



Crystal



Jean had money, or someone did, enough to buy the apartment in Carroll Gardens where she lived with Alexander.

‘We’ll torture and kill every creature on earth for the sake of the rich,’ Jean said. ‘You see it right? It’s a sickness.’ She talked like that, her arms and legs spread out to cover as much space as possible. I tucked my legs toward my chest and leaned on my elbow at the bottom corner of her bed.

It was March or already April when I started to visit her. I took the subway from the East Village after my morning class, and by the time I arrived, Alexander was at work and Emma was at school. It always started like his, with me at the edge of the bed, moving toward the center. I loved kissing her neck, up to the skin of her ear. After, Jean would make us something to eat, or take the plastic wrap off of leftovers, and we’d sit on the rug and eat out of the same bowl.

‘Would you do something good? If you were able to.’

I nodded. ‘Yeah.’

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I told Jean what my mother said to Stefan about why she named me Crystal. She said it was because the first time she looked into my eyes she could see the future. Jean’s laugh was a sharp exhale through her nose.

‘You’re too pretty for that name.’

I was looking down at her shins, pressing into the stubble with my palms.

See the future in your eyes—a man had said something like that to me in a velvet-walled bar when I moved to New York in the summer. He led me to the corner by the hand wearing a full pinstriped suit, his breath smelling like tequila, his hand on my waist.

‘What about Stefan?’ Jean said. ‘What did he see when he looked at you?’

I shook my head no. My mother wouldn’t explain the months at a time Stefan was gone, but sometimes he’d return unannounced. They’d go to her bedroom and listen to music together. He liked country, especially when the voice was a woman’s. Lucinda, or Iris, or something older like Tammy. Under it I could hear her laughing, teasing him or being teased. Then they’d get quiet again.

In the mornings, before school, she was more beautiful than usual. She was more beautiful than me I thought.

Jean’s bedroom was always dark, with curtains kept drawn during the day to protect the large framed textiles that hung on their wall. Exposure to sunlight would fade and damage them over time. I lay on the bed looking at them when she got up and left the room. One was cotton and two were a combination of silk and wool, with repeating flowers, leaves, and birds. Alexander had told me about them when we met. William Morris, from the late 19th Century. The most famous was ‘Strawberry Thief,’ a design you could find printed on napkins and stationary at the Met store. Alexander’s was an original, a large irregular scrap of blue and dark blue and red. I didn’t know how much something like that cost, but it looked beautiful in its large cherry wood frame.

He lent me his copy of Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, a novel in which a man in the 1880’s wakes up to find London has become a socialist Utopia in the future – ‘our present, actually,’ Alexander had said, grimly, acknowledging the maybe two dozen other protesters with us in Washington Square Park.

Gala had introduced us. Jean was there too, smoking a cigarette. She held her long wool coat shut, which flapped open in the cold air so I could see her pleated and high-waisted pants. Above her was a hand-made banner with the words:

OUR GRIEF IS NOT A CRY FOR WAR

‘Come on Emma,’ Alexander said. The small girl bundled in a parka twice her size had stopped behind us, in rapport with a couple of pigeons

who scratched and cooed on the sidewalk. He smiled at me apologetically while Jean and Gala walked ahead.

‘What I like about Morris,’ he continued – he’d been explaining his unfinished dissertation for an art history PhD – ‘is that he saw the need for art in his Utopia.’ He took Emma’s reluctant hand. ‘The first thing he describes is how much more beautiful everything is.’

‘He notices a man’s belt buckle, and he thinks, Wow. That is an exquisite belt buckle!’

After awhile I realized Jean had been running a bath. I went and sat on the porcelain edge of the tub, the room heavy with steam. Jean dipped her chin below the water and looked up at me, her hair dark tied up. Thin strands of it lay against her forehead, curled with sweat.

‘You see how it’s good, right? Even if it seems small? You’ll be doing something important. It’s a seed.’

