Isn’t that what you want?”

I said nothing at all but took her cold fingers in mine, massaging her hands to warm them. I bent forward to kiss the top of her head, the soft

curls, and she tipped her face up. I felt her tremble when my lips brushed hers. That was all. A brush of the lips. I didn't trust myself to go further.

As we went back to the car, she kept her hand in mine.

The pivotal day was the first of April, and I remember it still so well, walking through the Japanese gardens in Golden Gate Park, the narrow Victorians like trays of pastels cascading across the steep hills, the bells of cable cars pealing in the distance, and fingers of fog hovering over the pea-soup bay. And at last the cool quiet of the gardens. A wall had come down between us. Karen reached freely for my hand now.

In the stillness it was easy to forget the scrutiny of others, and I decided all at once that it was time. "What if I were to invest in you, Karen? If you were to come with me to New York?"

She stopped before a bed of deep red Japanese azaleas that matched her lips and I savored the surprised pleasure in her eyes. Then she said, softly—at first I did not understand her—"April Fool's."

"*Mais non*. I am not fooling."

She cast me a sideways glance, and caution crept in. A nervous laugh. "I couldn't do that, Jacques. I mean, of course, I'd love to. But my parents would never let me go."

Dear, sweet child. "No. I'm afraid you would have to give up your old life entirely."

"Oh, right. I can't go through life with a ninth-grade edu—" She broke off abruptly. Her eyes focused hard on her shoes, and her cheeks flushed red.

I feigned confusion. "*Pardon*, Karen? Did you say the ninth grade?"

"I'm sorry. Oh . . . God. I was afraid that if I told you, you wouldn't want to see me anymore." There was a tortured silence. "The truth is, I'm not even sixteen yet. I'm fifteen." A pause. "Barely." Her lovely eyes filled with tears. "I should have said so. I meant to. It's just that I feel older inside."

The words were shocking out loud, but I was beyond listening. I paused, conjured up a bit of consternation, then frowned in pretended disapproval. It was an exquisite joy to torment her this way, for it made it clear how important my approval had become. I looked away and back again, watching as various teenage agonies flickered over her features. "Ah."

"You must hate me."

"I could not hate you."

"But you're angry, I can tell—"

I spoke gently. "I'm surprised, Karen. That is all." And played the crucial card. "You seem much older, though age in itself means little. We're all different ages inside." I cleared my throat. "You're no different to me now than you were a few minutes ago. But it does complicate things."

"What was I to you, a few minutes ago?"

It was an adult question.

"You know that, surely."

"No, I don't." Without waiting for a reply, she rushed on. "I think I love you, Jacques—"

I held her eyes. She didn't breathe. How can I explain the sensation? It was as if my pulse rose, I felt my blood beat violently just beneath the skin. She was mine.

"You don't know what you are to me, Karen?" I said softly. "But you are everything."

I could see the horror warring with delight in her eyes. "You could be arrested . . ."

"*Oui*, Karen. I could. Only if we were careless. We would have to trust each other."

"But—"

"We would continue your education, of course. You would be tutored. I was tutored at your age. That way your schedule would be flexible for travel and . . . and that sort of thing."

Doubt crept in. "Would I live with you?"

"Of course." I paused, gauging her expression. "But you would have your own room, *ma petite*. Nothing would happen that you didn't want to happen."

"For all I know, you could be part of an international ring—white slavery or . . ."

"*Merde*," I sneered, contemptuous. "Tales your mother taught you?"

"People do that stuff," she murmured. "It's on the news all the time."

I could barely hear her, but I could hear that she did not believe it.

"There are all kinds of horrible people."

"Then I will protect you from them." I took her by the shoulders and kissed her.

Her lips were so soft, like the petals of a flower—not a rose but a delicate flower that needs a greenhouse to survive. They were cold, and I was very gentle with her, so that she responded first, her lips parting so slightly, then the fluttering touch of her tongue to mine. I enfolded her in my arms. She held on to me so tightly and was so slight that I could feel her heartbeat and might literally have crushed her. It filled me with a tenderness I had never known. To feel my power over her, to revel in my restraint.

She whispered into the folds of my jacket, “I can’t just run off, Jacques. I can’t leave my mom and my little sister—” But the protests no longer mattered. I was sure of her now, and it made it easy to be cruel.

“Perhaps you’re right,” I said curtly, pulling away. “I should not have mentioned it. I thought I might . . . I thought we . . .” I sighed. “But you’re right, Karen. It would be selfish to take you from the life you know and make you part of mine. It was wrong of me. And I can see I’ve frightened you.”

She watched me with wide eyes and a lip that trembled. “No, it’s just—”

“I know what it is. Don’t apologize. I’m the one who’s sorry.” I turned away from her, counted to five. “We will not see each other much more, I’m afraid.” How sour the words tasted on my tongue. “My time here is nearly over. I have to return to New York.”

“But I thought—”

“We will have a few days more together.” When I turned back again, she would not look at me. In a moment, wordlessly, she spun around and ran down the garden path.

I let her go.

That night I went to her house. I had not been there since I’d spied her with her father. It pained me too much. But I saw her upstairs alone, at her desk before the window, writing intently. She paused often, to wipe tears from her eyes, and several times crumpled the paper. Imagine what I felt. I knew she was writing to me.

The next day she came to me at three o’clock in the park. There was no letter. She asked, “Will you take me with you?”

It became almost a joke between us then, getting her away. I’m not certain when Karen realized that the joke was real, when she realized she could not turn back.