I didn’t ask Jean what Alexander knew or didn’t know about my coming to Carroll Gardens. It was possible this was all a part of their politics.

‘Did you ever do that thing where you draw a tree starting from the seed?’ I said, tracing an upward line in the air with my finger. ‘Then you grow out the roots. You follow it up, the trunk, the branches, the leaves, up up up.’

She seized on my smile. She tried luring me out, hoping my smile was the beginning of a turn in my mood.

‘You can be so sweet, sometimes,’ she said.

I was looking at the plastic bottles crowded together on her shower caddy. I said, ‘to fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause...’ ‘til united, all one we are, the whole human race...’

Jean lifted her chin from the bath skeptically, the steam bringing tears of sweat down her face. ‘What’s that from?’

‘Dr. Bronner’s,’ I said, looking at the purple shampoo bottle. She didn’t laugh. Did she scold me in some way? Did she say, ‘don’t do that?’

★



I moved to New York for college. It was the only school I applied to—it was free. In my first class, Professor Adelman asked us to go around in a circle and say where we were from. When it was my turn, and I told him, he said, ‘Uh oh.’ Some people laughed.

His back was hunched, and he’d brushed his silver hair far back, so there was nothing to obstruct his large forehead. He looked at me seriously, punctuating his speech with a long finger pointing out from his fist. ‘If you’re not careful,’ he said, ‘New York will chew you up. You might be lucky if it spits you back out.’

More laughter. I could tell I was blushing. But this is after all what I wanted from New York: to exorcise my immaturity and inexperience. I imagined it would be simple. I thought it would be like extracting a deer tick with a match, the way the summer camp nurse had done when I was a child.

Adelman smiled with one side of his mouth. ‘I’m from Dayton, Ohio, okay? But I was one of the only Jews to ever come from Dayton, so they let me in. They didn’t think I would stay.’

Art was completely different from what I’d previously understood it to be, especially in Adelman’s class. It was like the law; you made an argument based on precedent. Adelman would throw out artist names, movements, influential works—this array of human accomplishment made me feel shamefully ignorant. In his extemporaneous lectures, he usually returned to the earliest years he spent in New York, in the 1970’s, and to the lessons he learned then.

‘There are very old divides,’ Adelman had said, sternly, which I repeated to Jean. ‘Historic, pre-historic, primordial divides.’ He told us about the bars, Cedar Tavern and Max’s Kansas City, Fanelli’s. ‘The losers went to Fanelli’s,’ he said. ‘But of course, sometimes a loser can still be a great artist.’

‘He sounds like an asshole,’ Jean said, and I only tried a little bit to defend him. I mentioned his shoes, the black alligator wing tips I’d noticed on the first day (I’d tucked my own beaten blue converse as far under my seat as they’d go, and since then had bought a pair of reddish-brown Doc Martens from Z World on 8th Street). It was important to

important to me, a detail like that. I remember thinking, ‘what kind of shoes does a real artist wear?’

Jean didn’t care about his shoes. But she was always negative about the subject of school. It was the only thing she acted jealous of. She showed me her own work: in the corner by her messy wooden desk was a stack of permanently curled drawings, charcoal and conte-crayon or ink, of the skyline. If Jean sensed my disinterest in them, she didn’t let on. But there was one sketchbook of drawings I loved, a series of light watercolors, ‘suicide trees’ she called them. They were based on one of the cantos in *The Inferno*. I touched the pages when she showed me, wanting the pigment to seep into my fingers.

In return, I played her some of the footage from my collaborative video with Emily. It was on the camera we rented from the computer lab. We shot in one of the large, open workrooms on the 6th floor, early in the morning, when no one was around. Using mirrors, we directed the skylights onto whichever one of us was on camera. We took turns, and edited it together to look more or less like a conversation.

The premise was to shift the light by angling the mirrors, so it would look like the sun was passing under a cloud. The rule was if you were in ‘shade’ you had to whisper. We’d written a script, rambling and nonsensical and a little melodramatic. There would be a rivalry between the ‘Emily’ character and the ‘Crystal’ character based on looks, clothes, makeup. As the script progressed you’d realize how poisoned their friendship was by petty jealousies. We’d constructed costumes out of clothing bought at the Goodwill, spending the prior week adorning them with rhinestones, glitter, sea-shells.

Sometimes that semester, Emily and I would drink at a bar near school, especially on evenings after marathon critiques in Adelman’s class. We’d sit in the back where it was private, and decompress. That’s where we came up with the idea to collaborate, and where we’d returned again the night after we’d shown our collaboration to the class. It was the kind of bar where everything is lacquered, even the light.

Earlier in the semester, Adelman had made it clear he was disappointed in the quality of our collective work. And he’d hoped by

expressing this it would encourage us to try harder.

Emily had the same problem with the class that I did—neither of us had an instinct for the conceptual approach to art that Adelman presented. If I tried to start with a single idea or message, the way he described art – governed by ideas – it came out contrived, idiotic. I understood painting as being about discovery, questions, looking... these themes were inherited from things Mr. Markin had said. Emily felt the same, or close enough for us to feel camaraderie.

When we showed our first attempt, the response was mostly positive, much more so than anything I'd made for Adelman's class on my own. He said there were too many ideas ('having one or two good ideas is hard enough') but spoke as if it were worth discussing—this was progress. 'Humor might be your friend,' he said, praising the tone of the video. The tone of my previous work, mired in a romantic kind of mystery, had bewildered him with its desperation and earnest attempts to make something of significance. 'Serious does not have to be solemn' was another of his truisms.

I was tilting the Jameson in my hand so light bounced off the rim of the glass. Emily was still jittery from class, wrapping her hair in her hands and tucking it to one side before it reverted to its original shape. 'Do you think he liked it?' She asked.

I shrugged. 'A little?'

'Vulnerable' I said, repeating a word he'd used in critique. He liked that it was vulnerable.

When I showed it to Jean, she didn't say anything at first. 'No, I like it. It's interesting,' Jean said after a while. 'Really.'

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I only ever did one thing for Mother Earth, the group Jean ran with Gala. It was named after the anarchist publication of the early 20th Century. Together they'd organized some anti-war protests, but Jean spoke about it as a movement. She had a vision for it.

Jean called it a seed, but I never understood what I did for them.

It was one date with a man visiting New York. He chose the restaurant, and insisted on speaking to the waiter in French in a transparent effort to impress me. When the waiter disappeared into the back, my date performed a nervous gesture with his hand, saying he wasn't exactly sure what had been ordered. What I ate was duck, which was a good choice, and it came with some kind of root, I don't remember what, but I liked it. In between sips of wine he mentioned the name of the hotel where he was staying.

My only instruction was to figure out the brand of shirts he wore. It could take sleuthing.

Over duck and root and red wine I said, 'where does a man in his forties buy his clothes?' He said that was a boring subject, and that a man of said age wouldn't want to bore me. He'd rather hear about my life anyway. What he thought to ask me was what it had been like for me during the terrorist attack. 'Where were you when...?' This was a very interesting subject to him, and he'd already mentioned how we should walk by the recovery site after dinner. It was why he'd chosen a restaurant so close to downtown. I found his interest in going there embarrassing. When we did go, there was nothing to see except a long wall of green painted plywood, metal fencing, and below that a concrete cavern illuminated in sections by construction lights.

I said I'd answer his question if he answered mine.

'I'll think about it,' he said, trying to flirt.

I said I was doing homework in my dorm room that morning, a color assignment called 3 colors look like 2. It meant setting a color against two different background colors – a violet and a brown for instance – that would look violet when it was glued onto a brown, and it would look brown on top of violet. The requirement was to use squares of high quality printed color paper attached to foam board with rubber cement.

He looked confused but I didn't try to explain it any more than that. 'A color has many faces,' I said, repeating a line from our course packet.



‘I remember taking a break,’ I said, imagining the meticulous work of cutting color squares with the x-acto, rubbing my hands together to collect the dark lint of glue that had dried on my fingers. Weak, indirect light filtered through the window, but I didn’t turn on the lamp because Professor Vanni had told us the yellow bulbs would make it difficult to see the color accurately. ‘I could hear the TV playing in the shared kitchen outside my room.’ It was a small Panasonic on the counter next to the toaster and cutting board. Out there, I found Adriana adjusting the antenna to fix the picture, while my other two roommates watched from the table. The image kept getting lost to static, and jumbled with excerpts from other channels. ‘Jackie asked me if I had heard, two planes had crashed, not far from us.’

‘I didn’t know what to do, so I went back to my room and finished the color-aid assignment. I was looking for a color exactly the same value as a green I’d chosen. I landed on a gold-yellow.’

‘I spent most of the day after that in the dorms, drawing with a handful of other freshmen who lived on my floor, playing exquisite corpse, you know—’ I said, ‘that game where you draw the body without knowing what the head looks like?’ Eventually I drifted over to the studios, where Adelman was holding an impromptu class. His wife had gone to pick up their son from his private middle school in Brooklyn, but Adelman said – with self-congratulation – that his priority was to be here with us.

‘Later, when the trains started running again, I went with my friend to her stepbrother’s apartment in Carroll Gardens. We rode the F with her nephews, who she’d picked up from their middle school in Chelsea. I didn’t know her very well yet, but people were saying the air by the dorms wasn’t safe to breathe, and she invited me. I could sleep on her brother’s couch, she said, it wasn’t a problem.’ The train car was silent, even the conductor didn’t speak. Everyone looked exhausted, except her nephews, Casey or Cody and Jesse or Jason, who were giddy in a way that embarrassed me. ‘They were playing some game between them, passing cards back and forth. Somehow it was revealed that the cards were pornographic. They dropped one, maybe.’ The cards

advertised a phone sex hotline, with pictures of nude women turned three-quarters to meet the camera seductively.

They had names printed on the cards like Britney and Candy and probably Crystal, but I didn't say this to the man. I said: 'I assumed Emily was ashamed, too.' I might have even imagined an expression of our communal shame, someone standing up to say: don't you know how serious this is? People are dead, and dying.

'When I looked at her face, I saw how wrong I was. Emily wasn't upset or ashamed. She didn't expect them to treat the situation intelligently. It made me think what my mother might say if I transgressed in some possibly equivalent scenario.' One that had never happened. Would never happen. 'She can build to rage in no time,' I said. 'When she does, you can see the veins in her face, deep and deadly around her eyes and down her forehead.'

The man put his wine glass down and thought for a few seconds before loosening his collar. 'It's hard to pronounce,' he said. He pulled the collar away from his neck and up so that leaning in, I could make out the tag. Ermenegildo Zegna.

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I told Jean about it the next day, lying in her bed. She sat up, a silhouette in the dark room.

'How are you so smart at your age?' she said. 'You knew what to say to him. What you needed to get what you wanted from him.' I nodded, but I thought how I hadn't really learned anything about him. Nothing that wasn't familiar and tedious.

What she said reminded me of how my high school art teacher had described me when he introduced me to Gala in October. He said I noticed things. It was the kind of compliment I took as criticism, although I knew it wasn't intended to be.

It was Mr. Markin who had encouraged my painting. He told me about a scholarship that some evil corporation (was it Exxon?) had endowed. 'So what?' He said. Artists were always tangled up with wealth.

‘We can’t only deal with the virtuous.’ And a whole summer studying art in Rome was a good opportunity: ‘Go see the old paintings, Crystalen’ka.’

He claimed I qualified as promising. He said I was one of the best painting students he’d had in the U.S. Even then I knew this was a thing art teachers said, but I believed him anyway.

‘They let him come because he’s a Jew,’ my mother told me about Mr. Markin, in a way that sounded like she didn’t approve. Of his being Jewish, or of his being persecuted, I didn’t know.

He wrote a list of paintings for me to see, and I carried it in my pocket like a charm. It took me to the Palazzo Barberini, where I stood looking at Caravaggio’s Judith Beheading Holofernes. Judith’s face a puzzle of anger and fear. My eyes occasionally jumped to the corners of the painting, out to the shadows. I thought about the angle of her wrists, and how plausible it really was to hold the knife like that.

I told Jean how I remembered there being a stranger with me in the gallery, a man I wasn’t paying any attention to. He made a sound like he’d eaten something delicious. I looked at him, and he tilted his head with a comic expression of pain on his middle-aged face. I recognized it as a caricature of the painting, of Holofernes. The gallery was silent except for the faint squeak of my sneakers on the tile when I moved my foot. He emitted a choking sound to complete the scene, a sound that originated in his throat and not his gut, although what I observed was that he had a gut. I thought of something a school friend, one older and more experienced, had once said. It was a riddle, maybe, or a joke, but she’d said it without laughing. ‘I like a man with a gut.’ He thought my laughter had to do with his joke, and was satisfied.

Jean laughed. ‘Creepy.’

‘What was it like traveling in Rome?’ She said.

‘First tell me the kind of shirts you buy.’

Mr. Markin had emailed me in September to see how I was doing. I was already thinking about him, because he was someone who knew about emergencies and how one acts in them—I don’t know exactly why I assumed that. He never spoke about his previous life in Russia.

I waited a few days to reply to his email, editing myself to get the wording right. When I did, he wrote again to say he was coming to New York and would I like to get together for lunch? He wanted me to meet a friend of his named Gala and her nephew. The nephew had just moved to the U.S. ‘You’ll like them,’ he wrote. ‘At the very least, it’ll be a free meal.’

I took the train toward Coney Island to see them in October. The shadows had deepened, and I could see the ones tall buildings cast onto the silver rooftops of smaller ones as we rode above ground. Everyone was seated in Gala’s bedroom when I arrived, including Mr. Markin; the kitchen table had been moved there and joined with a desk to make one longer table. Mr. Markin ushered me over to an empty stool next to him.

‘Let me look. Have you changed? No, you’re exactly the same.’

When I sat, I was close enough to the bed to touch the duvet.

★

How does one become an adult? When I was a girl, what did I think a woman was? A woman is almost definitely not Raphael’s *La Fornarina*, despite its title. But I saw that painting in the same palazzo in Rome where I’d seen *Judith*. I looked at it for a long time. My eyes went back and forth between the chiseled backdrop of foliage, so thickly painted, and the sheer fabric draped across her stomach and over her arms. I took something from that about contrast. About how one appears against their surroundings.

In Rome, I saw how cheap my clothing was. This was especially clear because we traveled in the expensive neighborhoods. Not the outskirts, or even the non-tourist parts of the city. Although I did walk one day toward Ostiense, near an out of use general market, built under Mussolini. And Garbatella, on the other side of the bridge, where one could see the market’s skeleton and remains, a green field of scattered trash. But these weren’t like the gray stretches we chugged past on the train back to the airport, where it looked like any city—concrete, weedy,

and poor.

My jeans, drawn on with blue ballpoint pen, flared at the ankle. I reflected on them sullenly, sitting on a bench near the Tiber. How unlike La Fornarina I was. Of course, I did not really want to sit there naked under a translucent cloth. My friend Denise and the others – all of us in sneakers and carrying oversized, generic brand backpacks – were thankfully oblivious to my inner revolutions. To a passerby, I was simply seeing the sights. I was only admiring the trees along Via Testaccio, which were knobby and thick, or else tall and thin with spider web branches and a dark green crown.

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Jean's apartment door was open when I arrived again the next day. I could already hear the noise of overlapping conversations from behind the door, the chaos and punctuation of laughter, plates shuffling. A woman I didn't recognize was collecting glasses in her arms in the kitchen and handing them off to two young girls who fluttered around her. She was related to Gala somehow, I guessed.

There was a large second room I rarely went into when I came to see Jean, a living room that also had a wide circular dining table, where Gala and Alexander sat, and a man I didn't recognize. Haley and Gala's nephew Lev were on the floor coloring in the large block letters of a cloth banner in magic marker, **WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER!**

Jean was laughing by the open window, letting cigarette smoke out and surrounded by women I knew from the yoga studio.

Gala turned halfway in her chair to see me and put out her hand, which I walked toward and took.

'I want to show you something,' Alexander said, in the seat next to her. He was looking under scattered papers on the table. 'Where'd I put them? You'll like this. Reproductions of the original run of News from Nowhere, when it ran as a serial in Commonweal.'

'Beautiful girl,' Gala said, beaming at me.

I could make out some of what Jean was saying at the other end of

something I'd heard before. It was one of her themes.

Protest was a kind of art form, she said, a performance. It was a way of communicating but also a pursuit of self-knowledge. You began to feel in your body how you could reject the desires and manipulations of those who were more powerful than you; you saw how your ideas were also physical and emotional; you learned how you exist in a state of dissent. It's an uncomfortable feeling for some people, like being on the dance floor.

I want to go dancing, one of her friends said. Can we go dancing? Jean said she never found her medium as an artist, although she'd gone through phases of painting and drawing, photography, dance, and now yoga. I am my own medium, she said. Exactly, one of her friends said.

I excused myself to the restroom while Alexander looked for the pages. But in the hallway, I decided to go into the bedroom instead, where it was dark and empty. Maybe Jean would find me there. I picked up one of Emma's drawings from school that lay on the table, a cray-pas woman diving into water surrounded by dunes. On the back was her name, Emma Goldman Fisher. I opened the wood box where they kept their bowl and lighter, and thought about lighting it, but didn't. I checked my hair in the reflection of Strawberry Thief's UV resistant glass. After a few minutes, I left and walked to the front door. The woman I didn't know, who was or wasn't related to Gala, gave me a confused smile and I tried to reciprocate.

On the street again, I was dizzy from the light glittering off of the cars. I carried my gloom through the nice weather. I thought how it was Jean who had told me the name for an Irish exit.

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I read Alexander's copy of News from Nowhere on the train back to the dorms. William Guest, the main character, was in the middle of learning how the socialist utopia of the early 2000's had come into existence. Violent revolution.

I finished reading it in the park by school. Above me fluttered a grand canopy of branches and leaves, and through gaps in the leaves I saw the Carl Fischer building, and a platform draped in orange fabric that hung on ropes the length of the building, with no one on it painting or cleaning or restoring the windows.

It gave me some ideas for the script Emily and I were writing for our next video together. Her character's name was Antonia, mine was nameless. The premise was: I would convince Antonia to do something bad.

'We really can't,' she said, laughing, at my dorm room that night. Then paused like we talked about. 'Can we?'

'Do you trust me Antonia?' I said.

'Yes.'

My roommates were out, which made it easier to rehearse. By the time we finished, the beets were ready to come out of the oven. 'Artists eat together,' Adelman had said.

Emily opened a bottle of wine at the table while I unwrapped the tin foil and let the bright pink-purple juice wash down the drain. I held the beets in one wet paper towel over the sink, and slid the skins off with another. It was satisfying watching they dropped in neat peels into the metal strainer.

When she went to the restroom, I took the fish out and divided it onto two plates with the beet greens sautéed in oil. Then I did something—I didn't really think about it, I just did it. I spit in her salad, and put the plate on the table next to her wine.



